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Action learning: Images and pathways

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Book Review

Action Learning: Images and pathways

Author: Robert L. Dilworth and Verna J. Willis (2003). *Action Learning: Images and pathways.* Malabar, FL.: Kreiger. 213 pages, hardcover. ISBN: 1 5752 4203 6

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Action learning, as defined in this book, is "a process of reflecting on one's work and beliefs in the supportive/ confrontational environment of one's peers for the purpose of gaining new insights and resolving real business and community problems in real time" (p. 11). The claims made for action learning are impressive. Action learning:

- Allows participants (who work in groups called *sets*) to answer the question, "What is an honest man, and what do I need to do to become one?" (p. viii).

- Is more than learning by doing, action learning "has the potential for putting control of lifelong learning directly in the hands of learners, in ways that alter their perceptions, amplify self-efficacy, and re-connect these individuals to spontaneous curiosity and confidence in the exercise of their own good judgment" (p. xi).

- Is a "sleeping giant in the catalogue of individual and organizational change strategies" (p. xi).

- Is believed to address the five most important needs facing organizations today: 1) problem-solving; 2) organizational learning; 3) leadership development; 4) professional growth; and 5) career development (p. xiii).

Action learning is the product of half a century of development (p. xi), beginning with the work of Reginald Revans, the "Father of Action Learning" (p. 1). Revans' work with action learning in the 1970s and 1980s focused on its corporate and managerial applications, perhaps an example of what the book refers to as the "almost exclusive attention to the business sector" (p. xv) in previous publications. For that reason, this book has "several additional audiences in mind" in its approach, including higher education and training.

The first (and longest) chapter discusses the nature of action learning, placing it within the *andragogical* philosophy of adult learning. (An interesting question, not addressed by the writers, is whether action learning is applicable to pedagogy. Knowles [1978] maintained that andragogical principles were applicable to children who were capable and desirous of self-direction, and a teaching approach based on action learning's fundamental elements of

empowerment, focus on real-world questions, and collaboration in addressing them, certainly sounds as if it could be applied to education at all levels, in some form.)

In chapter 1, the basic systems used in action learning are summarized. *System Alpha* begins the process of seeking novel solutions by thoroughly exploring and describing the nature of the problem at hand (p. 189-190). At this step the questions asked include: What is happening? What should be happening? What needs to be done to make it happen? (p. 16). This phase is "definitional" (p. 157), providing the initial picture frame for addressing and solving the problem at hand (p. 185).

System Beta is "science-in-progress," (p. 55) a phase of "discovery" (p. 157) that elaborates on what was identified in system alpha (p. 190). This is the "scientific method" portion of the process and, like basic science, can include "intelligent trial and error" (p. 190), including fact-gathering (field research), surveys, observations, experimentation, assumption-testing, and evaluation. "System Beta uses whatever is revealed to pursue new avenues of inquiry that might yield a better solution" (p. 190).

System Gamma is the critical reflection stage (p. 55) and is embedded in all action learning processes (p. 190). Reflection is more than evaluation, examining "the changing self in the midst of the changing situation" (p. 157), and is critical in action learning. The reflective process focuses on realities and value systems of participants (journal keeping is recommended to assist reflection; p. 53), since these "guide what people say and do" (p. 190). In System Gamma, the learning process of the action learning participant and the client organization should undergo symbiotic change (p. 185) – the client and the consultant consider together what has been learned, and arrive at an understanding of what must be done.

Although they believe the applicability of action learning has "no known limitations" . . . whatever the recalcitrant problem" (p. 53), the authors concede that it has not made major inroads in higher education (p. 128). Resistance comes from several sources, including the historical autonomy of adult educators (p. 129), the stresses and demands that action learning can impose on participants (p. 131), and the culture of higher education with the dominance of formal curricula and directive, structured teaching methods (p. 133).

Despite the barriers, there is real potential in action learning. The focus on real problems, emphasis on reflection, reliance on collaboration, and importance of dialogue, are all potentially core purposes and values of higher education and skill training. Where do the problems lie in promoting wider adoption (or at least consideration) of action learning in post-secondary teaching?

Uncertainty over the role of the instructor and the definition of curriculum, and the administrative problems of a teaching model which relies heavily on real-world experiences (i.e., outside academe), must be addressed. The authors note that while the action learning process requires coaching, it cannot be scripted and must be egalitarian (p. 31). Coaches do not direct action learning sets so much as they make themselves available as requested by the group. Instructors accustomed to active teaching will not be comfortable in a role where their involvement could be constrained, or if their involvement is deemed to be "interruptive" by their students (the set), they could be asked to leave altogether (p. 25).

Curriculum is also viewed differently from what post-secondary instructors are used to. In action learning, it is considered divisible (p. 38 ff.), eclectic (p. 31), and cross-disciplinary (p. 10). In the

model, there are two types of knowledge and, by extension, two types of curriculum: "P" – programmed, previously learned and based on prior experience (p. 189); and "Q" – questioning insights, the important starting points of action learning (p. 12). All knowledge is important in action learning, but the most important is that which arises from the interaction of motivated minds engaged in real problem-solving activities rather than pre-packaged units of instruction assembled by the professor. Action learning is a product of collaboratively "tackling problems to which there is no right answer" (p. 11), not of "the solving of puzzles, evaluation of case studies, lecture-driven classroom instruction, or simulations . . . "(p. 10).

To engage in action learning, the authors advise that students be given opportunities to find and engage with real problems. Action learning students typically work in organizations in which serious efforts are being made to address actual, challenging problems. This environment is seldom found in the classroom, forcing action learning instructors to find relevant activities outside the ivory tower. Institutions must be linked to environments where useful action learning experiences can be found, and provide access to these for their students. The pressures on instructors, departments, and institutions as a whole can be imagined.

If these problems could be solved, would action learning be for everyone? To date, action learning has primarily been a corporate tool, a means for allowing knowledgeable employees to share their knowledge and experience with each other, and from such pooling to produce creative problem solving. As the authors acknowledge early on, the focus of action learning is on helping *managers* to address corporate issues. The authors claim that action learning, by its nature, is "an organizational change strategy" (p. 73), which requires top management involvement and support. The early successes of action learning were in addressing issues in companies such as General Electric, where knowledgeable employees were permitted by enlightened management to work with each other on internal problems, with which at least some of the participants were already aware.

Action learning really is not so much a method of teaching as it is a method of empowering experienced employees (and others, such as customers, even competitors) to apply their knowledge directly to problems, thereby solving them, improving morale, and increasing the company's efficiency. The five needs of organizations, listed earlier, are principally the needs of corporations facing global competition, rather than of educational institutions.

This is not to say that action learning has no application in post-secondary or higher education. In fact, the authors report using action learning in "capstone" courses, which take students outside the usual lecture-seminar process and "thrust[s] them into the heart of organizational crises" (p. xv). As they encounter real problems, learn from and with each other, help set the agenda, and, most importantly, experience the trust and mutual support typical of the classroom (p. 6), participants are able to practice the tenets of action learning andragogically. Not surprisingly, the authors report that the experience of action learning under these circumstances is highly motivating and deeply affecting. In exploring unfamiliar problems collaboratively, students ask fresh questions. Rather than formulas or prescriptions, the process teaches students to focus on the problem at hand and what is happening (p. 6).

Thus, action learning is similar to problem-based learning and other forms of teaching that enable learning to become more authentic, less prescriptive, and more capable of stimulating and incorporating the learners' creativity through collaboration (Bridges, 1992). What action learning potentially adds to a graduate experience is depth, but it may also create learning conditions too narrow for some students' needs. Not everyone who enters graduate programs has in his or her

existing background the knowledge and experience to address real-world problems, even in collaboration with other highly motivated people. When new inventions (solutions) are needed, enthusiasm and energy are not a replacement for information, skills, and experience. As the authors admit, the result may resemble the blind who take turns leading each other (p. 173). "P" must be present in problem-solving, since without it "Q" has nothing to process in the equation L(earning) = P + Q.

Of the book's eight chapters, the last four deal with how action learning might be adopted or promoted in various contexts. These chapters are useful for those who have concluded that action learning is for them, and now want to adopt it in their own organization. Managers and administrators, who are convinced they have "intractable problems" that their own resources could address, will find these chapters a thorough guide to launching action learning strategies.

Those who still wonder whether they need what action learning offers will need to read these chapters carefully, however. Depending upon the type of training offered, the following facts about and characteristics of action learning may be pertinent to readers considering how action learning might impact their work, students, and institutions:

- The greatest challenge in action learning is striking a balance between action and reflection (p. 21)

- In employee groups, results can include "an opening of communication channels, a deepening of employee networks cross-functionally, and better employee understanding of overall programs and vision" (p. 31)

- Sets are often asked to address problems of which some of the members have little or no knowledge or experience (p. 15)

- Learning in sets can be personally highly *transformational* (p. 27)

- Conflicts with human resources development, especially if action learning goes beyond narrow, traditional training objectives, can be expected (p. 28)

- In adopting action learning, a commitment to large-scale change seems to be necessary (p. 62)

- Climate and culture within the adopting organization must be identified, distinguished, and respected (p. 106), especially in the critical transition from planning to implementation of change

It seems to me that action learning, as part of capstone programs providing real-world apprenticeship or internship opportunities, is potentially of great value in higher education in exactly the way the authors are using it now. In this context, terms such as *transformative learning* are not unfamiliar, nor is it unusual for participants to have little direct, applicable experience prior to involvement. The environment in such situations is educative and supportive, and the curriculum (the term is from the Latin for "race course," surely descriptive of the experience of coursework of many graduate students) is seen to be more flexible and adaptable. In internships and apprenticeships, novices ideally encounter a range of supervisors, colleagues, and customers they will encounter in their careers, including those who care, those who can, and those who know (p. 68). In practical training, the objective is to *do*, and thence to learn, balancing action and reflection/ evaluation. These are the priorities in action learning (p. 21).

The case for action learning made by Dilworth and Willis is intriguing, but somehow unconvincing. As I read on, I felt I should be able to see more uses in my own distance teaching of master's students for what has obviously been a powerful, life-changing experience for the authors' and their students and clients. I must admit, I was surprised that the authors were surprised to find reports of effective teaching and learning among students and instructors who interact 100 percent online (p. 49), as I do with my students. That may be one problem for me: action learning assumes environments in which people interact face-to-face, and problems often relate to interpersonal issues, management rigidity, lack of vision, or other aspects of organizational culture (p. 61 ff.). In such circumstances, task achievement can be affected in curious ways by existing relationships and varying/ competing social agendas (Walther, 1996). The authors comment that the social dynamics of virtual teams is an area which needs further investigation (p. 141). Those of us working in this way already, and accustomed to the power of distance relationships supported by powerful communications technologies, may be able to help.

This book is a succinct (191 pages, including a useful glossary) description of action learning, and a starter's manual for anyone interested in implementing its elements. The tone is promotional, even worshipful – these are believers. Whether the book will motivate higher-education practitioners to become more involved with action learning is another question. I am still wondering how, at a distance, I could do so. I haven't decided I *can't*, but I am still wondering exactly how.

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