



Leading Change through Action Learning

Agency managers can change organizational culture and build a learning environment, as demonstrated by APHIS.

by Robert Kramer

Federal, state, and local governments in the United States invest hundreds of millions of dollars annually in university leadership courses, executive development programs, and off-site retreats for mid-level and senior managers—yet leadership is still the weakest link in public service, resulting in poor agency performance, scores of billions of wasted taxpayer dollars, and low employee morale.

The Best Classroom

Leadership is traditionally developed outside the workplace—in university classrooms, weekend retreats, and other off-site settings—but this learning rarely transfers when managers return to their high-pressure jobs. No one else's leadership has been "developed," so the strength of the organizational culture prevents managers who are returning from even the most well-designed program to translate classroom learning into practice.

Traditional university curricula employ a teacher-centered model: academics lecture and students receive a sprinkling of experiential exercises, role-playing, and case studies in topics such as government ethics, administrative law, budgeting, statistics and program evaluation, organization theory, politics, and policymaking. However, classroom teaching techniques don't directly relate to actual, real-time organizational predicaments and don't test the always unpredictable consequences of

managers' actions. For public managers, real time is the only time that counts, making the organization—not the university—the best classroom.

Permanent White Water

Peter Vaill tells us that managing in the turbulent context of today's public service means immersion into "permanent white water." Under such conditions, splitting the process of leading from the process of managing, following the conventional wisdom, is not helpful. Glorifying leadership as a calling and minimizing management as an occupation serves no purpose. Successful managers must be skilled at leading people, and the best leaders must meet budgets and timetables. A manager must know how to lead, and a leader how to manage. Following Vaill, such public administrators are "managerial leaders."

According to Vaill's research, permanent white water has the following characteristics:

- ◆ Shocks and surprises
- ◆ Novel predicaments with no single correct solutions
- ◆ Wicked problems that are messy, ill-defined, unpredictable, and difficult to solve
- ◆ Large expenses
- ◆ Continual repetition of these characteristics.

Permanent white water means that managerial leaders face daily predicaments that, as a matter of course, cannot be defined with clarity, much less resolved, and yet require immediate action.

Continuous Learning

In this permanent white water environment—where the only constant is surprise, pain, and confusion—leadership for public service must be reframed as the capacity to learn continuously. Learning how to learn in this fluid environment is the key to leading others to perform effectively in public service.

University courses and off-site retreats promote leisurely reflection but don't involve real-time action since by definition participants are "out" in three senses: they are out of context, out of commission, and out of touch. Is it any wonder that executive participants off-site can't seem to stay away from their BlackBerries,

e-mail, voice mail, and cell phones? When they return to work, these managerial leaders tend to act frenetically, but often little is resolved or learned in the process of taking action, resulting in endless recycling of the same problems.

In recent years, the nation has seen public administrators fail to manage recovery from Hurricane Katrina; fail to implement billion-dollar computer systems at the Internal Revenue Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Federal Aviation Administration; fail to intercept hijacked planes on 9/11; fail to build an effective Department of Homeland Security; fail to win the peace in Iraq; and fail to learn from any of these failures. Unless our public managerial leaders make quantum leaps in learning, catastrophes such as these, or worse, will haunt us for the rest of the twenty-first century.

Hierarchical or bureaucratic organizations have a hard time correcting behaviors in view of their mistakes. Too rigid to adjust to the transformation demanded by the pace of social change, market failures, and globalization, these organizations find it almost impossible to learn. Ownership for taking action is frequently impeded by the boxes on organization charts. Responsibility is easy to avoid in any hierarchical system. So how do we plant the seeds of a learning organization in the anti-learning culture of most public-service organizations?

One thing is certain: learning and working can no longer be separated. Learning is the work of the twenty-first century. Managerial leaders must develop the capacity to learn how to learn—and, even more, the capacity to lead others around them to learn how to learn.

The programmed solutions that managerial leaders are taught in conventional academic courses deal with past solutions to past problems. Programmed knowledge—in the form of "best practices" or "case studies"—is the right solution, the dominant culture says, when faced with a problem that has been solved at least once before. But it won't help managerial leaders who need to learn continuously in permanently messy, turbulent conditions.

Action Learning

More than sixty years ago, Reginald Revans formulated action learning, which involves managerial leaders working in a small group on an urgent organizational problem that has no single correct answer, asking questions, unraveling layers of the problem, taking action to implement solutions, and, in the course of the process, learning about their belief systems and the cultural as-

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sumptions of the organization. Widely used by Fortune 100 companies, action learning promotes practical solutions, group emotional intelligence, and individual, team, and organizational learning.

Action learning is a process that promotes learning in the “here and now” while managerial leaders tackle a real predicament with real work colleagues in real time. As they work to solve an urgent problem, these managers are also learning how to build a high-performing team, collaborate more effectively, ask higher-quality questions, think in system terms, and become more effective leaders. While these developmental processes unfold in real time, action learning simultaneously plants the seeds of a learning culture.

Action learning builds a community of learners that allows group members to transfer what they learn in the process of solving an urgent problem today to solve other, more complex workplace problems tomorrow. The optimal group size in action learning is five to seven, and meetings usually take place at least one day a month, but sometimes weekly or even daily, over the course of a project.

Action learning makes inquiry and reflection central to the group as members learn with and from each other. The changes implemented in the organization are called “action” and the changes disrupting the mindsets of the participants are called “learning.” The basic principle of action learning is that only those who have learned how to change the boundaries of their own mindsets—taken-for-granted values, assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes—can change those embedded in the culture of an organization. Those unable to change their own mindsets will never be able to change the organizational culture and subcultures in which they are spatially and psychologically located.

The power of action learning comes from the many ways it develops the skills and habits of questioning, listening, and reflection. As in the Socratic method, questions are more important than answers during action learning. At first, action learners engage new ideas by asking questions to frame and reframe the initial, or “presenting,” problem. Unlike conventional problem-solving approaches, action learning is a process of finding, rather than accepting at face value what is presented as, the right problem. “If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution,” a great thinker once said, “I would spend the first fifty-five minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I

knew the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.” The proper question can also be called a “high-quality” question (see box).

Asking High-Quality Questions

High-quality questions open our minds. They allow us to question what has been considered to be unquestionably true. They direct our attention to new vistas. They make us examine our assumptions and beliefs.

High-quality questions slow down our thinking. They allow us to consider new options before coming to closure. They allow us to value “not knowing.” They let us breathe fresh air.

High-quality questions tap our emotions. They connect to what is going on inside our psyche. They reorient us to what’s important. They motivate us to take committed action.

Learning How to Unlearn

While consciously framing and reframing the presenting problem—that is, finding the right problem—participants are, at a preconscious level, also beginning to learn how to unlearn. Learning how to unlearn means that they will repeatedly revisit values, assumptions, beliefs, and biases and question their own mindset. At the same time they are learning about and unlearning their norms and behaviors, they are learning how to inquire into the collective assumptions of their organizational culture and professional subcultures.

Through deep questioning, they also learn that “not knowing” an answer does not make them ineffective as managers or leaders. Not-knowing is reframed in action learning as an opportunity for learning, not as a sign of weakness, as traditionally seen by leaders obligated to “have all the answers.” Valuing not-knowing can inspire managerial leaders—and others in the organization—to take committed action, even in the face of unknowable outcomes.

In contrast to what Paolo Freire calls the “banking model of education,” action learning is designed to help learners in the here and now transform their internal, “invisible” psychic worlds at the same time they are engaged in transforming the external visible practices and systems in their organizations. But what, exactly, is invisible about the psychic world of human beings? Everything is, including our fears, hopes, dreams, speculations, puzzlements, hunches, intuitions, meanderings, habits, unconscious projections, identifications, muddle-head-

edness, misunderstandings, covert power relations in the organization, half-baked notions, social conditioning, prior training, values, assumptions, beliefs, and internalized cultural expectations. These elements of our psychic world are all liable to be questioned in action learning, supplementing the conventional questioning of what is visible: hard data, facts, bottom lines, ways of behaving, public agendas, project plans, financial statements, reward systems, and organization charts. In short, in action learning we question any idea, belief, feeling, habit, value, or practice considered to be unquestionably true by organizational members.

Participants in action-learning dialogues are learning the capacity for self-reflection and culture-reflection. They are discovering how to change mindsets—their own and those of their fellow group members—by examining assumptions. They are increasing their capacity for mindful learning and unlearning. They are making conscious what is not conscious, making visible what is usually invisible. In action learning, one might say that vision is the art of seeing the invisible.

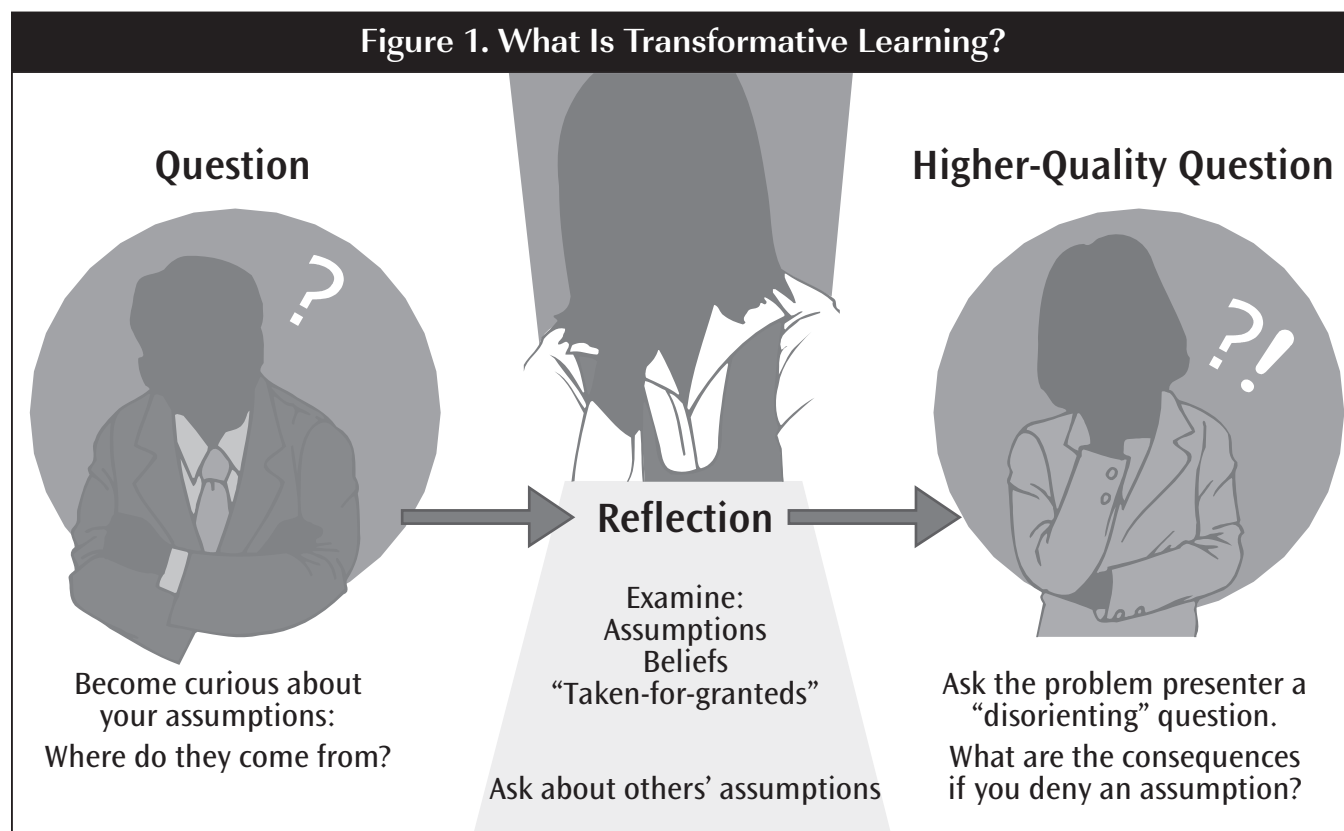
Under the most important ground rule of action learning (as first proposed by Michael Marquardt, who has recently advanced the theory and practice of action learning), group members do not offer statements, opin-

ions, or viewpoints except in response to another member's question.

On commencing action learning, participants are likely to be emotionally attached to the unconscious assumptions, beliefs, and values inculcated into them during a lifetime of cultural socialization into various roles—family, community, religious, educational, professional, and organizational. Bringing into awareness and questioning—and when necessary unlearning—these values, assumptions, beliefs, and expectations are essential for effecting personal and organizational change.

Transformative Learning

During sessions of action learning, the “contents” of mindsets and professional and organizational subcultures emerge, usually in fragments or short statements, in the mutual questioning process as participants share the multifaceted meanings they construct of organizational symbols, stories, mythologies, rituals, ceremonies, heroes, humor, boundaries, language, and professional jargon. At the same time that participants are learning about, and unlearning, their own norms and behaviors, they are learning how to inquire into the collective assumptions of the organizational culture. This is transformative learning (Figure 1).



The Coach's Role

At each session of the action-learning group meeting, one member serves as action-learning coach, a role that often rotates among members. The coach's task is to pose challenging questions to support the reflection, learning, and unlearning of the members. Much practice is needed to become skilled in the coaching role, which is not designed as a form of facilitation. In other words, the coach does not facilitate the group's agenda-setting or interpersonal, conflict management, and problem-solving processes.

Modeling the three conditions that Carl Rogers found necessary for transformation in any interpersonal or group situation, the action-learning coach must be congruent, stand fully present in the here and now (with no pretense of emotional distance and no professional façade), and show unconditional positive regard and empathy for members of the group as they struggle with questioning and unlearning beliefs that are no longer productive or helpful.

Acting on the Problem

The process of action learning is not merely an opportunity for Socratic questioning and unlearning. Action needs to be taken on the problem, no matter how provisional or incomplete its definition. Action must be tested against the limits of the real organizational culture, with all of its normal constraints, in real time. No action is meaningful without learning—as Reg Revans, the founder of action learning insisted—and no learning is significant without action.

By transforming their own mindsets, and taking action in the face of uncertainty and high risk, managerial leaders and other participants in action-learning processes create safe spaces for themselves and their group colleagues to learn and unlearn. They are learning how to become learning leaders: leaders who know how to learn and learners who know how to lead others to lead and learn for themselves. Their learning is inextricably tied to real organizational work. Working and learning are fusing into self-transformation and organizational transformation. They are planting the seeds of a learning culture.

APHIS Emergency Management System

Recently, President Bush directed federal agencies to adopt the National Incident Management System and defend U.S. agriculture and food systems against ter-

rorist attacks, major disasters, and other emergencies. In the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), the staff of the Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) office is responsible for safeguarding the nation's agriculture resources from natural or terrorist risks associated with the spread of harmful plant pests and diseases.

Senior officials at APHIS asked Osama A. El-Lissy, a senior operations officer in PPQ, to organize a team to produce the national APHIS-PPQ emergency management plan. El-Lissy and his team chose to use action learning to formulate the plan.

Responding to Nationwide Outbreaks

As framed by APHIS, the emergency management problem was, "How should PPQ respond nationwide to outbreaks of plant pests and diseases—those that occur naturally and those that are introduced through acts of bioterrorism?" El-Lissy and seven PPQ regional and national managers—from a variety of locations and professional disciplines—served on the team. Shortly after recruiting the team, El-Lissy held a full-day workshop to allow team members to get to know each other and become familiar with action learning.

At first, faced with the urgent task of responding to presidential directives, the team felt overwhelmed. Some members jumped to identify quick solutions rather than engage in the questioning and reflection process. Others were hesitant to speak. Serving in the role of action-learning coach, El-Lissy reminded the group to "think questions first." As individuals, their goal was to learn how to get better at asking each other quality questions. As a group, their goal was to learn how to build a high-performing team that could be smarter as a whole each time it met.

Over the course of many meetings, the team's questions ranged widely: What is PPQ seeking to accomplish? What is stopping PPQ from accomplishing it? Who can get the solutions implemented? Does PPQ have the right philosophy, vision, and values? Is the current organizational structure attuned to the task? Is PPQ using the appropriate technology? To what extent has the team assessed all external and internal issues that impact the PPQ mission? Have team members considered the needed coalitions, stakeholders, agenda, and power base? Are the needs of the organization and people aligned? Does APHIS have the right mix of people, talents, and experiences to achieve the president's goal?

Does APHIS have the right resources? Is APHIS organized optimally?

Listening and Reflection

At the heart of action learning is the process of listening and reflection. Members ask each other questions, actively listen to answers, reflect deeply, and continue the learning cycle by following up on prior answers or reframing questions on the basis of newly emerging thoughts and knowledge. As group members became skilled at practicing action learning, they developed confidence in their capacity to explore new options, reconsider their assumptions, and unlearn old ways of thinking and behaving.

For the first time in their careers at APHIS, team members, as they began to practice action learning, discovered that work and learning could be blended together to become the same activity.

Reflection was the most important team norm. Members were committed to continuously reflect on the words, actions, questions, answers, and thoughts of other members. Inquiry and questioning, openness, willingness to yield to others, ability to show empathy, active listening, courage and frankness, transparency, wisdom, common sense, and self-awareness—ways of being—were practiced intensely by the APHIS team members.

The process provided the team with a set of skills that opened their minds and hearts to three levels of learning: (1) about their own beliefs and assumptions, (2) about how the group was functioning in the here and now, and (3) about the larger organizational culture. A sense of responsibility for the urgent task drove team members to look deeply into the organizational context and alternatives before offering proposals to solve the emergency management problem.

Each session was facilitated by a learning coach, whose role was to promote the learning of the group, not to participate in the solution of the problem. The coaching role, first modeled by El-Lissy, was rotated among team members. Through questioning and active listening, the coach helped the team reflect on what it was doing well, what it could do better, and how it was evolving its thoughts and learning.

Leadership for public service must be reframed as the capacity to learn continuously.

Emergency Management Procedures

To date the action-learning team has delivered three sets of emergency management procedures. The first, *Standards for Plant Health Emergency Systems*, distributed to all 50 states and the territories, includes the following:

- ◆ *Emergency management plans.* Detail the logistical resources and responsibilities of local, state, and federal agencies involved in preventing and responding to emergencies.
- ◆ *Authorities and policies.* Identify state and federal laws, rules, and regulations to be applied in emergency response.
- ◆ *Surveillance.* Describes effective detection systems that can serve as an early warning for plant pests and diseases.
- ◆ *Communication.* Details communication plans for first responders, cooperators, and public awareness.
- ◆ *Training and education.* Describes training for all first responders.
- ◆ *Funding.* Identifies sources of contingency funding required for emergencies.

The second guidance, *PPQ Incident Command System Guidelines*, brings together multiple responding agencies from different jurisdictions under a single overall com-

mand structure in response to an incident. Adapted from NIMS, these guidelines describe the overall organizational structure to be used in responding to emergencies and define the functions, roles, and responsibilities of each position in the command and general staffs. The guidelines integrate PPQ's best practices for emergency management in the context of a comprehensive in-

cident command system (ICS) framework.

The third guidance, *ICS Training Programs*, offers a series of exercises simulating plant health emergencies to ensure a consistently high level of preparedness and response capability across all 50 states and the territories.

Conclusion

El-Lissy and his APHIS colleagues addressed the issue and simultaneously became more skilled at learning how to learn. This enhanced capacity for learning can now be tapped by senior APHIS leaders to meet future organizational challenges. By showing the courage

to inquire into their own mindsets, APHIS public administrators created conditions for themselves and other organizational members to learn.

Public administrators who become skilled at practicing action learning will develop more confidence in their capacity to build groups, teams, and organizations that continuously learn new ways of thinking and behaving—and continuously unlearn old ways.

For additional case study information, visit the American University Web site, spa.american.edu/executivempa/action.php, and download *Using Outside Experts at U.S. Food and Drug Administration* by Donna-Bea Tillman, *Creating an Emergency Management System for U.S. Agriculture* by Osama El-Lissy, and *Reframing Acquisition Logistics for U.S. Army* by Jim Kelly.

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