

## The Potential Power Offered By Action Learning

At the [International Coach Federation Metro DC Chapter](#) May meeting, Dr. Bea Carson, EdD, a seasoned coach, conducted a demonstration of action learning. While her demonstration was short, I was immediately taken by the concept and its potential.

Briefly, action learning brings together a diverse group of people, frequently internal to a company, to solve a compelling problem and to learn a **highly efficient method of creative problem solving**.

**Action learning is learning by doing**, the most natural way for us to learn. It enables us to learn a great deal about teamwork, appreciative inquiry, intentional listening, and about being a great teammate and leadership.

One of the ground rules of action learning is that **statements are only made in answer to a question**. That is sacred. It is essential to the success of creative problem solving. I know it is difficult to imagine how effective this is unless you've experienced the process. Believe me, it is effective!

After Bea Carson's presentation, I saw the potential for action learning in my work with my clients, so I enrolled in the next [World Institute of Action Learning](#) (WIAL) training workshop, which took place this past week. WIAL offers action learning coaches to companies, organizations, and government agencies all around the world.

Here are the steps involved in action learning:

- Present a compelling problem
- Gather a diverse group of 4 to 8 people, no less, no more; ideal size is 5 or 6
- Engage a trained action learning coach
- Questions may be asked to anyone on the team. No statements are permitted other than in answer to a question.
- The action learning coach does not participate in problem inquiry, reframing the problem, or problem solving, rather, solely assures that rules are followed and periodically asks process questions, such as, "How are we doing as a team? How might we do better?" -- thereby raising the awareness of the team of how they are actually interacting.
- During the discussion, the action learning coach asks each person to write down what the problem actually is. Very often, there are differences. The team determines when they have consensus on the problem.
- Once the team agrees reaches consensus they will shift to identifying the solution.

- At the end, the action learning coach asks the problem presenter what actions she/he agrees to take to solve the problem.

Note – for larger problems, different team members will commit to taking different actions between the sessions. These can be actions to help clarify they problem or help test (or determine) the best solution.

Six of us were in my group studying for certification. The other five were amazing leaders in their respective organizations.

We worked as a team with the supervision and coaching of WIAL officials. The problems presented were definitely challenging:

- What do you do about negative talk in a large government agency?
- What do you do about tenured professors at a renown university who do not treat online learning as a priority?
- How do you grow a company's business by 50%?
- How do you introduce action learning into a large organization that is hierarchical and bureaucratic?

We worked hard, became creative, and learned a great deal about the power of a team.

In my work with clients I have often used the expression “power of a team.” Until now, however, I honestly do not feel I ever really saw the true meaning of the expression. The six of us on our team built on one another's questions, dove deeper, and became more creative. We got to the heart of problems and found the best solutions, not just quick fixes to symptoms of the real issues.

I believe that action learning has the capacity to create a highly efficient culture where individuals, teams, and organizations are aligned to solve complex problems, and grow as team members and leaders.

In sum, these two quotes exemplify the powerful process of action learning:

*You look at what's there and say, Why? I dream about what isn't there and ask, Why not?*  
- George Bernard Shaw

*A good question is never fully answered. It is not a bolt to be tightened into place, but a seed to be planted and to bear more seed toward the hope of greening the landscape of ideas.”*  
- John Ciardi

Have you had any experience with action learning? I would love to hear your thoughts.

### **About The Author**



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