

The Coach as Catalyst for Action Learning

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Abstract

Purpose – *Describes the role of the coach as catalyst who optimizes the power of action learning.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Examines the way in which the action-learning coach operates, how he or she builds the learning climate of the group, the distinction between the role and actions of an action-learning coach and those of a group facilitator, how and when the action-learning coach intervenes and the art and skill of asking questions.*

Findings – *Demonstrates that, through the use of reflective questions, the coach helps group members to examine their actions and interactions and thereby improve their capacity as a group to solve problems.*

Practical implications – *Reveals how the action-learning coach builds the competence of the group and improves long-term performance.*

Social implications – *Highlights how the coach acts as a mirror to enable the group to reflect on its experience, and convert that reflection into learning opportunities and results that can have wide-ranging consequences.*

Originality/value – *Argues that the strategic and timely interventions of the learning coach can have powerful business results.*

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The coach as the catalyst of action learning

The action-learning coach is the catalyst that optimizes the power as well as the enjoyment of action learning. She is the synergizer, the glue that bonds group members together as well as the yeast that enhances and expands their ability to learn and take vigorous actions. The primary role and focus of the action-learning coach is to facilitate the group's ability to grow and learn so that it, in turn, can better solve the problem. The focus and objective of the action-learning coach must always remain on the learning, and not the problem. Learning will provide the leverage for continuously improving group performance.

Through the use of reflective questions, the coach helps the group members to examine their actions and interactions and thereby improve their capacity as a group to solve this problem as well as future problems they may encounter as a team or as individuals. The more she is able to improve the speed and quality of learning and the growth of the group, the more successful will become the group's work. She acts as a mirror so as to enable the group to reflect on its experience, and convert that reflection into learning opportunities and results.

The learning coach models the listening and questioning skills needed by high-performance work groups. Her questions should be open and supportive. She should ask questions that enable the group members to reflect on how they are doing as a group, how they can improve, what they are learning and how their learning can be applied to themselves and to their organizations. Her enthusiasm for learning and her commitment to helping the group to succeed should be evident to the group.

Why is one person designated to focus on the learning?

Although it certainly would be possible for any group member to focus on the learning and to ask the questions assigned to the action-learning coach, the reality is that these tasks are rarely, if ever, performed unless someone is designated to concentrate on the tasks. In the absence of a designated action-learning coach, the reflective-learning questions are simply not asked, and if they are, they are done with poor quality and timing.

To maximize individual and group learning, a person must be designated to focus exclusively on that task. Problem-solvers (i.e., the group members) are focused, as they should be, on the *urgent* problem. The urgency of the problem always overwhelms the *importance* of learning. Thus, a person who has power must be assigned this important role, or else it gets lost because of time and the pressures (and tyranny) of the urgent.

Action learning is dependent on a few simple rules and processes. The action-learning coach ensures that these norms and learning and processes are followed. Unless he is empowered to be sure the group takes time to learn, inevitably, as with other groups that seek to do so, there is no one who ensures that sufficient time is set aside for capturing learning. The action-learning coach creates and ensures the atmosphere of learning and reflective inquiry. It is simply too much to expect anyone to manage the learning as well as the problem.

If no one is assigned the role and everyone becomes responsible for it, the learning questions will either get asked too often in too many ways or not at all. And the questions will probably be asked for purposes other than to help the group to learn. In addition, it is important to note that group members may resent or may be uncomfortable with anyone in the group at any time arbitrarily assuming the role and functions of the action-learning coach. Taking over this responsibility in a spontaneous way will likely be challenged.

Building the learning climate of the group

The action-learning coach helps to set the climate of learning and openness and of being non-judgmental and trusting through implementation of the role of the coach. He should demonstrate frank, targeted questioning and reflection skills. Although it is tempting for him to get involved with the problem, he must always focus on the process and interactions and strive to find opportunities for developing the group.

The action-learning coach should not be put in the role of being the expert, controller, teacher or chairperson. However, it is valuable if she is more knowledgeable and experienced in action learning than the other members of the group, as she may be responsible for orientating and preparing group members on the fundamentals of action learning, including the elements and ground rules.

The coach never tells the group members what to do, but through questions assists them in discovering what they need to do. He does not teach, but seeks to create an atmosphere wherein members can learn for and from themselves, to develop confidence in themselves, to reflect, to develop new ideas.(1) The role of the coach is not to correct or to be critical, but rather to raise the group's consciousness as to what is happening.

The coach must always be cognizant of the fact that significant learning occurs as a result of getting the group to reflect and significant reflection occurs as a result of good questions. He must also help the group members to assume responsibility for learning and for taking their knowledge and learning back to other parts of their lives. He initiates all these essential processes through questions, the right ones at the right time.

Questions - the *modus operandi* of the action-learning coach

The action-learning coach only asks questions, unless he is asked a question by the group. Why is it so important for the action-learning coach to only ask questions? First, questions cause people to reflect, and therefore to learn. If the primary role of the action-learning coach is to get people to reflect and learn, it is appropriate that he does this through questions. In action learning, we expect group members to ask questions and to make statements only in response to questions; therefore it is important that the coach models the behaviour that he expects from the group.

Questions are always more powerful and valuable than statements if you wish an individual or group to consider a perspective other than their own. Also, statements from the coach, unlike questions, will cause people to become defensive, defiant and/or dependent on the coach, all of which reactions are contrary to the spirit and power of action learning. If this occurs, the coach will be seen as unobjective, insensitive, controlling or manipulative.

The coach should not be seen as taking sides on issues, or making judgments about the behaviour or attitude of group members. Good reflective questions are non-judgmental. The person responding will make his own judgments. Thus the members need not be

afraid that the coach will be jumping in and pointing out an idea or behaviour that may have been detrimental to the group or indicative of a poor personality trait.

A final reason why it is better for the coach to ask questions than make statements is that it allows the group members to reflect and take their own decisions. For example, if the action-learning coach perceives an action as being negative or positive, and makes a statement to that effect, the group will accept his statement as the truth, even if that judgment is incorrect. As a result, the group may be totally thwarted and misdirected in its work and its learnings.

It is critical that the coach has power to intervene when he sees fit. When he does intervene, the group needs to stop working on the problem and listen to the question or questions raised by the action-learning coach. The group should continue focusing on the questions of the action-learning coach until the point that he leans back and indicates to the group members that they may resume working on the problem. Likewise, after sufficient forewarning as to the closing time for working on the problem, the coach has the power to end the problem-solving phase of the session so that he has sufficient time to assist the group in capturing and applying its learnings.

It is critical that the action-learning group devotes a portion of its time to learning, yet we know from our experience that, without some altering mechanism, the importance of learning will always be drowned out by the urgency of focusing on the problem. Therefore, power must be given to the person in charge of the important so that he can overrule the natural tendency of going with the power of the urgent.

If time for reflection and learning is not assured when the coach requests it, it simply will not happen. Learning will be neglected, if not totally forgotten, by the group. Experience and research have shown that time for learning and reflecting is abandoned unless it is the chief and sole responsibility of a designated person. The coach needs to be delegated this power, particularly if he is seen as a lower-level person in the organization. If he is perceived as someone with less knowledge or experience of the problem, he will be ignored and/or overruled by the other members of the action-learning group unless he has been given this authority.

Therefore, whenever the coach leans forward and joins the group circle, the group immediately stops (or completes the sentence or thought begun) and listens to the questions of the action-learning coach. As long as he is within the work circle, he has control of the discussion. It is important that he does not lose that control and allow the group to jump back into the problem (the urgent) before he has indicated that they may resume, for once a group ignores the authority of the action-learning coach, it will be difficult to ever regain that authority in future interventions. If he can successfully and comfortably retain control during the first intervention, he will be more easily able to retain it for the rest of the life of that group.

Facilitating versus coaching in action learning

In action learning, we make a distinction between the role and actions of an action-learning coach and those of a group facilitator. Although there is certainly much overlap between these two roles, there are also clear differences in terms of emphasis and philosophical beliefs.

The facilitator's primary role and focus are on helping the group members to improve the functioning of the group. He does this by observing and occasionally making statements and offering advice on what they could do better. This is expected of him from the group since he has been trained to be a facilitator and that is his role. The members depend on him to guide them, and hope that their individual behaviours, if not productive, do not get publicized or blown out of proportion by the facilitator. The expertise and role of the facilitator can lead to dependence and, in some cases, resentment.

The action-learning coach has significantly different purposes. His primary role is to enable the members to take responsibility themselves to discover how to develop as a team, to increase their awareness of how they are doing and to generate norms and processes that will improve their effectiveness. The focus is on learning and connecting that learning to action, and the means to achieve that learning is through reflective questions. Action-learning groups become increasingly confident in their own internal ability to manage their group process and successfully to complete their tasks. The role of the learning coach needs to be performed by someone, but any of us would be able to do it, if called upon. The group members do not need to worry about being judged or criticized by the coach. The values of action learning are perfectly embodied in the coach. Members quickly become very comfortable with the coach and with each other. The process becomes ever more seamless and natural.

Interventions and questions of the action-learning coach

In addition to the knowing what questions to ask and how to ask questions, knowing *when* to intervene is also an important skill for the action-learning coach. Interventions should occur at the *beginning* of each session, one or more times *during* the session and at the *end* of the action-learning session. Let us now briefly examine how the action-learning coach intervenes at each of these stages and the types of questions asked during those interventions.

Intervention and questions at the beginning of the action-learning session

His first intervention (although technically not an intervention since it occurs before the group begins its work) occurs at the very beginning of the first session of the group. At this juncture, he checks to be sure that all the group members are familiar with the principles and norms of action learning. Once he has been assured that the members understand the action-learning process, the action-learning coach asks the problem-presenter(s) to state the problem/challenge. In subsequent meetings of the group, he will ask the individual (in the case of multiple problem sets) or the group (in single problem sets) what actions have been taken since the previous session of the group and what has been the impact of those actions as well as learnings gained.

Interventions and questions during the action-learning session

There is no set point or time frame at which the learning coach makes his during-session interventions. He may sometimes intervene within the first few minutes and at other times may not make his first intervention until 20 or 40 minutes have elapsed. The action-learning coach may intervene as many as 4-5 times during a two-hour session. He should always intervene at least once for, in addition to providing the group with some breathing space, it helps the members to become more aware of what they are doing well and what they might do better, to identify and continue their positive interactions and to improve upon the obstructive and unproductive behaviours.

There are always some more comfortable and natural times to intervene; for example, when the group is not working well or when there is struggling or uncertainty as to what to do next. Enabling the group members to be more conscious of the factors that may be causing this difficulty will allow them to address it directly and intentionally and thereby identify actions to remedy or overcome it.

An interesting phenomenon occurs while the action-learning coach has the group members reflecting on the quality of their group process and work. While the group consciously “works” on what it is doing well, what can be improved and so forth, members’ subconscious continues to work on the problem. After the group has finished working on the process, it returns refreshed and reinvigorated and ready to work on the problem. Amazingly, instead of being sidelined and delayed by the coach’s intervention, the group discovers that its subconscious has been “milling around and thinking about” the problem, and now generates ideas and solutions that might never have occurred if members had continued focusing only on the problem.

There is a wide variety of questions that may be asked during the action-learning sessions. Generally, they will fall into four major categories: (1) problem-framing questions, (2) action-strategy questions, (3) group-effectiveness questions, and (4) learning questions.

The first question that is normally asked by the action-learning coach at during-session interventions is “How are we doing as a team – okay or not okay?” This is an excellent question that allows an easy transition from the intensity of working on the problem to moving minds to begin reflecting on their group’s process and productivity. Remember that it is difficult for people to move from the urgent problem into a reflective stage where the focus is on the process and the learning. It is important to obtain everyone’s response to this question so that one or a few people’s opinion does not determine what each individual feels or thinks. This question also provides an opportunity to get everyone involved, especially the thus-far quiet person who may have had little or no participation. This is what is referred to as the “gut question” in that the action-learning coach is exploring members’ feelings about the quality of their group work thus far.

Once the learning coach has got a sense of how each member feels about himself or herself as a member of the group, he moves from the feeling or emotional level to the cognitive or intellectual level by asking the second question, “What have we done well thus far?” Whether the first question was answered by everyone saying “not okay” or “great” or somewhere in between, the action-learning coach believes and knows that the group has done some things well. For example, at a minimum, everyone is asking questions because of the norm of “statements only in response to questions”. They are also probably listening, gathering good information, working on the problem and so on. He wants the group to identify what those positive behaviours were in order that they are continued. In this way, the coach is applying the positive focus of appreciative inquiry (2) which energizes the group and causes members to be even more satisfied and more confident when they resume their work on the problem.

The coach’s next question, “What could we do better?” is also always asked, even if everyone in the group said “We doing everything well,” because, again, the coach believes and knows that every group has some behaviours that can be improved. The responses to these two questions – “What have we done well?” and “What could we do better?” begin to form powerful and positive norms that enable the group to immediately improve the manner in which it operates. The group is thus able to avoid the traditional forming-storming-norming-performing pattern of the traditional group to the much superior performing-norming-performing stages that occur in action-learning groups.

Note the use of the word “we” by the coach when she is asking the questions. This conveys to the group that she is a full member of the group and anxious for its success, even though her role is to focus on a complementary element of the group’s work. If the coach instead asked “How are you doing? What have you done well?” it would imply that the coach is separate, different, maybe above the group, and thus able to avoid responsibility for any failures or weaknesses of the group.

There is a multitude of possible questions that the action-learning coach could ask that helps the group to ask better questions, listen more carefully, become more creative and so on. Questions about the quality of the group’s questions are important since we believe that it is the quality of the questions that will ultimately determine the success of the group.

The action-learning coach should keep the time consumed by his interventions to no more than 10 minutes so that the group can quickly return to working on the problem. Some interventions may last for a minute as they consist of one question addressed to one person (e.g., Jim, what do you think is the impact of your question – or statement – on the group?) The coach therefore must carefully consider and chose questions that best enable the group to improve its capacity as a group and thereby more quickly and effectively handle the problem that group members are working on.

Intervention and questions at the end of action-learning session

The intervention and questions at the end of each action-learning session provide immensely valuable opportunities for significant and transformative learning for individuals as well as the group. To adequately prepare time-wise for the end-of-session intervention, the action-learning coach alerts the group about the timeframes for the meeting. For example, “This two-hour session is scheduled to end at 4pm; since I need the final 15 minutes to help us to capture our learnings and identify ways to apply our knowledge, we will need to complete our work on the problem at 3:45pm.” The coach may then provide a 15-minute alert at 3:30pm and remind the group to begin focusing on actions that they will be taking between this and the next session.

In multiple-problem sets, each person will have approximately 20-30 minutes for receiving help and guidance on his or her problem. The coach will tee up each round by letting everyone know the amount of time available for this problem and at what time she will initiate her final intervention. A five-minute reminder may be provided to ensure that action steps are identified before asking his final questions.

The action-learning coach directs the first set of questions to the entire group for single-problem sets or, in multiple-problem sets, to the individual who has just presented the problem. Asking the question “What action are you (we) going to take?” forces the individual or group to articulate specific action steps. No session or sub-session should end without a determination and selection of next steps. Being able to respond to this question allows the group members some degree of satisfaction that they have indeed helped or begun to help the individual and/or organization. The question, “Were you helped?” (which almost always receives an enthusiastic “yes”) solidifies the fact that the group has been helpful and valuable. It is rare, if not impossible, for an individual or group not to be helped by questions being asked from a variety of perspectives. As a minimum, the problem has become much clearer for, as Weick observes, “How can I know what I am thinking until I hear what I have said?” (3)

The question, “How were you/we helped?” shows the group how various questions and ideas coalesced and resulted in these useful strategies and possible solutions. It also sets up the group for the second series of questions that focuses on how well the group has done, what it has learned, what skills have been developed and what knowledge can be applied.

The action-learning coach needs to choose well which questions will be most valuable and helpful for the group as a whole and for the learning of each individual. Her time will be limited, so she should have selected three or four questions that she believes will accomplish the most learning and provide the greatest leverage for the future.

Follow-up questions of the action-learning coach

The greatest power and impact generally derives from the follow-up questions raised by the action-learning coach. Follow-up questions will quickly enhance and elevate the competency of the group and/or individual. Follow-up questions (sometimes just a “why?” or “Can you give me an example?” or “how?”) create deep levels of learning,

transformative learning, and double-loop (causes for) and triple-loop learning (systems behind). Often, the follow-up question is simply building upon the response to the previous question. Careful listening is needed for great follow-up questions. Here is a simple illustration of follow-up questions:

- Coach: What could we do better as a group?
- Response: We could be more creative.
- Coach: How could we be more creative?
- Response: (None)
- Coach: Why do you think we are not being creative?
- Response: I do not think we are building on each other's ideas.
- Coach: Why not?
- Response: I don't know.
- Coach: Anyone else who has any thoughts as to why we are not building on each other's ideas?
- Response: I think we are more interested in getting our own ideas into the mix rather than listening to someone else's ideas.
- Coach: Any other ideas as to why we are not building on each other's ideas?
- Responses: (May be several)
- Coach: What is the impact of not being interested in someone else's ideas?
- Response: We show that we do not think much of their ideas.
- Coach: What are some ways in which we could be more creative?
- Responses: (May be several)
- Coach: Okay, let's resume working on the problem.

As can also be seen from examining the scenario above, the action-learning coach follows a fairly simple procedure in the asking of follow-up questions:

- She addresses the follow-up question first of the person who has answered the initial question.
- After this response, the coach looks to see if others may have different perspectives and responses as to what is happening or additional comments to the question.
- If the person addressed does not have a response, the coach quickly turns to the other members of the group for their response(s).

Note that the coach does not have to agree or confirm the response or insight. His responsibility is to help the group members to become aware of their behaviour and the positive or negative consequences of that behaviour. Once a group recognizes what is happening and why, it will quickly and almost automatically adapt its behaviour to achieve what the group has determined is valuable. In the scenario presented above, for example, the group, somewhat to its surprise, started asking very innovative questions within 10 minutes and came up with great strategies by the end of the session. This positive change of the group's interactions occurs naturally and automatically because the

coach has helped the group to set new norms and subsequently their desired behaviours were converted into real actions.

The art and skill of asking questions

Although inexperienced action-learning coaches may initially be concerned about their ability to ask questions, there is generally little to fear since the power is primarily in the question, not in who is asking the question. Using a script of the questions will provide the starting point. Listening carefully to the response will provide the clues for the follow-up questions. As one gains experience in serving in the role of action-learning coach, the questions flow much more easily and one is more relaxed and confident in introducing the next questions.

It is best if the coach phrases her questions in the positive view, using what Cooperrider refers to as appreciative inquiry. So instead of asking what went wrong, the coach will tend to ask questions that focus on what has gone well, what could be done, how it could be improved. The approach will guide the group in seeking what might be rather than what is not. The focus remains on improvement and continuous learning rather than complaining and venting.

It is important and comforting to know that the coach accomplishes much of his objective simply by asking the questions. The subconscious of the group members will wrestle with the coach's questions while working on the problem and changes will begin to occur simply because the question was asked.

Although the action-learning coach is not directly involved in working on the problem, it is important that he shows his deep interest in the problem and his sympathetic concern that the group is successful and is working well as a team. He can demonstrate this by body language that communicates his support for the group. It is also helpful to jot down notes and possible questions he will be asking at the time of his intervention. Observe when the energy level of the group is rising and falling. And whenever someone says "That is a great question!" be sure to write that question down and later ask about it. One can be quite certain that the key to an eventual innovative solution has its seeds in that question.

Action-learning coaches should be comfortable when there is silence, or when there is no immediate response to a question they have posed. Allow the group members to reflect and let them know that you are comfortable with the silence. If the person asked is unable to answer the question, after a few seconds turn and re-asks the question of the rest of the group. Sometimes there will be no response to a question. That is okay, as the question will continue to incubate in their minds and perhaps a volume of responses will emerge when that same question is asked at the next intervention. Remember that the power and value are sometimes more in the question and the reflection that it causes than in the responses that it generates. Also, the action-learning coach has conditioned and prepared the subconscious to reflect on the questions asked during previous interventions. Thus the

next time the action-learning coach asks the same question, there are always much greater and richer responses.

Power of questions asked by action-learning coach

What makes the questions of the learning coach so powerful? Why do questions from a learning coach generate rapid and significant change in the culture and behaviour of the group? The intensity of the situation as well as the quality of the questions produce this impact. Bion notes that if something is intense and done well, it need only occur once for behaviour and values to change. (4) In action learning, everyone knows that their success depends on each other, that they are accountable for the successful solution to the problem. In addition, as they have identified areas for learning and growth, they have shared their vulnerabilities. The magnitude of the context, combined with the role and power of the learning coach, causes his questions to go to both the consciousness and even more strongly to the subconsciousness of each member of the group. The resultant responses trigger a natural biological need to change the individual's and the group's behaviours.

It is also valuable to note that while the group members are focusing on learnings as a result of questions addressed to them by the coach, their sub-conscious is working on the problem. The reverse behaviour occurs once the coach allows the group to return to working on the problem; namely, the subconscious is now working on the learning while the conscious is working on the problem.

Reflection is critical for the generation of innovative ideas. Reflection is made intentional by the action-learning coach and results in the interweaving of emotional and cognitive mindsets. The questions of the action-learning coach cause members to return to the experience and replay it. This helps them to capture and acknowledge the feelings associated with the experience.

How the coaching process accelerates learning

A significant amount of research has been undertaken over the past 50 years to identify ways to enhance the speed, quality and retention of learning. Probably the best known and respected was research conducted by Heiman and Slomianko (5) who identified the four actions that were deemed the most critical for increasing the speed and quality of learning, namely:

1. Asking questions (questions actually cause the brain to open the synapses so as to better receive data and learn)
2. Breaking up complex ideas and tasks into understandable, specific parts
3. Being asked to identify what and how one has learned
4. Connecting and applying the learning to specific goals or actions.

We can quickly and readily see that all four of these actions are an integral part of action learning. The action-learning coach explicitly and purposefully executes each of these

actions on a regular basis. Through his questions, he helps to bring to the consciousness of the group members what is happening and what they are learning. They become more aware of how they are learning and how they can apply it elsewhere.

Values of the action-learning coach

Due to the intensity and intimacy of the action-learning process, group members will quickly come to see the attitude of the coach toward them. A positive, humanistic confidence toward people in general will make the coach much more effective. With the right attitude and right questions, the coach becomes highly valued and appreciated by the group. Carter McNamara (2002), a leading action-learning theorist and practitioner, recently identified several values and attitudes that the action-learning coach should embrace relative to members of the action-learning groups:

- Members have great or even unlimited potential
- They must develop first and primarily from within themselves
- Learning and development include the whole person – thoughts, feelings, heads and heart
- People can develop a great deal by asking the right questions and by closely examining their assumptions and perspectives about themselves and the world around them
- The goals and direction of coaching come from the nature and needs of the group members
- The role of actions and experience is critical to learning and development – without practice, there is no knowledge
- Coaching is a way of working with people that should leave them more competent and more fulfilled so that they are more able to contribute to their organizations and find meaning in what they do. (6)

Other roles of action-learning coach

In addition to his coaching role, the action-learning coach may be called upon to serve a variety of other roles to ensure the success of action learning in the organization.

1. Trainer/teacher

Often the action-learning coach is the person who is responsible for orientating and preparing the organization as a whole and individuals of action-learning groups about action learning. She should brief them on the basic principles and benefits of action learning, including the components and ground rules of action learning. Such training may occur before large groups prior to the establishment of an organization's action-learning programmes. At the beginning of the first action-learning session, he introduces or reviews the fundamental components of action learning, and particularly his role as the action-learning coach.

The teaching role may arise during the action-learning sessions when he is asked by group members to explain why an activity is or is not working, or is asked to offer a technique or tools or concept that might be beneficial for the group in improving the quality or speed of its work. This connecting of current activity to a principle or theory can provide a valuable service to the members. It is important never to impose help, but to either respond to a request or to introduce by asking questions such as “Would a tool be helpful here?” or “What principle or theory is occurring here?”

2. Administrative

In most organizations, the action-learning coach also serves as the administrative coordinator and manager of the action-learning programme. She is involved in arranging the sites and dates of the action-learning projects as well as serving as a bridge between the group and top management. She maintains contact with key people outside the groups to ensure their continued support. Appropriate people are updated as necessary. She may need to work with the sponsor to assure him that the group is progressing well or to confirm that he will support the action being proposed by the group. She may serve as a link with, and provide support for, the organization’s action-learning champions. Between meetings of the action-learning groups, she may send reminders of next dates, of completing the actions, and the importance of applying the learnings in other parts of the organization. If the membership of the action-learning group is composed of people from different organizations, she may need to serve as the key link and contact point among the various organizations.

3. Adviser/champion/internal marketer and promoter

Another critical role played by action-learning coaches is that of being the “cheerleader” of action learning, the person who promotes action learning to top management and throughout the organization, who develops the appropriate orientation programmes and announcements, who recruits sponsors and champions, who advises those affected by the action-learning groups. Organizations with several action-learning coaches may divide the responsibilities of promoting, championing and advising.

Skills and attributes of the successful action-learning coach

There are a number of important skills, values and attributes that will enable the action-learning coach to be successful.

1. Ability to ask questions

The key skill of the action-learning coach is the ability to ask good questions – the initial and especially follow-up questions. She should be able to ask questions that make people think and feel challenged; the questions should be supportive and positive rather than critical. In order to consistently ask good questions, the action-

learning coach needs to have a strong and sincere belief in the power of questions and the critical role of action-learning coach in asking questions. The manner of introducing questions should be gentle and not arrogant. He should screen himself and determine whether this question will be truly helpful to the group. He should be looking at how questions can create possibilities for significant learnings and breakthrough actions.

2. Courage and authenticity

Asking questions is not always easy, especially the tough follow-up questions or questions that require deep and intensive soul searching. The action-learning coach needs to be courageous and authentic, be strong and not intimidated by the rank or expertise or character of the person to whom the question is posed. He should trust his doubts to confirm if agreement and/or clarity truly exist.

3. Timing in interventions

Finding the ideal time for intervening is an art for the action-learning coach. If he intervenes too early, there may be insufficient experience for the group or individual to have sufficient data to adequately respond, and thus there may be a missed opportunity for understanding. If the intervention is too late, there may be missed opportunity for learning as well as a frustration on the part of the participants that the group is struggling too long. Experience will make the coach grow more confident in his intervention timing. And, though timing is important, any time that one intervenes can be an occasion of great learning.

4. Confidence and trust in the process and the people in the group

It is important that the coach has confidence in his role as an action-learning coach, and demonstrates this confidence by his relaxed belief in the action-learning process and that the group will be successful. He should be self-assured that the action-learning process will always work because it is built upon many intertwining theories and principles that have been put in place. The coach should believe that everyone in the group has the necessary abilities to solve the problem and his job is to merely bring out and capitalize on these strengths. The coach's job is to get the group from today to tomorrow (unlike the therapist who seeks to get you from yesterday to today). With a strong confidence in the success of the process and the people, the action-learning coach is able to tolerate ambiguity more easily.

5. Values of humility, integrity, patience and openness

The action-learning coach, because of the power given him, should be cognizant of how his values as well as his actions affect the group and the action-learning process. His presence alone has a significant effect on the group; the members know that the coach may raise questions at any point that will challenge their thinking and actions, decisions made and not made. Therefore, a number of characteristics are fitting for an

action-learning coach, including openness, patience, integrity, humility, the ability to be non-judgmental and being a reflective person himself. Like the leader in Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*, the action-learning coach is so subtle and natural in his effectiveness and transformative actions that the group does not realize how powerful and beneficial he is. Group members do not realize his value unless or until they no longer have him.

6. Strong coordination and planning skills

The action-learning coach has a variety of other roles in addition to serving as a coach to an action-learning group. These other roles require strong co-ordination skills, someone who can see the big picture and not become lost in details. Since he needs to be able to maintain working and supportive relationships with so many people inside and outside the group and even the organization, he must be able to manage many "balls in the air" at the same time.

7. Deep listener

Successful action-learning coaches need to possess strong listening skills. They should be able to hear what is not said as well as what is said. Careful observation and good note taking allow them to be in tune with who is saying what, how, when and to whom. Active listening requires a great deal of attention. This strong listening enables them to acquire a "helicopter-type" perspective and holistic view. They must be able to stand apart from the problem and focus on the development of the group.

8. Strong commitment to learning

Action-learning coaches must be eager to see people learn. As tempting as it may be to do otherwise during the action-learning sessions, he must focus on the learning, not on the issue or problem being discussed. He understands and appreciates how adults learn and sees learning as a way of life. And he recognizes that learners can only learn for themselves.

9. Positive attitude toward group members

The action-learning coach respects each person and has a concern for the well-being of all members of the group. He wants them to succeed with the project and to learn from so doing. His ability to empathize and be supportive is very important. He should see members as curious and thoughtful about the problem and about each other. These attitudes generate more trust toward him as well as each other as well as more openness among the group members.

10. Self-awareness and self-confidence

The action-learning coach needs be cognizant of his strengths and limitations. His self-confidence enables him to be authentic and resilient. His humility demonstrates

him as someone who is still willing and able to learn. He should want to be seen as someone who can be trusted, who can handle rivalries, distrust and anger.

Impact of the action-learning coach

The impact of the efforts of the action-learning coach ultimately builds the competence of the group and leads to stronger long-term performance. As the group learns and matures, the members are better able to self-correct and are able to learn on a continuous basis. The group soon has a stronger capacity for learning and changing. The learning coach is a catalyst whose strategic and timely interventions lead to momentous and powerful business results and learning successes.

Note

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