



THE MILLENNIUM GROUP INTERNATIONAL—WHITE PAPER

Building Organizational Capacity

Aim for the Fairway With Action Learning

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We've all heard the accolades of the power of positive thinking — so why is it we tend to focus on the negative? Rarely do we talk about what to do — rather we talk about what not to do.

By now you are thinking, “Not me! She must be talking about someone else.”

Let's start with an example. You're out at your favorite golf course, and you've brought a friend (let's call this friend Sam) along with you. Sam has never played this course before, so you decide you'll help out Sam and point out all the hazards.

You walk up to the first tee box. As you and Sam stand there, you tell Sam, “Watch out for the water down there on the right.” Sam lines up the shot — the contact is good. As each of you watch the ball, it is eminently clear the ball is heading right. The distinctive splash of the ball making contact with the water is unmistakable.

On each hole with a hazard, you opt to help Sam out. Almost like clockwork, the hazard comes into play for poor Sam. You and Sam are confused. You were so helpful, pointing out each of these hazards. How did Sam end up playing so poorly?

I'm guilty of having done the same thing. One day it finally dawned on me — my friend was drawn to line up where I had her focus. My warnings had her thinking about the water, the tree, the bunker — whichever hazard it happened to be. I was the reason my friend played my course so poorly.

To test this theory, I changed my tactic — I started telling my friends where they should aim, not where they shouldn't aim. Almost like magic, everyone I brought to play my golf course started playing better. Were these golfers any better than the earlier golfers? No. They were simply focused on what to do — not what not to do.

The lessons here are easy to grasp and apply well to business in general and learning and development in particular.

Action Learning

Action learning is a process for solving real, urgent problems creatively while simultaneously developing the leadership skills of the participants and teaching them to work better as a team.

There are only two ground rules: A statement can only be made in response to a question, and the action learning team coach can intervene whenever a learning opportunity presents itself.

A typical action learning session starts with the coach establishing these ground rules. The coach will have one participant state, in two to three minutes, the problem the group needs to consider. Now, the questioning begins. Anyone can ask a question of anyone (or everyone) at any time, but to make a statement a participant must be answering a question. During the process, the coach listens for learning opportunities.

On each occasion, the coach will test how the group feels it is doing, what they are doing well and what they believe they could do better — with each intervention digging deeper to help the group discover how they can work better as a team.

The problem solving is done in two stages. The first focuses on coming to a consensus as to what the problem is. As has been seen in many action learning sets, the issue that is presented is typically a symptom of the true problem. The coach plays a key role in ensuring the group reaches a consensus on the problem before allowing the group to move to the solution stage. What action learning team members quickly discover is that as they dissect the challenge, they are actually planting the seeds for the solution. Regardless of how certain the participants were of the nature of the problem when they entered the problem-solving session, this exercise quickly opens their eyes to other possibilities. Ultimately, the team creatively solves the real problem, instead of slapping a bandage on the presenting symptom.

Action learning coaches have discovered the complete power of positive thinking. During an action learning session, coaches will phrase their questions in the positive. Why? Because these are the seeds that we want to germinate. We want all team members focused on positive behaviors. We ask, “What can be done better?” not “What went wrong?”

In business, how do we conduct a best practice review? We focus on what went wrong. We wonder whose fault it is. We firmly ground ourselves in the negative. We will spend days, months, sometimes even years figuring out who is at fault and what was done wrong. Drastic changes are consistently observed in action learning teams because they learn to focus on the positive — what they should be doing. Each intervention the action learning team coach does leads to an exponential improvement in how the team processes.

Action Learning Outcomes

Three scenarios follow. In each situation, the team brought their dysfunctional behavior with them. In each situation, the action learning coach was able to help them discover a more powerful way of processing together.

Scenario 1: The group that was brought together was composed of individuals from three organizations. They were tasked to determine how they would work to accomplish a single project. Each of the organizations had a track record of success and each was sure they knew how to best accomplish the project. The animosity in the room was thick.

There were 16 participants — too many for a single action learning team. We divided into two groups, with representatives from each organization assigned to each group. The groups were told they would each work on different aspects of the problem and each group would accept the solution identified by the other group.

At the appointed hour, the lists were brought to the front of the room and posted. Within minutes it was clear the lists were virtually identical. The most vocal opponent to working different problems spoke first — “I guess I could have trusted them and we would have gotten twice as much work done.”

The groups realized they were not that different from each other. They discovered that by working together and communicating they came up with solutions much more robust than any one of them could have come up with alone. Through action learning, they hit the fairway of trusting their teammates instead of getting caught in the trap that our way is the best way.

Scenario 2: The group was tasked to come up with a new shift schedule. The plant in question needed to be in operation six days a week, 24 hours a day. Currently there were three shifts — everyone working eight hours a day, six days a week. No one at the plant liked the current schedule — something that allowed for more than one day off a week was needed.

The group was resistant to using the process — it was obvious to everyone it was a simple math problem. Through the questioning process, particularly those questions posed by the coach, they were able to discover a piece of crucial information presented by the quietest member of the team — the plant employees were angry because they were not consulted when the shift schedules were changed to accommodate 24/6 instead of 24/7. The questions from the coach shifted the thinking from the idea that if someone is quiet he is on board with the current discussion to the idea that someone needs to check in with the quiet person for his perspective.

The quiet person was quiet because he believed he needed to go along with the more experienced managers because that was where everyone else was headed. The shift in perspective the team experienced allowed them to hit the fairway by coming up with three schedules and allowing the employees to vote, instead of landing in the trap of fixing the symptom of an unacceptable shift schedule.

Scenario 3: The group was tasked with restructuring the organization so they could function better. The group wanted to jump right to a solution — grouping the tasks done by the division to see how they could better be aligned.

The interventions done by the action learning coach created a safe environment that allowed the real issue to surface. The director was a hard-driving individual — when he said “jump,” the response better be “how high.” The consequence of this was that the communication among the group members had deteriorated to the point that no one spoke to anyone and everyone assumed the actions of the others were intended to better each individual’s position.

The director was unaware of the consequence his actions were having on the group. To the credit of the director, when the issue surfaced (through the interventions done by the coach) he opted to put the reorganization on hold and address the communication issue head on.

Years later, the ability of this team to communicate is admired by the other divisions. They were able to hit the fairway by learning to truly communicate, rather than land short of the green in the restructuring trap.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Not every situation calls for an action learning session; however, there are elements of action learning that can easily be woven into everyday life — ask questions, understand the situation before trying to fix it or making judgments and, most of all, look for how it can be handled better.

Action learning prompts curiosity that takes us to new heights of learning. Initially, the questioning is a mandatory constraint thrust upon the group. By the end of the first session, participants embrace the power of questions, not only during problem solving but also as a way of life. The hazards will always be there — aiming for the fairway will take you down the most direct path to your goal.

About the Author

Bea Carson, TMG Senior Consultant, is a certified Master Coach by the World Institute for Action Learning (WIAL). As a co-founder of WIAL, she has been led various efforts to develop methods and standards for training Action Learning Team Coaches. Dr. Carson has consulted with government, non-profit, and commercial organizations throughout the United States including Constellation Energy, Triplex, NASA, Rotary International, and Special Olympics Maryland. Dr. Carson has been an invited lecturer at American University and the George Washington University. Bea is also a member of the board of Special Olympics Maryland and the Annapolis Rotary.

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