ABC of Action Learning

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Preface

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These ideas have emerged from my experiences of action learning over thirty years and more; they are intended to help those who might wish to contribute to our understanding of this educational approach by becoming involved in it. Although many practitioners are in the field of commercial management, it is pretty clear that action learning has a growing appeal to those in many other forms of human development such as hospitals and schools. This suggests that fresh and stimulating use will be made of the ancient idea of learning by doing, perhaps generating as wide a variety of new approaches to the mastery of our troubles as that of the current unrealities strutting with such confident insouciance in the pageantry of higher education.

Since action learning suggests that we may best master whatever unknown challenge appears by working with others who seek to triumph in the same way, its programmes should be collectively designed and launched by those who hope to profit from them. This symposium is thus in no sense prescriptive; it merely assembles what has emerged from many previous endeavours and is offered between one pair of covers to save the time of any who may now feel bold enough to set
up programmes of their own. The more substantial elements of action learning, as they have evolved from my pioneering programmes abroad – learning communities, sets, clients and client groups; paradigms of action, learning, advice and research; vocabularies of managerial debate, project sequences, diagnostic and therapeutic question triads; exchange options and management levels – are identified and related in the following pages.

Some readers may feel the presentation a little too condensed; the 29 words for example, of the three therapeutic questions of section 8 (iv) in Chapter 2, should well be the theme of a major treatise upon the nature of human action. But I do not offer here such a treatise; this ABC should be taken as a simple paint box, filled with a few primary colours for composing whatever patterns of curative enquiry seem appropriate to its users. I leave it to other to market the Painting-by-Numbers packages that have become the ways and means of the management education trade, in which the elements of action learning listed above are offered under a great variety of ingenious brand names, from management action groups to executive exchange enrichment experience, and from developmental practice to mission-oriented psychosynthesis. However this may be, there is still great scope for experimenting with the substance of action learning as well as in seeking new names under which to sell it.

Action learning is not new; like all organic growth, it depends more upon the reinterpretation of old and familiar ideas than upon the acquisition of new cognitive knowledge. Much of this symposium will therefore be familiar to students of learning and management decision. But the detailed elements of many new subjects can also be familiar to an observer without the subject itself being readily perceived. There is something
fresh in each of Shakespeare’s plays, even although they are formed from the same words from the same old dictionary. What impresses us is that he can build from the very words we understand – and sometimes even use ourselves – such wonderful patterns and analogies.

I make this commonplace remark because I am often told that managers who argue about their tasks with each other, or visit each others’ places of work, are already ‘doing action learning’. I hope that those who read what I have written in the following pages will agree that, whilst action learning must necessarily involve managerial conversation and even the visiting of unfamiliar sites, it is very much more than both of these.

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