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**Workshop 3: Training and Developing Leaders**

# **How is Action Learning Being Used to Develop Public Service Leaders in the US and Europe?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents the theoretical foundations of action learning for leadership development. Action learning is a group process that promotes learning in the “here-and-now” while public administrators tackle a real challenge with real work colleagues in real time. As people work in a small group to solve an urgent problem, action learning also plants the seeds of a learning organization, builds a high-performing team and develops the leadership capacity of group members.

During the workshop, the presenters will describe their experiences in introducing action learning at various levels of government in the US and at the European Commission. Throughout May 2007, the presenters are conducting action learning on both sides of the Atlantic: one of the authors at the European Commission in Brussels and Luxembourg, and the other at the Providence Fire Department, where he has been engaged in a long-term action learning consultancy. Therefore, during the June 2007 workshop, the authors will present as-yet unwritten reflections on their still-evolving experiences of action learning rather than read or summarize this paper.

Each year, the US and the EU invest hundreds of millions of dollars/euros in university leadership courses, executive development programs and off-site retreats for mid-level and senior managers—yet leadership continues to be cited as the weakest link in public service, resulting in poor agency performance, scores of billions of taxpayer dollars/euros wasted and low employee morale.

### **The Problem of Transfer of Learning**

Traditionally, leadership development for mid-level and senior managers has been seen as an activity that takes place outside the workplace in university classrooms, weekend retreats or off-site settings. But leadership development conducted by means of courses, retreats or off-sites is rarely transferred when managers return to their high-pressure jobs at 8 a.m. the following morning. No one else's leadership has been "developed." The existing organizational culture is often so strong that it's virtually impossible for managers returning from even the most well-designed program to translate classroom learnings into practice.

In universities, traditional curricula use a teacher-centered model of academics providing lectures and a sprinkling of experiential exercises, role plays and case studies in such topics as government ethics, administrative law, budgeting, statistics and program evaluation, organization theory, politics and policymaking, etc. However, case studies, role plays and classroom exercises bear no direct relationship to real time (not simulated) organizational predicaments and do not test the always unpredictable consequences of action taken by managers during real time challenges. For public managers, real time is the only time that counts. The organization not the university is the best classroom.

Established learning theory tells us that our capacity to learn is based on what we already know. "Existing cognitive structures have to be compatible with the new information, and an experience-base has to exist for connecting the new information and what is already known. When new information is to be introduced which is incompatible with existing cognitive structures, or contradicts previous experience, then groundwork has to be very carefully laid in order that the new information can be assimilated" (Boulding 1987, 317). We believe the current teaching methods found in most universities do not establish the groundwork necessary for students to learn the necessary skills required for leadership. The experience base of most students does not allow for new learning. Rather, it reinforces what they already know from their experience as members of organizations and the modeling of ineffective positional leaders.

### **The Permanent White Water of Public Service**

Managing in the turbulent context of today's public service means immersion into "permanent white water" (Vaill, 1996). Under such conditions, splitting the process of leading from the process of managing, following the conventional wisdom, is not helpful. We do not want to diminish the importance of either skill, as some writers now do by glorifying leadership and minimizing management. In recent years, too many writers have split "leading" and "managing" as if one were the calling of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the other merely the work of an accountant. One cannot succeed as a manager unless one is skilled at leading people, and one cannot succeed as a leader unless one meets budgets and timetables. We need both skills in one

person. Managers must know how to lead and leaders how to manage. Following Vaill, we call such public administrators “managerial leaders.” Permanent white water means that managerial leaders face daily predicaments that, as a regular course, they cannot even define with clarity, much less resolve, and yet require immediate action. Here are five characteristics of permanent white water that Vaill has found in his research:

1. Permanent white water conditions are full of shocks and surprises.
2. Permanent white water conditions produce novel predicaments with no single correct solutions.
3. Permanent white water conditions feature wicked problems that are messy, ill-defined, unpredictable and difficult to solve.
4. Permanent whitewater conditions are expensive.
5. Permanent white water conditions tend to recur.

In this permanent white water environment, where the only constant is surprise, pain and confusion, *leadership for public service must be reframed as the capacity to learn continually.* And learning how to learn in such a fluid environment is perhaps the single most important requirement for leading others to perform effectively in public service.

University courses and off-site retreats promote leisurely reflection but don’t involve real time action since, by definition, participants are “out” in three senses: they are out of context, out of commission and out of touch. Is it any wonder that executive participants off-site cannot seem to stay away from their Blackberries, e-mails, voice mails, and cell phones? When they return to work, these managerial leaders tend to act frenetically, but often little is resolved or learned in the process of taking action, resulting in endless recycling of the same problems. Those in charge often complain that they do not want to “pull their employees from their work,” to attend training programs or team meetings. *Action learning leads employees to their work, not away from their work.*

Within recent years, on this side of the Atlantic, US citizens have seen public administrators fail to manage recovery from Hurricane Katrina; fail to implement billion dollar computer systems at the IRS, FBI and FAA; fail to intercept hijacked planes on 9/11; fail to build an effective Department of Homeland Security; fail to win the peace in Iraq; and fail to learn from any of these failures. Unless quantum jumps in learning occur in the mindsets of our public managerial leaders, catastrophes such as these, or worse, will haunt us for the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We have known for a long time that hierarchical or bureaucratic organizations have a hard time correcting behaviours in view of their mistakes. Too rigid to adjust to the transformations demanded by the pace of social change, market failures and globalization, such organizations find it almost impossible to learn. Ownership for taking action is frequently impeded by the boxes on organisation charts. Responsibility is easy to avoid in any hierarchical system. So how do we plant the seeds of a learning organization in the anti-learning culture that describes most public service organizations today?

One thing is certain: learning and working can no longer be separated. Learning is the work of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Managerial leaders must develop the capacity to learn how to learn – and, even more, the capacity to lead others around them to learn how to learn.

The programmed solutions that managerial leaders are taught in conventional academic courses deal, by definition, with past solutions to past problems. Programmed knowledge in the form of “best practices” or “case studies” is what the dominant culture says is the right thing to do when you face a problem that has been solved at least once before. But that won’t help managerial leaders who need to learn continually in permanently messy, turbulent conditions.

### **What is action learning?**

Formulated over sixty years ago by Reg Revans (1971), action learning involves managerial leaders working in a small group on an urgent organizational problem that has no single correct answer, asking questions, learning from the process and taking action to implement solutions. Action learning is a process that promotes learning in the “here-and-now” while managerial leaders tackle a real predicament with real work colleagues in real time. As they work to solve an urgent problem, these managers are also learning how to build a high-performing team, how to collaborate more effectively, how to ask higher quality questions, how to think in systems terms and how to become more effective leaders. While these developmental processes unfold in real time, action learning simultaneously plants the seeds of a learning culture.

Many others (Albrook, Argyris, Bennis, Blake, Brower, Lewin, Lippit, McGregor, Rank, Rogers, Schein, Tannenbaum, et al.) have contributed partially to action learning by documenting their observations and experiences and by initiating many innovative developmental programs (participative management, action science, T Groups, organic problem solving, experiential learning, etc.). In combination, the whole of these parts makes action learning a powerful force in both individual and organizational change and evolution.

Action learning builds a community of learners that allows group members to transfer what they learn in the process of solving an urgent problem today to solve other, even more complex, workplace problems tomorrow. The optimal group size in action learning is 5-7, and meetings usually take place at least one day a month, but sometimes weekly or even daily, over the course of a project.

Action learning makes inquiry and reflection central to the group as members learn with and from each other. The changes implemented in the organization are called “action” and the changes breaking through the mindsets of the participants are called “learning.” The basic principle of action learning is that only those who have learned how to change the boundaries of their own mindsets – their own taken-for-granted values, assumptions, beliefs and attitudes – can change the taken-for-granted values, assumptions, beliefs and attitudes embedded in the culture of an organization. Those unable to change their own mindsets will never be able to change the organizational culture and sub-cultures in which they are spatially and psychologically located.

The power of action learning comes from the many ways it develops the skills and habits of questioning, listening and reflection. Questions are more important than answers during action learning. At first, action learners engage new ideas by asking questions to frame and reframe the

presenting problem. Unlike conventional problem-solving approaches, action learning is a process of *finding*, rather than accepting at face value what is presented as, the right problem. “If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution,” Albert Einstein once said, “I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I knew the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes”.

In the setting of action learning, the anti-learning assumptions of Weberian bureaucracy, a model of organizing that has long been seen as contributing to “occupational psychosis”(Dewey), “professional deformation” (Veblen) and “bureaupathology” (Merton) are able to be questioned without fear by public service managers perhaps for the first time in their careers.

### **Asking High Quality Questions**

*High quality questions open our minds.* They allow us to question what has been considered to be unquestionably true. They direct our attention to new vistas. They make us wonder about the assumptions and beliefs we have taken for granted.

*High quality questions slow down our thinking.* They allow us to consider new options before coming to closure. They allow us to value “not-knowing.” They let us breathe fresh air.

*High quality questions tap our emotions.* They connect to what is going on inside our bodies. They reorient us to what’s important. They motivate us to take committed action.

### **Learning how to unlearn**

While consciously framing and reframing the presenting problem – i.e., finding the right problem – participants are, at a preconscious level, also beginning to learn *how to unlearn*. Learning how to *unlearn* means that they will be repeatedly revisiting taken-for-granted values, assumptions, beliefs and biases, and becoming more and more open to questioning their own personal mindsets. At the same time that they are learning about, and unlearning, their taken-for-granted norms and behaviours, they are learning how to inquire into the collective assumptions of their organizational culture and professional subcultures.

Through deep questioning, they are also learning that “not knowing” an answer does not make them ineffective as managers or leaders. Not-knowing is reframed in action learning as an opportunity for learning, not as a sign of weakness, as it is traditionally seen by leaders who feel obligated to “have all the answers.” Valuing not-knowing can inspire managerial leaders – and others in the organization – to take committed action even in the face of unknowable outcomes.

In contrast to what Paolo Freire (1970) calls the “banking model of education,” action learning is designed to help learners in the “here-and-now” transform their internal, “invisible” psychic worlds at the same time they are engaged in transforming the external visible practices and systems in their organizations. But what, exactly, is “invisible” about the psychic world of human beings? Everything. Here is an incomplete list of what is usually invisible: our fears, hopes, dreams, speculations, puzzlements, hunches, intuitions, meanderings, habits, all our

unconscious projections, identifications, muddle-headedness, misunderstandings, covert power relations in the organization, half-baked notions, all our social conditioning, prior training, values, assumptions, beliefs and internalized cultural expectations. All of these elements of our psychic world are liable to be questioned in action learning, supplementing the conventional questioning of what is visible: hard data, facts, bottom lines, ways of behaving, public agendas, project plans, financial statements, reward systems and organization charts. In short, *what can be questioned in action learning is any idea, belief, feeling, habit, value or practice considered to be unquestionably true by organizational members.*

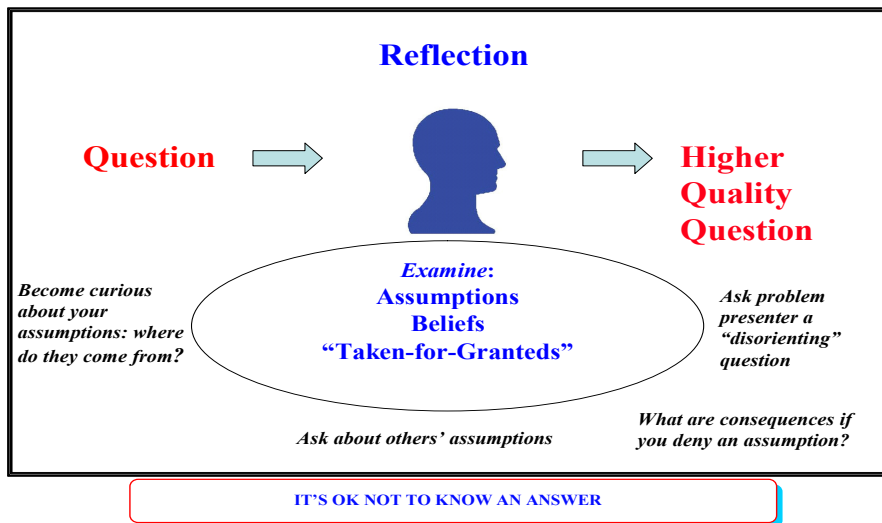
In essence, participants in action learning dialogues are *learning the capacity for self-reflection and culture-reflection.* They are learning how to change mindsets – their own and those of their fellow group members – by examining taken-for-granted assumptions. They are increasing their capacity for mindful learning and unlearning. They are making conscious what is not conscious, making visible what is usually invisible. In action learning, one might say that vision is the art of seeing the invisible.

Under the most important ground rule of action learning, as first proposed by Michael Marquardt (2004), who has recently advanced the theory and practice of action learning, group members do not offer statements, opinions or viewpoints except in response to another member's question.

On commencing action learning, participants are likely to be emotionally attached to the unconscious assumptions, beliefs and values inculcated into them during a lifetime of cultural socialization into various roles – family, community, religious, educational, professional and organizational. Bringing into awareness, and questioning – and *where necessary* – unlearning, these values, assumptions, beliefs and expectations is essential for effecting personal and organizational change.

During sessions of action learning, the “contents” of mindsets and professional and organizational subcultures emerge, usually in fragments or short statements, during the mutual questioning process as participants share with each other the multifaceted meanings they construct of organizational symbols, stories, mythologies, rituals, ceremonies, heroes, humor, boundaries, language and professional jargon. At the same time that participants are learning about, and unlearning, their own taken-for-granted norms and behaviors, they are learning how to inquire into the collective assumptions of the organizational culture. This is transformative learning.

## WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING?



### The role of action learning coach

At each session of the action learning group one member serves in the role of action learning coach, a role that often rotates among members. The coach only asks questions. Much practice is required before members become skilled in the coaching role, which is not designed to be a form of facilitation. In other words, the coach does not facilitate the group's agenda-setting or interpersonal, conflict management and problem-solving processes. Instead, the coach's sole task is to pose challenging questions to support the reflection, learning and unlearning of the members.

Modeling the three conditions that Carl Rogers (Kramer, 1995) found necessary for transformation in any interpersonal or group situation, the action learning coach must be congruent, fully present in the here and now, with no pretense of emotional distance, no professional façade, and show unconditional positive regard and empathy for members of the group as they struggle with questioning and unlearning beliefs that are no longer productive or helpful.

### Acting on the problem

The process of action learning is not merely an opportunity for Socratic questioning and unlearning. Action needs to be taken on the problem, no matter how provisional or incomplete its definition. Action must be tested against the limits of the real organizational culture, with all of its normal constraints, in real time. There can be no meaningful action without learning, as Reg Revans, the founder of action learning insisted, and no significant learning without action.

By willing to be open to transforming their own mindsets, and taking action in the face of uncertainty and high risk, managerial leaders and other participants in action learning processes create safe spaces for themselves and their group colleagues to learn and unlearn. They are

learning how to become learning leaders: i.e., leaders who know how to learn and learners who know how to lead others to lead and learn for themselves. Their learning is being inextricably tied to real organizational work. Working and learning are fusing into the same activity: self-transformation and organizational transformation. They are planting the seeds of a learning culture.

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