

Coaching via Action Learning

By

Bernadette Carson

Michael Marquardt

Merriam Webster defines a coach as one who instructs or trains a performer or a team of performers. Typically, when the word coach is heard we think of the sports coach; that is, one who instructs players in the fundamentals of a competitive sport and directs team strategy.

Executive coaches are utilized by many executives to increase their efficiency; they are utilized to improve leadership skills or address personal or organizational goals. Coaches also introduce the executive to new skills and techniques that will help them deal more efficiently with today's rapidly changing organizational environment. Executive coaches focus their work to an individual; however as their skills as an executive improves the entire organization benefits. There are five elements to being an effective coach: 1) establish a rapport, 2) expand self-awareness, 3) establish goals, 4) feedback, and 5) renewal and growth. Action learning takes this coaching ability to the group level.

Action Learning Coaching

Action Learning is a dynamic process for solving-problem, building teams, and developing leaders. It consists of six components: 1) the problem, 2) a group of 4-6, 3) a process that encourages questioning and listening, 4) a resolution to take action, 5) a commitment to learning, and 6) an action learning coach.

The action learning coach is the catalyst that optimizes the power as well as the enjoyment of action learning. She is the synergizer, the glue that bonds group members together as well as the yeast that enhances and expands their ability to learn and take vigorous actions. The primary role and focus of the action learning coach is to facilitate the group's ability to grow and learn so that it, in turn, can better solve the problem. The focus and objective of the action learning coach must always remain on the learning, and not the problem. Learning will provide the leverage for continuously improving group performance.

The action learning coach takes the power of coaching to the group level, but is even more powerful because action learning groups only work on real problems requiring real solutions. The action learning coach not only establishes the rapport with the group members but also builds the rapport between group members. Through the action learning process the group members self-awareness is not only raised by the coach, but by virtue of the of the process. Rather than setting goals for the group, the coach leads the group to being able to set their own goals. The feedback the coach gives takes the group to deeper level of learning. Instead of just focusing on 'what' has transpired; the coach takes the group to understanding the 'how' and 'why' of their actions. Finally, by focusing the group on learning rather than just solving a problem the coach takes the group to extraordinary levels of renewal and growth. The action learning process on the surface appears fairly simple, but in truth is extremely powerful.

Action Learning Process

A typical action learning session starts with the coach establishing the ground

rules; the two most critical ones being: 1) statements can only be made in response to questions, and 2) the coach has ultimate power. The meaning of this latter one is that when the coach intervenes in the problem solving to work on the learning, everyone stops and focuses on the coaches questions; the problem solving does not resume until the coach gives permission. Once the ground rules have been established, the coach determines which leadership competencies each member wants to work on; typically posting them as a gentle reminder throughout the session. With that, the coach will have one person state the problem the group needs to work on in two to three minutes. The time limit on this is to prevent the team members from being led down a specific path.

At this point the problem solving begins, team members asking questions of the person who presented the problem and of each other, and the presenter asking questions. With each question the seeds of the solution are planted. During the questioning, the coach listens for learning opportunities; they present themselves in several forms. The simplest is an early intervention. This one takes place typically within the first ten minutes of a session. The purpose of this is to determine how the group has started as a team, but more importantly it is a time to insure everyone is participating. The coach will require each person answer “good” or “not good” to the basic question “how are we doing?” By requiring everyone to answer the coach pulls all team members into the conversation – their silence has been broken. Once everyone has spoken the coach will follow up with the deeper questions.

The other two opportunities the coach looks for are: 1) when things are going astray, or 2) when things are going particularly well. Again the coach will test how the

group feels they are doing; again digging deeper. Through this process the team will discover if there are issues they have been hiding below the table and surface them, allowing the air to be cleared of the issue and the group to focus their energies on being a better team and solving the problem. During these interventions the coach will also ask questions of each person related to the leadership competency they are working on. These questions will lead the individual to understand how the competency is being emulated or what they could be doing instead.

When the coach intervenes, she brings the learning to the forefront. During these times the problem continues to mull around in the members subconscious; when the group returns to problems solving, the problem moves to the forefront and the learning moves to the subconscious. This flip flopping of conscious and subconscious processing has a phenomenal impact; with each flip from subconscious to conscious there is a leap in performance, from both the processing and learning aspect.

The coach will save the last ten to twenty minutes of a session to work on a final intervention. Again probing questions around process and leadership competencies will be investigated, but also questions around what has been learned and what actions will be taken.

Action learning groups tend to show similar patterns. The process starts slow, the members typically finding it hard to ask questions. After the first intervention, the process starts to pick up, the coach drawing all members into the conversation and helping them to figure out how to process better. In addition to determining how to ask better questions and work better as a team the coach probes to insure the members know why certain

actions will work better. Action learning coaches restrict their participation to asking questions, letting the members find the answers for themselves. This questioning processes forces the participants to reflect - thinking about the impact of their actions. With each intervention the participation becomes more intense. Particularly exciting sessions have occurred when the group reconvenes after taking a night off. The subconscious working on the learnings and the problem all night creates an intense fire when the group reconvenes in the morning. This new relationship between the group members infiltrates their day to day to activities from that day forward; conversations shift from statements to questions as those that have participated in action learning realize the real power in a team is determining what is not known, not showing off what is known. The action learning coach is the catalyst that causes this transformation to occur.

Copyright © ASTD OD/Leadership - March 2004. Volume 1, Issue 3.

Contact Info:

Bea Carson

bea@bke-associates.com

www.bke-associates.com

410-353-4722