

Initiating Action Learning in Management Development Programs

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The start of an action learning set in the context of a management development programme is critical to the establishment of rules with managers that have specific expectations shaped by their job environments as well as prior experience with management training. The method suggested here starts by focusing on capabilities and aspirations within the set before questioning the situation. This helps members of a newly established set create intense personal contact early on. The method is influenced by elements of dynamic teaming. At the end of the exercise, a reflection process introduces critical reflection.

Action Learning takes so long to describe, so much longer to find interesting, and so much longer still to get started (Revans 1983, p. 9)

Introduction

The method described in this paper provides an approach for introducing action learning in the context of management development in major companies. Taking into regard Reg Revans' statement above, we are faced with a potential dilemma when initiating action learning with managers: They want to understand what is happening from the get-go and, above all, they want quick results. Furthermore, expectations managers bring to our action learning programs are not only shaped by their everyday professional work environment but also by previous experience collected when attending management trainings. The experience they find valuable is theory immediately applicable to practical problem-solving at work as well as active involvement, role play and enactment, always combined with personal performance feedback.

The start of an action learning set is critical to the establishment of implicit and explicit rules. There certainly may be differences between the rules a set intends to follow and the rules it actually does follow as it unfolds.

From an ethical point of view, it may be desirable for a facilitator to help to establish a mindset that thoroughly questions contexts while remaining respectful and even caring towards the persons involved. A potentially conflicting standard may be respect for the set's autonomy and self-development.

The following approach provides an answer to this challenge by guiding and leading managers into action learning.

Method

The method applied is an adapted version of Savage's (1997) Dynamic Teaming. This method guides participants through a process, using subsequent instructions and time frames. The method has been adapted in several respects. Savage provides a framework for his method by referring to the transformation from the industrial age to the knowledge age. Instead of this historical approach, the principles of action learning are used here as a point of reference. Applying these principles, a second major adaptation includes the integration of explicit learning and reflection in the teams. The dynamic teaming process takes no longer than half a day within the first action learning workshop in a management development program.

A first step consists of building the sets for this exercise. Our management development programs usually consist of enough participants to form a number of sets. In this phase we use criteria for set-building similar to implicit norms applied within the company at hand to establish task forces or project teams. As a rule, such company practices are not personality-centered but driven by skills, job descriptions and mere availability etc. Thus, how teams are formed especially in a large company may be highly random from the perspective of the single team member.

Once the sets have been established we focus on the persons in the set. Savage (1997) follows a resource-oriented approach when he suggests concentrating on capabilities and aspirations. On the one hand, the capabilities a person has acquired reflect his or her learning and educational history. Traditionally, in many companies this used to be a main aspect of employee evaluations. Aspirations, on the other hand, help to understand what motivates a person and what to expect of him or her in the future.

The assessment of capabilities and aspirations starts with a dialog between paired-up participants that focuses on the two partners' personal achievements. The findings that emerge from these dialogs are subsequently shared in the set. In the end, the group will create a map reflecting all the capabilities and aspirations available in the set. Every single set member will have contributed some of his most valuable personal assets to this map.

After thus sketching the skills and goals of all of the managers forming the set, the group concentrates on the task ahead. Each set is assigned the task of pursuing a business opportunity or effecting a process improvement, making the best use of the capabilities and aspirations within the team. This implies a creative search followed by a consensual decision process that gauges all the options at hand. A project plan is developed and all set members receive specific tasks to assure success.

Later on, every set sends a consultant to another set, thus establishing connections between the teams and providing a first reality check for the newly developed business

opportunity. Following the consultation phase, the teams will prepare a presentation of their project that includes a concise outline and a business plan.

The active part, which is competitive as well as cooperative, is followed by a review of the process in the set. This section is introduced by setting forth criteria for critical reflection (Marsick and O'Neil, 1999).

Results

Two different types of data are used to assess the outcome, including, on the one hand, the observations of facilitators who have worked with a great number of dynamic teamings as well as "real" action learning sets and, on the other hand, participant feedback at the end of the dynamic teaming exercise. The data is gathered mainly by conducting qualitative in-depth group interviews, but sometimes also by using a questionnaire containing open as well as closed questions.

An analysis of the results of dynamic teaming yields various aspects that merit discussion. As an immediate outcome, it is apparent that creativity most frequently helps team reach a high level of interaction and fun quite easily and rapidly.. Team members are surprised at how fast they were able to produce a business model and achieve involvement of the individual team members.

A more systematic analysis focuses on the following aspects: 1. Establish the team by focusing on the capabilities and aspirations of all members. This approach is significantly different from what many managers report they normally experience when starting a project. When being assigned a new project, generally their main focus tends to be on the task. From this perspective, individuals are primarily viewed with an eye to the skills needed to fulfill the task. Exploring aspirations, on the other hand, poses a real challenge for many managers. Even though this may lead to some frustrations in the beginning because sometimes managers have difficulty finding out how to explore, most often the activity is perceived as interesting and even fulfilling before long. At this moment, learning may occur. Managers start a questioning process, which is a key element of action learning from the beginning, and they start with the persons in their team as they establish a respectful and acknowledging stance towards others. This attitude may lead to an ethical standard and/or to an implicit rule which may help to productively overcome conflict situations. It also tends to create self-confidence within the team approaching the task ahead.

2. Execute a challenging task by making use of the team's resources. The focus of the questioning now turns from the team perspective to the environment in order to detect and define the task. This process is always shaped by the capabilities and aspirations available in the set. While capabilities reflect the learning history of a person, aspirations embody what people seek to achieve and therefore need to learn to accomplish the task. This aspect comes very close to action learning.

3. Link the team to the environment by interteam consultation. The consistent team focus of dynamic teaming helps the set members become familiar with and even close

to each other by assessing each other's resources and producing a common result. Thus, the cohesiveness in the set will gradually increase. The downside of such a team building process might be the emergence of groupthink (Janis, 1982), which is best countered by outside feedback. In action learning, a set faces reality when being confronted with the client and his business environment. In dynamic teaming no client and business environment are available during the exercise. This is why a different approach is used to provide outside feedback to the set. Every set sends a consultant to another set, thus contributing fresh perspectives and insights. This again implies learning on a team as well as an individual level. Set coherence is balanced by interteam exchange.

This interteam sharing could lead to an important learning or implicit rule, which will be helpful when the real action learning program starts. In our programs involving various action learning sets, we sometimes experience that sets tend to withdraw and even become competitive towards other sets. On the contrary, whenever the dynamic teaming consultation phase showed positive results, during the later action learning process all sets formed a support system counteracting groupthink and providing each set with outside but still close-to-home critical reflection.

4. Critical reflection of team development. This last aspect might include individual feedback as well as an analysis of team behavior. It might also take into account to what extent team behavior reflected (hidden) rules governing the managers' own organization. Finally, the participants draw conclusions as to what procedures they might find helpful to create an effective as well as reflective set.

Discussion

In our management development programs we combine consistent result-orientation with critical reflection of practices, underlying values of the individual, and norms in the organization. The question is to what extent an approach such as the one described above will help first-time action learning participants to understand more easily and practise action learning. According to Dean (cit. in Rothwell, 1999),

Action Learning is a voluntary, participant-centered, evolutionary process to solve real, systemic, and so-far-up-till-now-unresolved organizational work-cum-learning problems in the workplace as it applies the principle of democratic values and team learning in an environment of trust and authenticity. (p.3)

In this sense, dynamic teaming as suggested here provides at least some of the major aspects of action learning even though in a limited way. Analyzing the constituents of action learning as listed by Inglis (1994, p. 12 f.) provides a more detailed view of the power and limitations of dynamic teaming:

- the problem (which is to be restated as a project)
- the client (the person who owns the problem)
- the set members (the people on the project team)
- the set adviser (the action learning expert)
- the tutors (subject-matter specialists)
- the set meeting and workshops.

Three of these constituents (the problem, the set members and the set adviser) are also available in the dynamic teaming exercise. On the other hand, there is no explicit client and there are no tutors. The last constituent, set meetings and workshops, materializes in mini-sequences.

This result suggests that dynamic teaming could be used as a laboratory introducing action learning, because it condenses some of the key aspects of “real” action learning into a very short timeframe. And as with any lab, there are not only useful similarities but also significant differences between action learning and the dynamic teaming exercise:

- Dynamic teaming with its instructions and time restrictions is much more structured than action learning, taking place during the course of several months, would ever be and hence perhaps tends to be what may be called a bit educational.
- In a short time frame of merely several hours, team members in the laboratory will produce a feasible concept as well as a business plan outline. Even though this is quite a lot given the relatively limited time budget, action learning as practiced in our programs goes one important step further: It aims at changing practices. This means that people will not only perform analysis but enhance their understanding by getting involved and shaping reality.

As a conclusion, dynamic teaming is not action learning, but, during the course of half a day, it mentally prepares the participants for getting started with results-oriented action learning by applying rules that establish respect and even caring and engaging in profound reflection of behaviors, attitudes and organizational norms.

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