

Staying mindful in action

The challenge of 'double awareness' on task and process in an Action Lab

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Staying mindful in action:

The challenge of ‘double awareness’ on task and process in an Action Lab®

Abstract

Action Learning is a well-proven method to integrate ‘task’ and ‘process’, as learning about team and self (process) takes place while delivering on a task or business challenge of real importance (task). An Action Lab® is an intensive Action Learning programme lasting for 5 days, which aims at balancing and integrating individual challenges and business challenges, as well as the ‘Action’ and the ‘Learning’ of Action Learning. However, in spite of the aspiration to balance and integrate ‘task’ and ‘process’, a tendency and a challenge is experienced: When deeply involved in delivering on a business challenge, participants tend to shy away from or see reflection on the process as disturbing or disrupting. This tendency is like a seesaw: When the pressure of the task increases, awareness about the process goes down. This account of practice aims at exposing and understanding better this tendency by sharing a study looking into what hinders and promotes mindful awareness on the process, while dealing with a business challenge in an Action Lab®. Drawing on the findings, the account of practice will share some recommendations for the Action Learning facilitator to take up the challenge of integrating task and process whenever the seesaw is tipping.

Introduction

In many organisations, the treadmill speeds up and reflective spaces become both harder and harder to find and more and more important. Organisational members need such spaces to figure out what is truly important to them, to consider choices they make, and simply to check in with routines: Is the way we do things, the way that really works for us? Do our routines produce happy and well-performing teams? Do our routines deliver the best results on our primary tasks? Or put simply: *How* are we doing – what can we keep doing and what do we need to change?

Whereas there is much agreement on how to promote and create such reflective spaces and foster reflection-on-action less is known on how to foster reflection-in-action; In the context, in the moment – while we do things. In creating reflection-in-action the question becomes: Can we stay reflective, mindful, actively noticing ‘the how’ while we are in the middle of action – in the middle of it all?

Let me share why this is a key challenge and concern for facilitators conducting Action Labs® and

why it’s a key challenge and concern for the organisations we work with. The organisations that we work with are strongly result-oriented and performance-oriented. Plenty of these organisations do not think that they benefit sufficiently from training programmes in general, as learning obtained in programmes tends to fade, the moment the participants get back into the hamster-wheel of the daily routines they left behind. It is like a seesaw: When task intensity increases, the awareness about ‘creating the reflective space’ goes down. This is what is often referred to as the *task-process split*. Though striving at bringing together task and process together, in our Action Labs®, we experience the same challenge: When task intensity increases, groups tend to find the process work both disturbing and less relevant for ‘the real deal’, which is delivering on the task – the business challenge; And the engagement with the process tends to fade into the background. Before moving on, I will give you a sense of the flow and the structure within an Action Lab®.

The context

As action on a company’s business challenges is held central within our approach, Action Lab is drawing upon and inspired by Business Driven Action Learning (BDAL), which is an Action Learning –brand with a particular strong focus on result-orientation. BDAL is described as “ a process for working on important business problems or opportunities, in diverse teams, to both improve the business and develop the participants” (Bolt & Boshyk, 2005, p. 86).

While working on a strategic task, an Action Lab® holds Action Learning Sets, individually and on group level, where participants reflect on issues like: “What role do I take up in the group? Why? What do I avoid speaking to? When? What promotes efficiency in the group? Why? How can we become more efficient?” An Action Lab® is a process covering 5 off-site days of fully committed Action Learning with selected in-company participants. It starts on Monday morning with senior management presenting business challenges that they need input on, and ends Friday afternoon after presenting solutions back to senior management. Here a number of groups – or Action Learning Sets - , typically consisting of 6-8 participants, work very intensively to develop solutions to the real business-strategy challenges that have been identified by senior management. The participants come from various business areas and nationalities, and the challenges provided are selected on the grounds that if resolved, they will have significant impact on the organisation.

In the design of an Action Lab® equal attention is paid to resolution of the actual business challenges (the task) and to development of team and self (process). The balance between process and task orientation is considered a core element of the approach and as such it is discussed and

defined in close cooperation with the client company; Also a group’s ability to deal with various aspects of their process is an integral part of the feeding back to senior management on the Friday-presentation. Thus, the integration of process is a vital component of the Action Lab® methodology through out the programme. At the start of an Action Lab® the groups are encouraged to make some contracting on their cooperation, map and discuss personal profiles, strengths and weaknesses, individual success criteria etc. And during the week an Action Lab® features the following reflection slots: Morning roll calls (where individual reflection as well as sharing within and between groups takes place), team-optimisations (where each group is evaluating and reflecting on their own process), as well as individual feed-back (where each group member is provided with feed-back from other group members on what to keep, change, and try.) After these reflection slots it is up to the participants to get the most out of these slots by staying with and acting on whatever has been shared and worked during the reflection slots.

Now the challenge is: Even though learning about self and team is positioned as just as important as delivering on the task, participants tend to shy away from or avoid this work when under pressure or in meeting with competing task-oriented factors. In Action Labs® this tendency is often felt: When the participants are “under fire” to produce results they tend to shy away from mindful awareness on the process, the task orientation increases, and they strive to obtain something tangible. So the question becomes: Rather than reflection and action happening sequentially or in parallel, can we make it happen more intertwined – more in-action (not to be seduced into solving the actual business case only)? How can we strengthen the process work to create a stronger learning environment - and help our participants to *stay with the process whenever task is present*?

The study

Exposing and understanding this challenge better – and preventing learning from taking a backseat – is the focal point for the study I want to share. I asked the question: “What hinders and promotes mindful awareness and action on process cues when in the middle of it all?” – and I explored this research question within three Action Labs® in three different organisations, representing the pharmaceutical industry, the brewery industry, and the financial sector. In each Action Lab there were three teams of 6-8 participants, who were all high performers on a senior level.

I did participant observation of the teams during the three Action Lab®, where I closely observed how the teams worked together and how the process of the team was dealt with. Following the

observations I formed ‘working hypotheses’ about “what was really going on” in the teams (hypotheses that point to discrepancies between what people believe they do, and the task they seem to be engaged in), and I used these hypotheses as springboards for exploring with individual group members what “was *really* going on” within their teams. Thus, my data holds field notes from three Action Labs® (covering 9 Action Learning teams), as well as 48 transcribed individual sessions. And as I processed the data, I was surprised.

First I will invite you to have a glimpse into one of the groups I observed – a troubled one...

A look into a troubled group

Day 1 on the Action Lab 17.45pm. (When I step in the group is together. They just seem to sum up on something. The atmosphere is heavy. Are they tired?)^[SEP]

Mark: “So we need a plan for today and tomorrow?”^[SEP]

Susanne: “Should all of us do a plan or should we split up?”^[SEP]

Mark: “It only takes 10 minutes”

Susanne: “OK?” (Raises her eyebrows and looks at Mark with a questioning look on her face, doubtful tone of voice). Mark ignores her. The group starts discussing in detail the task of tomorrow. Mostly they touch upon different subjects without really concluding. (I feel ‘heavy’ and bored. And at the same time a strong urge to DO something)^[SEP]

Susanne: “But now we are doing this in 10 minutes!” She emphasizes 10 minutes and says it in a sneering way. Then she smiles. Mark doesn’t respond.^[SEP]*A new question is raised. The group starts discussing this. Susanne closes her eyes, rests her head on her hand. Mark closes his eyes and massages his front head. I feel exhausted my-self just by observing them. The most silent member of the group is on his computer. He does not have eye contact with any of the other members. Maybe he is doing emails?*

The amount of things going on in this group, which are seemingly not noticed, and not explored or acted on, is tremendous. The group members come forward as absolutely mindless of the process and nothing is done to bring the process of the group into focus what so ever.

What hinders process-awareness and action?

However, in exploring “what was *really* going on in the groups” in the individual research talks with individual participants after the experience, a different reality than mindlessness started to emerge. Here are some vignettes of what was said:

“He...I was very aware of that...He simply couldn’t stand to sit at that table for yet another second – he was about to crack up. We could all sense that, but no-one...addressed it, and he didn’t speak to it him-self”

“We talked about it during the breaks, and we agreed that it didn’t work, and still we continued...”

So the different reality is: It is not that they do not notice...

I will continue by looking into what characterises the moments where mindful awareness and action on process-work is hindered. In condensing and categorising my findings, 4 categories came forward the strongest: Mindful avoidance, Defensive routines, Emotions as disturbance and Fear of not-knowing.

Mindful avoidance: Mindful avoidance is a term that ‘grew out of’ the data. I define mindful avoidance as an active avoidance of a potentially threatening or disturbing situation, where people make whatever is noticed un-noticed and appear mindless as ‘the noticed’ is neither shared, spoken to, nor acted upon – but mindfully avoided. Thus, in mindfully avoiding, intra- and interpersonal data are noticed though neither expressed nor acted upon.

I was genuinely surprised how much is noticed that is not turned into action. The participants notice much more than they express. So what comes forward as mindlessness is often avoiding.

Sometimes this avoidance is less conscious, and sometimes it is conscious as they simply choose emotional blind spots. The question is why they would choose such blind spots? E.g. it is obvious that ‘the quiet member’ in the group is not feeling good and everybody senses that, however, no one acts on this obvious sense. Emotional and relational work is simply perceived as over-whelming as well as raising complexity – so it’s easier not to...

“And it was a bit like... We just looked at each other all of us and then pretended nothing had happened. We... We did not act on it in any way, it was a bit as if we thought, well, okay...”

Defensive routines: The participants establish strong defensive routines to avoid the complexity of the emotional and relational work. They disperse: Notice something – and leave it. They displace: Push it in front of them. They suppress the feelings and convince them-selves that this is for the best.

”So I just chose to...Yeah, sweep it under the carpet and then say...Friday afternoon, then you can forget all about it”

Emotions as disturbance: In establishing strong defensive routines, emotions are dealt with as disturbance rather than intelligence. Rather than using emotions as informers about potentially dysfunctional modes of operating, the participants push emotions away as uncomfortable knowledge, mainly disturbing and slowing down the group work, rather than informing and helping the group towards more functional modes of operating.

“I guess I have to keep feelings out a bit in order to reach the goal in the time available”

This is closely interlinked with the next category.

Fear of not-knowing: Dealing with emotions takes times and is often related to something 'un-controllable', endless discussions that you do not know the benefit of. No one wants to invite what is perceived as un-controllable. Given the fact that the participants are senior people and chosen as high potentials, what is really surprising to me is how really strong the 'not knowing how to' is... How really anxious they are to offend, to be misunderstood, to create conflict, or to be perceived as vulnerable.

“Should I like.... put words to my values and frustrations – and then really like throw it out in the blue, or how to put it, without knowing how the others will react to it?”

“Uhm you don't want to offend somebody, that you don't know. It is a very intense situation. You want get the job done.”

”Well, I may come forward as incompetent or something, right?”

What they struggle with is: How can you speak to what you notice in an assertive way?

This may be linked to the general perception that action is valid only, if you know how to solve an issue, fix it, make people happy. This perception of action demands knowing, and leaves the participants with the obvious dilemma: If you don't know how to 'fix an issue', how can you act on it?

“Just making an observation. That's not very helpful – is it?”

In the following I will turn towards the moments where process awareness is promoted.

Exploring: What promotes process-awareness and action?

Here I have summarized my findings in what I refer to as a 3-T-model: Truth, Transparency, Trust. This model draws on and adds to the Truth-and-Trust model developed by Ben Bryant (2008). My reasoning for adding transparency to the model is due to the strength with which this dimension comes across in my data. Truth here means: Doing whatever helps in gaining a perception of things as they really are in this exact moment - the reality of the here-and-now. Often this takes the form of ‘daring sharing’ - also what is difficult and vulnerable. Daring to share real feelings, real thoughts, and real sensations, like: “I don’t know anything about this”, “I’m anxious that I can’t contribute” or “I feel inadequate with this task I have been given...” The reason why this is so important is that it leads to transparency. Individual members as well as the group as a whole become more transparent and it becomes much simpler to navigate as it decreases the amount of hypotheses made, phantasies and projective spaces held, and anxieties of making the wrong moves. If there is transparency in a group, it creates the platform for trust, which again opens the gates to even more truth – daring sharing even more of what’s on your mind. A key first step is to trust that value comes from sharing thoughts and emotions not just having them, and that this can be a source of learning. Let me share an example of such a mindful moment in one of the groups:

It’s day 3 of the Action Lab®. The group is working in a fast pace. The atmosphere is intense and discussions are wrapped up fast and decisions made. This turns into a slightly hectic state – and at a certain time a decision is made, which is not insignificant. I make this note in my field book: “How was that decision made – and by whom?” as it happened so fast that I did not even notice. The group continues for a few minutes, until one of the members pauses, leans back and says: “Wait a minute. I feel unease... Why do I feel unease?” This brings the group to a stop, and they all lean back and rewind and revisit the decision just made. It turns out that only two of the six group members feel confident about the decision, and it’s refined and changed. Everybody agrees that this is now the right decision, and the group continues. Now in a more steady pace.

The sharing of the feeling, simply stating it and putting it out there, allows the group to understand the situation differently. Voicing a question is enough to loosen up a groups’ thinking, as it puts the group in a different place, as it helps the members of the group to recognise their state of mind – and then do something about it.

Where do these findings leave the Action Learning- facilitator?

I have now shared the essence of my findings when looking into what hinders and what promotes process awareness, and the questions that follow are: Where do these findings leave the Action Learning- facilitator? How are they helpful in the striving to create strong learning environments? How can facilitators draw upon them?

Based on my findings my suggestions are:

1. Facilitators need to find a way of helping participants stay with and tune in with what they notice – in them-selves and in others. Also when it feels messy and uncomfortable.
2. Facilitators need to find ways of helping participants notice defensive routines in them-selves and others (Disperse, displace, intellectualize) – in order to help them catch the exact moment where they avoid what needs to get done.
3. Facilitators need to help participants find ways of ‘daring sharing’ thoughts and emotions that are helpful for the group’s work - self-driven and in the moment.
4. Facilitators need to help participants find ways of dealing with questions and the unknown as much as with answers and the known.

In the following I will share 6 recommendations for doing this work. The first three recommendations are about dealing with mindful avoidance, whereas the next three recommendations are facilitating mindful action.

Let us return to the glimpse of the troubled group that we had a glimpse into at the beginning of this account of practice. In observing them they came forward as mindless – not noticing what was going on in the group at all -, but in exploring, this turned out not to be the case. Rather they were a group in a state of mindful avoidance. In exploring, it’s clear that there is a strong undertow of emotional and irrational issues, as well as defensive routines, like rationalizing to them-selves, why they don’t have to speak to what’s on their minds.

Dealing with mindful avoidance recommendation 1: Speak to the emotional and irrational more.

One of the things needed is to bring different core concepts into the introduction of the Action Learning-programme – in this case an Action Lab®. The introduction of the work includes setting up a framework for ‘a good beginning’ of the group’s work. It becomes clear to us that - as it is now, we speak a lot to the cognitive and rational part of group work in setting the frame and introducing

the work. However, my findings suggest that we need to address emotional and irrational issues more – as these play a considerable part in keeping the split between task and process alive. E.g. This can be done by sharing some of the findings addressed in this account of practice.

Dealing with mindful avoidance recommendation 2: Position not-knowing as a potentially creative place. The second thing we need to do more is to position and value not-knowing as a potentially creative state. It comes across in my data that there is a tendency to look for and value people who know. However, what is mainly asked for during an Action Learning-programme is the capacity to deal with not-knowing.

Thus it is key to find ways of sharing - and normalising – common thoughts and feelings in what may be uncomfortable moments of not-knowing in any group.

Dealing with mindful avoidance recommendation 3: Make mindful avoidance a core concept.

As an Action Learning facilitator: Keep in mind that though participants may come forward as mindless, this may not at all be the case. Make mindful avoidance a core concept. E.g. this can be done sharing an example like this:

I was once at a conference, where a CFO of a large international organisation was asked: “What is the one thing we need to do differently in our organisations – to make a huge difference?”

And he promptly answered: “People sit in meetings for hours, they go to the coffee machine during breaks and they talk about what doesn’t work in the meeting, what feels like a waste of time, how they are confused about the primary task of the meeting, their roles etc. And then they join the meeting after the coffee break, and continue as before... If people could start bringing *into* the meeting what they share during the coffee-break, *that* would make a difference.” Most people will recognise this example of noticing deficits, but choosing to pretend that they do not. This is what mindful avoidance is all about.

When they mindfully avoid something – in this case speaking up - they contribute to defensive routines. This is another core concept that needs to be introduced. Action Learning facilitators can help participants notice moments of mindful avoidance and the use of defensive routines simply by asking questions that help them reflect on what they notice that they choose not to act on – and why.

Questions like that lead to the next three recommendations, which are about facilitating mindful action.

Facilitating mindful action recommendation 1: Exemplify’ the how’: Value comes from sharing.

Participants don’t know ‘how to’ – and this may have to do with the notion that acting is perceived as equal to knowing and giving answers. ‘The how’ may need to be exemplified. Acting can be based on not-knowing and asking questions. Recognising what is unfolding is also action. ‘The how’ can be exemplified by sharing an example like the mindful moment that is shared earlier in this paper. It can also be done by sharing observations of such moments from within the group where sharing a feeling or voicing a question allows the group to understand a situation differently.

Facilitating mindful action recommendation 2: Build on the 3T-model.

Thoughts and emotions are data on what’s going on in the group. In whatever steps are taken to deal with the process, the 3Tmodel needs to be the platform. If steps taken are not characterised by ‘trying to understand the reality of the moment as it really is’, transparency is lost– and inefficient routines may keep repeating themselves. This is an important awareness area in whatever intervention is made. Such interventions can be made drawing on the 3T-model and it can be explored within the group whether actions taken are characterised by truth, transparency, and trust. For example many groups kick off their group work by establishing ground rules as a contract. Such ground rules often hold rules like: Be open, be honest etc. And often such ground rules are made and put on the wall, and then they tend to fade into the background or they are forgotten. If this is the case the ground rules only serve a ‘front-stage-purpose’ (“now we have done the process, and we can move on to task”), and task and process will never be intertwined. Ground rules can be revisited frequently, for example via questions like “Are our ground rules characterised by truth, transparency, and trust?” and “Is the work you do based upon your ground rules?”

Facilitating mindful action recommendation 3: Exemplify’ in-the-moment-self-driven-action’

Mindful action is acting on what is noticed in the moment - not waiting for the next scheduled team-optimization or coaching session. It is making a conscious choice of sharing whatever is noticed whenever it is will help to pull the group together as a team. Like in the example of sharing the moment of un-easiness. It is helpful and it kicks of the truth, transparency and trust-spiral. Facilitators asking questions that prone and push reflection on how to stay with and act on process during the task becomes crucial. If this is not done, Action Learning- facilitators may unintentionally risk adding to the split between task and process, by introducing structured reflection sections as ‘the place’ where process is dealt with only, and participants may tend to follow this very literally and conveniently. This may also unintentionally increase dependency on

facilitators– as participants may talk to difficulties when facilitators are in the room, whereas they do not know how to (and they do not dare to) when facilitators are not present.

Thus, in drawing on the research study accounted for within this account of practice, it can be argued that these recommendations may strengthen the engagement with process work while working on the task. There may be many other ways of acting on the findings shared.

The recommendations shared here also takes courage for Action Learning- facilitators, as facilitators need to engage with the emotional arena as well, and need to engage with their own fear of ‘not-knowing’ and ‘daring sharing’ what ever they notice – also when it is perceived as disturbing, raising complexity, and uneasiness.

Reflective discussion

As put by Dilworth, Action Learning can take a variety of forms (Dilworth 1998). It can be argued that the recommendations shared here may tend to tip Action Learning towards the P (programmed instructions) rather than towards the Q (Questioning insights), which can be seen as opposite to Revan’s thinking on always starting with fresh questions rather than be encoded by programmed instructions from the past (Revans 1993)

However, this is not at all the intention. In contrary I will argue the following: “The facilitator can play a key role in jump-starting the set activity and orienting the set members on basic fundamentals of action learning” (Dilworth 1998 p40). I see the recommendations shared as possible stepping stones in the jump-starting of the Action Learning-program, which frame ways of keeping double awareness - working on and learning from the process in the middle of it all – rather than avoiding it, and thereby decreasing learning opportunities. They are also awareness areas to keep on top of mind during the entire Action Learning programme in order to enhance awareness of and action on whatever is noticed about self or team *while* working on the task.

Conclusion

The aim of this account of practice was to expose the challenge of staying with learning from the process within an Action Learning programme, and to propose ways of ‘keeping learning in the front seat’ while working on a real task. Double awareness on task and process is seen as one of the most potent ingredients in Action Learning. Drawing on a recent research study, this account of practice includes recommendations on how to stay with the process whenever it tends to fade into the background.

Notes on contributor (50 words)

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