

Action Learning Conference

Bob J. Holder
Executive Resources Center & Gray Matter Productions
620 Roosevelt Drive
Edwardsville, Il. 62025
(314) 772-8154/ (618) 692-0258
Fax (314) 772-8154/ (618) 692-0819
HBob372917@aol.com

What is an Action Learning conference? First, It's based on a new meeting paradigm. Exhibit I illustrates the differences between the traditional and emerging paradigm for organizing conferences. The former tends to support control, lecture and passive involvement while the latter support inquiry, high involvement and learning through doing and participation. An Action Learning conference also encourages ownership, aggressive application of conference and results.

Exhibit I: Traditional and New Approach for Organizing Meetings & Conferences

| Traditional | New |
|---|---|
| Managed, Structured & Directed Meeting. | Create time-space for participants to self-organize teams for perform selected tasks. |
| Management & Facilitator Responsibility | Participant & Team Responsibility |
| Stable and Controlled. | Messy & Dynamic. |
| Structure Is Imposed. | Order is Created by Participants. |
| Problem Solving. | Information Creation, Visioning & Learning. |
| Chaos is Controlled. | Chaos is Constructive and Supported. |
| Information is Controlled | Information is Freely |

& Managed.

Generated.

Create Plans & Solve Problems.

Develop Relationships &
Action planning.

This paradigm recognizes that people tend to learn through action and sharing knowledge rather than being trained and lectured at. The emphasize is on "actual issue" rather than engaging in abstract cases and simulations.

Second an Action Learning conference is directed by a business opportunity or challenge. For example, the vice president for sale and marketing for a chemical manufacturer, organized a Action Learning conference based on the theme of improving customer service. The emphasize is on solving and working with critical issues rather than implementing a new program.

An Action Learning conference creates the time-space for people to discover common purposes, share intuitions, information and perceptions, create information and knowledge, develop new relationships and formulate action plans. An Action Learning conference is self-organizing, encourage messiness and is relatively nondirective. Participants create the agenda. They are responsibility for the success or failure of the event.

Third, an Action Learning conference supports the development of ownership and commitment. Ownership is created by involving large groups of diverse people. An Action Learning conference can involve as many as 300 participants. Ownership results from organizational members developing their own vision, strategies and tactics. Commitment arises, naturally, from such ownership.

Fourth, an Action Learning conference is guided by straight forward principles. It involve performing simple tasks. Exhibit II presents the principles guiding an Action Learning conference. It assumes participants are capable of self-directed facilitation and don't require

meeting and interpersonal training. Participants form their own teams. Each team decides how to organize itself to complete tasks. It also assumes a willingness by participants to support each other's potential and not to thoughtlessly interpose on each other.

Exhibit II: Suggested Guiding Principles

- * Whoever comes is the right people.
- * Whatever happens is the only thing that could happen.
- * Whenever it starts is the right time.
- * Whenever it's over, it's over.
- * Law of Two Feet: You have the ability to leave the group whenever you aren't contributing or aren't interested. Engage in scouting other groups or form your own.

Supporting Personal and Group Trust

- * Be who I am.
- * Express my thoughts, beliefs, feelings and values.
- * Do what I want.
- * Be with others in an interdependent fashion.

Supporting Meaningful Communication, Inquiry, Learning and Action Planning

- * Show up.
- * Pay attention to what has significance, value and meaning.
- * Be truthful. Don't blame or judge. Engage in deep inquiry.
- * Be open to outcomes, not just your agenda. Be open to fresh information and ideas.

Sources: Jack Gibb. (1978). Trust--A New View of Personal and Organizational Development and Harrison Owen. (1992). Open Space Technology--A User's Guide.

Fifth, an Action Learning Conference is most effective when participants engage in a dialogue. What is a dialogue? Dialogue is not

a discussion. Discussion can be imagined as a ping-pong game with participants hitting ideas back and forth to win. Participants tend to talk at others. There tends to be a real or imagined hierarchy. Participants have numerous issues and ideas that tend to be undiscussable, non-negotiable and untouchable.

In dialogue, a person treats others as equally important beings. They talk with others. They respect each person as unique. They ask questions, listen to responses, and provide feedback.

A dialogue takes place for the purposes of mutual learning and creativity. A dialogue involves a flow of communications, possibly resulting in understanding and new meaning from creating new knowledge. In a dialogue, one can begin from a certain position. However, this position is flexible and can change. The spirit of an dialogue is creative, neither competitive nor hostile.

The likely outcome of an dialogue could be a New Theory. A theory is a set of assumptions about the world directing action and behavior. Everyone has theories. For example, many people hold the theory that people are only motivated by monetary rewards.

It is important in a dialogue that all facts, feelings and insights are recognized and not disregarded because they do not conform to one's theory. It is also important that no point of view be written in stone. When a person becomes angry about another's position, the assumption(s) causing the feeling must be explored. When the core assumption is discovered, it needs to be compared with the facts and the views of others. Often, people assume that their assumptions are a part of their personality. This is not necessarily true. Many assumptions are learned.

It is important that each person involved in a dialogue explore their own assumptions. This needs to be done by assuming or role playing the position of the other to gain an understanding and not to discredit or discount the other.

The outcome of a dialogue is not necessarily consensus. Too often, the idea of consensus and team spirit involves a group of people who already share a common set of assumptions. When a disagreement or facts contrary to the group's theory are presented, the presenter is perceived as not being a "team player" and his or her point of view is disregarded. This is not a dialogue. In a dialogue, a new idea is explored. One likely result is the creation of a new theory. This is the spirit of true community and democracy, not group think, conformity and authoritarianism.

The following are principles for supporting dialogue.

- * Suspend your assumptions. Most people tend to take a position and defend it. In groups, this creates polarization. Dialogue does not require you to suspend your position but to be open to hearing the position of others. Also, dialogue encourages examining the assumptions and beliefs upon which your position is based rather than defending them.

- * Support a Spirit of Inquiry. Explore the thinking behind your's and other's views and beliefs. The purpose is to create fresh insights and support creative intelligence amongst group members. It's not a contest or game of winning. Asks such questions as "What leads you to believe that's valid?" and "What are the beliefs, values and assumptions upon which your idea or view is based?"

- * Be Colleagues and citizens. Dialogue is best facilitated when all members live the words of Thomas Jefferson presented in the Declaration of Independence. "All people are created equal." That means leaving your hierarchical position and professional credentials at the door. We are all citizens in a dialogue. That means each has a gift to express.

Sixth, an Action Learning conference consists of the following stages.

Action Learning Conference Stages

- * Preconference Work with a Design and Conference Implementation Team
 - * Conference Performance
 - * Editing of Conference Proceeding & Action Plans
 - * Dissemination of Conference Proceeding Action Plans
 - * Implementation of the Action Plans
-

A sample Action Learning conference outline is presented below.

Action Learning Conference Outline

- * Introduction by the sponsor
 - * Conference Management Team Introduction
 - * Statement of Conference Team
 - * Statement of Expected Outcomes
 - * Conference Constraints and Commitment Statement
 - * Introduction to How the Conference Works
 - * Housekeeping Statement
 - * Introduction to Principles & Dialogue
 - * The Actual Conference Begins
 - * Teams Self- Organize
 - * Teams Dialogue and Create Action Plans
 - * Presentation of Conference Outcomes
 - * Conference Closure
-

An Action Learning conference maybe followed by an After Action Review. It's purpose is for participants to engage in discovery learning to improve conference and implement performance.

After Action Review Themes

- * "The problem is no problem."

"Every event or experience we have provides data and creates information and knowledge that can be used to improve effectiveness and performance."

"The most fruitful lesson is the conquest of one's own errors. Whoever refuses to admit error may be a great scholar but he is not a great learner. Whoever is ashamed of error will struggle against recognizing and admitting it, which means that he struggles against the greatest inward gain."

Johanen von Goethe

After Action Review Assumptions

- * Each person is responsible for his or her learning and contributing to team learning.
 - * Productive learning takes place when maximum participation takes place.
 - * Productive learning takes place when the emphasis is on improving performance and effectiveness; not assigning blame or punishing.
 - * Effectiveness is improved through Learning II; that is discovering the source of why errors took place."
 - * Effectiveness is improved when inquiry involves everyone; that is, learning takes place in a circle, not a hierarchy.
-

After Action Review Themes Process

- * Establish a AAR Covenant. The covenant ought to specify:
 - (1) agreed upon or shared objectives,
 - (2) the AAR's purpose,
 - (3) the frame of reference (beliefs) and
 - (4) guidelines (norms) for operations.
- * Create Time-Space for the Team to Gather to Explore Scouting and/or A Scouting Event.
- * Deeply Review the Process and/or Event. The image is that of a sports team reviewing game videos.
 - * Deeply Explore such Questions as:
 - What went on?
 - What actions took place?
 - What ought to have taken place?
 - What was effective?
 - What was not effective?
 - Who did what?
- What have we learned that will improve effectiveness and/or performance later?

Create an Action Plan for Improving Performance.

Seventh, an Action Learning conference has a variety of applications. Exhibit IV presents selected applications.

Exhibit VI: Potential Applications

- * New Product Development
 - * Strategic Visioning
 - * Self-Organizing Work Teams
 - * Customer Assessments
 - * Market and Environmental Assessments
 - * Empowerment
 - * Organizational Learning
 - * Discovering Discontinuous Improvements
-

Finally, an Action Learning conference is fertile soil for sprouting serendipitous and discontinuous improvements. The reasons are simple: cross-fertilization and chaos. The former encourages the creation of new orders by supporting people to stop making sense and by breaking existing rules. Cross pollination supports the creation of new information: the "difference that makes the difference."

New business may even arise from such conferences. Business lore is filled with stories of firms arising without business plans, market analysis or clearly defined objectives. David Packard and Bill Hewlett didn't have a goal or a clearly defined idea or plan when they began Hewlett-Packard. They just wanted to start a business together in the electronic engineering field. Masaru Ibuka had no idea what kind of business his new company would enter. For weeks, Ibuka, Akio Morita and their associates sat around discussing what kind of business the new firm would enter. Today, this confused and lacking in purpose group is known as Sony.