

Developing Learning Coaches for Action Learning

We often use various action technologies in our work with organizations. One of these technologies is action learning.

Action learning is an approach to working with, and developing people, which used work on a real project or problem as the way to learn. Participants work in small groups to take action to solve their project or problem, and learn how to learn from that action. A learning coach works with the group in order to help them learn how to balance their work, with the learning from that work.

The role of the learning coach in action learning is a very important one. Based on her research and work with organizations, Judy O'Neil has a number of recommendations for the development of people for this crucial role.

1. Participate in an action learning program. Unless you have the experience yourself, you will not be able to fully understand how to support participants yourself. If there is no available ongoing program, a group can be formed from people wanting to learn the coach role.
2. Follow-up this experience with either 'shadowing' an experienced coach in a program; then having an experienced coach 'mentor' you; and finally work on your own with a group.
3. My research shows that the best learning coaches are those who are self-aware and have an explicit understanding of how they are trying to help the group to learn. This self-awareness can be developed in several ways:
 - learn about the fundamentals of learning from experience and transformative learning
 - learn about some of the basics of Action Science, i.e., theories of action, Model I and Model II reasoning, the ladder of inference
 - create a metaphor that can guide how you will interact with your group, i.e., some coaches see themselves as 'radical' coaches—enabling participants to become empowered and using that empowerment to question and challenge authority.