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Action Learning

Creating the Connection Between Good Intentions and Great Execution!

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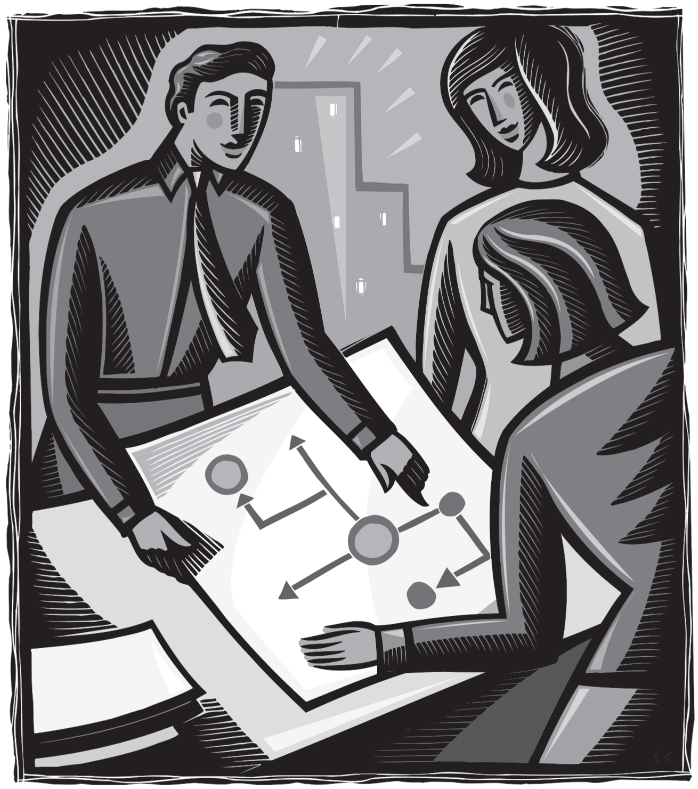

Have you ever been in a study group where you got great ideas but didn't implement them? Or after a company meeting where best practices were shared, you may have wanted to put one or two into practice, but daily activity and challenges prevented your follow through? You are not alone! This is a common phenomenon for both leaders and advisors in financial services. Most people have good intentions and want to implement good ideas or make the changes they know are necessary to grow. But too often the inspiration fades when "hot fires" need to be extinguished and plans to improve move to the back burner.

Execution often differentiates the very successful from the mediocre. Years ago, as a new field leader for veteran advisors, I knew I needed to find a better way to get results. Action Learning Teams became the vehicle for my success and for the success of many of my advisors. In my first year as a field leader, I got a 30% increase in veteran productivity. Later in my career, I discovered the power of using the same Action Learning process to develop my leaders. Action Learning Teams can truly make the difference between good intentions and great execution that gets measurable results.

What is Action Learning?

Action Learning is a dynamic process where a team meets regularly to help individual members address real issues through a highly structured, facilitated team process of reflection and action. Peer accountability and visibility of plan execution are powerful motivators that get results for the individual team member and meaningful experiential learning for all.

Teams of colleagues meet, in a monthly facilitated session, to focus on real-time work issues—commonly called "bottlenecks." The team focuses on one member at a time, called the "focus team member." A unique peer-questioning process helps the focus team member identify biases and assumptions that drive his or her thinking and behaviors. Using this structured process of inquiry, the team seeks to help the focus team member select changes or actions that lead to greater results. The focus team member commits to a plan (specific steps that he or she will take between this month's meeting and the next) and then reports back on what worked and didn't work at the following meeting. Research has shown that people will break commitments to themselves—or even their managers—much more easily than they will to their peers. This method of peer accountability is extremely important and is one of the key success factors of Action Learning. When the focus team member shares the results of the action steps they implement, everyone on the team benefits and true experiential learning occurs.

How Does Action Learning Work?

Action learning has existed in various formats for over sixty years and has many variations. At the end of the this article you will find The Action Learning model that I developed. As you can see it is a cyclical model with processes and outcomes. Following you will find descriptions of these processes and outcomes starting with Awareness in the left-hand corner of the model and continue clockwise.

Now let's look at a hypothetical focus team member going through the process. The leader in our example, Jack, is a branch manager responsible for 200 financial advisors.

about the author

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Awareness

The first step in Action Learning is to examine where you are in relation to your business plan and personal goals. We are often so busy with day-to-day activity that we don't stand back to take in the big picture. No matter how well you are doing, chances are that you have two or three bottlenecks—any issue or challenge preventing you from achieving your goals.

Prior to the team meeting, Jack has a coaching session with a facilitator. In that meeting, Jack takes stock of where he and his business are and, with the coach's help, identifies his most critical bottlenecks. (Having this heightened awareness of his bottlenecks is a valuable outcome in itself.) When he meets with the team, Jack begins his Action Learning discussion by sharing highlights of his business plan and year-to-date results. Then he says his dwindling recruiting pipeline is his most critical bottleneck.

Inquiry

Action Learning uses a very structured, facilitated questioning process to explore a bottleneck. At an Action Learning kickoff meeting, team members are trained in the Action Learning process, including how to ask questions rather than to give advice. The questions cover four main areas:

1. **Factual questions** help the team to understand the specifics of the bottleneck. What objective information about the situation would be helpful in determining future actions? Jack may be asked questions such as: Who has recruiting responsibilities in your branch? What percentage of your time do you spend on recruiting? What are your major sources of prospects? What has changed since last year when you hit your recruiting goals? What do you use for tracking? How do you hold your leaders accountable?

2. **Feeling questions** seek to uncover emotions and filters associated with the bottleneck—that is, how does Jack perceive the issue? Many times recognizing the filters and emotions can uncover conscious or subconscious thoughts that affect the end goal. Jack is obviously concerned, but is he angry, frustrated, stumped, conflicted? Jack shares with the team that after having such a good recruiting year last year, he is embarrassed and about how things have fallen apart this year. He is also fearful that if he doesn't act quickly, he won't be able to meet his recruiting goals for this year.

3. **Possibility questions** seek out new ways of thinking about the issue. They help the focus team member get "outside the box" to a variety of possible actions. It explores best-case and worst-case scenarios as well as helps the team member get creative about solutions. Jack and his team spend the majority of the inquiry process with these interpretive questions. The team asks questions such as: What are three creative things you could do to increase your pipeline? What would be the riskiest thing you could do and what would be the safest thing you could do? What resources can you leverage to help you with this bottleneck? Until this point, the members have not shared their thoughts or ideas; they have only asked questions. Now they get to "laser share" information that might be helpful to Jack. For instance, one team member encourages Jack to consider updating his tracking system.

4. **Decisional questions** help Jack get specific about clear, tangible actions to implement between this meeting and the next. They've stretched Jack's thinking; now the time for commitment has come. The team asks Jack to tell them what he has decided to commit to for Action Learning. They follow up with questions to get him to be as specific as possible. Follow up decisional questions could deal with timing, resources, who else will be involved and so forth.

Insight and Possibilities

While going through the questioning process, the focus team member may experience a common outcome called "unfreezing." This unfreezing often refutes a person's cherished assumptions and replaces them with a more empowering paradigm from which to operate. It also has the power to take an "old" idea and uncover new, more effective ways to implement it.

Jack takes notes on his own ideas or thoughts that the team's questions triggered as well as notes on insights and suggestions from the team. Those notes help him decide what actions he will commit to. In this case, Jack gained a renewed passion for doing what had worked for him in the past. He realized that he had stopped taking some critical steps that were key to his past successes. He also recognized the potential benefit of adding more recruiting staff, leveraging additional resources and raising the level of tracking and accountability.

Plan and Commitment

A focus team member takes into account these insights, possibilities and feedback and creates a plan to implement between the current meeting and the next meeting. The team reviews the plan to make sure that the plan specifies what will be done by when. Jack now makes his commitment to the group to do the following:

1. He will identify additional staff to be included in the recruiting pipeline meetings. He will meet with those individuals to clarify expectations and revisit their roles and responsibilities.

2. He will update the tracking system to be more detailed and more specific regarding follow-up assignments. He will start using the new system in a week at both the recruiting pipeline meetings and in his one-on-ones with direct reports.

3. He will personally observe all of his leaders doing recruiting interviews to confirm their skills.

4. He will set up a meeting with the corporate sponsor for college recruiting to have her do a gap analysis on their current program in his branch.

Accountability and Execution

Jack now has a plan of action to implement. It has chronological steps that get on his calendar right after the Action Learning meeting. Having to report back to the team keeps the plan high on his radar screen. Right after the Action Learning team meeting, Jack executes on his commitments:

1. He meets with staff about recruiting roles and responsibilities.

2. He meets with his business manager about the tracking system.

3. He sets up a phone conference with the corporate college recruiting specialist.

4. He schedules observations of his leaders doing recruiting interviews.

Reflection

Between meetings, the commitments that Jack has made are tested and applied in real life, creating critical data to share with the team.

Before reporting to the team, Jack and the facilitator discuss the results and experiences he has gained. Jack reflects not only on the final outcome but on the steps taken to this point. He is already seeing increases in his pipeline and a renewed sense of energy around recruiting. He did have some bumps in the road when he changed some of the roles and responsibilities of his staff. He did get a meeting set with the college recruiting resource from the home office, but she wasn't able to do the gap analysis until next month. He did spend more time observing his leaders doing recruiting activities.

Experiential Learning

At the following meeting, Jack shares his experiences and results to date. He shares his revised recruiting tracker and the actual data from the past month. Some of the other team members asked if they could use his tracker with their teams. Jack discussed some of the challenges of changing some of his staff's roles in recruiting. A healthy discussion ensued about how to make that transition smoother. After Jack shared his experiences doing more hands-on observations of recruiting activities, it confirmed for Jack as well as others the importance of the leader in setting the bar. Identifying what works and what doesn't is "experiential learning." It often helps a focus team member and the team understand what needs to change going forward. Deep experiential learning drives more proficient behavior for the focus team member and for the whole team.

Recalibration

As a final step in the process, Jack steps back and recalibrates. Sometimes a member needs to take the current action plan to the next level or try different options, but often they are ready to address a different bottleneck. The process of recalibration makes Jack make important decisions about future actions. This is part of the evolutionary aspect of Action Learning. So after sharing his commitments and results with the team, Jack recognizes that he needs to continue to observe his leaders and to revisit some training for them.

When Jack shares what he has learned and what he is committed to making happen next, the other team members share what they have learned from his experience. This process often results in benefits for everyone.

What Can Action Learning Mean for Your and Your Organization?

Joel Barker once said, "A Vision without Action is merely a dream. Action without Vision just passes the time. Vision with Action can change the world." Action Learning is a tool that brings vision and action together, helping propel people and their organizations to the next level in terms of production, development, recruiting and even retention (people who are successful and who are growing and learning rarely leave an organization).

One team member said that "the Action Learning process often forces creativity and novel solutions to current problems." Another team member said, like a study group, "it teams you with high-performing colleagues that face similar issues, but it isn't about receiving advice; its more about being asked the right questions. Couple that with the peer accountability and real-time learning, and you have a winning combination." Action Learning equips team members to effectively use inquiry, commitment, peer accountability and experiential learning to get powerful results as well as a unique opportunity to focus on professional and personal development. Action Learning can be a vital and engaging strategy for your organization!