



"Leading and Sustaining Change at all Levels of the Organization through Action Learning: Individuals, Teams and Organizations"

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****This is the second of a three part article that will be distributed over the next two months.***

Part II – Action Learning and Teams

In Part I, we addressed the complexity and changes of the leader's world. A leadership imperative was reducing the time of learning and development and to create leaders at all levels. Action learning fosters individual leadership development, by reframing how problems are seen by broadening one's perspective, reflection and self-awareness.

In this article, we broaden the discussion to include reducing the learning and development time in teams and as leaders, answering the pivotal questions of "How to Align Learning Strategies with Business Strategies".

In action learning, leaders become the architect of social constructivism of shared knowledge. Learning is then a social activity as leaders, make sense of and re-organize existing mental models by asking questions that simultaneously challenge *"the way we do things around here"* and build upon ideas for future actions and organizational performance.



In lieu of simply solving the technical problem, social constructivism makes explicit the subjectivities we each hold and creates the negotiated relationship of

each other and of teams throughout the organization visible so that new environments can be created to learn, change and solve problems together.

Traditional and typical problem solving is rooted in the politics, hierarchy and personal perspectives of individuals.

The reframing process starts with the organizational context that individuals and teams share. Personally, I've also come to appreciate the role of context - that is the organizational setting, the people, mission, goals and norms – as a driver to change. Context also informs the inherent mechanisms of power and influence that help or hinder individual, team and organizational development and performance. Team and organizational learning and development become a process where knowledge is produced from the transformation of information derived from the experiences of the person in the context that they are in. For us, the goal has several objectives to include the learners heightened self-awareness, improved sense of authenticity, safety, ability to take action and improved organizational performance within the context.

Consequently, five elements become necessary for this learning or changing a leader's perspective of themselves, their team and organizational performance and those are

- (1) An experience in the current context that does not fit with preexisting assumptions about how it should be. Hence, learning happens in the intimate connection of the idea and the experience from which it comes;
- (2) Self-reflection on the experience to become aware of the contradiction that one has to what one thinks and feels to what actions are possible;
- (3) A revised interpretation and perspective in that context;
- (4) Taking action on those change perspectives, and
- (5) Taking action to change the context from which new perspectives can flourish and lead to sustainable behavior changes.

So the leader's role at any level in the organization is the shift from *finding out* to *creating from within* the context and conversation of others to promote learning and that involves change within individuals and teams.

What about Teams and Action Learning as part of the alignment of Development and Strategy?

For leaders and for teams, we know that as complexity increases they tend to revert and rely on habitual ways of doing things.

Action learning is experiential and participatory its design of asking questions to learn and to reflect and reflect on the mental models that guide them as a team. As this is done collectively and within a constructivist model, teams collaboratively diagnose problems, create the networks and agreements to develop action plans within the context of their operating environment and importantly are free to change it.

In my experience, leaders at any level of the organization start to move themselves away from the person that sounds like “What do I want them to do” to one of creating an environment that communicates “how are we seeing this together” and “how are we doing this together”, which inherently shortens the period of team development

One important result is that teams view each other and themselves through a more humanistic philosophy as resources to each other, as equals amongst equals and in doing so create the space for feedback and support to develop themselves. Action learning develops teams as they inquire together – each bringing their own knowledge and perspective, adding fresh questions from their peers who have their own perspectives, linking currently shared experiences, self-reflection on one’s own mental models of how things have been done before to explore and create a common mental model of the organization’ context, building cohesion and trust, and taking different actions than before action in a supportive environment. In this context of a commonly shared problem the group or team is linked to the larger organizational system.