

The Power of Action Learning for Global Leadership



Why is action learning a topic for a global leadership conference?

This world - - is the only one we have. Economic, political, social, environmental, and spiritual forces, are interacting to create a dynamic global system. Addressing the problems we face and leveraging the opportunities available to us requires that we deal with complex, multi-faceted realities, the interdependence of different cultures, different political ideologies and different worldviews. While these differences can lead to conflict, violence and suffering, they also offer the potential for creating a world that works for all.

Our collective future, as citizens of this global system requires a new understanding of who “we” are and how interdependent “we” are. It requires the engagement and collaboration of people in every part of the world. It requires collective awareness, collective decision-making and collective action. Action

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learning, a continually emergent process of learning and doing, offers the potential for enabling insightful and inspiring leadership.

This paper describes the Antioch University Seattle Center for Creative Change, an interdisciplinary graduate center based on action learning. The paper also provides the historical and theoretical background of action learning and demonstrates ways in which action learning nurtures dynamic, collaborative leadership.

The Bridge Group - A Collaborative Change Project

Five students in the second year of their graduate program in the Center for Creative Change were drawn to work with communities in South Seattle at the Duwamish River Superfund cleanup site. They called themselves the Bridge Group, as they conceived of their work as supporting the bridging of differences for collective action. As they engaged with the community and various agencies involved, and explored their own interests in the project, they discovered that working as a team both strengthened their impact and deepened their learning. The students were pursuing degrees in different programs within the Center for Creative Change – Environment and Community, Whole Systems Design and Organizational Psychology.

The students initiated and were involved in a variety of collaborative activities with the communities, government agencies and other organizations with a stake in the clean-up. One student provided technical understanding and support. Two developed and implemented an evening workshop for community residents. Through the workshop residents improved their ability to represent themselves and their neighborhood with informed and reasoned public comment at Environmental Protection Agency public meetings. This workshop empowered the members of the community and enabled a valuable experience of public participation in environmental decision-making. Another student in this team helped organize a community visioning workshop to prepare for Superfund cleanup and shoreline restoration projects. Interested community members, governmental agencies, businesses and other stakeholders then began to work together to create a multi-phase and multi-use future for two contaminated sites.

Through their partnership with these various stakeholders, and with one another, students engaged in the on-going cycle of action learning: taking action, personal reflection and collective reflection, deepening understanding of what was happening, collaborative planning for new action, etc. The action, and the learning, were equally important; they are interdependent components of the same process.

Antioch University Center for Creative Change

Action learning is one of the key principles on which the Antioch Center for Creative Change is based. This interdisciplinary master's level program offers graduate education that not only provides "knowledge about" a particular field, but the opportunity to explore and deeply understand issues and possibilities, and to engage with classmates and with members of communities and organizations in projects that make a difference. In short, students learn from experience, from collaborative planning, acting, reflecting on results and enlarging and deepening their understanding, leading to new awareness for planning new action. They learn through self-reflection and collective, interactive reflection and dialogue in real situations addressing real problems.

Students earn a Master's Degree in one of five disciplines:

- Environment and Community
- Organizational Psychology
- Whole Systems Design
- Management
- Strategic Communication

Entering the program in cohorts, students complete six core courses during their first three quarters. Thus, students from all of the disciplines are interacting in classes such as Systems Thinking for a Changing World, Global Pluralism, Transformative Leadership. The rich context created by the juxtaposition and interaction of the perspectives of these various disciplines causes students to challenge their assumptions and enlarge their worldview. In addition to their core courses students complete a three quarter Reflective Practicum.

As they move on to specialization courses within their individual disciplines students are also engaged in planning for and participating in a change project in the community, often as a team composed of several students as described above. And again they are engaged in a second three-quarter Reflective Practicum. The Reflective Practicum series integrates theory and practice and supports students as they undertake change projects.

Action learning can be seen in multiple aspects of the students' experience, from the incidental interaction with others who think differently, to structured reflection – individual and collective – as class assignments, to collaborative engagement in real projects.

An important aspect of the students' action learning comes from their interaction with one another. Through working in small teams in each course, and with significant learning outcomes depending on the work of those teams, students develop awareness of differences in assumptions, perception and thought processes of individuals. They become more attuned to their own beliefs and values and how these influence their perception and behavior. They

develop competence in acknowledging differences and working with those differences to achieve desired outcomes. Though not programmed, they are continually experimenting with various strategies for expressing their ideas, for listening to one another, for reaching agreement and taking action.

Students become self-aware and more conscious of the ways they are co-creating their experience. They become more observant of their own assumptions and how these influence their perception and their action.

As the world becomes increasingly interdependent, and the pace of change continues to amplify, action learning becomes a highly valuable process for creating collective, meaningful and sustainable change. In fact, the momentum of action learning comes from its wholistic and dynamic characteristics. Combining learning and doing, it is engaging and real-time. Students are not learning “theory about” something that is “out there,” separate from themselves, that they may use in the future. They are, instead, learning theory, applying theory to get things done, reflecting on that action, and pursuing and creating new theory that leads to adaptive new action. They are learning about themselves at the same time. It is an on-going cyclic process.

Action learning creates leadership, a kind of leadership that is self-aware, collaborative and process-oriented. If we are a collective, desiring to accomplish some project together, we quickly realize that leadership is more than awareness of qualities and characteristics we expect of leaders in our various cultures. We realize that leadership is a process, a dynamic, interactive process of influencing one another, of emergent relationships and action. We are global leaders, simply by the fact that we live in an interdependent world, and that we care about the future of that world. Action learning is an approach that informs and provides structure for this dynamic leadership process.

While action learning is the focus of this paper, it is important to note that the Center for Creative Change is grounded in an integrated framework that prepares students to understand the world as a whole system. It embraces a constructivist philosophy of learning. It continues the Antioch tradition of rigorous scholarship and community involvement. Since its founding in 1852, Antioch University has been committed to the values of social justice, the integration of theory and practice, and to experimentation and innovation in the service of transformational education. These provide the roots of the Center for Creative Change.

The Heritage of Action Learning

Action learning is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of approaches to learning from our own experience, or learning-by-doing. It is a process of reflecting-on-our-doing, drawing conclusions or making generalizations, and developing new theories upon which to act. It is not a simulation or a case study.

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It is bringing together a small group of people to engage in a continuous process of learning and reflection with the intention of getting something done.

Whereas conventional quantitative research is linear and sets out to prove or disprove a hypothesis, action learning is circular and iterative. It is process oriented. There is no expectation that results can be used to predict what could or should happen; instead the results of action learning projects are inputs for the on-going cycle of reflection, drawing conclusions and developing new theories upon which to act.

The heritage of action learning, and the closely related approach, action research have roots in the work of Kurt Lewin, in the 1940s and Reginald W. Revans. in the 1960s.

Kurt Lewin, [1890 – 1947], a German psychologist working in the United States and a pioneer in social psychology in the 1940s, was one of the first to examine social phenomena by integrating inquiry and practice. He extended the scientific method to the study of human, social problems. While his name is not well-known, his influence is deeply evident in a broad spectrum of social technologies – from work design to minority-majority relationships, from culture change and systems change to leadership styles. His research in field theory, group dynamics and participative methods laid the foundation for major shifts in understanding how people can work together to accomplish goals. (Marrow, 1984)

Reginald Revans, of England, originally an astrophysicist, also developed principles related to action learning more than 50 years ago. His conceptualization of action learning emerged in opposition to traditional business school practice. Revans resigned his Chair at the University of Manchester in 1965 following negotiations over the new Manchester Business School, where he describes the victory of the 'book' culture of Owens College over the 'tool' culture of the then Manchester College of Technology, later UMIST. He favored the latter as being closer to the needs of industry. (Revans, 1980)

Action learning was initially conceived as bringing together persons from different organizations, each dealing with individual problems, to learn together. Action research was conceived as a process through which change and learning were pursued simultaneously. In practice, however, the processes have become blended. Bob Dick maintains an action research web site at Southern Cross University in Australia. (Dick, 2004). He argues that the important thing is that both action learning and action research are about learning from experience, both are cyclic, both involve action and reflection on that action, and both are intended to improve practice and enable positive change.

It is important to note that several variations on action learning and action research have evolved. One important one, growing out of the roots of both

Lewin's field theory and group relations theory and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, is Participatory Action Research. PAR is research that involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. It is widely promoted and implemented by many international development agencies and university programs, as well as local community organizations around the world.

Exploring the Theory

Both Lewin and Revans saw their work as not only theory about learning and change but also as a change mechanism because the theory supports human beings in reflecting on and changing their own systems. As the Antioch Center for Creative Change draws on the tradition growing out of Lewin's research, his theory will be described in more depth.

Action learning, as we have noted, is more than learning about – how to solve a problem, or how to create something that is desired; it engages the motivation or the will to change as well.

Lewins's Contributions:

Cooperative Social Problem-Solving

Through his research Lewin developed a rationale and methodology for cooperative social problem-solving. One of his fundamental findings was that diagnosis does not mean just finding the problem, but doing it in such a way that builds commitment for action. The core principle he discovered in his research was that "we are likely to modify our own behavior when we participate in problem analysis and solution and likely to carry out decisions we have helped to make." (Weisbord, p. 94) He learned that you cannot do things to people, only with them.

This awareness led him to develop methodologies for creating situations where people can diagnose their own situation and determine action strategies to which they are committed. Instead of isolating variables for control, such as with scientific reasoning, and identifying whether or not those variables were significant, he chose to study the dynamics of multiple variables, many of which cannot be controlled. Lewin believed that in real life you cannot control all the variables, especially other people, so you do the scientific thing – you involve them in learning how to do the experiment (Weisbord, p.100).

His research revealed that the people engaged in the work, the people affected by community realities, were very capable of conducting research that provided

new information, of reflecting on that information, making decisions and making changes in their work and their communities.

In a recent re-appraisal of Lewin's work as it has been applied over the past fifty years, Bernard Burnes of the Manchester School of Management reminds us of this central tenant of involvement. Lewin had a strong interest in social issues. and was sought to assist in resolving all kinds of conflict including racial and religious conflict and union-management disagreement. In each situation, Burnes points out, Lewin emphasized participation and learning by everyone involved. (Burnes, 2004)

Strange as it seems, the roots of participative management grew out of experiments with Iowa housewives. During WWII as meats were rationed there was a strong need to promote the use of less desirable cuts. Lewin set out to explore how to best reduce resistance to nonscarce meats. He set up a comparative experiment.

“An expert nutritionist lectured housewives on what they ‘should’ do – a traditional, reasoned exhortation to change. Women in comparison groups were given the facts and invited to decide together what to do. . . . Groups that reached consensus through discussion changed their food habits much more than those given expert advice.” (Weisbord, p. 94)

Lewin was becoming clear that while motivation to change might be inspired by lecture and discussion, motivation alone does not lead to change. The link between motivation and action he believed was provided by group decision-making. (Lewin, 1947)

Field Theory

Some years prior to Lewin's work, field theory had evolved in the physical sciences as physicists struggled to explain what happened when a number of forces interacted. The focus shifted from analyzing phenomenon into components, and then into irreducible elements, to thinking in terms of fields of energy in which forces are spread and operate within a matrix (Marrow, 1984). Gestalt psychologists had already begun to view perceptual responses as distribution of energy. Lewin broadened this concept to include all psychological activity. Behavior, he believed is a function of the person and his or her environment; these are interdependent variables.

Believing then that behavior arises out of the tension of the various forces one experiences at any given time, Lewin developed two fundamental concepts and related methodologies that live on today. The first, [Force-Field Analysis](#), involves identifying the field of forces holding a situation in place, by determining forces that are driving toward change, and those that are restraining change. This extremely useful methodology enables individuals and teams to analyze and

act on situations which cannot be easily measured or quantified (Weisbord, p. 83). This methodology is particularly valuable because identifying the forces that are holding a situation stable, frequently leads beyond the rational, logical frame of the situation, to the emotions, attitudes and values which play a powerful, often overlooked role in resisting or supporting change. Lewin pointed out that, while it seems counter-intuitive, reducing the restraining forces is usually more powerful than increasing the driving forces, as the later triggers increased resistance.

The second key concept and methodology Lewin derived from field theory is his [theory about how change happens](#). He described change as a three -phase process: **unfreezing** which involves reducing the forces inhibiting change, **moving**, which means changes in attitude, values, structure, feelings and behavior, and **refreezing**, which means reaching a new balance of forces with support mechanisms which maintain the desired behavior (99).

Some newer perspectives on change reject Lewin's change model on the basis that it is mechanistic and linear, arguing that in the rapid change of today's world, it is unrealistic to think of "unfreezing, changing, and refreezing." Deeper understanding of the theory, however, leads to an opposite conclusion. While circumstances and situations may change rapidly and while technological developments trigger rapid shifts in many industries, individual beliefs and assumptions, and deeply embedded group, community and national norms and values do not. Action learning is an iterative process, dynamic, and continually emerging. It is a multi-level process. Because it is a collective experience, it tends to be wholistic, bringing personal transformation within the context of the group.

Building on Lewin's work, and collaborating with him, Ronald Lippitt further explored the connection between a leader's behavior and the culture of a group. It was out of their dialogue that the term, group dynamics, was coined. (Weisbord, p., 88) From the experiments that he and Lippitt conducted Lewin became even more firmly convinced of the importance of working with groups.

Lewin's student, Alex Bevalas, involved workers in a pajama factory in increasing their productivity. Rather than an expert studying the system and determining one best way, Bevalas, engaged high producing workers and low producing workers in weekly discussions. "Not only did people learn efficient practices from one another, they removed the barriers to change by deciding together what to do." (Weisbord, p. 95).

The tradition continued with important work done by Eric Trist, Wilfred Bion, and Fred Emery at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London.

Chris Argyris' seminal work on defensive routines and his collaboration with Donald Schon on double-loop learning and reflection-on-action and reflection-in-

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action continued to deepen both the theory and practice of action learning. This work is particularly significant because we do not automatically learn from our experience. Our actions may trigger a habitual pattern of thinking, which in turn, may trigger an automatic behavior. It is reflective skills that can lead us to become aware of assumptions beliefs, engrained patterns of thinking and to examine these assumptions in terms of how they may be influencing our perception and our behavior.

Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*, first published in 1990, placed these theories in the broader context of a learning organization, highlighted their systemic perspective, and drew attention to their relevance.

Action Learning and Global Leadership

It is this systemic perspective, recognizing the interdependence of life, that provides the most powerful incentive to utilize action learning as a source of global leadership. As we consider again the opening question of this paper, we see a deep resonance between global leadership and the process and underlying theory behind action learning.



Every region, every tribe, every nation, every culture holds a part of the wisdom and energy for creating a world that is sustainable and supports healthy living for all. Discerning and acting on that wisdom is, of course, a collective process that

requires collaboration and cooperation. It requires, moreover, the ability to allow our individual and cultural assumptions to surface, the willingness to suspend our beliefs and perceptions as **the** reality, and the openness to “see” from other perspectives.

Moving from the Industrial Age to the Information Age reflected a shift from a focus on things, to a focus on ideas. While different in many respects (physical objects to conceptual, symbolic representation), these two periods also have much in common. The basic assumptions underlying both are similar. Most significantly, in both we externalize our experience. In the Industrial Age this is easy to see. The machines we create are “out there,” separate from us. In the Information Age, the concepts we give attention to also tend to be externalized. We have extensive knowledge about. From the dna of our physical selves, to the planets in space, we know, and can get information about, almost anything.

However, when we look around us - - - the problems we see, and the opportunities we see, have less to do with information and knowledge and more to do with meaning, intention, values, will, and action. We have extensive knowledge about what needs to happen to slow and reverse global warming and climate change. Knowing that, does not automatically translate into action. We know much about ways to eliminate poverty and to improve the health of people around the globe – but, again, that knowledge does not necessarily translate into action. So, what is the missing connection?

Lewin would say that the gap between knowing and doing is bridged by engaging people in the study of what is actually happening, in identifying the forces that are holding the situation in the current pattern, and in making decisions about what actions to take.

From the Information Age to the Age of Understanding

Action learning is one powerful contribution to the challenge of global leadership. It is situated with other emerging social theories and technologies which have great potential for creating a desirable future. It seems incumbent at this time for us to reframe the way we think of our current global situation. This “age” we live in has been labeled the Information Age or the Knowledge Age, in contrast to the Industrial Age. If, however, this is our perspective, if this is how we identify ourselves, then we will tend to remain focused on creating and accumulating more information or knowledge. Instead, the energy that seems needed, and ready to emerge might better be framed as the Age of Understanding.

In *The Birth of The Chaordic Age*, Dee Hock suggests an interesting way to think about information and knowledge. He describes a continuum with data at one end and wisdom on the other:

data information knowledge understanding wisdom
(Hock, 1999)

Knowledge is generally defined as the possession of information, facts, ideas, or principles. Understanding is described as the interpretation of something, or the capacity to perceive and explain the meaning of something. It also is defined as , empathetic or tolerant recognition of somebody else's nature or situation Wisdom is defined as the knowledge and experience needed to make sensible decisions and judgments. Hock describes it as understanding which is informed by purpose, ethics, principle, memory of the past, and projection into the future.

As we move from data, information and knowledge to understanding and wisdom, an interesting thing happens. We move from externalized knowing to more wholistic knowing, knowing that not only includes subjective, intuitive knowing as valid and important, but that also moves knowing and doing closer together. Understanding something means I can begin to appreciate differences in *perception*. It enables me to accept, and even appreciate, that you and I may experience the same event, but interpret it and respond to it in very different ways. It becomes clear that knowing is as much about what I bring to the situation as it is about the situation as an external event – out there.

So, understanding provides the potential for powerful shifts. I have to accept the fact that my interpretation is simply that, my interpretation. That may be humbling, but it also sparks curiosity and challenges me to engage with you. So, how do you see that? What does it mean to you? Here is what it means to me. Understanding then also provides a basis for creating shared meaning. And processes such as action learning lead to understanding, as individuals engage with one another to study a situation in which they are involved and make decisions about what they want to do.

Seeking to understand allows me to acknowledge the importance of unique life experience, personal values and emotions. It leads not so much to knowing about you, but to engaging with you. It enables us to realize that “just the facts” are rarely (if ever) just the facts. They are “the facts” from someone or some group's perception. They are “facts” based on some set of assumptions.

Action learning contributes to this process of moving from knowing to understanding and doing because it draws its momentum from collective involvement and openness to the co-evolution of concepts and practices. It leads to valuing diverse perspectives, enhancing the ability to deal with ambiguity and inquiry, by generating the flow from action to reflection

It is, at the same time, one of many theories and methodologies for social change which are rooted in shared experience, reflection, decision-making and action. The work of William Isaacs using dialogue to enable social problem-solving and Adam Kahne's use of that process in resolving conflict situations around the world come to mind. (Isaacs, 1999) (Kahane, 2004). Margaret Wheatley's call

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for us to “turn to one another,” and her example of learning from other cultures provides rich examples of collective action, reflection, action. (Wheatley, 2002, 2005) Senge and his associates, in the book, *Presence*, illustrate the connection of personal transformation and social transformation. (Senge, et al 2004) Ralph Stacy, Patricia Shaw and their colleagues at the University of Herefordshire in their work on organizations as complex adaptive systems leads us further into understanding that we are continually co-creating our emerging reality. (Shaw, 2002), (Stacey, 2002) As well, the work of Rupert Sheldrake and Eleanor Rorsch lead us into new understandings of field theory. These are but a few of the researchers and authors who are contributing to new perspectives and conceptions of how we may collectively analyze and learn from our experience. Abundant resources in terms of theory, methods, and technologies are available for the support of global leadership in bringing about powerful positive action. Considering ourselves as being a part of the Age of Understanding may serve to nurture this growing field.

As we have discovered at the Center for Creative Change, the competence and the will to create a desirable future is widely distributed. Students develop, through their own experience, fundamental confidence in their ability to learn and to lead. They learn to trust their ability to collaborate in both learning and action. Whether they choose to pursue careers in organizations, where continual learning is increasingly being seen as the underlying foundation for success and sustainability, or in communities and grass-roots movements where learning and collaborative work across differences is essential, graduates are secure in their capacity to lead and to nurture the leadership of others.

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