THE POWER OF ACTION LEARNING:

A Process for Building a Collaborative Culture

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One of the most powerful tools for moving an organization’s culture toward collaboration and knowledge sharing is a process called Action Learning. It is not a new process, but one that was used both in Europe and the US, long before the term “Knowledge Management” was first heard in organizations.

I find that many Knowledge Management professionals, particularly those whose background is more based in technology, often remain unaware of the wealth of useful knowledge management processes available to them from disciplines such as organizational development, change management, and organizational learning. Action Learning is one of those, as are many of the other processes I have referenced in blog posts for example, Knowledge Cafe, Open Space Technology, Participatory Action Research, and Appreciative Inquiry.

Action Learning is based on taking one or more crucial organizational problems or opportunities and having small groups of managers, analyze their dynamics, implement proposed solutions derived from the insightful questions of their colleagues; monitor the results; and through being held responsible for these actions, learn from the results so that they develop greater competence in future problem solving and opportunity taking.

There are four elements that make Action Learning effective:

1. A crucial organizational problem/opportunity
2. Organizational members willing to take risks to develop themselves and their organizations
3. Authority to take action on the problem/opportunity
4. A system for learning reflectively – sets, which are small groups that meet regularly over several months

There are many formats for Action Learning. Two of the most frequently used formats I describe here, 1) the members of the set each work on a different problem/opportunity, and 2) all members of the set work on the same problem/opportunity.
Format 1 - Each Set Member Works on a Different Problem/Opportunity

- Each set is composed of 4-6 participants.
- Set members are drawn from different parts of the organization in order to bring a variety of perspectives to the issues they deal with.
- Each set member, with their supervisor, identifies a significant problem/opportunity within the supervisor’s sphere of influence. The set member develops a solution and then implements that solution.

For example:
- Design and implement a collaborative process for long-term strategic vision development and deployment
- Design and implement a materials-flow process for a new body shop
- Develop and implement a new billing system

- Set members, with their supervisor, also identify a developmental challenge for the set member to work on.
- A set advisor is appointed to help the set reflect on what they are learning from the actions they take.
- Typically, sets hold a day-long meeting every two weeks over a period of four to six months. In between meetings set members take action on their issues and then report back on the results at the following meeting.
- During set meetings each member has an hour to focus on his/her problem/opportunity. To help the set member uncover assumptions, other members adopt a collaborative, reflective, questioning approach.
- Set members meet regularly with their supervisor to report on their progress with their problem/opportunity.

Format 2 - Set Members Work as a Group on the Same Problem/Opportunity

- The Sponsor of Action Learning, who is typically a high level leader, identifies several difficult, real problems/opportunities that the organization faces. They are problems/opportunities in which:
  - No clear expertise already exists
  - There are no known answers or there have been many failed attempts to resolve the issue

- Each set is composed of 4-6 employees who come from different disciplines across the organization.
- From the Sponsor’s list of problems/opportunities each set selects an issue in which they feel a vested interest. The set members 1) study the issue, 2) develop a solution, and 3) work with the appropriate client to implement the solution.
For example:

- Design and implement a solution to improve the company’s performance in responding to customers’ requests
- Create and implement a process for attracting and retaining technology partners

- A set advisor is appointed to help the set with their reflections.
- Set members are expected to devote 20-30% of their time to the problem for a period of 6 months. In some organizations set members spend full time on the problem/opportunity for a period of 3-4 months.
- Each set member identifies a developmental goal to pursue while working on the group problem.

For example:

- Learning to express empathy for others
- Developing skills in handling conflict
- Developing skills of influence without authority

- The set holds a daylong meeting every two weeks.
- In the set meetings, set members have their own airtime to report on their progress and to respond to insightful questions from other set members.
- The set invites into set meetings any expertise or resource they need in dealing with the problem/opportunity they are working on.
- Each set has a high level manager who monitors their progress and who can open doors as needed for the set members to study the problem/opportunity and/or to implement the solution.
- The set reports to the sponsor on the outcomes it has achieved at the final meeting.

Most action learning programs have 5-6 sets working at the same time. A kick-off meeting is held with all the sets coming together as a large group in a workshop. The kick-off is attended by set members, their direct supervisors, set advisors, clients and the sponsor. A mid-term workshop is held to provide the opportunity for sets to learn from each other’s experience and a final workshop to continue that learning and to report on outcomes. The following diagram illustrates the set and workshop meetings.