

Importance of a Learning Journal



Action learners are required to keep a journal to document their learning so that when they produce their outputs, understanding the process of how they learned is a breeze

For years I have wondered why people write in diaries or keep journals. Somehow, it never seemed worthwhile to me to simply sit and contemplate on the past – why write about life when you could live it? However, in recent years I have changed my tune. For the past five years I have written to my sons each week as they have grown up and moved away. I try to keep them informed of what is happening at home and in our small circle of family and friends. It has been a good exercise for me. I have learned that writing is not simply an act of mindlessly recording the past, but an active working out of ideas and a form of problem solving in itself that builds creativity and ingenuity, which can then be usefully applied to any of my daily tasks. Also, I am able to read what is on my mind each week as I write to my sons. I find it fascinating to look back and see how I handled certain situations and problems, and learn and grow from this reflection as well.

Many astute action learners keep a journal to chronicle their learning. It is amazing what is lost when we do not take the time to write it down. Our mind wipes some thoughts and experiences away as clean as a windshield wiper does rain. It is truly best to write down our ideas as soon as we can because there is no better time to describe how we feel than in that moment. Often, our learning and maturity increases accordingly as we handle increasingly complex situations. Sometimes, we are amazed at how silly our thinking was when we look back, and can have a good laugh at ourselves when reading our first learning journal entries.

Action learners are required to keep a journal to document their learning. Then, when they produce their findings to others, understanding the process of how they learned is a breeze. Recently, I heard of a learner who had lost his learning journal, and I was at first surprised at how upset he sounded. How hard could it be to just write it again? However, when I thought about how I would feel if I lost my journal, I understood: he had lost some thoughts forever.



Typically, like many other problems associated with failing to plan for the future, people do not keep track of their progress. The mindset, “I will get to this later,” takes over, and this type of thinking causes potential losses in the future.

We recommend that all action learners maintain as detailed a learning journal as possible. If for no other reason than that, if you are famous one day, someone may want to read it and write a book about it. In that case, if you did not have a journal, it would be a tremendous loss to society!

Indicators of Output Success

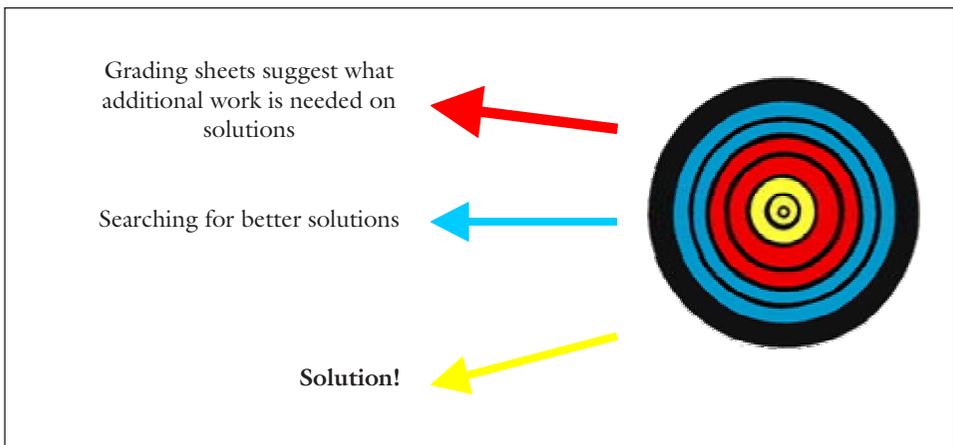


The grading sheets offer progressively harder targets to obtain in the problem-solving process and coach the learner to do a better and more comprehensive job of learning

Action learners want to know if their outputs have accomplished useful goals. They want to know if their proposal will make a difference to themselves and their company.

There are a couple of ways to determine success. One of the most powerful is to seek the learning group's viewpoint on how the problem solving occurred. This causes the group to question whether their solution is satisfactory. This takes some getting used to for most people. Action learning involves much more than just solving the problem; it requires workable solutions to be carried out within the company or with a client. No problem-solving team is done until the solution has been implemented. To find out if a solution will be effective, ask the one who proposed the problem. The learning group surely must seek this knowledge.

Grading sheets offer a wonderful opportunity to reflect on whether or not the team's solution has had an impact. Often, groups have to do a bit more work on their solution when they refer to the grading sheet and see what mark they will



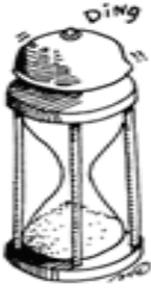
receive on their project. I have seen many groups dive back into the problem-solving mode when they realized that they had not done a good job of problem solving so far. The grading sheets offer progressively harder targets to obtain in the problem-solving process and coach the learner to do a better and more comprehensive job of learning.

As a part of the write-up of any project, there is an element of return on investment or measures of change that can be explored and quantified. No report would be complete without a thoughtful explanation of how the group solved the problem. Often, the personal-learning portion of the output write-up is as powerful as the solution one. In this portion, the team has the chance to demonstrate the worth of the project to them, and it is their opportunity to set their own distinctive mark on the whole project.

At times, groups must “sell” their solutions to others in the company. Make no mistake about it, not everyone will immediately agree with or want to implement your brilliant ideas. They are busy with their own problems and solutions. Implementation of any good idea requires action learning groups to strategize and find effective ways to present their ideas to others.

Solutions discovered by action learners are more likely to succeed than ones discovered through traditional means, as the power of groups to solve problems is greatly increased by supplying personalized incentives (such as a degree), and by requiring rigorous tools of self-evaluation. Surely, when many questions are asked, it is likely that the answers will determine the effectiveness of the process.

Just in Time Approval (Timeliness of Events, Capturing the Energy)



Action learners must tap into this energy source and run to solve problems. Timing is a key element in this process

When we started the action learning degree program, we spent a great deal of time developing learning designs for each degree track. We were sure that we could plan an entire curriculum for our learners that would carry them to graduation. It seemed reasonable that the students could follow a track just as if they were enrolled in a traditional college. As with most fastidiously planned activities, we were about to learn differently.

We learned that the degree tracks (learning maps) could not be set in stone. We even had to admit that we could not approach this way of learning in a traditional way. What happened was that our learners had to complete their career review before they could tackle their first action learning project. By the time that the career reviews were completed, the problems that needed to be solved changed. In an active business that has to be responsive to our customers changing needs, we have to adapt and change the problems that are presented.

We learned to be flexible and focused on the needs of the company and customer. Some learners actually simultaneously wrote their career review while they began to solve their first problem. How could we advise differently? After all, if action learning is here to solve complex problems facing our business, we need to be flexible enough to accommodate the real case of multiple problems and priorities that face our managers. We went back to the drawing board with each changing dynamic opportunity. I am pleased that our action learners were able to juggle the multiple priorities in a just in time fashion. It worked; action learning truly is an adaptive business needs driven process.

There is a distinct energy that is applied to problem solving that must be tapped. If it takes too long to get going, then interest and enthusiasm drops. This is a typical consequence that groups regularly face. Action learners must tap into this energy

source and run to solve problems. Timing is a key element in this process. Because we have been able to adapt to changing conditions, the risk of lost energy and motivation to complete an action learning project stays high.

Time changes the projects for some learners dramatically. It is possible that during the process the learner is transferred or promoted or temporarily assigned to another unit or project. When the need changes, the plan changes. This is most gratifying when one understands the dynamic nature of learning that takes place. I am glad that we have been able to learn quickly how to adapt and to capture the energy of our learners. We now know that whenever the process interferes with the learning and problem solving, we need to find a better way.

Potential Points for Partnering



We are excited about the possibilities of linking business necessities with traditional academia

The associates involved in the Sodexho University action learning accredited degree program have produced such wonderful outputs that doors have been opened for us to partner with more traditional universities. An example of this exciting possibility of integrating traditional learning with the action learning process, and vice-versa, is with Roger Williams University.

We are excited about the possibilities of linking business necessities with traditional academia, as it will better prepare both our employees for future managerial responsibilities as well as give opportunities to students for hands-on business experience. We are certain that the problem-solving business tool of action learning linked to accredited degree programs is the future of Sodexho, as well as all successful corporate universities.

There are many fronts upon which we would like to partner with traditional universities. The following points are for exploration and possible development.

Immediate partnering opportunities:

- Collaboration on external reviewing of outputs for academic rigor and applicability to business needs.
- Development of a balanced curriculum – incorporating traditional academia and driven through action learning.
- Leverage and ability to offer opportunities to the community, in particular those who would not be accepted by traditional academia.
- Involving students in internship-based programs to carry out projects, partnering with Sodexho for real business experience.

Some near-future possibilities:

- Possibility of credit mapping for associates – i.e., various outputs completed would be worth a set number of credits at a traditional institution.
- Transferability of both credits and degrees (our accreditation body is the Distance Education and Training Council, or DETC).
- Perfecting of curriculum that can be used cross-divisionally.

While this list is not comprehensive, these are our areas of priority.

Look Outside for References to Make Things More “Encompassing”



Do extensive research to assure yourself that you have learned a reasonable amount of information to solve the problem

There is an old saying that goes, “The fellow who chooses to represent himself in court is bound to be represented by a fool.” This is certainly applicable in the business world as well – where some people assume that working for a company requires little training or preparation. To people who have done their homework, so to speak, they realize how much they do not know, and seek out help where appropriate.

Action learning requires students to do their “homework.” In this case, homework is having completed the research necessary to develop a well rounded and complete problem-solving solution.

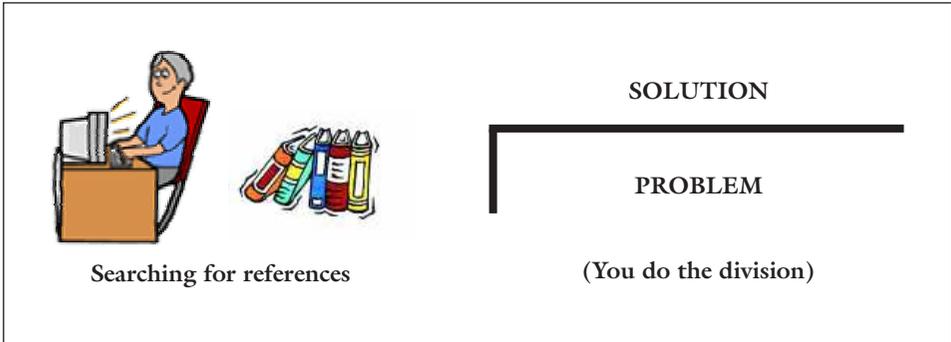
Grading the action learning outputs has shown me that our learners usually need more development in finding and using references. Often I get the impression that learners feel required to have references rather than actually needing them. When I was in school, I was required to have a certain number of references for my papers. The teacher was the mean fellow who made me look stuff up and reference what I found at the end of my paper. In retaliation, I would find the minimum number of required references, rather than a more appropriate amount.

When we enter the action learning school, references are required. Often, however, the tone and direction of these references is quite different from the old-school model. We do extensive research to assure ourselves that we have learned a reasonable amount of information as to how experts, practitioners, or other companies have solved their problems.

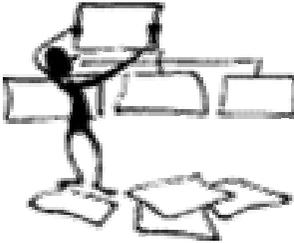
When determining where to look, it is much easier today to accomplish a search. The Internet is full of references and opinions on almost any topic imaginable. Additionally, libraries are full of reference books and magazines that cover interesting topics. It is almost like there is too much information. The smart action

learner casts a broad net to learn about alternative solutions and refines the sources to a select number of quality references. These references serve as a way of tempering our thinking to reflect a mature view of the problem and the solution. As a result, action learners are likely to reject many references as having little or no value for solving their problem.

At first, finding references seems a necessary evil for most of us. However, we need to adopt the attitude that a well-researched problem and solution is really the best way to learn and move forward.



Setting the Direction: The Learning Designs



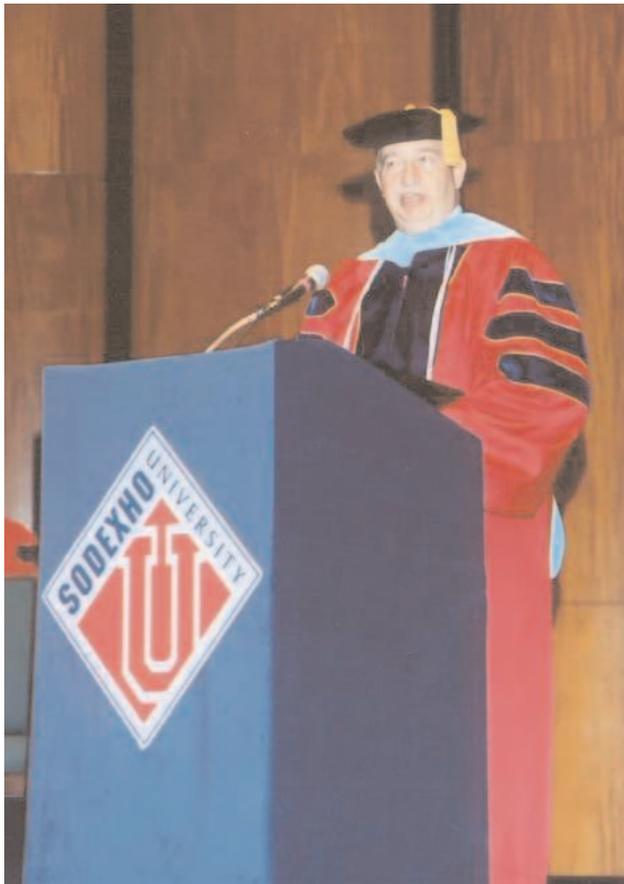
The learning designs can grow as the student progresses, and often each exact output is not clearly defined until the last output has been completed

Like any good process, it is important to have some structure. In action learning, there is the structure of the program itself, and then there is the structure of the learning designs to help guide work in a positive and cohesive manner. The learning designs serve as a model of the type of activities necessary to facilitate learning in the individual and to carry out the gradual alignment of the learner with the goals of the company. The action learner produces “outputs,” which are written demonstrations of how the action learner is progressing through the program. The complexity of the outputs from the learning design increases as the students work through their learning design map.

The first activity in all the learning designs is to document personal learning up to the date when the student enters the university. The second output is where learners demonstrate their familiarity with the roots of their company, and further, where they can show that they have a grasp of the technical knowledge of their discipline. The third output is meant to get students started on the action learning process where they work with a group of peers to solve a problem that directly impacts their team. The fourth output has students reach out horizontally to solve a problem that affects other similar teams at their level, for either their team or for a customer. The fifth output links learners vertically with their boss and subordinates. This gives them three opportunities to have influence in the area of leadership – with their subordinates, peers, or bosses. Finally, learners document their knowledge gained since their last personal learning documentation in output one. It is very helpful to do a good job on each of the outputs as it captures the personal learning as well as the solution.

The learning designs can grow as the student progresses, and often each exact output is not fully defined until the last output has been completed. This allows the design to meet the business and personal needs of the learner as well as adapt to

changing conditions within the company. Ultimately, everybody wins. When learners say that they are worried about what their next project might be, I say, “Don’t worry, something interesting will come up, I am sure.” So far, something has always come up for these people. Sometimes a question like: “What problem that you could work on would help things go smoother around here?” plants the seeds for the next project. Some worry that they might run out of problems; experience, however, has taught me that we will never run out of ideas to improve ourselves, our businesses, or the world around us.



*Dr. Harry Lenderman, Academic Dean Sodexo University,
Master of Ceremonies for the Sodexo University Class of 2003
Commencement Ceremonies.*

Action Learning Outputs: An Ongoing Process



Sometimes, the learning coach needs to jolt them into action by notifying them of their personal responsibility to learn

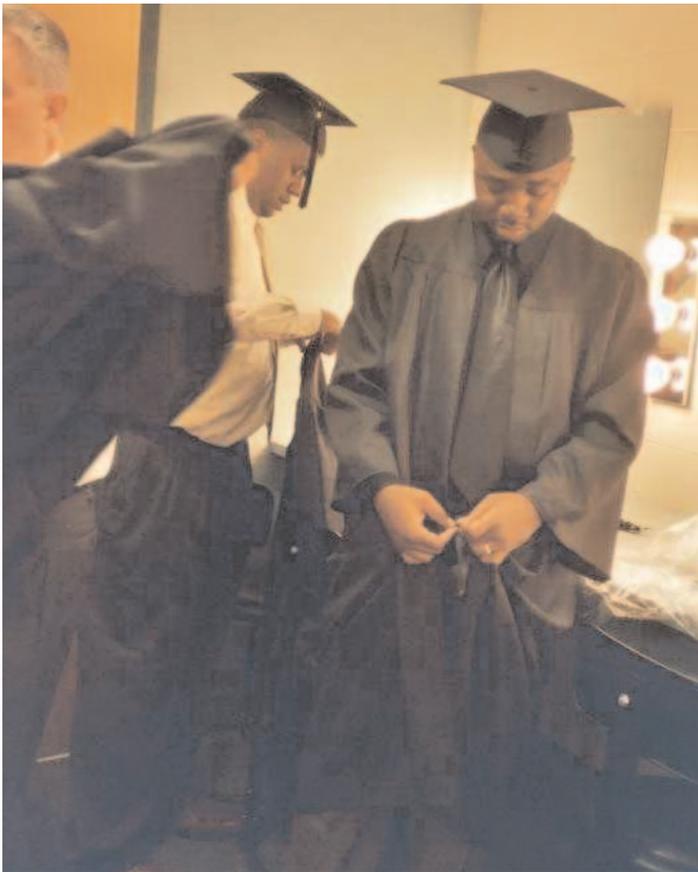
Action learning is a team effort. Often people try to do their learning alone. This is understandable in traditional educational settings where most often the student is required to perform their work on their own. I saw this the last time I took a class in a traditional setting. It was actually hard for the students to function in a work group because they were so used to doing their own work alone. Those days are over with the advent of action learning.

Action learners learn to be part of a team rather than depend on a teacher or professor to chalk out the rules and lines to follow. In a class, there usually is not a lot of room to learn about things that are not in the syllabus. Again, the rules are different for action learners.

I have noticed that individuals who are new to the action learning concept still expect to have a professor to go to for help. I get a good laugh whenever a new action learner presents an output to me and sincerely expects me to accept the work as a finished product! I certainly am happy to read and comment on the students work, but I always treat the paper as a work in progress, and read it to see if something else needs to be addressed to meet a business need. Rather than accepting an incomplete paper as in the traditional academic setting, there is more at stake than simply taking off a grade point because something was not addressed. Many times, I have to hand back an output with comments on areas that require further study and explanation by the student. At times, they have the impression that I am being unreasonable! Eventually, though, the action learners understand that their work is part of a dynamic and serious process.

There is also a difference in the support structure for an action learner. Action learners are responsible for their own learning, not their coach or boss. Accordingly, action learners quickly learn to seek out help when they need it rather than expect

others to seek it for them. Another magical moment is when the action learners turn the corner and take responsibility for their learning. Sometimes this comes quickly and naturally. Sometimes, the learning coach needs to jolt them into action by notifying them of their personal responsibility to learn.



Associate degree graduates gowning up.

How Do You Fail?

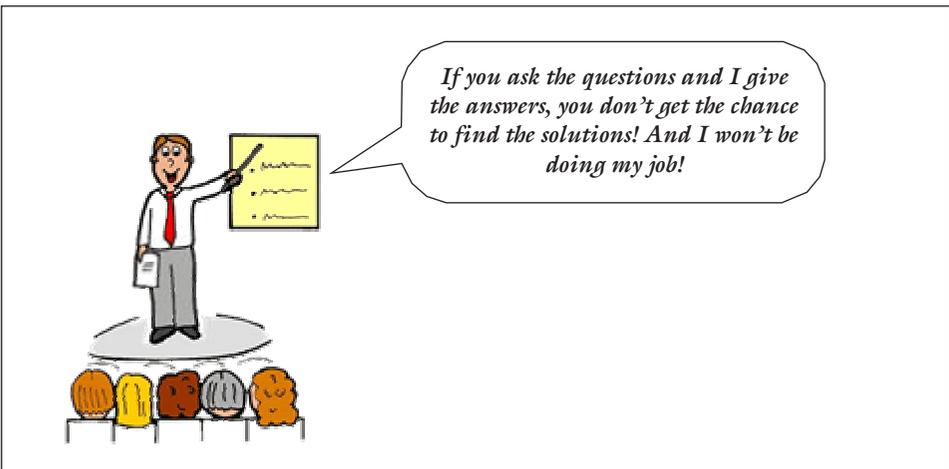


Once the coach is in the position of being asked rather than doing the asking, the group is doomed to be a poor-performing one!

Two questions that can be usefully applied to the process of action learning: “What can I do to anticipate problems that could occur in this project?” “What can I do to mess up this project so that it will not work?” Often, this view is helpful at plugging the holes that can be found in most projects.

If learners do not base their studies on questions first – even before problem solving – then the process is sure to fail. The advantage of solving the right problem is lost when this is done. Energy expended towards problem solving rather than problem discovery is often energy wasted.

To mess things up, all one has to do is facilitate the group’s progress rather than coach the group to higher levels of understanding. A facilitator or a poor coach who strays from question-based coaching cuts against the process in such a way that the group will not function well or even not at all. The group needs to be solving their problems and not be directed off the trail by a poor coach.

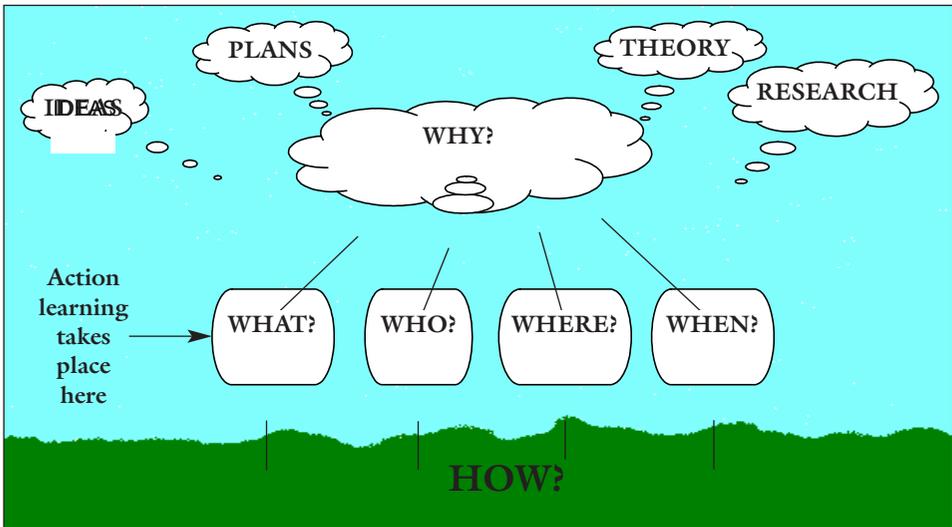


The coach is very important, especially at the beginning of the action learning team meetings. If learning coaches want to mess things up, all they have to do is direct the group to a solution rather than guide them with questions to self-discover better ways to approach their job. One way embraces growth while the other forces the group to be dependant on the coach. Once the coach is in the position of being asked rather than doing the asking, the group is doomed to be a poor performing one.

If the coach and members of the team do not ensure that all members have a chance to speak up with their questions and answers, then the group is sure to fail. It turns out that the quiet ones can also be thinking about questions and solutions to problems, whether they speak up or not. If we fail to ask and listen to all the members, we are doomed to have less satisfactory questions and, subsequently, answers.

Clouds and Ground

Maps help us discuss things that we have not previously experienced



Dr. Charles Margerison and Dr. Richard Hale taught me a valuable lesson one day, one that has helped me understand how the action learning process relates to different people. They taught me that, just as there are literal maps that we use to get from one place to another, there are also theoretical maps that can perform the same function to help us learn new things and assimilate new experiences. Maps can be very helpful when we are going to a new place – in the outside world or the internal. Action learning can be seen as a map to help others better navigate both their own internal world and the business one in which most of us are embedded. This can be shown through a metaphor of “sky and ground.”

There is the “sky,” (where it seems most philosophers have their heads!), which on our map represents the people who are always asking “why?” They think in terms of “ideas, plans, theory and research.” Having one’s “head in the clouds” is not necessarily a bad thing: quite often, in fact, these people are the visionaries that move humanity forward. In the case of action learning, those with their heads in

the clouds are the ones that thought up this whole process and used the very best thinking available to put together a comprehensive plan. However, these people are often frustrated by others of a more practical nature, and so often never touch foot to ground.

Then, there are the people on the “ground” rooted in everyday practicality. These people are the ones that get things done. They are grounded in reality. Like their opposites, the dreamers, in order to be effective they have to be able to combine theory with practice. They have to avoid being a “stick in the mud” or possibly having their “head in the sand.” Just as the dreamers often get frustrated with the grounded people, these practically minded individuals can become frustrated with those dreamers who want to be theoretical and not get down in the mud with them.

In the end, while neither party seems to speak the same language, there is a position that takes advantage of both camps of thinking. In this case, there is a middle area connecting the people in the clouds with the people on the ground. The connecting rods between sky and ground are the questions that need to be answered in order to connect theory with practicality. The answers to the questions of “what, why, where and when” form the basis of understanding between both types of people. When these questions are asked of both groups, and when they work together to solve the questions, the best results are produced. Both can come to understand and share their personal strengths when combined with seeing things the way the other side sees it.

I am a “head in the sky” person seeking practical solutions to problems that we come upon at work. Often, the language that I use when speaking with the “sky” people is much different than how I talk to the “ground” people. Now that I understand both types (such as through my metaphor of sky and ground), I can better appreciate and communicate with both positions. I have known for many years that a practical example is what many people need to understand a concept, while others can fill the gaps themselves with their own examples.

Always keep in mind that the basis for action learning is the proper use of questions. Learning that takes place by asking questions brings about greater understanding. Questions bridge the gaps among all kinds of people and between a problem and a solution.

Coach from Where the Learners Are



The coach’s role is to coach the team’s from their capability level, not the coach’s

The coach’s job is critical to the success of the learning team. The coach must ask the questions that help the team learn and guide them through the difficult stages of team development that the learners go through on each project. One of the things I have learned about the coach’s role is to remember to help teams on their capability level, not my own.

I have entered into coaching situations with a vision already in mind of what the team would be learning, only to find that they are not ready to learn it yet. The team needed some prerequisite learning before they were ready to learn what I had to offer. When this first happened, I was frustrated with them and I struggled to get the team to address what I felt was the problem. I made assumptions about the team’s knowledge level, asked questions I thought would help, and received blank stares in reply. When I pushed them still harder, I soon had a room full of people giving me that deer in a headlight look. Simply put, the solution was not within the team’s current capability. As Marquardt points out, remaining on the team’s level is an essential element of problem solving in action learning (*Action Learning in Action*, 1999).

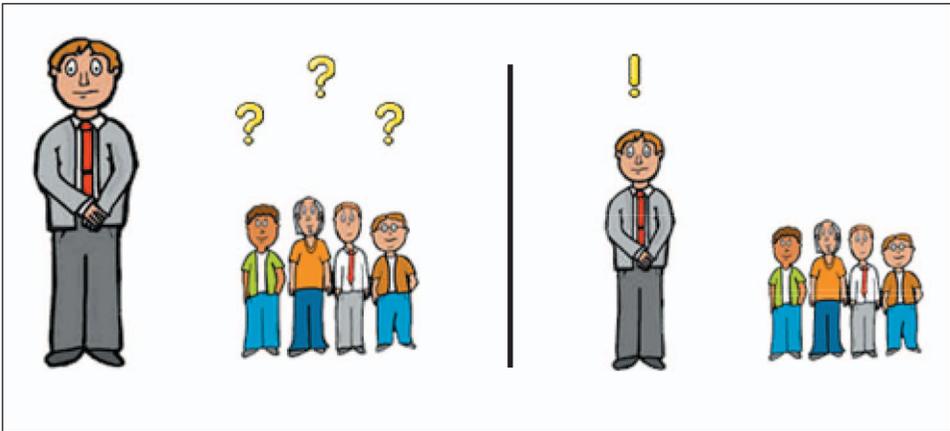
Sometimes, the disparity in the group’s abilities can cause anxiety in some team members. However, one should keep in mind that as long as the group is focused and working as a cohesive unit, individual member’s abilities should augment each other, not detract, as the strength of one now becomes the strength of the team. One action learner, Francine Dowd, explains how she felt in such a situation: “At the beginning, I felt lost and out of place because, while my team members had already completed a project, this was my first. I still did not feel as though I knew exactly what to do. However, it turns out they were not sure which direction to go in either.”

I found that when I relaxed, asked different questions, and took the time to learn what the team’s capabilities were, I could then guide them through the learning processes needed to get their skills to the level that enabled them to address more

far-reaching problems. A team member in an action learning group, Ninnie Carey, had this to say about the whole process:

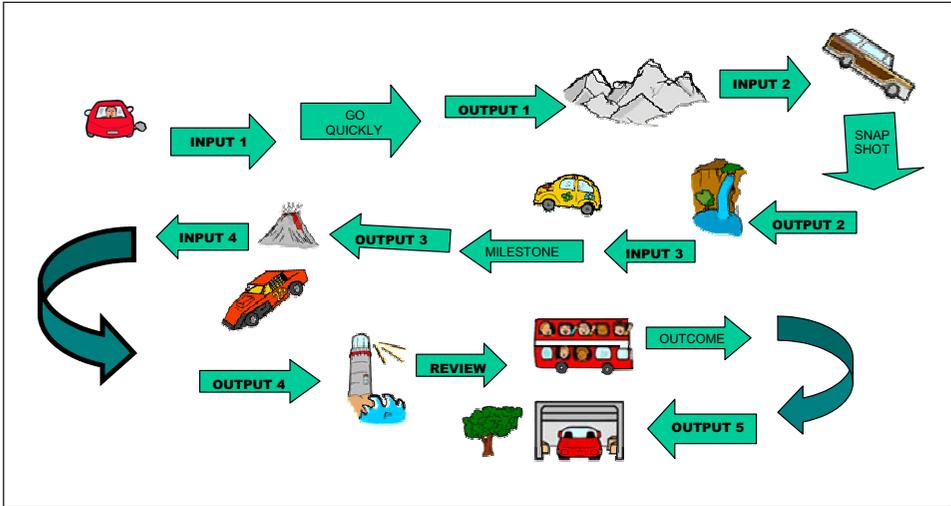
What really brought us together was when we had a meeting and got a handle on the situation and found out that we were not that far from the solution to the problem. With this newfound energy we started up again and the team members on the project got a second wind. As the project went the coach would ask of us “What about this...?” We would all start to argue with him about the question until we realized that he was actually right and that there were other angles to the particular issue. Every time we thought we were almost done we turned the corner, and there was another angle or perspective to the problem that really needed to be looked at.

By remembering to coach the team from their learning level the problem was addressed, the team was energized, and the result was a well-researched and analyzed solution. The team had learned what was needed to solve their problem on their own, instead of relying on an imposed solution by an impatient leader.



Creating the Learning Designs

Follow your learning map to earn your degree



Before we could effectively start the action learning degree program, we needed to create the official Sodexho University degree tracks. The process began in May 2002 and is still ongoing. Our goal is threefold: first, we need to ensure that the learner is able to earn a degree aligned with their operational level of influence. Second, the degree tracks need to be stringently designed so as to meet the necessary academic rigor and maintain our accreditation rights, but flexible enough to allow for creativity and project selection with real business applications. Third, we need to strike a balance between the value of personal learning as well as the obvious Return on Investment (ROI) implications to Sodexho. With Dr. Richard Teare’s help, we were able to accomplish this task through two days of deliberation (the sister of action learning).

Projects, as previously mentioned, must have real business application. In other words, the boss, or business coach, must see the value and need for a proposed project to be carried out. The lack of potential projects was an initial concern that surfaced and was quickly quashed. In the service industry, there are innumerable projects that could add value to the unit, department, division, client and hopefully

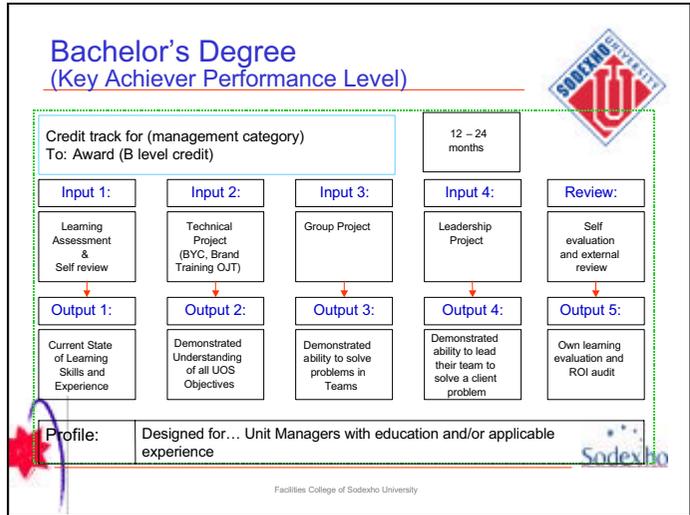
the entire company. We have found that the degree program is a natural way to motivate employees to act upon their creative ideas, initiate them in the workplace, and bring them to completion.

As degree candidates are applying and enrolling in the action learning program, they each need a copy of their personal degree tracks as well as a briefing on the projects. Set a date quickly

for submission of the Career Review and Learning Portfolio, or the first output of each degree track. This document is a snapshot of what each candidate has learned in their lives, where they are currently in their learning, and what they foresee as areas of emphasis for future learning. It stresses the importance of setting milestones for learning, identifies personal skills as well as motivational factors. Even though this document is of a personal nature, we found it helpful to set the students in action learning teams to work through each of the outlined sections. This serves two purposes: first, it creates an environment of teamwork and is a natural setting for action learning, and, second, it helps each member of the team get past the most difficult part of each project: starting. A suggestion is to give a maximum of one month to complete the output. The student needs to have an output completed quickly to encourage them to begin working on business-related outputs.

To recap, remember these key points:

- Projects need to be aligned with real business needs. Make sure the learning coach is involved with the approval of all projects.
- Give a copy of the degree track to each student. Make sure they understand how projects tie into their individual track.
- Begin working on the Career Review immediately. Allow one month for completion of this project. Start the students in action learning to work on the Career Review output.



What Could Be Better?



We needed to go through many experiences to internalize how to begin the process of installing action learning for the next set of learners

As we (the initiators of Sodexo University) have progressed throughout the year, we are constantly asking ourselves what could have gone better? This section lists items that either worked but could be improved, or things that worked well from the beginning. Surprisingly, everything we tried worked to some degree. We needed to go through many experiences to internalize how to begin the process of installing action learning for the next set of learners.

When explaining the program, we emphasized that the degree was earned at work while solving problems *at work*. While for the most part this is true, we have learned that there is some additional time needed outside of the work environment to reflect and to write up the personal learning portion of the outputs.

Additionally, we have learned that groups must form into a self-directed team of cooperative, interdependent members before they can perform to a high standard. We have seen the level of maturity rise rapidly and continue to rise as they progress through their outputs. This evolution of abilities yielded better results when we reflected on where the teams were performing before they entered the degree program.

We had to learn, as we went along, the roles of the set advisor and learning coach. While we had Dr. Richard Teare's and Dr. Michael Marquardt's wise advice, in the end, we had to learn for ourselves. We look back now and wonder why we did not carefully read what they have already discovered. Perhaps discovering on our own still yields benefits, but we afterwards find out that others have already traveled our roads!

The roles of set advisor and learning coach have merged at times to meet the needs of particular groups. Originally, we had these two roles distinctly set apart, but learned on a continuous basis that all the members of teams had to step in with advice on this. The teams were more self-policing than we originally anticipated. We come from a training environment where we try to anticipate where the learners

might go wrong and we felt responsible to correct their thinking. Now, the learners take over the responsibility for learning with some guidance. The teams function without either of their coaches at times. They can do this on their own once they gain the ability to perform.

In the beginning, we proceeded without much preparation. This was a worry at first until we realized that the teams matured and learned at a much faster pace than we could have facilitated. We worried about the pain they might feel if we were not there to catch their fall. However, we discovered that we were not needed in most cases!

We have felt the heavy burden of explaining what we are doing to those who are training oriented rather than learning oriented. What we have learned is to have the action learners explain for themselves what they are doing – this method is contagious and explains the power of the process with little provocation.

We learned that the best way to internalize the process, rather than simply intellectualize it, is to “Just do it!” I cannot emphasize how important this step is. The excitement that a group feels when they are actually connected with others in a learning environment is powerful. This is more than a nice idea: it also works! I am sure that some of the people, maybe even most, really must try this concept to understand it.

Many times we tried to explain action learning with too much detail. We presented the concept to groups and told them everything we knew about it, often overloading them in the process. Truly, action learning is an individual journey that has to take place in steps that eventually validate themselves as a person’s paradigm shifts gradually to learning, managing, and leading. Something more than mere spoon-feeding, yet far less than cramming information into our learner, has to take place.

Many of the lessons learned have to be considered “just in time” to be effective. For example, many times Fred Lastar, Richard Lenderman or I referred our students to the orientation packet to answer questions. Universally, they said that the information was there but that it did not have meaning until it was needed. Surely, this is at the heart of action learning as a concept.

We transitioned, in all our teams, from a viewpoint of maturity that embraced private victories to one that embraced public victories. At first, some team members held back information from other members. This occurs more often than I thought. As the teams progressed, however, this tendency grew smaller as members grew to trust each other. Dr. Stephen R. Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, talks about this as going from dependence to independence and finally to interdependence. Covey was right.

There are some organizational obstacles that have to be considered. While Sodexho is not a bureaucratic institution, we have to consider all the “players” when we do

something like installing action learning. Part of our instructions to our learners was that we need to get the advice and consent of those who are senior to us in the organization before charging onward. At times, we stepped on toes. The pilot was our cover and excuse for not including everyone. Interest is high and we will now have to deal with the next set of learners and be prepared to answer their questions when we go to the full program after pilot. The process of gaining buy-in is no less important as we move forward.

When a boss changed, we lost a couple of students. This is hard to figure out at times. If the new boss does not embrace the concept, the students may be stranded in their learning efforts. We want to assure the students that they can still complete their degree when management, or even their job, changes. I suspect this will have to be handled on a case-by-case basis.

Out of the goodness of our hearts, we drove our teams to dependence on us. We knew better but were not capable of doing otherwise. We have spent our careers showing others that we care by providing solutions and breaking down barriers that were ahead of them. We had to learn to coach through questioning rather than by solving problems for our teams. When we realized the error of our ways, the phone calls to us for advice dropped dramatically.

I am sure that there are many more lessons that could be shared besides the ones listed here. We are still attempting to do the learning for the learner. Read them and perhaps these lessons will stick in the back of your mind. When you realize these lessons for yourself, you will be so much the better for it. I think that the best parents let their children learn and intervene only when there is danger involved. We are not dealing with children here. We are dealing with adult learners who know a great deal to start with and are searching for more as they grow. Please keep in mind that, if you were writing this book, your lessons learned would be different!

Incorporating Learning into Your Personal Life

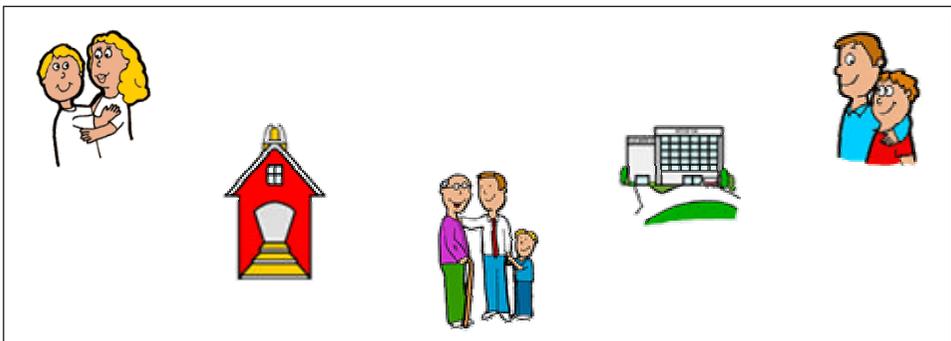


Action learning is an effective tool that can be applied in all areas of our lives

An interesting byproduct of learning in an action learning team is that the process of learning with co-workers is contagious. Many of our learners report that the same attitude of learning and questioning works on the home front as well as it does in the work environment. Clear thinking and questioning before drawing conclusions is simply a good process.

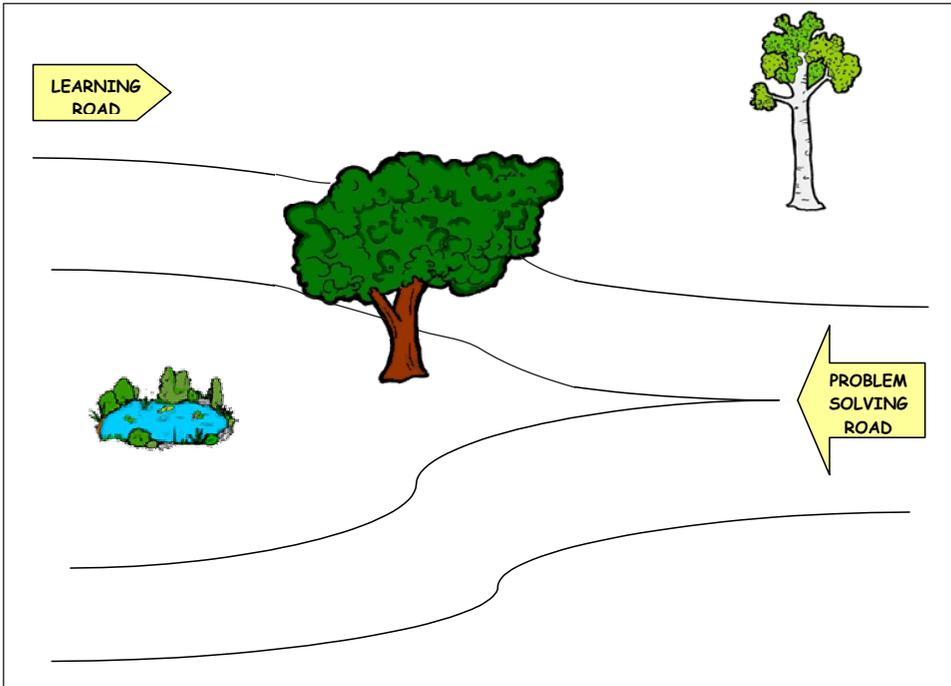
A couple of our learners who are raising teens have commented favorably about their ability to deal more effectively with their children by asking questions to seek understanding, rather than bombarding them with pure logic or emotion. Questions, somehow, are less threatening or confrontational than statements or sharply pointed questions. It seems that the questioning process enhances human-to-human relations. People seem to be more on the same side of the problem when we do not draw hard lines in the sand.

An employee who is a member of a governing board for a condominium told me how he has used action learning questions to focus and unite his group of divergent thinkers. People feel more “listened to” when they are asked to express an opinion



about a problem rather than being railroaded into a solution that does not quite fit. Somehow, the solution is better when learners are able to choose the size for themselves. The learner is more comfortable trying on a new idea without pressure. Community groups have also expressed interest in the action learning process. They see the advantages of harnessing the energy of the group to do good things in the community. Some have asked us to partner with them in awarding their members degrees by solving community-based problems. I enjoy watching the interaction that occurs when learning is at the center of the discussion. Everybody seems to immediately grasp the value of learning from one another. It is nice to validate action learning by seeing how it has more applications than simply at work. Who knows where all this will lead us in our communities? It will be fun to watch as action learning grows and spreads the learning community out among more people and to different areas of our lives.

Track A and Track B



Richard Lenderman stood up and wrote the words “track A” and “track B” on the flip chart. At first, I wondered what he was going to say. Rather than saying anything, however, he wrote under track A, “What are we going to learn?” and under track B he wrote, “What sort of problems are we going to solve?”

A Scotsman once said, “You take the high road and I take the low road,” which is what we faced next. One was the road to learning and the other was the road to determine which problem we were to solve. One road takes the position that, first, we are here to learn and that the problem will be solved as a consequence of learning about it and afterwards finding well reasoned solutions. The second approach is problem-solving centered rather than learning centered. What action learners repeatedly tell me is that if we rush to problem solving and leave the learning part out, then we are not effectively applying the most powerful tool available: learning. Like the roads leading to Scotland, both roads get you there. The difference is that one road leads to a better part of Scotland (or problem solving) than the other!

I call this “blaming it on learning” when I describe the process of action learning. First we must learn before we can solve. There are too many outputs produced that are not as far sighted as they could be. When groups that are not learning centered present their solution, often they are asked questions that probe whether they have fully investigated their solutions. A quick run to the finish line usually does not yield a quality race. Groups that take the questioning route are often better able to explain their thought processes and justify their solutions than traditionally oriented problem-solving groups.

Richard Lenderman was on to something when he wrote on the flip chart. He got us thinking about the consequences of a track that would land us in a better place. He asked questions rather than telling us anything. As a result, we were able to add to what we knew about action learning and were taught to stick with the questioning process rather than simply providing answers.