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The Practical Primacy of Questions in Action Learning

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Abstract

The centrality of questions in action learning is fundamental for both theory and practice. Reg Revans, the principal pioneer of action learning, a scientist who made important contributions to the fields of management and organizational development, put the search for fresh questions and questioning insight at the core of action learning. He emphasized that questioning insight is the starting point and that people learn very effectively from and with each other, as distinguished from highly formal didactic approaches to learning. His focus was on "learning while doing," with questions accelerating and deepening this process, which also includes self-questioning and reflection. One reflects on what has occurred or what is occurring (reflection in action), which allows one to harvest the learning.

Asking questions invigorates thinking, learning, action, and results. Interpersonal questions are used for speaking and communicating with others. Internal questions are used for thinking, learning, and reflection within oneself. In either case, one best arrives at effective answers and solutions by route of the best questions. Traveling this route requires resisting the expediency of easy answers and immediate concentration on solutions. Rather, it depends on thought-provoking questions that get to the heart of the matter and can yield more effective answers and solutions, both in the short term and the long term. Reinforcing an "inquiring mindset" in the context of action learning bolsters the habit of questioning and the quantity and quality of questions asked, which can also contribute to generative learning well beyond the experience itself.

Introduction

Today, the perspectives and processes of action learning, in which question asking is so primary, are widely respected as a powerful approach with objectives such as leadership development, organizational change, team building, problem solving, raising self-efficacy, and building competitive advantage. While some see action learning as a last resort when traditional methods fail, the practical imperative to develop leaders, managers, and other professionals capable of traveling the route to thoughtful and effective solutions impels many organizations and businesses globally to engage in action learning.

The chapter builds on Revans's premise about the primacy of questions, questioning insight, and curiosity as the foundation of action learning. Curiosity-fueled adult learning, where spontaneity is encouraged, can be strengthened and operationalized by focusing on the question asker as well as on the question. We begin by exploring the centrality of questions in action learning and the power and purposes of questions in general. We note the role of internal questions in thinking, reflection, learning, and problem-solving as well as the role of interpersonal questions in communication and collaborative problem-solving. The tendency to value answers more than questions is discussed. We also explore the relationship between questions and their impact on results for both individuals and teams. Enhancing awareness and skills of effective question asking

strengthens practical avenues for learning, reflection, and collaboration and also contributes to a greater probability of achieving real-world business results.

Action Learning and the Primacy of Questions

While there are many variations of action learning**,** there are several fundamental characteristics that Revans associated with it: "the primacy of questioning insight over programmed knowledge, individuals/teams preferably (but not always) assigned to solve problems with which they have little or no familiarity, learning (is) given priority over problem solution, and there is selection of a real problem focus *always.*" (Dilworth and Willis, 2003, p.15) While learning is the first focus, urgency to solve the real problem is what powers the "learning engine."

This focus on "learning while doing," typically occurs within an organizational, system, or team context. In an action learning program, a team uses a key business challenge as a vehicle for intentional learning that often leads to accidental and unexpected learning as well. Practice varies within different schools of action learning, including the definition and involvement of a team advisor or learning coach, the degree of direct focus on learning, the types of learning sought, and whether the team addresses a joint or individual business challenge. Experiential learning focused on the business challenge marks all these endeavors, and may include teams working in simulation situations. (Dilworth and Willis, 2003, p.137) While Revans thought that simulations didn't meet his standard that action learning should focus on real, even daunting problems, what is "real" today can be found within sophisticated computer simulations and other simulation formats that address real issues in real time. These include those related to homeland security, military operations, and the complex issues facing global organizations.

It is not surprising that Dilworth and Willis cite "the primacy of questioning insight" as the driver of action learning. They note that Revans "repeatedly (made) the point that 'fresh' questions are central to action learning" (Dilworth and Willis, 2003, p.12). Virtually every writer and practitioner of action learning echoes this fundamental theme about the primacy of questions in action learning. For example, Marquardt tells us, ". . . in action learning, questions are not only seeking answers. Rather, they are seeking to go deeper, to understand, to respond to what is being asked, to give it thought. Asking questions is not only a quest for solutions but also an opportunity to explore." (Marquardt, 1999, pp. 30-31) Kramer writes that, "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." (Kramer, Winter 2007-08, p. 40) Czajkowski considers action learning "a construct through which participants learn questioning skills." (Czajkowski, 2009, personal conversation) These perspectives on the primacy of questions in action learning are echoed in the following comments by participants and facilitators of action learning programs.

> "One of the predominant learnings cited by all participants was the use of questioning insight. They used this learning both in the program and back on the job. . . . questions can move you in a direction that you did not think about

> because you were in that box and you were not thinking . . . Now all of a sudden they have a realization and start questioning their initial decision." (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007, p. 142-143)
>
> "This jolt – this realization that asking questions is the key to beginning to think, to doing different things, and to doing things differently and learning – is something many participants comment on." (Weinstein, 1999, p. 178)
>
> "In essays and self reports, I noticed a pattern that asking questions would bring new understanding. They would get most excited about their own best questions. They would try so hard to come up with questions. These became milestones and landmarks. And yes, you see them developing these questioning and reflection skills all the time. They integrated questioning skills and continued this up until the last process (in their AL experience)." (Willis, 2008, personal conversation)

Revans on Learning and Questions

The term action learning implies intentional learning. Revans notes that this is vital because, "in any epoch of rapid change, those organizations unable to adapt are soon in trouble, and adaptation is achieved only by learning . . ." (Revans, 1983, p. 11) This is as true for individuals as it is for organizations. For Revans, therefore, the goal became accelerating the rate of learning to anticipate, match, and even exceed the rate of change. Revans famously described learning (L) as the result of "programmed knowledge" (P) and questioning insight (Q). Hence we have his Learning Equation: L = P + Q. While both P and Q are essential, "Revans clearly specifies that the operational start point must be Q. It is Q that expresses the realization that the solution to the problem is *unknown*, or the problem would have been solved already." (Dilworth and Willis, 2003, p.17, authors' emphasis)

Revans emphasized that, "Q . . . remains the essence of *true* action learning" (Revans, 1989, p.102, author's emphasis) He also frequently used "fresh" to describe the most valuable kinds of questions, those unburdened by assumptions and old ways of perceiving. To get to such questions, he wanted learners, whenever possible, to be outside their comfort zone, having to deal with unfamiliar problems, unfamiliar settings, and even unfamiliar associates. He expected that the lack of familiarity would encourage a person to notice long-held assumptions that might no longer work, including some acquired early in life. Recognizing the need to challenge old assumptions and create new ones is the province of transformative learning.

Three interdependent systems of thought and action comprise Revans's formulation of action learning. These he terms Systems Alpha, Beta, and Gamma and each has questions at its core, either explicitly or implicitly. In System Alpha, people continually ask themselves and others: "What is happening? What ought to be happening? How can it be made to happen?" In System Beta, people ask questions about "facts" and assumptions, using whatever is revealed in pursuit of new avenues of inquiry and better solutions. System Gamma requires focusing questions on oneself, the kind of reflection required for transformational learning. ". . . it is Gamma that caries the insights. It explicitly requires

the action learner to investigate the problem in relation to self, and to examine both self and problem in relation to others." (Dilworth and Willis, 2003, p.157) Commenting on the importance he placed on System Gamma, Revans wrote that "self-knowledge is gold in the mind." (Revans 1982, p. 766) Self-knowledge occurs with the willingness to honestly question and examine oneself with reference to mental models, assumptions, intentions, limitations, and places where personal change is deemed desirable.

At any age, young or old, curiosity is the catalyst of questioning and learning. As children, our natural curiosity led to asking questions and learning. Yet, as adult learners, we often need to revitalize our natural curiosity in order to become intentional learners capable of asking questions that can call forth fresh perspectives, answers, and solutions. Revans often marveled at the spontaneity of children at play as they explored and exercised their curiosity. He observed how these traits seemed to be driven out of people by traditional education systems and the stultifying environments in which people work. Revans believed that the empowerment inherent in action learning could rekindle for adults the spontaneity, excitement, and joy of learning that children naturally experience through their curiosity and questioning.

The Power and Purposes of Questions

Focusing on the power of questions in general is germane to this exploration of the practical primacy of questions in action learning. Dilworth comments that while, "Questioning insight and questioning processes are the very core of action learning, people tend not to know what to ask and also to be judgmental instead of curious about the underlying causes of the problem." (Dilworth, 2008, personal conversation) The pervasive, though often unrecognized power inherent in questions led me to write in *The Art of the Question* that, "questions are like treasures hidden in broad daylight." (Goldberg, 1998, p. 6) The treasure they provide is embedded in every aspect of our lives. Recognizing the unique, profound, and pervasive value of questions may enhance motivation for intentionally developing more skillfulness in formulating and asking them. While every human being *asks* questions, it takes skill and intention to *use* them strategically and effectively. This skill may be continually reinforced and expanded through using questions in action learning to resolve important business challenges.

Skillful and frequent question asking begins with awareness as well as curiosity. In organizational, business, and professional contexts, and in roles such as leader, manager, mentor, coach, consultant, mediator, and educator, the value of questions becomes apparent by realizing how many everyday reasons we have for asking them. We ask questions in order to:

- Gather information
- Lay groundwork for answers and solutions
- Think critically, creatively, and strategically
- Learn and reflect (including critical reflection)
- Uncover and challenge assumptions
- Solve problems and make decisions
- Clarify and confirm listening
- Build and maintain relationships and collaboration

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- Negotiate and resolve conflicts
- Set goals as well as develop strategy
- Create, innovate, and open new possibilities
- Catalyze productive and accountable conversation and action

The Importance of Questions "Versus" Answers

This list increases awareness of the multiple and essential functions of questions. Nevertheless, since asking a question implies some level of "not knowing," people are sometimes uncomfortable, reluctant, or even reticent about asking questions at all. (Goldberg, 1998, p.3) In fact, Boshyk commented that "while questions are at the core of action learning and business effectiveness, it's often the case that people are paid *not* to ask questions." (Boshyk, 2008, personal conversation)

If anything, it's answers that people prize, not questions. Unfortunately, valuing answers above questions obscures recognizing that *an answer is the end point of a process*, one that *begins* with a question. Indeed, "We live in an answer-oriented, fix-it-quick world. In the clamor for answers—sometimes any answer—we often overlook quiet distinctions and fresh perspectives that could reveal whole new worlds of possibilities. Moreover, sometimes the conditioned hunt for answers represents a desperate attachment to 'knowing,' and a simultaneous avoidance of any anxiety associated with not knowing, or even appearing not to know." (Goldberg, 1998, p. 4)

Moreover, sometimes an answer arrived at too quickly or precipitously may itself develop into another problem. The inquiring mindset that participants in action learning programs develop leads them to recognize that effective questions are likely to lead to effective answers and results, ineffective questions may lead to ineffective answers and results, and questions that are missed (often because of assumptions about what is "known") may lead to random and sometimes problematic answers and results. In other words, the zeal for answers may unintentionally compromise the ability to solve problems as well as create new directions and possibilities.

Participation in action learning programs can redirect attention to the power of questions as being at the *source* of answers and solutions, as illustrated by the comments we heard from participants earlier in the chapter. Implicitly or explicitly, they were coming to recognize the value of questions as well as the intrinsic relationship between questions and answers. This relationship is succinctly described by Postman: ". . . all the answers we ever get are responses to questions. The questions may not be evident to us, especially in everyday affairs, but they are there nonetheless, doing their work. Their work, of course, is to design the form that our knowledge will take and therefore to determine the direction of our actions." (Postman, 1976, p.144)

Postman's point is that questions, including the structure and assumptions imbedded in them, frame and direct attention and *action*. As Weinstein commented, "If I don't ask questions in action learning, I can't make anything happen." (Weinstein, 2008, personal conversation) This includes questions of others as well as those we ask *ourselves.* In fact, internal questioning is the essence of the thinking involved in problem-solving. We might

heed this perspective on the importance of questions in thinking and problem-solving attributed to Albert Einstein: "If I had an hour to solve a problem, and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper questions to ask, for if I knew the proper questions, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes." Focusing one's inquiring mindset on a problem makes it obvious that if one wants the best answers and solutions, one must *begin* with the best questions.

Questions, Learning, and Reflection

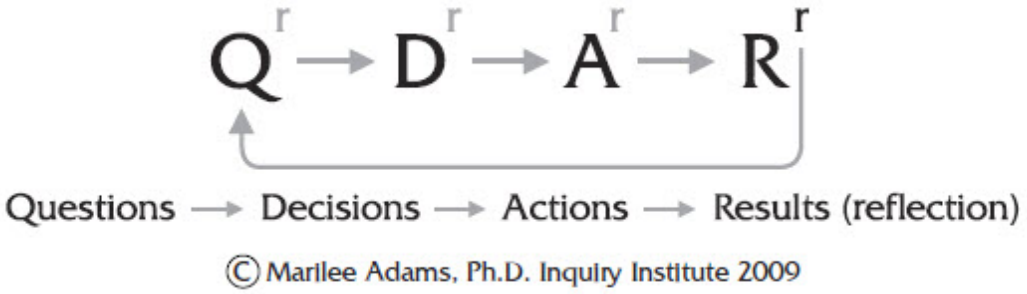
The emphasis on reflection as intrinsic to learning is imbedded in the very fabric of action learning. Reflection, which is replete with questioning, refers to complex and multidimensional operations that are associated with metacognition, stages of development, the nature of learning sought, focus on the learner, and the contexts in which this all occurs. Mezirow writes that, "While all reflection implies an element of critique, the term *critical reflection* . . . refer(s) to challenging the validity of *presuppositions* in prior learning (Mezirow, 1990, p. 12, author's italics) He also notes that "*Reflection on one's own premises can lead to transformative learning.*" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 18, author's italics) This is consistent with Revans comment that, "the learning process is . . . critically about the Self." (Dilworth and Willis, 2003, p viii) Operationalizing reflection leads to recognizing that asking questions, especially internal ones, is *how* reflection occurs. For Revans, focus on the self occurs within System Gamma. In this context, one might ask oneself questions such as: What assumptions are I attached to? What honestly were my motives in making that comment? What am I missing or avoiding in this situation? What lessons might become available from this mistake if I had the courage to face them?

Linking Questions with Action and *Results*

For practitioners of action learning, learning itself may be considered the Holy Grail; certainly all recognize that questions are intrinsic to learning, reflection, and development. Others, as we have noted, may worship mainly at the altar of answers and results. For this reason, especially in organizational and business contexts, it is important to explicitly link learning and question asking with real-time business challenges and results. In actuality, every organization, and every individual who works in one or with one, is in the "results business." From this perspective, it is primarily the *benefits* of learning that matter, rather than learning for its own sake. As one executive coaching client confessed, "I wouldn't care much about learning if I weren't convinced I had to in order to get the results I want."

One way of describing the relationship between questions and results is through an illustration, the QDARr™ model. (Adams, 2010, p. 6) In this model, Q = Questions, D = Decisions, A = Action, R = Results, and r = reflection. Here, I use the term "Result" to refer to the "present state," that is, whatever is now present as an outcome of whatever led up to it. Notice that reflection on Results brings attention back to the Question at the beginning of the equation in a quest to understand any limitations and assumptions imbedded within it. Ideally, reflection is an ongoing activity (reflection in action), as the equation indicates. In this iterative process, one can apply the equation in a myriad of situations as a way of deconstructing, understanding, and learning from them. It can also

provide a way to understand what has contributed to causing a problem, how to reconsider and reformulate the problem itself, and how to resolve it by beginning with a better-construed question.



When a client is looking for change, either organizational or personal, the QDARr model can help them understand how changing their questions can directly impact their ability to influence their results in a positive way. (Adams, 2004, p.14) In other words, when a new result is desired, identifying and then redesigning the originating question provides a practical "how to" for reconceptualizing and resolving a problem, thus paving the way for achieving the results that are important.

A teaching story illustrates the impact of a new question when a different result is desired. Of course, for the new question to have the desired effect, its structure and the assumptions imbedded within it must be reconceived and reformulated, as this example demonstrates. A woman in one of my workshops asked for help with a difficult professional situation. She told us that she loved her career, but conflict with her boss had left her wondering if she should quit her job. When I asked what questions she was asking herself about this dilemma with her boss, she responded with an edge to her voice, "What's he going to do wrong *now*?" and "How's he going to make me look bad today?" Clearly, her current questions would render near impossible any satisfying resolution. In this case, the R represents her conflicted relationship with her boss.

I asked this woman if she would consider asking herself a new question, and suggested, "What can *I* do to make my boss look *good?*" She looked startled, almost confused, by the new query. The thinking and assumptions it represented were clearly outside the mindset or frame with which she had been viewing her boss as well as herself in relation to him. Nevertheless, she agreed to experiment with the new question.

This is a true story with a fortuitous ending. When I encountered this woman by coincidence a few months later, she gave this report. "Since that workshop, I've gotten a promotion and a raise. The most remarkable thing is that my boss and I volunteered to work on a committee together, whereas before we avoided even being in the same room." Then she added that her husband had noticed a change in her and had even thanked her for not complaining about her boss anymore.

This woman was so intrigued about the power of a single question to lead to such far-reaching results that she requested a coaching conversation to discuss it. She was able to

engage in critical reflection about her original problem by wondering out loud, "What was I assuming about my boss? How did my judgmental attitude toward him prevent me from assuming responsibility for the conflicts we were having?" She also asked, "Where else in my life do I do this?" and, "How can I become more aware of making assumptions in future situations?"

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Now we can return to the QDARr model and use it to deconstruct this teaching story and explore its lessons about the power of questions, especially with reference to outcomes. Clearly, this woman experienced very different Results when her thinking was directed by her "before" question in contrast to her "after" question. Her original Question about her boss ("What's he going to do wrong now?") led to her Decision (probably not conscious) about how to relate to him. That decision surely led to some unpleasant Actions (ways she communicated with her boss) since the Result was their conflicted relationship and her fear about leaving the job she valued so much.

This story emphasizes the importance of focusing on questions first, not answers, if a change, improvement, or new direction is desired. Noting the assumptions imbedded in the original question, we can see that it was past-oriented, blame-focused, and outwardly directed. By contrast, the new question assumes a future orientation and a solution focus. Moreover, the new question implicitly required this woman to assume responsibility for her own perceptions, actions, and results. The new question *("How can I make my boss look good?"*) provided the groundwork for her to make new Decisions about her boss, Act differently toward him, and enjoy the positive Results that ensued.

There are practical ways that an action learning team can use the QDARr model to examine, resolve, and generatively learn from their real-time business challenges. Assuming that either limitations or possibilities are imbedded in the questions with which the team approaches a problem, they could work together to discover limiting questions and transform them into those capable of leading to the resolution of their business challenge. A team (or individuals on a team) could also use the QDARr model as a guide for collaborative inquiry, "*a process consisting of repeated episodes of reflection and action through which a group of peers strives to answer a question of importance to them."* **(Bray, Lee, Smith, Yorks, 2000, p. 6, authors' emphasis)** They could collaboratively, reflectively, and sequentially examine their questions, decisions, and actions in light of desired results. They could also create and explore powerful new questions to help them achieve and perhaps exceed their goals.

A Team Discovers Missed Questions

The inquiring mindset that is reinforced individually and collectively by participating in action learning could also lead a team to search for questions they may have been missing altogether. They might even discover that every question missed is a crisis waiting to happen. Discovering such questions could lead them to approach resolving their business challenge more strategically and comprehensively. In the following example, this search for missing questions helped a team reconceive a problem in a way that led to new directions in thinking and strategy. It also helped them avert potential further problems that could have occurred by responding to the old one too quickly.

This executive team of a large city hospital, which is also part of a larger hospital system, met to address a serious and mounting problem. Other hospitals within their system were transferring a particular category of patient to them without adequate or timely communication or coordination. This was causing problems with finding beds, providing quality patient care, and increasing stress levels for staff. The team decided the answer was to create a new role for a coordinator and then launched into a discussion about obtaining funding for such a position.

At this point, a respected team member commented that she didn't think they had thought through the situation thoroughly enough yet. She suggested they come up with a list of potential questions to explore before jumping precipitously to a solution. Among the questions they had not considered were these:

- What is the formal and informal patient transfer process for this particular category of patient as compared to that of "regular medical patients?"
- Have we adequately communicated the guidelines for this process to staff, both in our hospital and the others in our system?
- What perspectives and suggestions could we get from the nurses who deal with this problem on a daily basis?
- What are best practices in other hospital systems for dealing with similar situations?
- What assumptions are we making and what systemic issues might we discover that would allow us to take patient care to a whole new level?

The team realized that they lacked adequate information for resolving their problem. They also recognized that creating and funding a new role without this information could mask the real problem and potentially lead to even more. In addition, they recognized that a personnel solution cannot "fix" what might be a systems issue. Therefore, they decided to approach the problem by filling in gaps in their understanding of it so they could be more strategic and successful in alleviating this stress for staff and even reach new levels of quality patient care.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has been to make more explicit the implicit, primary, and practical power of questions in action learning. More important than any specific suggestions about questions is the meta message about the power and primacy of questions themselves. The typical approach to problem-solving is to search for answers, ideas, and solutions. In such situations, questions, when asked, are more for information gathering than anything else. By contrast, participation in an action learning program is a willing immersion in an experience of curiosity, question asking, reflection, and learning. Participants naturally inculcate the imperative to consider questions *before* looking for answers.

The context of action learning provides a powerful opportunity for individuals as well as teams to strengthen the inquiring mindset that undergirds being a life-long learner. This strengthened inquiring perspective helps individuals and teams collaboratively resolve

their real-time problems in such a way that new learning also occurs. Over time, the quantity, quality, and uses of questions expand. Simultaneously, action learning participants become more comfortable with "not knowing" and with asking questions in general, both of themselves and others.

The potential transformation of participants—from answer-driven problem solvers to more thoughtful, strategic, collaborative, and inquiry-based ones—can be seen as the generative gift of action learning. Should any contribution to action learning itself emerge from these perspectives, one focus could be to explore, qualitatively as well as quantitatively, the impact of explicitly sharing practices and perspectives on question asking as a skill and guide to problem-solving, collaboration, learning, and personal reflection early in the action learning process. Perhaps useful understandings and positive outcomes would emerge that would further support and extend the growth of action learning, adult education, and the generative contributions of both.

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