

Collective Learning within CoPs

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INTRODUCTION

Like it or not, CoPs are awash in assumptions, and we presume validity at our peril in organizational contexts that are increasingly complex and ambiguous. If we wish to successfully address issues via CoPs, it is critical that members continually, individually, and jointly question their suppositions, evolve fresh questions out of their ignorance, and share relevant knowledge. Although CoPs clearly have the potential to do this, in the author's experience, little attention is paid by CoP members to the processes of either individual or collective learning that would facilitate achieving such ends.

The ability to think things through and debrief experiences at non-trivial personal and contextual levels is increasingly recognized as essential to effective learning in all situations, including CoPs. Action Learning (AL) is a well-proven individual, collective, and organizational development philosophy (McGill & Brookbank, 2004) that provides a sound setting for such reflective inquiry. Its application in CoP settings seems to be largely undocumented or untried.

BACKGROUND

AL, in its traditional form, originated more than 50 years ago as a means to improve UK coal production (Revans, 1982) and has become widely practiced worldwide (Marquardt, 1999). AL involves working on real problems, focusing on learning, and actually implementing solutions. It is based on Revans' notion that effective learning requires us to both question what is known and explore what is unknown ($L = P + Q$). There is general acceptance today that AL is a form of learning through experience, "by doing", where the task environment is the classroom and the task the vehicle (IFAL—Canada, 1998).

AL programs are typically based on the following tenets:

- Participants are tackling real problems (no "right" answer) in real time.
- Participants meet intermittently in small learning groups (AL Sets).
- Problems are relevant to a participant's own workplace realities.
- A supportive collaborative learning process is followed.
- The group process is based on reflection, questioning, conjecture, and refutation.
- Participants take action between meetings to try to resolve their issues and return at later sessions with progress reports, learning, and so forth on which to base further AL.

AL has an "elicitive" framework, intended to draw out, capture, and build on "what is", rather than operate in a detached, analytical, and rational world of "what should be". It is well known that experience is a very untrustworthy teacher, since most of the time we have experiences from which we never learn. AL seeks to throw a net around slippery experiences and capture them as learning, that is, as replicable behavior in similar contexts and as a source of questions in differing contexts (Smith & Peters, 1997).

By promoting reflection and insightful questioning with perceptive partners in situations where solutions are not always obvious and by leaving responsibility for implementation of the solution in the participant's hands, the individual makes sense of an experience by conceptualizing it and generalizing the replicable points; plans for future actions are based on the learning gathered. In this way, an AL group provides a "safe practice field" where the participants' mental models and future actions are shaped and reshaped in continual developmental cycles.

FUTURE TRENDS

The relevance of the above methodological tenets to CoPs should be clear to CoP practitioners, and its application is straightforward. The author uses a style of AL described by McLaughlin (1998). This approach is based on the counseling approach pioneered by Gaunt (1991) whereby participants negotiate for time to explore an issue. This model is favored over the more familiar project model advocated by Revans (1982) because of its relevance to CoP settings; for example, individuals are encouraged to define their own areas of interest/concerns and work in-depth with these issues, thus building increased capacity for ownership and insight. In addition, the author disregards the stable-group membership criteria advocated in project model practice and successfully applies AL processes in “whomever turns up” CoP settings; this provides the kind of attendance freedom typically associated with CoP sessions.

CONCLUSION

It is the author’s hope that CoP practitioners will give serious consideration to more generally adopting AL processes as a means to better identify and encourage individual and collective learning in CoP programs. Such a flexible and powerful methodology deserves its place in the CoP lexicon of tools.

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KEY TERMS

Action Learning: A collaborative but challenging group process of cyclic inquiry that facilitates insight in an individual group member facing an important real-life problem such that (s)he may take reasoned action to resolve her/his problem, and the individual and other group members learn through the overall process.

AL Set: The name given to an AL group.

L = P + Q: AL is based on the radical concept that significant learning (L) only results when based on “routine knowledge in use” (P) and “questioning insight” (Q) brought together through a process of personal and communal reflection that integrates research on what is best practice or obscure with practical action to resolve a problem.

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