

The Power of Action Learning: Insights from a BAodn Action Learning Group

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Action Learning is focused on real work experience, and thus as a real-time coaching vehicle can be very powerful. The focus is on action and reflection around current challenges facing the group's participants. In late 2009, a small group of Bay Area OD Network (BAodn) members formed with this explicit purpose of creating a structured space for reflection on practice, best-practice sharing, networking, and peer support. This "Action Learning Group" intentionally set out to work on difficult, responsible, challenging issues and problems or difficulties which connect each person to his/her work. Now, two years later this short paper seeks to review that experience and draw lessons for future Action Learning efforts.

"Action learning particularly obliges subjects to become aware of their own value systems, by demanding that the real problems tackled carry some risk of personal failure." (Revans, 1982)

The purpose of the BAodn Action Learning Group, then, was to provide an opportunity for, in this case, internal OD practitioners to reflect on how they were handling their work challenges and to assimilate new learning into acting, and behaving in new and different ways. Each person was offered space and time as a client to present his/her issue and/or opportunity to the rest of the group. The other group members, then, acted as consultants to their client by asking that individual a series of questions to help him/her examine and reflect on the approach he/she was taking to address the issue or opportunity. Was there another way of being or doing that would produce different, and better, results?

From the outset, this group established a real-world focus and a relentless pursuit for authentic action-based exploration. More than that, we refused to get side-tracked by theoretical or academic distractions. The framing materials and process frameworks typically used by an Action Learning Group were deliberately kept as minimal as possible so as not to detract from the quality of our personal interactions.

A few of our members entered the group with some rather strong pre-conceived ideas about the role of the group leader and the need for him to actively facilitate our learning experience. These ideas were quickly challenged when the group was forming and, to our delight, proved a quite unnecessary condition for success if not outright inappropriate for meeting the group's needs. We experienced a blurring of the boundary between facilitator and participant very early on, and this blurring added significantly to the quality of the interaction for us all.

As one member commented, "...the opportunity to share in your knowledge and wisdom has been wonderful, but the opportunity to share in your lives has been truly incredible." Another shared, "...to invest in myself outside of work with non-work development activities, AND every time I experiment with a new adventure it's been a rich and rewarding experience. There is a valuable life lesson I have learned."

While this group formed with the intention of discussing, and addressing, professional challenges we face as internal OD practitioners, it's quite clear that the real value we gained from the group carried well

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beyond our four walls at work. Yes, we discussed possible promotions, challenging clients, and even when and how best to look for new professional opportunities. Beyond this though, group members shared their whole selves with others addressing topics like relocating to new cities, getting engaged and married and divorced, caring for sick and injured children, and simply finding time to balance it all.

What is more difficult to convey here is the warmth of a deeply human shared experience focused on joint discovery and learning. The creation of a “highly trusting, transparent and cohesive peer group” provided an opportunity for us all to bring our whole selves to the group and always be accepted as we did so. One of the participants described the group by sharing, “In the end it was about what we are struggling with as a person that gets in the way of our effectiveness, and this space made me a better person at home and at work.” Another participant noted how questions challenged thinking, to check the accuracy of assumptions and to help others discover answers for themselves. “There were generally two elements to our inquiry method (1) questions around dilemmas, (2) questions around where a member might want to go based on values, vision (and objective goals and mission).”

Action Learning clearly can contribute in significant ways to the development of OD practitioners by raising self awareness and supporting group members as naturally creative and resourceful individuals. The simple container offered by the group process establishes a safe space where we

get to scrape below the surface and experiment without fear. The blend of real work, reflection, and theory-building leading to the next round of action is a powerful recipe, and we encourage other BAODN members to try it for themselves. This group’s formal activities lasted about a year and a half. The group’s experience, however, not to mention the learning we take from it, will last a lifetime!

Now that the group has formally disbanded and we all have shared our “thank you’s” and “good-bye’s”, we’ve had a chance to look back and reflect on what made it such a powerful and successful group experience. We share the following lessons learned with you as our greatest insights and recommendations for launching your own Action Learning Groups.

Guidelines for starting an Action Learning Group

1. Establish a group of 6-8 persons with a convener who has prior knowledge of Action Learning but does not feel the need to maintain a facilitation or traditional leadership role beyond the first meeting.
2. Avoid getting distracted by the call of some grand ‘project’. Instead, recognize each of the individual learners themselves as being the ‘projects’ on which the group should focus its attention and energy.
3. Use a very simple structure to create the container for the group, and stick to it rigidly! We used a standard check-in process of rating ourselves on a scale from 1-10 across 4 dimensions – Business, Personal, Health, and Life – that gave everyone a simple framework for sharing

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individual updates and key highlights with fellow group members every time we met.

4. Schedule your meetings in advance. Setting our meeting dates proved to be the most challenging issue to manage, until we finally settled on the 4th Thursday of every month and calendared our sessions for the whole year.
5. Take time to reflect on the group's process itself every so often, and adjust as needed including facing issues of saying farewell to members who aren't able to maintain the group commitment.
6. Pay attention to the process of learning how to learn together. No individual has all the answers, so it takes the group's willingness to be in the conversation together for any one individual to succeed.
7. Use the group as an opportunity to practice new behaviors. The whole purpose of the group is to practice taking different actions and experiment and then reflect on how that experience actually turns out.
8. Be prepared to be surprised! Our members had several major life events during the course of the group that significantly added to the experience of the group.
9. Hold each other accountable for your own learning and action.
10. Create connections in between meetings – virtual, social and otherwise.

11. Don't be afraid to offer your content expertise when you have it and that is what the learner most needs. Sharing an example, a white paper, or a model is not only practical at times but also invaluable to the learning and development process.
12. Establish some simple ground rules and one or two simple rituals that create a container for an otherwise loose and emergent process.
13. Meet no less than monthly to maintain cohesion and a sense of group.
14. Maintain the focus of group time on the 'person in the work' and avoid getting distracted by the technical issues that leave the person out of the story.
15. Expect – and accept nothing less than – generosity, authenticity, frankness, clarity, and insight from yourself and others throughout the journey.

Authors' Acknowledgement

While this article was written by two authors, it is only possible due to the heartfelt sharing and personal commitment of every member of the BAodn group. We therefore acknowledge all of them for their contributions to us, and for their unwavering commitment to contribute to others by allowing us to share their learning with you.

References

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Published

www.baodn.org, October, 2012