

ACTION-LEARNING

HOW WE DEVELOP CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT FOR TEAMS AND INDIVIDUALS SHOULD FOLLOW A CYCLE OF ACTION-LEARNING

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The best methods and the best of intentions can easily fail unless we take into account how adults learn in our organizations. During World War II a process that has become known as *Training Within Industry* (TWI) and its component *Job Instruction* (JI) was developed and was then adopted by Toyota as it developed its system of production. For management development Toyota and other Japanese companies added the role of the *sensei* or coach. These methods are effective because they are consistent with *action-learning* that recognizes the reality of how adults learn.

Malcom Knowles who pioneered the field of adult learning identified the following principles as critical to adult learning:

- Adults are autonomous and self-directed. They need to be free to direct themselves. Their teachers must actively involve adult participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators for them. They must show participants how the learning experience will help them reach their goals.
- Adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base.
- Adults are goal-oriented. Instructors must show participants how this class will help them attain their goals.
- Adults are relevancy-oriented. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them.
- Adults are practical, focusing on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. Instructors must tell participants explicitly how the lesson will be useful to them on the job.
- As do all learners, adults need to be shown respect. Instructors must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the classroom. These adults should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely.

Another way of saying this is simply to say that adults aren't good at sitting at a desk and obediently following instructions and learning theories or abstractions. Learning has to make a difference to them and they have to put it into action. I think the same could be said for children, but we don't need to argue that point.

Much of my own training is focused on the development of both work and management teams to engage in effective continuous improvement, problem solving, and to become a high performing teams. What has proven most effective is to apply this action learning model to team development. The eight steps illustrated here constitute a cycle of learning and continuous improvement. In many ways they correspond to the PDCA cycle of improvement. However, they are a bit more specific to the actions required for effective learning and incorporate the role of *sensei* or coach.

The steps illustrated in yellow are primarily knowing/gaining knowledge steps. The steps in purple are more experiential and have more impact on how the learner feels. Knowledge and emotions are equally important in gaining sustained change in individual behavior or in the culture of the organization. Too often our training methods focus more on knowing, and too little on the emotive aspect of learning which is more likely to occur from experience. Often we assume that “if they know, they will do” and this is a false assumption.



1. Build A Case for Action:

It is essential that team members understand the business case for action. Why do we need to do this? What difference will it make to our performance, to customer satisfaction, and to my own work?

As management embarks on a process of continuous improvement they need to point to competitors, best practices, financial benchmarks and the voice of the customers who are telling us that we need to improve. And, it helps to make clear that learning and practicing the new skills will be a component of everyone’s appraisal process. In other words, it is the job of managers and coaches to make change matter!

2. Gain Knowledge:

Transferring knowledge is what most corporate trainers do best. It is what classrooms are best designed to accomplish. It is why we have books and websites. However, knowledge very often does not result in behavioral change. It is the difference between taking a history course in which knowledge acquisition is the goal in itself; as opposed to learning to play the guitar. The former is primarily about cognition/knowledge, the latter is about habits or changes in behavior gained through experience and feelings of comfort with that new behavior.

If we are training teams to solve problems effectively, knowing the steps in a problem solving model is important, but it is only the beginning of employing that knowledge for continuous improvement. Knowledge without action will not change habits or culture.

3. Agree on New Behavior:

Intention is the beginning of change. The guitar instructor may teach a chord position or scale on the fret board. By itself, that is useless knowledge. It only becomes useful when practiced. The student must agree to practice the chords or scales.

The way I have designed my own training manual is so that each chapter is a training module and each training module corresponds to a deliverable – a desired performance or behavior. For example, the second chapter is on writing the team’s charter. The deliverable or action step is to actually go through the steps in writing the charter and gain approval of the sponsoring manager. Another chapter is on defining customer requirements. Of course, the team then brainstorms customer requirements, interviews customers, and agrees on customer requirements. So, each bit of knowledge and training then asks for a new behavior to be performed the team agrees on the behavior and then takes action.

4. Apply & Practice New Behavior:

Imagine learning to play a musical instrument. How much knowledge of the keyboard or fret board is useful without then putting your hands on the instrument and practicing? The answer is very little. The important learning comes from playing the instrument, hearing the sounds, trying out different positions and chords and experiencing their difference. At one point I had the idea that I would learn to play the banjo and I bought a lesson book by Pete Seeger. When asked how often you should practice his answer was “Never. Just play!” What he understood was that the learning will come from the joy of playing, not from doing exercises or turning the experience into a painful task.

Learning any new skill is much the same way. Teams need to practice problem solving and experiment. It is OK to fail as long as every effort is recognized as a learning experience.

Practicing, evaluating, improving becomes a way of life. A Fast Company article (6/2/2009) on Toyota’s Georgetown, KY plant described the reflection of one worker in the plant: *“Artrip has been at Georgetown for 19 years. The way he does his work is so compelling it has become part of his personal life. ‘When I’m mowing the grass, I’m thinking about the best way to do it. I’m trying different turns to see if I can do it faster,’ he says.”* This is a clear sign that continuous improvement has become ingrained in the culture.

5. Receive Feedback from Coach:

The role of the *sensei* has become understood as an element of Toyota culture. A *sensei* is, essentially, a personal coach and mentor. Someone who can guide, observe, and gives feedback and encouragement. It is worth noting that in every sport, whether the emphasis is on team performance or individual performance, there is always a coach. And coaches are not reserved for children or new learners. The best professional quarterbacks, tennis stars, professional golfers and opera singers all have personal coaches even though they are at the top of their game.

In a May, 2004 Harvard Business Review article (*Learning to Lead at Toyota*) Steven J. Spear does an excellent job of describing how a new manager is hired and trained at Toyota. His coach introduces him to the organization with structured observation and debriefing on what he sees. He is asked to find improvements, many each day, just from observing. Then he is asked to work on the line with an assembly team. He is asked to find improvements and work with the team implementing them. He is then taken to Japan to again work with a frontline team and implement improvements, even in the very plant where the Toyota Production System began its development. At each step the *sensei* is encouraging him, guiding, and debriefing with him on the lessons he is learning. It is intensely personal and direct training and coaching. But, the *sensei* does little instructing in the traditional sense. Rather, he is creating experiences, asking questions, encouraging reflection.

Now consider how you develop teams in your own organization. Do they have a coach? Do they follow a structured learning process? Do they receive guidance, encouragement and feedback from a coach? Let me suggest that this is a necessity for the development of teams at every level of the organization.

6. Gain More Knowledge:

And now, the cycle becomes obvious. After each lesson learned, action or deliverable completed, the team receives feedback from the coach and then goes on to learn the next element of development: how to develop a balanced scorecard; how to map their work process; how to recognize variances of common versus special cause; how to reduce waste and cycle time, etc. And again this leads to practicing those skills.

7. More Practice:

The team and their coach should map out a series of ten to twenty steps that the team or individual will learn then do, then gain feedback and reflection. These steps should be those that lead to the complete set of behaviors you want a team to perform.

8. Positive Reinforcement from Coach and the Natural Environment:

As teams practice the skills of continuous improvement they begin to have an impact on actual performance. They should be able to see this impact on measured performance, on graphs. This is in itself, positive reinforcement and strengthens the learned behavior. It is the job of both the coach and the manager to assure that new skills and desired behavior lead to good outcomes for both individuals and teams. These outcomes can be as simple a certification that you are a High Performing Team, or the opportunity to present the results of your efforts to senior managers. There are a hundred ways to “make it matter” to strengthen the behavior of continuous improvement and this reinforcement should be part of the designed learning process.

While there is nothing entirely new about the eight steps of this action-learning cycle, it is a key to establishing lean management and culture that is too often overlooked.