



Action Learning Forum

EXPLORING ACTION LEARNING

As developed by the CGO Action Learning Project Team, May 2000

‘Action learning’ is a broad term used to encompass a whole range of approaches to learning-by-doing. There is a considerable literature on the variations on action learning. At the CGO, we have distilled elements from a number of sources as the basis for this exploratory project. We feel that action learning is a promising approach for change agents involved in making and sustaining change. It breaks down the polarity between theory and practice. (As Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in social psychology in the 1940s observed, “there is nothing as practical as a good theory.”) Action learning draws its momentum from collective involvement and openness to the co-evolution of concepts and practices.

Co-evolution of concepts and practices

The term action learning is used in the literature to embrace a continuum of practices from ‘practice-based action learning’ at one end to ‘action research’ at the other. No practice-based action learning is unconcerned with ideas, and no action research is concerned only with conceptual output. According to a widely referenced definition of action learning, “There is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning” (Pedler, 1991: xxii-xxiii). While valuing both action *and* learning, approaches differ in the amount of attention given to, or importance attached to, the conceptual or knowledge output of the process. CGO is concerned with working with practitioners to advance the state of the field and make a difference in organizations, addressing concepts and actions integratively. Learning and change are important results in themselves.

At CGO, we work at the cusp of theory and practice, and our approach to action learning is anchored in the understanding that practices and ideas evolve together through cycles of action and reflection and in the company of others engaged in a meaningful and motivated inquiry into their own work. This approach to action learning is consistent with our mission and way of operating. We expect that this approach will itself evolve through the dynamic process of engaging in action learning during this pilot project.

Most action learning models emphasize reflection, and moreover, that reflection is not in opposition to action but is intrinsic as an enabler, and even an aspect, of action. For example, McGill and Beaty (1995:194-195), in a review of the role of reflection in action learning, write that “reflection is more significantly achieved in a social context,” and “reflection is an intentional event.” They continue:

Senge (1990), drawing upon the work of Argyris and Schon (1978) and Schon (1983), suggests some useful skills that enhance our skills of reflection. Skills of reflection ‘concern slowing down our thinking processes so that we can become more aware of how we form our mental models and the ways they influence our actions (Senge, 1990). Mental models represent images, assumptions, stories that we carry in our heads about people, families, organizations. ‘Our mental models determine not only how we make sense of the world, but how we take action’ (*Ibid.*).

Beyond “getting it right”

The intended purpose is not to get the action “right” or even to maximize effectiveness within an existing conceptual framework. Rather, it is to move on a collective journey towards a new understanding of what we are doing, which in itself would open up new possibilities for action. Some new language emerging among diversity practitioners suggests that diversity in organizations leads to “richer solution sets” to problems – language that captures some of the spirit of action learning.

Naming and sense-making

Moving between action and reflection is more a process of telling a story and making sense, rather than raising a problem or issue for diagnosis and then fixing it. This is not the territory of right answers. Instead, the focus is on increasing awareness and therefore expanding options. One of the purposes of telling our own stories is for us to hear ourselves, to notice the process of how we frame and describe what we are doing, and to be able to deepen our thinking about it.

Organizations are all too good at naming something in a way that reduces its potential and shuts down the transformative possibility held in an action. It is difficult in strong cultures to discover and maintain alternative language and views. There need to be more places in the system where these alternatives can rise to the surface and people can reflect on them mindfully. Action learning provides one such place and also models how these places can be created in our everyday workplaces.

Away from “heroic action”

In cycles of action and reflection, the ‘action’ part does not always look like action in a traditional sense. For instance, setting out to notice something, or pay attention to something, is an action. From the perspective of recent work on feminist approaches to knowing and doing, it is important to be alert to the tendency toward heroic action – the push to *do* rather than to *be*. Some action learning groups use the phrase, “be the change you want to see.” Sometimes deciding not to do, or to stop doing, is a valid choice – “learn when to persist and when to desist” (a phrase used by Prof. Judy Marshall, Bath, England).

Small actions can ripple in interesting ways. For example, if we are used to focusing on managing upwards, talking with someone in a lower position might open fresh ideas. Actions need not be codified and announced in strategic plans but can be small experiments in the course of everyday work; no one else has to know we’re doing it if it involves taking quiet notice of what we’re doing, giving ourselves a little bit of space to reflect or note our gut reactions, or watching the effects of gentle pushes against a culture or moments of authenticity or spontaneity.

Deep cultural change in complex systems

The connection with ‘deep cultural change’ can be made: we know enough about how difficult it is to change organizations (and other systems) to know that work on gender equity and broader diversity engages the resistance of power systems and tends to produce surface/first-order change rather than fundamental/second-order change. Many of us have experienced the sense of pushing against something pretty big and immovable. We have stories to tell, as do others. The acts of telling stories and understanding them richly are moments of mobilization and change. Action learning emphasizes that new stories do not simply set the stage for change, they can be the change.

Change agents' reflections on their roles

One of the ways in which action learning can be important is to enable individuals to begin to see themselves as actors inside a complex system which is partly held together by the everyday actions we all carry out. The process of honoring our individual work – by paying attention to it, talking about it, being heard, and having our accounts thoughtfully reflected back to us – is itself very empowering. It is also significant because individuals *are* important, and our own understanding of what we are engaged in is a crucial part of enabling us to act with intention and purpose.

It is also the case that much of the work that people who are trying to bring about change in organizations carry out is hidden: it takes place in the form of largely internal debates, decisions, sense-making processes, survival strategies, defense mechanisms, and so on. The first-person *experience* is seldom shared and used as a basis for learning. Engaging in cycles of action and reflection with others is intended to help make explicit some of these silent activities, so that they can be part of a wider process of understanding.

Collective learning

Action learning involves more than the simultaneous learning of individuals as in a seminar situation. Instead, we use our collective energy to come to new understandings and possibilities for practice and to guide one another's reflections and actions. The ongoing importance of reflection and the iterative experiments with actions are made possible and sustained by having a group that holds the process, listens to one another's dilemmas, and helps to name and frame issues. The group members remember for one other and create something to come back to. We hope we might be in touch in between sessions, but that is something that will evolve in the group. The work of action learning need not be something on top of our regular work. Instead, when we go back to work, we can think about paying deeper attention to what it is we do – maybe notice if we achieve one small win or how we or others try to make one. Being more mindful and remembering to notice are simple but powerful elements of action learning. It is not an additional assignment so much as a way of being in our work.

The momentum of action learning requires continuity in the group and engagement in the process: being prepared to share what is going on and to discuss and work out any anxieties about confidentiality, status, or the appearance of “doing things right” or needing to “have the answers.” The group can evolve into a space where it is safe to be vulnerable, and to take that vulnerability toward collective learning. Our common concerns will show us places where it is not our individual craziness and frustration but strong systemic and cultural forces at work.

Multi-level approach

While individual learning embedded in the group process is important, there are other layers as well. There is learning at a collective level, hopefully in a way that advances thinking and practice in the area of diversity. While individuals practice skills of listening and inquiry, the group as a whole learns across boundaries from a range of examples. There is engagement with systemic processes and learning that can be carried back to the work setting to effect change.

Collective ownership of the process

One role of the CGO is to create a “liberating structure” – some principles, schedules, and ideas within which to work, creating just enough structure for the group to be enabled to work creatively. When we offer our prototypes, we invite discussions about how to adapt them. The group will decide when to bring in outside concepts or readings as inputs, making sure they are relevant for advancing collective learning

at particular points along the way. As the model for an action learning process develops, we hope that participants will think of ways to extend it in this forum and perhaps in other ways in other settings.

Ambiguity and inquiry

A root assumption of action learning is that our working knowledge and theories-in-use are always conditional and in process. A critical part of the action learning and inquiry process is to explore the dynamics between reductionist certainty about a situation and the possibility of holding multiple awarenesses of what might be going on. Tolerance of ambiguity can be enabling rather than constraining. Change agents who have learned to be fluent in the status quo of their organization in order to find strategic leverage point, but who are also working on the language of alternatives, may be carrying around multiple, unarticulated, and sometimes contradictory agendas. Surfacing and working with these can be empowering. Some action learning groups use the phrase 'creating dialogic space' to try to capture this spirit. We use the language of 'inquiry' to encourage one another to take an 'inquiring' look at our work, to act 'inquiringly' towards our colleagues, and so on.

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