ACTION LEARNING – SYMPTOMS OR CAUSES?

An often quoted characteristic of Action Learning is that it is effective for addressing 'actionable problems'. So does this mean Action Learning risks addressing the symptoms rather than the causes of issues? In other words does it fail to reach the parts of the problem that are inherent in the system? This leads to the question: How can action learning be used to address systemic problems?

What follows is based on a conversation with Ibrar (Ibby) Hussain, Senior Lead Consultant at Vanguard Consulting. Ibby has 18 years experience of helping leaders view their organisation as a system as a starting point to making improvements in performance. Showing leaders how to 'see' their system means making visible the series of interlinked, interrelated pieces that work together in the organisation to deliver the aim of the organisation.

Not surprisingly, Ibby finds that leaders are typically concerned about aspects of performance, whether that relates to customer service, efficiency, revenue generation or staff morale. Vanguard uses a unique framework to enable leaders to recognise that their thinking has a direct effect on the way the system works. The framework represents two key aspects, first is the direct correlation between how the leaders think and the organisational system. Second is the fundamental way the system creates and governs organisational performance. He describes understanding that relationship as the first step to making the work work better.

How can action learning be used to address systemic problems?
I put the question to Ibby who has successfully used action learning this way with leaders of organisations including: HSBC (call centre operations), Dixons Retail Group and HBOS (retail operations), Vodafone Retail (customer service operations), numerous public sector organisations including - Milton Keynes Council, Oxford City Council, Buckingham County Council, Lincoln County Council, Middlesbrough Council, Bath & North East Somerset Council (transforming the design and management of work to deliver citizen centric services)

Intriguingly Ibby says he has not yet found the boundaries of Vanguard's approach. So naturally I was thoroughly curious, wanting to know what he did and how he did it. And was it Action Learning? This is what Ibby told me.

He sees his role as a 'learning advisor' or 'learning coach' to a group of leaders, meeting around 12 times over a 5 to 6 week period. They start by focusing on understanding their organisation and the methods they use to create change. By engaging Ibby to help them see their organisation from a systems perspective, leaders are recognising for themselves the

need for 'programmed knowledge'. This reminded me of Revans' formula:
L (learning) **= P** (programmed knowledge) **+ Q** (questioning).

To deliver the knowledge participants want, Ibby gathers illustrative stories to engage the leaders and show them the unintended consequences their current thinking has on performance, and contrast this with stories illustrating the performance benefits of 'Systems Thinking'. He describes these two ways of thinking as like 'oil and water', they never mix. Using stories develops a rational dialogue in the group from where they start to explore and reflect on the situation in their own organisation.

From this rational basis the leaders go through an experiential process to enable them to ask fresh questions of themselves and others. The questions are geared to enabling them to understand, from an outside-in customer perspective, the system their thinking has created.

This involves understanding what customers want by listening to 'demand' at each point of contact with the organisation. And parallel to learning to listen, learning to ask insightful questions of front line staff and each other. This does not come naturally for most leaders who are generally more used to telling others rather than asking them questions. Ibby's role is to model the questioning approach, demonstrating this to individual leaders.

The first objective is to learn how customers experience service and identify how the system operates. Having done this the aim is to learn how to gear the system to only do the things that add value for customers. Each leader's fieldwork involves listening to demand in an area other than their own. Ibby sees this as an important 'un-learning' for each of the leaders, to bring a fresh view to a situation rather than be limited by existing 'knowledge'.

To me this sounded similar to Revans' idea of the value of tapping into 'wisdom' rather than 'cleverness'. So for example the Finance Director may learn that what she believes could have a deleterious effect on the area overseen by the Sales Director, and vice-versa. Only the Chief Executive does fieldwork in all areas, to get an overview of what her directors will learn.

At this point the leaders have done their individual 'un-learning' but don't yet know what each other have found out. The next step is to enable the leaders to understand those things they have learned that are common to all and those things that are particular to one or some. Here Ibby sets the ground rules of confidentiality and anonymity, then 'gets out of the way' and trusts the learning process.

He challenges the leaders to question each other and piece together an emerging picture of their system. He supports the group as they work out how to address the issues they have found in their system and how to lead the necessary changes. At each point he uses a form of process review to focus on what has been learned, covering both content and process, thinking and feeling.

Ibby captures what emerges from this learning process in words and pictures that represent the group's shared understanding, from which the leaders identify their 'actionable problems' and the teams to address them. It strikes me that following this process means leaders identify the right problems to solve, and that these will be very different from the ones they may have thought they had at the start of the process.

This brings Vanguard's approach to a point familiar to action learners, the identification of 'actionable problems'. The difference is that problems are identified from a collective learning process, so systemic issues can be addressed. By now the leaders have usually created a compelling case for changing the system. Their job is then to ensure the system is designed to make it easy for people to add value for customers.

So is it action learning? Or is it action learning but not as we know it? I imagine that classic action learners would find much that did not 'fit' neatly. Yet in my informal exploration I have been struck by how Vanguard's approach uses action learning principles to address systemic problems.
These are the parts that I recognise as action learning:
   o Setting ground rules to enable groups to work safely
   o The development and use of listening and insightful questions
   o Space to reflect
   o The identification of actionable problems and plans to address them
   o Ongoing review of learning and process
   o The importance of a skilled learning advisor to facilitate the group

The characteristics I like very much and see as 'extras' to take account of working on systems are:
   o The initial 'un-learning' of what leaders think they know
   o A clear focus on the need to change leader's thinking about the nature of the work and the people who do the work
   o The creation of a series of heuristic loops or exercises to enable leaders to 'see' and reflect on their own system
   o Storytelling to engage leaders, getting them curious to learn more
   o Use of practical fieldwork

To my mind the widely tested effectiveness of Vanguard's action learning offers practitioners rich scope for reflection. I perceive that sound logic underpins the approach, which though it is a variant adds considerable value and is consistent with the spirit of action learning.

With sincere thanks to Ibby for sharing his expertise and time so generously and enthusiastically for this conversation.

More information about Vanguard and Systems Thinking can be found at www.systemsthinking.co.uk.

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