

PERSPECTIVES ON DIALOGUE

MAKING TALK DEVELOPMENTAL FOR
INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Nancy M. Dixon

Center for Creative Leadership
Greensboro, North Carolina

perhaps six to nine months. The groups meet for a full or half day depending upon the nature of the problem and the constraints of the organization. Halfway through this time all the groups may come together again for three to five days to exchange information. A final meeting of three to five days is usually planned at the end.

The nature of the problems that the groups address is critical. First, they are problems that are important to the organization, not made-up exercises. Second, the problems are complex in nature, dealing with systemic organizational issues. Third, they are problems that are not amenable to expert solutions nor have ready-made right answers.

Action-learning differs from more typical cross-functional task forces in that action-learning groups are charged with learning from the problems they are solving; that means assumptions are challenged and actions are confronted. In conventional task teams the major goal is to address the problem; any learning that occurs is incidental. A second difference is that action-learning groups are charged with implementation as well as planning. Much of the learning from an action-learning problem comes from attempting to garner the support and face the problems inherent in implementation. A third difference is that action-learning groups address *unfamiliar* problems rather than problems in which they already have expertise, as might be more common in task forces or process-improvement teams. Addressing unfamiliar problems results in fresh perspectives being brought to bear on problems and provides individuals the opportunity to learn new ways to address problems.

Action-learning is based on adult-learning principles, which hold that: (1) managers learn best from each other, (2) managers learn from reflecting on how they are addressing real problems, (3) managers learn when they are able to question the assumptions on which their actions are based, and (4) managers learn when they receive accurate feedback from others and from the results of their problem-solving actions.

Likewise, action-learning is based on organizational principles that hold that: (1) organizational issues are solvable by organizational members who care about the issues and (2) organizational members who have not previously been involved in the issue can offer a fresh perspective that results in innovative solutions.

There are numerous variations of action-learning which have been successfully implemented in different organizations. Action-learning can vary in terms of the composition of the groups, that is, across organizations, functions, and departments. It can also vary in terms of the length of time and frequency with which groups meet.

typical conference lasts for two to three days. The essence of the conference is embedded in the rules Owen (1992) has constructed for it:

(1) There is no agenda, but there is a theme that is stated at the beginning of the conference.

(2) No one is in charge.

(3) The meeting starts with everyone standing or sitting in a circle where they can see each other.

(4) Each participant who chooses identifies an issue related to the theme for which he or she is willing to take responsibility for holding a discussion. The topic is announced and then posted so that others can join. The identification of topics continues until all ideas have been exhausted.

(5) When all the ideas are out, participants sign up for the groups that are of particular interest to them.

(6) The sponsor of each group convenes the group at the appointed time, leads the discussion, and takes notes.

(7) The notes from all of the meetings are typed into a bank of computers and made immediately available to everyone.

(8) Each day of the conference, the topic identification and subsequent discussions are continued.

(9) "The rule of two feet" says that if a participant is bored or has nothing to contribute to a group, he or she should "honor the group" and leave to join a group that is of more interest.

According to Owen, the lack of form allows ideas to take their own shape, undistorted by status or politics. The facilitation for open space involves little more than establishing the purpose initially and outlining the minimal open-space guidelines as listed above.

Action-learning

Action-learning is a process developed by Reginald Revans fifty years ago in the coal fields of England. He involved managers in the resolution of their own production problems, an unheard of idea in 1945. Action-learning has two goals: (1) to benefit the organization by addressing perplexing problems that have heretofore been unsolvable, and (2) to benefit individuals by making it possible for them to learn with and from others by discussing the difficulties each member of the action set experiences while working on a significant organizational problem.

A typical action-learning program begins with a large-group workshop of three to five days in length. Following the workshop, small groups are formed to address specific organizational problems. The groups meet with or without a facilitator on a weekly or biweekly basis over a lengthy period,