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Action learning: Reflections of a first-time coach

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Action learning: reflections of a first-time coach

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Introduction

In recent years, action learning has been widely adopted as a problem solving and leadership development tool. Many organizations are beginning to realize the benefits of action learning in identifying innovations and building strong teams. As part of an Asian multi-business group's corporate initiative to sustain business growth, an action learning program for the three business divisions was launched in June 2010. The business leaders and key managers attended a one-day seminar to better understand the action learning methodology and experience first-hand the action learning process. A two-day coach training workshop was conducted in October 2010 for the first batch of 24 in-house action learning coaches. Subsequently, these coaches were deployed to facilitate action learning sessions in their respective divisions.

The origin of this article arose as a result of the author's initial first-hand experience in coaching an action learning team. Based on the belief that initial exposure to new methodologies usually sheds the most insight, the author has attempted to document the initial first-hand action learning coaching experience and share the lessons learned in organizing action learning sessions. The purpose of the article is to reflect on key learning points when initiating action learning sessions and provide tips on what to expect from such sessions.

Getting started

An action learning session, typically, involves a group of six to eight individuals working on a problem, taking action, and learning as individuals and as a team with the assistance of an action learning coach (Marquardt, 2004). A problem presenter would be asked to share a real and urgent organizational challenge. The team members would then raise questions in order to identify possible solutions. In the process, the coach would intervene at appropriate junctures to highlight learning opportunities. Two sets of ground rules help to guide the proceedings:

1. statements are made only in response to questions; and

2. the action learning coach has the authority to intervene whenever a learning opportunity arises.

Finally, before the closure of the session, a listing of actions is taken to ensure follow-up actions.

Key learning points

From my personal experience as an action learning coach, there were four key learning points:

1. team member selection;

2. role of action learning coach;

3. questioning techniques; and

4. desired outcomes.

Each of these is discussed below.

Team member selection

On team member selection, diversity of the team is crucial. While the proposition seemed intuitive, actual implementation may pose a certain degree of difficulty. The reason is because conducting a business discussion with a group of people from diverse backgrounds is, generally, considered unproductive. Many participants may feel that they are not able to contribute effectively because of a lack of contextual knowledge of the specific business issue on hand. In action learning sessions, unlike regular business meetings, only the problem presenter has intimate knowledge of the business issues involved. In such an environment, the necessary conditions are created for other team members to ask fundamental and ''stupid'' questions to challenge the status quo. To this end, diversity helps to promote the fielding of such questions and looking at the problem from different angles. The problem presenter would need to defend the initial rationale for the business decisions and further test their assumptions. Another point to note is, in selecting the issue to work, the person who presents the problem should have some authority to take action or at least make recommendations for tackling the challenge.

Role of action learning coach

The main role of the action learning coach is to ensure meta-learning or ''learning how to learn'' among team members. By intervening at appropriate junctures, the coach helps team members become aware of inquiry and development practices so that they can be internalized. The coach is like a referee who presides over the meeting process but does not participate in the discussion of the content. A key challenge for first-time coaches can be an awkwardness felt when they make an intervention as the action can be perceived as in interruption to the proceedings. Given the pressures to provide instant answers to business problems, interventions may be viewed as a waste of time and totally unrelated to the problem solving process. Nonetheless, first-time coaches must learn to overcome this ''disability'' and preserve the meta-learning aspect of the session by viewing interventions not as interruptions but as opportunities to strengthen the group's meta-learning capabilities. At times, meta-learning may not be immediately apparent over a single action learning session. Thus, a coach may need to follow-up on themes over a series of sessions to make certain continuous team and individual learning has occurred. To a great extent, the role of a coach is really to develop a reflective practice over several action learning sessions among team members.

Questioning techniques

A basic attribute of leaders is the ability to ask the ''right questions''. The action learning approach helps to develop leadership skills by encouraging team members to ask rather than to tell. Questioning techniques, therefore, is an important component of the action learning process (Revans, 1998). However, observations from the initial action learning sessions conducted suggest that many team members find some difficulty in crafting

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thoughtful questions. To improve the line of questioning, some suggestions are offered. The initial framing of the problem statement is important because it sets the baseline for subsequent line of questioning. The appropriate ''leveling of the problem'' greatly improves the chances to sift out the root cause from the symptoms. In such cases, asking ''why'' repeatedly can be helpful. In the age of quick fixes and instant solutions, the coach should encourage team members to listen more, ask laser-type focused questions, restrain from giving advice too early and avoid jumping to conclusions. However, for complex problems with many ''root causes'', patience is a much needed asset to finally arrive at the ''right level'' of the problem as it is, generally, an iterative process.

Desired outcomes

Desired outcomes of action learning can be identified at the process, output, individual and group levels. At the process level, a desired outcome would be when members start to take it upon themselves to support the problem presenter to solve the problem. When this happens, one can be sure that a ''connection'' has been established among the team members. Such team dynamics created ensures that members view the challenge as the ''group's problem'' and not just one ''individual's problem''. At the output level, the most visible outcome is the identification of innovative solutions to a challenge. However, there are times when the problem represented is much too complex and the action learning session only results in a better and cleared understanding of the issues. This can then lead to identification of root causes and plausible alternatives, and refined scoping of the issues at hand. Therefore, solutions may not be the sole measure of success. Finally, at the individual level, it is envisaged that leadership skills are developed through active questioning. At the group level, through the active identification of learning opportunities by the coach, team members develop a better understanding of group dynamics and their role within the group, which can lead to an increased ability to work in teams.

Conclusion

Action learning is an effective problem solving and leadership development tool. Its effectiveness can be enhanced by developing a deeper understanding of key factors affecting the action learning process. These factors include team member selection, role of the coach, questioning techniques and desired outcomes.

References

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