

Decreasing Duplicate Directory Distribution: A Case Study in Action Learning within the Telecommunications Industry



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What is Action Learning?

- ▶ It is very hard to label with a concise definition.
- ▶ As described by Professor Reg W. Revans,
“Action learning is a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subject, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change sufficient to improve his observable behavior henceforth in the problem field...” (1981).

What is Action Learning?

- ▶ Dr. Mike Pedler suggests this definition:

“Action Learning is an approach to the development of people in organisations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning.”

Action Learning and “Sets”

- ▶ An Action Learning set is a group of people who meet together to work with each other (Beaty, Bournier, & Frost, 1993; Davey, Powell, Cooper, & Powell, 2004; Passett, 1996).
- ▶ Sets work on problems that do not have a clear-cut right or wrong answer.

Set Advisors

- ▶ Often play a facilitator role in the Action Learning Sets.
- ▶ Although a set advisor is not absolutely required for Action Learning to take place, Weinstein (1995) has advocated,
“Without the set advisor pulling the set back from rushing into action, constantly asking them ‘what have you learnt?’, action learning becomes merely another action-focused programme where the experience and action are not fully explored and reflected on” (pp. 43-44).

"Learning Equation"

$$L = P + Q$$

Learning results from a combination of Programmed knowledge plus Questioning.

Action Learning and Programmed Knowledge: The "P"

- ▶ Programmed knowledge (Law & Chuah, 2004; Smith & O'Neil, 2003) is all we have to know from the past; it is what experts acquire in their various fields of specialization; it is what schools and universities teach.
- ▶ The limitation to programmed knowledge is that the past may be very different from the future.

Action Learning and Questioning: The "Q"

- ▶ Posted in a Revans Centre Newsletter, Vick (1997) wrote:

"Action learning is a way to defy existing assumptions by summoning our courage to accept the possibility that different perspectives may be needed-perspectives which may lead to the truth."

- ▶ This defiance in assumptions and acceptance of different perspectives fuels the engine of Action Learning.

Action Learning and Questioning: The "Q"

- ▶ The "non-expert" is crucial in questioning assumptions in Action Learning.
- ▶ Non-experts often ask very simple questions- because of lack of familiarity- causing the expert to explain the basics, exerting lateral thinking.

Action Learning and Learning: "The L"

► According to Revans (1986),

"In a simplistic fashion, we may say that learning is the sum of programmed instruction and of questioning insight."

Action Learning and Change

- ▶ The rate of change which humankind now faces raises some serious issues about adaptation on both an individual and a societal basis.
- ▶ Revans (1983) suggested,
“If conditions change more rapidly than you can (or adapt) you will be in trouble, as are all organisms facing change.”

Action Learning and Change

$$L > C$$

The rate of Learning must be **greater** than the rate of change (or else).

Background Information

- ▶ The divestiture of AT&T was the direct result of a court-ordered breakup of the organization's regulated monopoly.
- ▶ RBOC's (Regional Bell Operating Companies) were spun off from AT&T as separate operating companies.

The Client

- ▶ The director of distribution was the individual who was responsible for providing telephone directories to all business and residential customers throughout the region of the United States serviced by the RBOC under which his organization operated.
- ▶ The client's organization was the directory and publishing subsidiary of a parent telephone company.

The Client

- ▶ Telephone directory distribution was divided into two phases.
 - A massive annual disbursement when new directories are published
 - An “interim” phase during the year
- ▶ These disbursements amounted to approximately fifty-million throughout an annual distribution cycle.

The Project Set

- ▶ Set members in this case were a mixed group from several organizations: managers from the client organization, an official telephone company liaison, representatives from the contracted distribution company, and the set advisor.
- ▶ The client was at the mercy of a variety of persons and procedures that required the input and problem solving commitment of several parties.

The "Problem"

- ▶ The company was handing out far more directories than it had in prior years.
- ▶ The increase was far beyond normal for the client.

The "Problem"

- ▶ The organizational structure itself became a stumbling block.
 - The parent company was operating under a collection of companies, all ultimately operating under the umbrella of the holding company.
 - The organizational structure created a complex set of interrelated problems.
- ▶ Telephone directory representatives were largely evaluated on the basis of expediency.

The "Problem"

- ▶ Due to the Regulatory Environment, if the telephone service provider gives out its customer list and account activity data to the client's organization, it could be forced to give the information to a competitor as well.
- ▶ "It's Not *My* Problem" mentality was created.

The Outcome

- ▶ Although it had been strongly suspected all along, confirming evidence finally showed that directory order increases were directly correlated to wildly successful second line sales, and the client finally had exact numerical findings to go by.

The Outcome

- ▶ Several changes were needed including:
 - Significant and expensive computer programming changes would be required.
 - Training service representatives on new systems and procedures would be required.
 - Performance issues related to how representatives were evaluated would have to be examined and addressed.
 - More accurate data would need to be gathered, where possible, as to what customers' usage plans for their phones actually were.

The Outcome

- ▶ At one point, underwriting the costs of changes such as these was considered to be the problem, and burden of the client.
- ▶ After all, *he* was the one sending out more phone books than planned for in *his* budget—it was therefore *his* problem.

The Outcome

- ▶ Although the changes did require several months to implement, the client's problem was rendered under control.
- ▶ Estimated savings for the client company were reported to be in excess of \$1 million, *annually*.
- ▶ Indeed, the outcome in this particular case demonstrated that reallocating the ownership of the problem became the impetus for the solution itself to prevail.

Conclusion

- ▶ Hopefully, the results reported above will inspire those who are in doubt (or are unfamiliar with) the usefulness of Action Learning.
- ▶ While the Action Learning literature addresses issues of risk and problem ownership somewhat definitively—stressing the underlying importance of genuine and sustained commitment—the real point is that risk and ownership are infinitely variable.

Conclusion

- ▶ In essence, one can own a problem to some extent, while another *owns* a problem.
- ▶ Future Action Learners and researchers may benefit from further evaluating the notion of problem ownership within sets.

Questions?

