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Orchestration of learning style differences and other variables in an action learning experience.

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Abstract: Research centered on 31 students who participated in a two-week International Action Learning Seminar in Salford, England. International participants were assigned to action learning sets on the basis of several variables. Composition of sets (six to seven individuals) was purposely mixed to enhance diversity and promote learning.

Purpose of Research

Action learning experiences normally involve the bringing together of interested individuals in “sets” of five to six without any real consideration for group composition. Some action learning practitioners eschew pre-determination of set composition. The same can be said of team determination in businesses and public organizations. Group assignments can be relatively random and haphazard. This can lead to a reinforcement of likeness and stifle creative properties. When given a choice of group to join, or assigned to a group at random, the mix of member characteristics can be excessively skewed in a given direction. Those with a strongly reflective inclination can end up together, with few activists present (i.e., learning style preferences).

In international groups it can be a case of persons of like nationality ending up in the same group, losing the opportunity for multicultural expression and interplay. It can also be a case of placing people in groups where their expertise directly aligns itself with the problem to be solved (normal practice). In action learning, it can be more productive to place people in action learning sets that are targeting problems far removed from their education and experience. This can cause the individual to ask fresh questions and draw on the collective experience and ideas of his or her set through the synergy that accompanies deep dialogue. Reg Revans of England, the principal pioneer of action learning refers to this approach in terms of individuals being

temporarily invited, not merely to leave their own familiar field of employment, their own interprise, but also to set aside their own familiar field of work, their own profession. . . (1983, p. 25)

This research set out to primarily mix the 31 American, Canadian and Australian participants in a two-week International Action Learning Seminar. A variety of variables were used. There was

then an assessment of the perceptions of the learners, themselves, concerning the quality of the learning experience.

Theoretical Framework

When individuals with like background are brought together, they will tend to create subgroups that are comfortable to them (e.g., nationality, gender, ethnicity, back-ground and even similar learning styles/perceptions when they are evident). Friends and colleagues can naturally flow into subgroups. Such cliques can damper the creativity and block the ability to introduce new perspectives.

The scheduling of an International Action Learning Seminar in England in the Summer of 1996 offered the opportunity for research and experimentation. The 31 participants were highly diverse. The group included 23 Americans, four Canadians and four Australians. They were to be broken down into five action learning sets, each to be assigned a real world problem related to health services. Each set would, in turn, have a mentor to support the set and serve as a set facilitator (of learning) as the set members found it appropriate. The mentors were either English, American or Australian, all university professors. In addition, Reg Revans served as an overall doyen for the program.

Students ranged in age from 22 to 73 years of age. The median age was 44. Two months prior to gathering for the program, background information was obtained on each participant. They also completed the Honey-Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire. This self-graded instrument, containing 80 questions, determined the preferred learning style(s). Four styles are associated with the instrument: activist, reflector, theorist and pragmatist. The results show the relative weight the person assigns to each style in terms of very strong, strong, moderate, low and very low preferences. These results, together with student background information, became a prime basis for determining set assignments.

Action learning is dialogue driven. The set members typically have equal status, no leader is designated and the degree of facilitator intervention varies. For the purposes of this seminar, facilitation was held to a minimum. Almost the entire seminar program involved having sets work independently on client specific problems. All problems related to the South Manchester University Hospitals NHS Trust (comprising Withington and Wythenshawe Hospitals), one of the largest health service related trusts in England. Problems provided to the sets were real and extremely complex. One of the problems concerned reconciling the demand of increasing activity by three percent a year in line with national and purchaser thinking, while at the same time preparing to downsize the organization by 20 percent in three years' time. Each set had a different problem to work with, although all of the problems were related to the one Trust. At the conclusion of the two week seminar, each set had 20 minutes to concisely brief their findings and recommendations to senior managers of the Trust and the specific clients associated with each assigned problem.

From the outset, a concerted effort was made to creatively blend the human resources in a way that provided maximum diversity and strength to each set. Where possible, people were assigned to sets dealing with problems only remotely related to their background and experience.

The Setting Process

The 31 participants were assigned to sets using the following guidelines: balance the learning style preferences; mix gender and nationality; provide for age distribution; scatter individuals with prior action learning experience; distribute those persons with health services related experience; mix those individuals with prior overseas experience with those overseas for the first time; and, assign individuals to problems which they are unlikely to have had experience with previously.

A matrix was created to plot all these variables in relation to the five action learning sets to be created and their respective problems. Arriving at a mix that honored these guidelines proved complex. It was not possible, at times, to honor all guidelines. Sometimes it became necessary to move away from what seemed an ideal mix of learning style preferences in order to ensure that sets had multicultural representation. In the end, all Canadians and Australians were assigned to different sets and the eight male participants were distributed throughout various sets. Four individuals with some form of health service related background were assigned to different sets. All sets had a blend of learning style preferences. Two of the five sets had no one with a strong pragmatist leaning; however, in both instances, they were well endowed with individuals listed as moderate and therefore probably able to assume a pragmatist orientation as needed.

Related Literature

Much has been written on action learning, anchored by a book by Reginald W. Revans of England on the Origins and Growth of Action Learning (1982) In 1994, a Monograph was published by MCB University Press in England on Authors and Authorities in Action Learning. Interest in action learning has been growing in corporations and institutions of higher learning, where it is being incorporated into the curriculum design and learning processes. The researchers had at their disposal the entire archive of the Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research at the University of Salford, site of the International Action Learning experience. There are over 1,000 manuscripts in this collection, as well as books and journals.

Framework for Analysis

Participants kept learning journals and submitted reflective essays after program completion keyed to a Critical Incident methodology. For example, when did they find themselves most engaged, most disengaged, most affirmed, and most puzzled? What learning gaps did they

identify in themselves and what was their personal learning strategy for closing them? In addition, each participant submitted a comprehensive essay analysis of the action learning process, group dynamics, conflict resolution and what worked or did not work.

This qualitative research approach begs a very important question. What contrasting results would have been realized had no effort been made to creatively blend the composition of the action learning sets? That is largely unanswerable, because as is true in most research of this type you cannot realistically use both an experimental group and control group. The mix of human beings will have unique properties in each instance. Cause and effect relationships become very difficult to prove.

What makes the approach used for this research significant is that the participants themselves are judging their experience against other group experiences in their lives. In effect, their collective life experience with groups leading up to the experience in England becomes a reference point for the purpose of comparative analysis.

Results

The data is still being sifted but some of the early findings are noteworthy.

1. Participants expressed the belief that they had “freedom to learn”.
2. Diversity of set content was seen as a plus by participants even though there were cross-cultural disconnects from time-to-time. While Americans, Australians and those from Great Britain speak English and the Canadians were fluent in English, there were, in fact, significant cultural differences. While participants got along well cross-culturally, differences in speech patterns and cultural back-ground could lead to miscommunications, awkwardness and occasional irritations.
3. There were many comments related to the speed with which the sets commenced to function effectively. Sets tended to self-norm quickly. It, of course, needs to be kept in mind that the maturity level and keen intellectual capabilities of the set members probably contributed to this result. However, the participants perceived the mix of people to be a contributor.
4. The amount of creativity in evidence was perceptually tied to the wide diversity in the sets. There were comments about the wide range of ideas that surfaced. Some felt that it represented a marked difference from their past experience, and even attributed it to set member diversity.
5. Diversity and individual personality traits in some instances contributed to divisiveness. Group process was not always smooth. Some of the ripple effects seemed to relate to uncomfortableness with lack of clear cut structure and agenda. Most found the free rangedness a positive.
6. There was almost a universal satisfaction with the learning experience, with several individuals stating that they were transformed by it. Readministration of the learning style

preference instrument several months after the program ended showed decided shifts in preferred learning style in some instances. That could relate to adoption of new perspectives. However, most of the later preference results matched with the original preferences that were identified.

7. Facilitators to the action learning sets observed instances when set members would contribute in ways that seemed out of line with their learning style preferences. In one such instance, it involved a participant with an extremely low activism score volunteering to give a presentation. That individual told the facilitator later that it was “like an out of body” experience. She found it hard to believe that she had done that and suggested that the program experience had changed her in ways that she was not yet able to fully comprehend. She also indicated that her self-efficacy had been elevated and that she had become more participatory as a result of her views being recognized by set members and others as important.

A number of the summer program participants are maintaining contact by e-mail world-wide, suggesting that the program provided a bonding experience.

The clients were also impressed with both the quality of the recommendations provided by the sets and the vitality of the group dynamics.

Significance to the field

Research of this type is by its nature highly qualitative, but this research demonstrates the value that can be realized from such approaches. The research is also probably unique in an action learning context. There has been little, if any, research around the value of pre-determined set composition to action learning. Such research would seem to have clear applicability as well to the formation of self-directed work teams, task forces and other group related ventures.

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