HOW ACTION-LEARNING COACHES FOSTER
A CLIMATE CONDUCIVE TO LEARNING

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Abstract

Today's businesses rely on the effective functioning of self-directed work teams to learn how to solve complex problems and take action. A key factor in a team's ability to perform in this manner is a group climate characterized by psychological safety. Psychological safety must often compete with a climate of evaluative pressure frequently found in fast-paced, competitive business environments. Action-Learning teams are successful at group learning, defining then solving problems, and taking action. High-potential employees are often appointed to Action-Learning teams to provide management with an opportunity to evaluate their performance and to consider them for advancement in the organization. Action-Learning coaches play an essential role in promoting team learning by managing the group climate and modeling effective interpersonal behavior. These coaches are in a unique position to report how they manage to establish a climate of team psychological safety in a context characterized by evaluative pressure. The conceptual frameworks that informed this study were Argyris' (1993) theory of action and Knowles'(Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) theory of self-directed learning. The research method used in this study was content analysis of semistructured interviews with 16 experienced Action-Learning coaches. They answered questions about how they conceptualize their performance and their roles based on the concepts and constructs above. The results indicated that Action-Learning coaches are able to unfreeze people's behavior in groups, introduce effective change, and refreeze behavior at a higher level of functioning.

KEY WORDS: Action Learning, psychological climate, psychological safety, evaluative pressure, coaching, facilitating, small group behavior, action science.

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Dedication

For Stephanie Leigh Henderson

Stephanie bore the brunt of the impact of my decision to become a student at this stage of my life. She heard about "my new favorite book" and "money diets" far more times than she wanted to during her high school and college years. Nevertheless, she consistently supported my efforts to fulfill my dream. Thank you, darling.

And

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And

For Walter L. Gibson

My father has always been a wonderful example of how to be a civilized and decent, as well as accomplished, human being. He taught me to be attuned to ethical issues and to lead by example. Thank you for also teaching me to dream big.

And

For Viola A. Gibson (1920-1976)

My dazzling, larger-than-life mother demonstrated a *joie de vivre* and generosity of spirit that knew no bounds. She taught me to perceive life's abundance…and she always made me feel safe.

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CHAPTER ONE: ACTION-LEARNING TEAMS AND THEIR COACHES

Decades ago, Drucker (1988) forecast the impact that information technology would have on organizations: They would become leaner and flatter. In addition, he predicted that the demand for responsiveness to technological developments would require that different kinds of experts in a variety of disciplines, (e.g., research, development, manufacturing, and marketing) would begin to meet on a synchronous basis using a task force structure. His predictions have been remarkably accurate. Indeed, surveys indicate that 68% of Fortune 1000 companies use teams to overcome the challenges modern organizations confront (Tata & Prasad, 2004).

To be effective, teams have to learn how to self-manage and self-direct (Fisher, 2000; Glaser, 1992). Group members must be able to use skillful communication strategies to overcome the challenges posed by the diversity in professional disciplines, organizational cultures, and personal characteristics that distinguish these task forces. Group members must transcend the linear process of gathering relevant data, analyzing them, and taking action (instrumental learning), and make the leap to learning how to learn (double-loop learning) (Argyris, 2002) to rise to the demand for fast-paced innovation and creative problem solving. However, learning is often impaired because the group climate is not conducive to learning. Argyris (1990) claimed group members are naturally inclined toward controlling and competitive behaviors that affect climate, and, in turn, impair learning and teams' ability to creatively solve problems.

When businesses face intractable human problems, management sometimes seeks to address those problems by appointing a task force to generate ideas and propose solutions. A particular group process design (i.e., a structured format that guides group behavior) that has

enjoyed success in these situations is known as Action Learning (Dotlich & Noel, 1998). Action-Learning teams have been used successfully to solve complex problems. They are also used by senior management to observe high-potential employees in action to enable senior managers to evaluate employees' readiness for advancement.

Action-Learning teams are typically composed of four to eight individuals from diverse disciplines within an organization and are coached by an individual whose role is to set a group climate that promotes learning among members of the team so they can grow both personally and professionally (Marquardt, 1999). The purpose of this study was to seek expert testimony from Action-Learning coaches to discover how they perform this role and enhance group performance.

Research Question

How do Action-Learning coaches report that they foster a climate conducive to learning?

Conceptual Framework

Facilitating a diverse team whose job it is to solve a complex problem by learning in a small-group environment is itself a complex task (Fulk & McGrath, 2005). The conceptual framework for this study uses two theories, Argyris' (1993) theory of action and Knowles' (2005) self-directed learning theory, to examine the tasks Action-Learning coaches seek to accomplish. These theories were used as lenses to examine specific aspects of Action-Learning coaches' behaviors including how the coach influences group climate to promote the group's learning. This project specifically examined the coach's influence on the team's emotional dynamics because many aspects of the group climate and learning have emotional components. In particular, this study focused on the constructs of psychological safety and

evaluative pressure because they have been shown to be aspects of group climate that affect learning and hence group performance (Edmondson, 2002; Lee, Edmondson, Thomke, & Worline, 2004). See Figure 1.
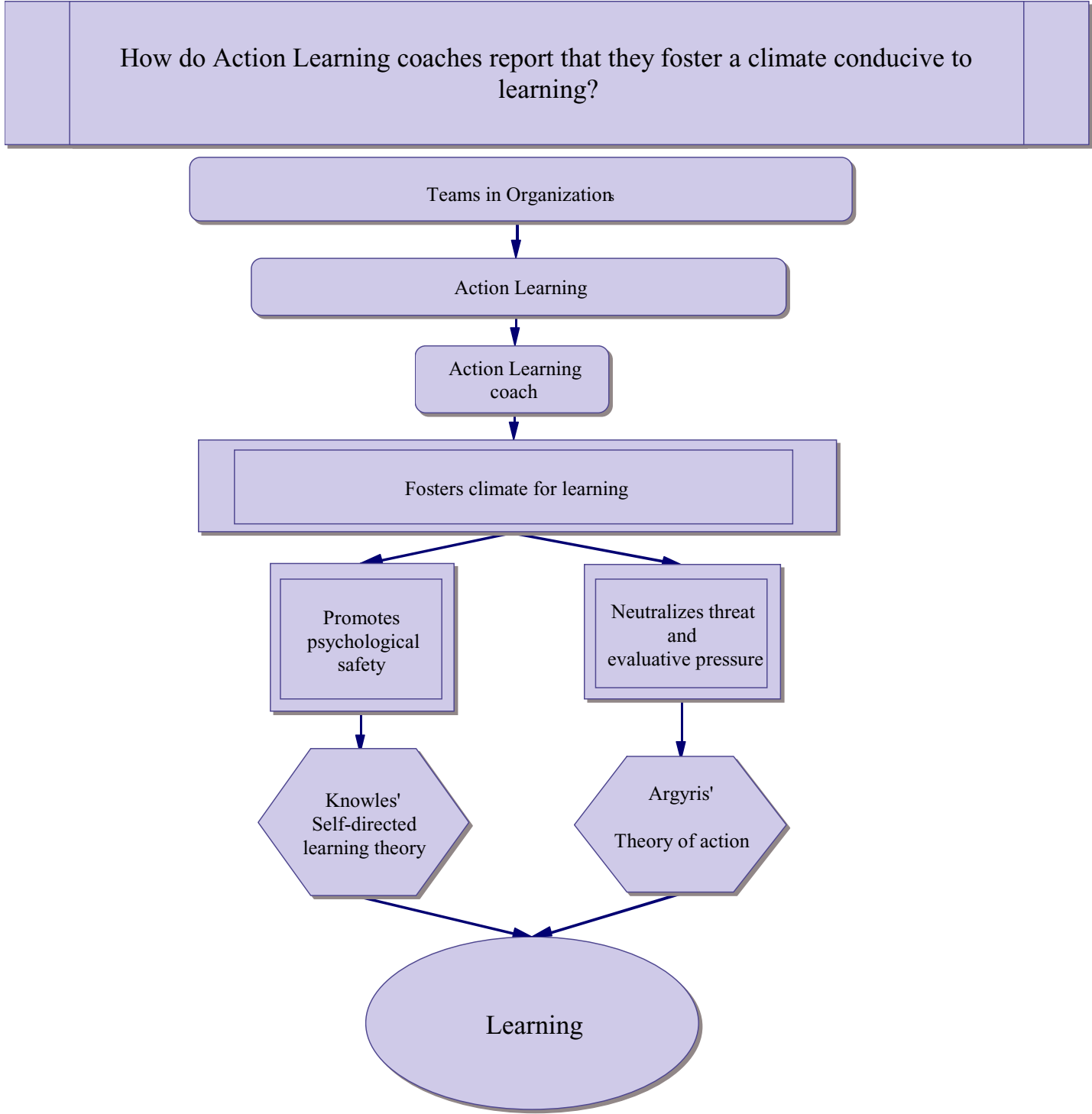
Figure 1. Conceptual framework..

Set Group Climate

The Action-Learning coach performs the important role of setting the group climate. Action-Learning teams must learn to accomplish their mission to find solutions to complex problems, so the coach seeks to create a climate that fosters high-level performance and learning. Brown and Leigh (1996) proposed that the following relationships among variables show how a group's psychological climate influences its performance. Their study confirmed this relationship: that psychological climate affected job involvement that, in turn, affected team performance.

Psychological climate⇨	Job involvement⇨	Performance

Figure 2. Relationship of psychological climate to performance (Brown & Leigh, 1996).

Brown and Leigh (1996) found that employees scan and appraise the psychological climate of their organizations to determine whether it is beneficial or detrimental to their well-being. A climate that is beneficial has two primary characteristics: It is safe and it is meaningful. This study focused on the aspect of safety in the climate of Action-Learning teams because safety affects the group's ability to learn and create effective solutions (Edmondson, 1999).

Theories of Action

Argyris (Argyris, 1990, 1995, 2002) wrote extensively about his observation that people consistently behave in particular, unproductive ways when they interact in groups. One of the beneficial contributions an Action-Learning coach can make is to discourage unproductive interpersonal behaviors (Argyris labels these *Model I behaviors*) and encourage productive interpersonal behaviors (Argyris labels these *Model II behaviors*).

Self-directed Learning

Knowles (2005), considered the father of andragogy (Cross, 1981), provided the second component of this study's conceptual framework. Knowles and his colleagues (2005) emphasized the critical role of the small group as an important context for adult learning. Further, they stipulated the ideal conditions for adults to learn. Their self-directed learning theory is therefore relevant to the small-group dynamics involved in learning within Action-Learning teams. The purpose of forming an Action-Learning team is to focus the organization's resources on a complex business problem. These teams need to be capable of learning in order to address problems with innovation and creativity. Knowles' (1975) theory of self-directed learning was useful in understanding how an Action-Learning coach sets the group climate and fosters an environment conducive to learning how to solve intractable problems. The literature review in Chapter 2 reviews Argyris' and Knowles' theories in greater detail.

Why this topic?

I selected this topic to study because of the business experiences I had in my 20-plus years working in accounting and financial services firms. Often, profitability in these firms was measured by comparing the *costs* generated by billable hours charged to a project with the revenue generated by the fixed price paid by the client for the project. In general, every attempt was made by management to encourage the stratified, interdependent teams of people to work together cooperatively and to have both productive as well as warm and supportive relationships (i.e., a climate largely characterized by psychological safety). This was appropriate in a professional environment and even, arguably, necessary due to the significant learning curve encountered by junior members of the team who were being

mentored and coached to learn how to address issues in each, ultimately, unique client situation. Nevertheless, the precision and efficiency of measuring profitability made success or failure very salient. The partner in charge of the bottom-line result of the project always exerted significant evaluative pressure if it appeared the project would not be sufficiently profitable to meet the goals set further up the management chain. The competitive forces of psychological safety on the one hand and evaluative pressure on the other seemed to play themselves out like the swing of a pendulum—sometimes one dynamic would prevail and sometimes the other would dominate. I personally experienced those swings as living examples of Argyris' (2002) distinction between espoused values and values-in-use.

Significance

This study is significant because it examined the dynamics at work in Action-Learning teams. They have a long history of successfully addressing complex business problems. The team dynamics are affected by a group's climate, how group members interact, and how they learn. It is important to know more about how coaches are able to establish and then manage a climate that enables a group to work together and learn how to generate solutions to complex problems.

This study builds upon and extends the work O'Neil (1999) began with her dissertation, *The Role of Learning Advisor in Action Learning*. She used two learning theories to examine Action-Learning coaches' role in Action-Learning teams: experiential learning and transformational learning. In O'Neil's discussion of research directions, she suggested future studies should consider the role of the Action-Learning coach using Knowles' (2005) self-directed learning theory. This study followed that suggestion.

This study also built upon and extended the research Edmondson (1999) conducted on the importance of team-level psychological safety to team learning and, in turn, to team performance. In her discussion on research directions that future studies should investigate, she suggested investigating factors that promote team psychological safety.

Action-Learning teams enable creativity and experimentation to thrive in the context of evaluation. This study contributes data about good management practices by illuminating how Action-Learning coaches report that they foster a climate conducive to learning in the presence of the competing forces of psychological safety and evaluative pressure.

Limitations

This is a self-report study. The data about psychological climate setting, team behavior, and self-directed learning were filtered through the perceptions of the Action-Learning coaches. However, because this study's purpose is to understand how Action-Learning coaches conceptualize what they do, their self-reports are the appropriate data to analyze. Directly observing Action-Learning coaches would not have provided the data this study sought. It is probable that the constructs used in this study, psychological safety and evaluative pressure, are culturally variable. This study is conducted in the context of the American business environment and may not be generalizable to other environments.

Summary

In summary, learning in self-directed teams is an important business skill. Action-Learning teams have successfully generated solutions to intractable human problems. The coaches of these teams foster a climate conducive to learning and help teams function effectively. This study investigated how the coaches conceptualized and reported they achieved those ends.

Chapter 2 begins with a brief summary of the various perspectives that encompass the current theories of small groups. Two of these theories, the functional theory and action science, are particularly relevant to this study and were reviewed in detail. Subsequently, Action-Learning teams are described, followed by a discussion of the research conducted with such teams. A review of the group facilitation literature follows along with a description of the role of the Action-Learning coach. Next, O'Neil's study on Action-Learning coaches is reviewed in detail. Finally, the literature on climate setting, psychological safety, and evaluative pressure is reviewed. Chapter 3 contains a description of the methods this study used to answer the research question. Chapter 4 presents the findings and Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings and conclusions.

CHAPTER TWO: THE LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter contains a review of the literatures relevant to the research question: How do Action-Learning coaches report that they foster a climate conducive to learning? This undertaking began by broadly defining the general approach researchers have taken to the study of decision-making groups. This line of research has a long history that illuminates how varied and complex decision-making groups are and why researchers from multiple disciplines have found it challenging to study. The review then recaps the current state of group decision-making thought by briefly identifying the 13 broad categories of this research. Research in two of these categories, the functional perspective and the action perspective, is particularly relevant to Action-Learning teams and research findings in those perspectives are described in greater detail. Once the broad topic of decision-making groups is contextualized historically and theoretically, the discussion turns to how this body of literature and theory relates to the nature and characteristics of Action Learning. An analysis of the group process decision-making theories from which it draws its structure and strengths follows that description.

Next, the role of a facilitator in a decision-making group is discussed. The more practitioner-oriented nature of the facilitator literature is assessed along with a review of the few studies that specifically address facilitating in decision-making groups. The review to this point basically provides a contextualization for the research question. The argument is summarized to that point. The discussion then focuses on the psychological climate setting literature, interpersonal interaction literature, and learning literature as it relates to the research question. Having surveyed the literature broadly and discussed relevant studies specifically, the final section of Chapter 2 defines the terms and constructs used in this study.

Teams: Small Group Behavior

Ever since social scientists concluded a century ago that groups produced better

decisions than did individuals (Dewey, 1910, 1933), small group behavior has been studied

with keen interest (Frey, 1996). The fields of psychology, sociology, social psychology,

political science, education, management, public policy, information science, and

communication have all studied groups (Poole, Hollingshead, McGrath, Moreland, &

Rohrbaugh, 2005). However, in spite of the literally thousands of studies published over the

years, the research is "fragmented and discipline bound" (Poole et al., 2005). A comment

made decades ago is still relevant,

> It is bad enough for the consumer of the literature to confront subject matter that is
> represented alternatively as "group process," "group interaction," "group dynamics,"
> "group forces," "group relations," "group discussion," "group behavior," "group
> skills," "group performance," and "group communication." But what is even worse is
> to find such an unwieldy assortment of terms treated as interchangeable and
> synonymous." (Mortensen, 1970)

Indeed, communication authorities Hirokawa and Poole (1996) commented:

> As important as group communication processes are, they have proven elusive and
> difficult to understand. In part, this is because they are truly complex. The interaction
> of multiple parties subject to manifold psychological, social, and contextual
> influences is one of the most difficult objects of study in the human sciences.
> (Hirokawa & Poole, 1996)

However, despite the challenges posed by the diversity of disciplines, the broad

terminology, and the subject's complexity, the critical need to understand the quality results

groups produce drove researchers to pursue answers to questions about group decision

making.

History of Research on Small Group Behavior

Frey (1996) summarized the history of group research by dividing it into eras with

distinctive characteristics. The section below contains a brief recap of his summary.

The first era, the *Early Years* (1920-1945), was distinguished by three major lines of studies (Frey, 1996). The first line was conducted by psychologists and sociologists who investigated what factors made group discussion successful and particularly how discussion promoted productive thinking. Social psychologists investigated a second line of research about how group discussion helped change group members' attitudes. A third line, and the most influential, was introduced by John Dewey, who explored reflective thinking.

The second era, the *Grand Old Days* (1945-1970), was characterized by exciting and creative ideas. It was during this time that Lewin (1948, 1951, 1997) introduced his Field Theory (Lewin, 1951) and his formula B = F*(P, E)*, that is, behavior is a function of persons within their environment. He postulated that individuals live in a subjective *life space* with others, so they are interdependent. Communication promotes group cohesion, which leads to enhanced task accomplishment. Lewin also explored the impact of leadership styles on group behavior, specifically democratic, authoritarian, and laissez-faire styles.

In contrast to Lewin's Field Theory research, a second line of inquiry in this era was Interaction Theory, pioneered by Bales (1950). Bales developed an observational scheme for coding behavior during group discussion. As a result, he produced the first empirical studies that linked communication to group decision making (Frey, 1996). Interaction Theory led to the speculation about group developmental processes and debate about whether such processes were linear or spiral or otherwise based on phases. By 1970, the communication discipline was asserting itself as a distinct discipline and laid claim to this line of research.

The next era was dubbed the *Decade of Discontent* (1970-1980; Frey). As in many areas of social science, group communication research was fragmented and atomistic (Heritage, 1984). The research was critiqued for being barren primarily, because it was

devoid of a theoretical basis upon which to begin to tie together the disparate facts and to support the development of a coherent method to study group behavior.

The *Infusion of Theory* era (1980-1990) followed (Frey, 1996). Communication researchers in particular responded to the call for theory-based research. Research in this decade was guided by three dominant theories: the functional approach, the structuration approach, and symbolic convergence theory. The functional approach was championed by Hirokawa (1985) and was based on Dewey's (1933) work. Hirokawa claimed group decision quality was directly linked to an accurate understanding of the decision content, realistic identification of alternatives, and assessment of the positive and negative qualities of the alternatives. The structuration approach promoted by Giddens (1984) linked the development of a group system through three activity tracks: a task-process track, a relational track, and a topical track. Bormann (1983) proposed symbolic convergence theory and described how, over time, group members began to share a common social reality and consciousness in order to make collective decisions.

The advent of the millennium and the decade that followed inspired scholars who worked on group research to reach across disciplines and collaborate to produce three comprehensive reviews of the team literature. Poole and Hollingshead (2005) edited *Theories of Small Groups,* Wheelan (2005b) edited *The Handbook of Group Research and Practice* and Hackman and Katz (2010) contributed a chapter to the *Handbook of Social Psychology* that also reviewed group literature. Table 1 illustrates the categories the editors and authors used to subdivide the studies. The table indicates where categories overlap and where they are distinct. All 15 different perspectives are described below, because each perspective offers insight into the experience of participation in a small group. Thirteen of the 15 are

briefly summarized, followed by a more detailed review of studies in two of the classifications that illuminate the focus of this study, the functional perspective and the action perspective. Whereas Frey's (1996) eras describe the chronological evolution of research and theory on decision-making groups, the perspectives described in the three works cited above provide a comprehensive overview of the field as it currently exists.

The Psychodynamic Perspective. The psychodynamic perspective focuses on the relationship between emotional and nonconscious aspects of group behavior and the rational and conscious aspects. A key assumption of this perspective is that a lack of awareness of emotional processes inhibits group effectiveness, and conversely, awareness of emotional processes removes inhibitions and promotes effectiveness. The psychodynamic approach has produced compelling and enduring research (Geller, 2005). Key theories in this perspective are Lewin's (1951) Field Theory and Maslow's (1968) humanistic psychology (Geller, 2005; McLeod & Kettner-Polley, 2005; Poole et al., 2005).

The Social Identity Perspective. Advocates of the social identity perspective postulate that the uniformity and coherence in group behavior can be explained by the shared identity the group creates for its members (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005; Hogg, 2005). Group experience generates a shared psychological reality that in turn creates collective processes that transcend individual qualities such as motives or relationships as in interpersonal interactions. Social identity is both the cause and consequence of intragroup behavior. The key theories used by this perspective are social identity theory and self-categorization theory.

Table 1

Comprehensive Small Group Literature Reviews

2005, Poole & Hollingshead *Theories of Small Groups*	2005, Wheelan *The Handbook of Group Research and Practice*	2010, Hackman & Katz *Group Behavior and Performance*
Perspectives of small groups	Perspectives of small groups	Approaches to the study of small groups
Functional	Functional	Decision analytic
Psychodynamic	Psychoanalytic	Psychodynamic
Social identity	Social identity	
Conflict-Power-Status		
Symbolic interpretative		
Feminist		
Network		Network
Temporal		
Evolutionary		
	Systems	
	Chaos-Complexity-Catastrophe	Complex Systems
	Communication	
	Developmental	
		Action
		Process focus

The Conflict-Power-Status Perspective. The conflict-power-status perspective focuses

on group issues concerning the causes and effects that result from group preferences, choices, and

differential resource allocations among group members that are the source of those differences.

Key theories used in this perspective are power-dependence theory, game theory, and dominance

theory (Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuleson, Sell, & Wilson, 2005).

The Symbolic-Interpretative Perspective. The symbolic-interpretative perspective

investigates symbol usage in groups with the objective of understanding symbolic practices and

their consequences. This perspective also regards group processes themselves as a product of

symbolic activity. The key theories proponents of this perspective use include symbolic

convergence theory and structuration theory, among others (Frey & Sunwolf, 2005b; Poole et al.,

2005).

The Feminist Perspective. Research in this domain has as its objective promotion of

equality for women and other marginalized groups through elimination of oppressive practices. A

key assumption is that gender is a factor in group dynamics. Theories in this perspective include

cultural feminism, standpoint feminism, and multicultural and global feminism (Meyers et al.,

2005).

The Network Perspective. The focus in this line of research is the concept of a

connection between individuals, between groups, and between individuals and groups. An

assumption in this perspective is that patterns of relationships have both individual and group-

level effects. Examples of theories in this tradition are social exchange theory, theories of self-

interest, and theories of mutual or collective interest (Katz, Lazer, Arrow, & Contractor, 2005).

The Temporal Perspective. This perspective encompasses research in which time or

change is the main focus of study. It assumes time is socially constructed, that groups change

systematically over time, and the patterns of group process are identifiable in terms of time. Theories in this arena are sequential, cyclic, and punctuated equilibrium theories of group development, activity phase models, and structuration theory (Arrow, Henry, Poole, Wheelan, & Moreland, 2005).

The Evolutionary Perspective. This collection of research studies uses Darwinian concepts as its unifying theme. Assumptions include the notion that adaptation is evident in groups, as they select and retain processes, and that they try to maximize their reproductive potential. Theories in this classification include Machiavellian intelligence, group selection, and niche construction (Caporael, Wilson, Hemelrijk, & Sheldon, 2005).

The Systems Perspective. This research uses the concept of systems thinking and applies it to groups. Both Lewin (1948, 1951, 1997) in his work on Field Theory and Bion (1959) in his work regarding fight or flight, dependency, and pairing tendencies used a systems perspective and laid the foundation for system theories. The key assumption is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Mink, Mink, & Owen, 1987). This perspective serves as an umbrella theory under which both groups and individuals can be seen as living human systems (Agazarian & Gantt, 2005).

The Nonlinear Dynamics Perspective. This perspective uses complexity theory as the lens through which to study groups. It enlists concepts such as emergence and evolution to study phenomena of interest and eschews notions about efficient or mechanical causes in the development of group behavior. Theories in this arena integrate complexity theory with organization development and psychoanalytical theories (Arrow, 2005).

The Communication Perspective. This perspective is represented by two approaches: the information-exchange approach concerned with understanding communication as a transfer of

information from a sender to a receiver and a second approach that is meaning based or socially constructive. The meaning-based approach consists of theories that focus on symbolic management such as symbolic convergence theory, which describes how communication creates group consciousness and symbolic interpretative theory, which describes how groups are products of symbolic activities (Frey & Sunwolf, 2005a; Pearce, 1989).

The Developmental Perspective. This approach examines how groups develop over time from simple to complex and from having more dependent to more independent cultures. Many models of group development suggest groups develop in stages or phases that are orderly and predictable. Others suggest that group development is cyclical. A key theory in this arena is the life cycle theory of groups (Wheelan, 2005a).

The Process-Focused Perspective. Proponents of this perspective argue that group interactions form the basis of group life. Bales et al. (1979) developed a methodology, Interaction Process Analysis (IPA) to precisely chart the kinds of interaction that transpired in groups. They argued that every group must resolve certain issues in the task domain (e.g., how to make decisions, the basis for accepting or rejecting ideas) and in the socioemotional domain (e.g., tension reduction techniques). The work of Bales and his colleagues has evolved into structuration theory—the ways stable group structures evolve from group interaction patterns (Hackman & Katz, 2010).

The perspectives described above use well-articulated theories that have been supported by numerous studies. These studies contribute in significant ways to what is known about how groups function and perform.

Team Literature in Detail: The Functional Perspective

Two of the 15 perspectives itemized in Table 1, above, on small decision-making groups are particularly relevant to Action-Learning teams and this research project. The functional perspective and related theories is reviewed below followed by a review of the action perspective.

The functional perspective is defined as a normative approach to task-performing groups (Poole et al., 2005). Proponents of this perspective (Cummings & Ancona, 2005; Gouran & Hirokawa, 1983; Hirokawa & Gouran, 1989; Hollingshead et al., 2005; Wittenbaum et al., 2004) claimed they can describe and predict group performance by examining group inputs, outputs, and processes. Inputs include the group's task, group cohesiveness, group composition, and group environment. Outputs include group effectiveness as measured by productivity, efficiency, and quality, as well as leadership effectiveness. A key conclusion of research in the functional perspective is that the quality of group decisions is linked to the quality of interaction and communication in which group members engage before they make decisions (Cummings & Ancona, 2005; Hollingshead et al., 2005). The functional perspective has produced the largest quantity of small group research (Poole et al., 2005). It is based on the pioneering work of William James, John Dewey, Robert Merton, and Talcott Parsons.

The functional perspective and specifically the functional theory under its umbrella, is based on four assumptions: (a) Decision-making groups are goal oriented; (b) group behavior and performance varies in quality and quantity and can be evaluated; (c) internal factors (e.g., group member composition, group size) and external factors (e.g., threats, time pressure) influence group behavior and performance; and (d) interaction processes (e.g., information processing) have utility and can be regulated (Orlitzky & Hirokawa, 2001).

Research on the functional theory confirmed the critical importance of the five-step process proposed by Dewey (1933): (a) define and thoroughly understand the problem; (b) establish criteria potential solutions must meet; (c) identify alternative solutions; (d) apply the criteria to the solutions; and, (e) select the best option. In a meta-analysis of research studies that examined functional theory, the five steps cited above were confirmed as being essential to good-quality decision making (Orlitzky & Hirokawa, 2001). The most critical processes that affected the effectiveness of the group decision making was the assessment of the negative consequences of the alternate solutions the group considered. This function requires group members to be critical evaluators. The next most important function that contributed to effective group decision making was problem analysis. When groups spend time carefully defining the problem, the group's effectiveness was enhanced. The third most important function was establishing evaluation criteria. Assessing positive consequences was next. The brainstorming function was found to be the least important of the five functions critical to effective decision making.

The meta-analysis of research on functional theory classified the tasks on which groups worked on three dimensions: task structure, information requirements, and evaluation demands (Orlitzky & Hirokawa, 2001). Task structure consisted of four variables regarding the group's goals: *goal clarity*, the degree to which the group understands the end state for success; *goal-path clarity*, the means necessary to reach the end state; *goal-path mechanics*, the number of steps necessary to achieve the end state; and, *goal-path obstacles*, the number of barriers standing in the way of achieving the end state for success.

A task is deemed to be *complex* if it has goals that are unclear (low goal clarity), low goal-path clarity, numerous goal-path mechanics, and numerous goal-path obstacles. When task

structure is complex very deliberate problem analysis and attention to process variables are even more important.

Information requirements are determined by *information distribution*, the degree to which group members possess the information needed to accomplish the task and by *information-processing demand*, the quantity and complexity of the information that must be applied in order to accomplish the task (Orlitzky & Hirokawa, 2001). When information is unevenly distributed among group members and information-processing demand is high, each of the five functional steps becomes more important than when those conditions do not occur.

Evaluation demands are comprised of *solution multiplicity*, the number of choices deemed correct, *criteria clarity*, the degree to which clear standards are available, and *objective verifiability*, the extent to which a solution can be determined to be correct. A task is considered *equivocal* when it is high in solution multiplicity, low in criteria clarity, and low in objective verifiability. When tasks are equivocal, group process functions are even more important that when these conditions are not present. The kinds of problems Action-Learning teams are asked to address are complex, have large information processing demands and are equivocal. It is, therefore, highly useful for them to be very attentive to each of the five problem-solving steps emphasized in the functional theory of small group behavior.

The Role of Conflict in Small Group Decision Making. An important subset of research in the functional perspective concerns the role of conflict in problem-solving groups. The value of having a group work on solutions to problems is the advantage gained by having the knowledge and experience of multiple people. That advantage also often introduces a challenge— the presence of conflict. A number of studies, cited below, have been conducted in an attempt to elucidate the nature and role of conflict in the small group decision-making process. Jehn (1997)

identified two primary types of conflict found in groups: task conflict and relationship conflict.

Task conflict refers to cognitive-based conflict regarding the group's work or task. Task conflict

occurs when group members have different viewpoints, ideas, and opinions, and it is distinct from

relationship conflict, which refers to emotional conflict that concerns interpersonal relations and

typically involves tension and animosity. Task conflict is positively related to group effectiveness

(Jehn, 1997). Simons and Peterson (2000) conducted a study of conflict in 70 companies' top

management teams and found that task conflict helped group members better understand the

issues they discussed and that the group members experienced greater acceptance of group

decisions, and greater satisfaction with the experience of being in the group

Relationship conflict, in contrast, reduced group satisfaction and the quality of the group's

decision making, because it increased the members' focus on each other instead of on the group's

task. Relationship conflict tends to increase the stress and anxiety level in the group and leads

group members to make antagonistic attributions to fellow members (Simons & Peterson, 2000).

However, when the group is able to establish high levels of trust among group members, the leap

to negative attributions is less likely to occur. The Simons and Peterson (2000) study found that

group-level trust is a valid construct and that its presence decreased the likelihood that task

conflict would be converted to relationship conflict through misattribution of motives.

Simons and Peterson (2000) wanted to reconcile the finding that task conflict contributed

to effective decision making and relationship conflict detracted from effective decision making

but that the two kinds of conflict were often correlated. Their study confirmed the hypothesis that

top management teams that had established a high level of trust, which is associated with

"benevolence, honesty and competence" (Simons & Peterson, 2000), reduced the likelihood of

task conflict being misattributed to group members as relationship conflict, with all the negative

consequences that accompanies it. When the teams lacked trust, group members attributed sinister intentions to one another that conveyed distrust and generated a cycle of mistrust that elevated relationship conflict. They concluded that establishing team-level trust helped the groups benefit from the positive aspects of task conflict, without the detrimental impact of relationship conflict.

In a longitudinal study on the effect of conflict on group performance, Jehn and Mannix (2001) identified patterns of group conflict that enhanced the groups' performance. Consistent with other studies, task conflict had a positive effect on group performance and typically peaked at the midpoint of the group's lifecycle. When group members were familiar with the task and suddenly cognizant of the impending deadline for task completion, constructive debate concerning the task, particularly at the midpoint, minimized relationship conflict. Relationship conflict was kept low when groups had high value consensus and a positive group atmosphere characterized by high levels of trust, respect, open conflict norms, cohesiveness and liking, and low levels of competition. Their conclusion was that it is important to provide training in conflict management at the beginning of a group's life so it is managed positively. The study's authors also noted how group leaders are critical in setting open communication norms, developing a cohesive group, and establishing a friendly environment because those qualities enhance members' attitudes and contribute to the group's overall performance.

DeDreu and West (2001) conducted two studies of real-world, ongoing organizations, with a focus on the role of minority dissent on a team's ability to produce innovative decisions. They found that the way groups can avoid the tendency toward group conformity, leading to premature consensus and limiting thorough discussion of all ideas, was to encourage the expression of minority dissent. This was particularly valuable when the team represented a wide diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds. The variables that linked the willingness of minority-

opinion group members to speak up was the value the organization placed on individuals' awareness of other group members' capability and knowledge which, in turn, was linked to the organization's absorptive capacity (i.e., "the ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends"; DeDreu & West, 2001). Absorptive capacity is directly related to the degree of group member participation in exchanging information in the group. Participation fostered learning, social support, and cooperative communication (DeDreu & West, 2001).

Nemeth, Brown, and Rogers (2001) noted the tendency of group members toward majority consensus; they also noted the tendency of group members to share what everyone knows and to withhold the information they have that is unique. They attributed two causes to this tendency. One is pure probability—the common knowledge was more abundant. A second possible cause is a reluctance to suffer the consequence of being disliked when taking a position that differs from the majority—with the socioemotional baggage that implies. A solution to this dilemma was to ask group members to play deliberate roles as "devil's advocates" because that would introduce the dissent and achieve the broader diversity of thought and resultant innovation without engendering possible hostility. The results of the study indicated the groups with dissenters who genuinely believed the position they were advocating had the desired effects on group innovation and generativity. When the devil's advocate role-players were simply acting out their assigned role, group members did not generate as many creative solutions as when the dissenter was speaking and acting from an authentically held position. The study then compared devil's advocates who held a position they did not believe, with authentic dissenters who held the same position, and with controls. Only the authentic dissenters achieved positive results

consistent with task conflict. The authors attribute this finding to the possibility that while the positions were identical, the psychological experience in the group was not.

In summary, this section of the literature review included a discussion of the functional theory of small group decision making, including the five key functions a group must perform in order to make effective decisions. Much of the benefit of making decisions in groups derives from the fact that diverse knowledge and experiences are brought into the group by the various group members. However, that diversity generates different points of view and differences of opinion. Numerous studies have examined group conflict and under what conditions it is helpful to group productivity and under what conditions it is harmful. In general, task-focused conflict, particularly at the group's lifecycle midpoint, enhances group creativity and generativity in contrast to relationship-focused conflict, which reduces group effectiveness in producing high-quality solutions to the problems groups address. High levels of group trust as well as high levels of group participation enhance group effectiveness. Authentic minority dissent appears to play a role in contributing to broad-based innovation. However, the positive effect of task conflict cannot be generated by members who merely role play a dissenting voice.

Team Literature in Detail: The Action Perspective

The section that follows contains a discussion of the second perspective discussed in depth, the action perspective, because of its relevance to this study and the research question about how Action-Learning coaches foster a climate conducive to learning. This part of the discussion will be challenging for the reader, as it was for the author, because, in addition to the topic Action Learning, which is a group process design, this section introduces the action perspective, one of the 15 categories used to classify the research on issues in decision-making groups. The action perspective encompasses action research, a collaborative approach to social

research and action science, a variation of action research. These terms are more fully defined below, but this serves as a warning that this part of the discussion uses very similar terms derived from the literatures reviewed, but each of them has a distinct meaning and they are not interchangeable.

The action perspective is grounded in Lewin's (1948, 1951, 1997) work. He proposed the idea of action research (Hackman & Katz, 2010) based on his work with leadership styles and group dynamics. Action research projects were successfully applied in business, educational and broader-society settings (Pasmore, 2001).

Lewin (1948, 1951, 1997) was interested in real-world problems, particularly regarding attitude and behavior change. He sought an alternative to traditional research methods because they were not able to address the complexity that existed in real human interactions in group settings. His values were better expressed through action research because it is fundamentally a democratically-based process. The process action research employs implies confidence in the rank-and-file person's ability (a) to understand the complex forces surrounding the problems encountered in educational or business settings and (b) to act on that understanding in an intelligent and constructive manner. Lewin (1948, 1951, 1997) was concerned about the lack of respect and the discounting of knowledge people possess. Instead, he suggested that treating people as co-collaborators in the research process is a more appropriate expression of the values they and he held dear: democratic principles, confidence in people's abilities to gather data and make rational decisions to solve the problems they confront (Pasmore, 2001).

Basic Steps in Action Research

Diagnose problem: Carefully define the problem and carefully define criteria any solution must meet to be acceptable.

1. Plan: Generate possible solutions and analyze them in relation to the criteria.

2. Implement: Take action.

3. Collect and analyze data on outcomes of action.

4. Reach conclusions.

5. Define new set of action steps (Chisholm, 2001).

Clearly, these steps share a similarity with the problem-solving steps in the functional perspective.

Argyris (1974) and Putnam (1999) called Argyris' version of action research *action science*. They found that people have espoused theories (what they say) and theories-in-use (what they actually act on). For the unreflective, these are almost always different. Action science helps people understand the differences and helps them align their theories-in-use with both their behavior and their espoused theories. Action science is discussed in greater detail below. It is the basis for the conceptual framework used in this research project.

Initially, Argyris (1993) was a proponent of Lewin's (1951) work that evolved into T-groups at the National Training Laboratory (NTL). He was very disappointed in the failure of the potential of T-groups to impart lasting change (Argyris, 1964). He concluded that the reasons individuals did not make lasting changes based on their T-group experiences were because "behavior in groups is governed by the overriding goals of controlling the task, maximizing winning and minimizing losing, and avoiding embarrassment and threat" (Hackman & Katz, 2010). From this conclusion he developed the following models.

Argyris asserted that most people's theory-in-use is based on Model I assumptions. Model I assumptions are as follows:

1. "Achieve your intended purpose;

2. Maximize winning and minimize losing;

3. Suppress negative feelings;

4. Behave according to what you consider rational" (Argyris, 1995 p.20).

Argyris claimed that the action strategies that result from Model I principles are the following:

1. "*Advocate* your position;

2. *Evaluate* the thoughts and actions of others (and your own thoughts and actions);

3. *Attribute* causes for whatever you are trying to understand"(Argyris, 1995 p.20; Emphasis added.)

When team members advocate, they focus on their thoughts and position and not on having an inquiring attitude toward others' thoughts and positions. When they evaluate others they introduce an attitude of critical evaluative pressure that has known negative consequences. Finally, when they attribute causes, they often make leaps up the *ladder of inference* (Argyris, 1982). This idea refers to the human tendency to observe specific actions or hear specific comments and draw much larger conclusions from them than the actions or comments support. People often attribute intentions and motivations based on scant evidence and, as a result, draw incorrect conclusions (Argyris, 1995). He claimed his research demonstrated that the Model I assumptions exist tacitly and are completely taken for granted, so people are blind to their existence. The blindness leads to a process of *by-pass and coverup* making the assumptions and their resulting strategies undiscussable.

In contrast to Model I values that Argyris (2002) said lead to self-defeating and ineffective behaviors; he advocated a different approach that uses a different set of values and, as a result, produces different outcomes. He said that if people can become self-aware and change their theory-in-use to Model II values, more effective behaviors ensue. Model II values are as follows:

1. Share all valid information.

2. Promote free and informed choice.

3. Commit to action.

Model II behaviors consist of action strategies that intentionally reveal how the team members arrived at their assessments and attributions and invite others to question and test those assessments. Model II behaviors enable group members to achieve *double-loop learning,* defined as the ability to examine the system within which a problem resides and to be able to challenge status-quo goals and the values they are based on.

The goal of action science is to develop a group's capacity for double-loop learning: "the capability not just to regulate behavior to achieve one's goals but to explore the validity of the goals themselves" (Hackman & Katz, 2010 p. 1236). The greatest strength of action science is the collaboration between those who conduct research and those who participate in it. Collaboration results in research that has practical as well as scholarly value.

Critique of Action Science. Action science's goal is to develop a group member's capacity for double-loop learning in real time (Hackman & Katz, 2010). Torbert (1999) is critical of this goal and action science for several reasons. He says Argyris is "ambivalent about the relevance of first-person, emotional research" (Torbert, 1999). He argues that Argyris objects to using developmental theory to explain how people change as a result of participation in action science activities. Action science also does not attend to the dimension of timeliness. It uses inductive and deductive logic to explain the relationship among variables and has a tendency toward positivism in its effort to achieve universalizable generalizations. Torbert (1999) suggested analogical logic is superior for this purpose and that action research should shun its positivistic tendencies.

Action science is concerned with aligning people's behavior with their espoused theory. It is founded on the premise that once individuals become aware of inconsistencies by carefully examining the principles that guide their behavior, their behavior will change and the individual will achieve congruence.

Argyris (1990) made clear that people feel threatened when group members advocate, evaluate, and make misattributions, so he clearly recognized the emotion-based reaction. However, his prescription for addressing the threat was to help them logically align their belief systems with their espoused values. This implies individuals are able to think their way out of feeling threatened. This author claims that this is unlikely. A further critique of Argyris' theory is developed at the end of this chapter.

In summary, 13 of the 15 perspectives that categorize research conducted on small decision-making groups were briefly described above. The summaries were followed by a more lengthy and detailed discussion of the functional perspective. As part of that discussion, the important role of conflict in groups was reviewed. Following the functional theory of group behavior and decision-making, action research and its subset, action science was reviewed in detail. Argyris' (2002) theories of action, Model I and Model II, are part of the conceptual framework for this research project and they were discussed in detail. This concludes the discussion of the literature on decision-making groups. The following section defines group process design.

Group Process Design

A *group process design* is a tool organizational development consultants and group facilitators use to help groups accomplish their objectives. Different designs are used for different

purposes. Schwartz (2002) identified process improvement and strategic planning as examples of the purposes for which group process designs are used.

Group process designs typically are composed of three features: procedures and rules (e.g., when in the brainstorming stage of problem solving, no critical comments can be made); role specialization of the group members (e.g., facilitator, problem owner, subject matter expert); and, technologies (e.g., easel and flip chart or projector; Chilberg,. 1989).

Action Learning as Group Process Design

Action Learning is a group process design that was developed for the purpose of solving intractable human problems in organizations. It was developed by Reginald Revans in the 1940s to address labor relations problems in United Kingdom coal mines (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt, 1999; Revans, 1998).

Three primary groups, Robert L. Dilworth (Willis & Dilworth, 2003) and Verna J. Willis (1999) at the Virginia Commonwealth University and Georgia State University, respectively, Victoria J. Marsick (Marsick, 1990, 2009; O'Neil & Marsick, 1994; J. A. O'Neil & V. J. Marsick, 2007; Watkins & Marsick, 1993) at Columbia University, and Michael J. Marquardt (1999, 2004, 2005; Marquardt, Leonard, Freedman, & Hill, 2009) at George Washington University write and conduct research about Action Learning. Marquardt and his associates have also formed a nonprofit corporation, World Institute of Action Learning (WIAL), whose purpose is to promote Action Learning and to provide training to coaches. In addition, practitioners who use Action Learning in their consulting practices write and describe how it is used and the successes they have achieved (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Earle, 2005; Garvin, 2000).

Elements of Action Learning

Although Action Learning has been used in a variety of circumstances with a variety of modifications, several fundamental elements are consistently present. In the section below, the six elements of an Action-Learning group that typically do not vary are described. The elements are distilled from the writings of all the academic groups cited above as well as from the practitioners.

The Problem. The problem, often identified by senior management as urgent and challenging as well as one that has resisted standard management solutions, is generally selected prior to the formation of an Action-Learning group. An appropriate problem is significant to the organization and provides an opportunity for participants to stretch themselves intellectually (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt, 1999; Revans, 1998). A suitable problem involves high-visibility issues that matter and whose resolution will yield a substantial benefit to the organization (Lewis, 2002). Action Learning was designed to deal with problems the group literature discussed above labeled equivocal: high in solution multiplicity, low in criteria clarity and low in objective verifiability, that is, problems that are not technical puzzles, but that are complex and messy.

Action-Learning groups typically use the problem-solving phases identified in the functional theory of problem solving groups (Hollingshead et al., 2005). In the first phase, they spend a considerable amount of time carefully understanding and defining the exact nature of the problem. This often involves defining then redefining the problem as more data become available or action is taken and feedback received. The second phase involves identifying criteria for possible solutions, developing alternatives, and then evaluating them. Finally, the group

constructs a solution and takes action to move toward implementation. The group then analyzes the consequences of progress to date, and may, as a result, start the iterative process again.

The Group. The group—often called the set or team—is most frequently composed of four to eight members with diverse backgrounds so the number of perspectives among members is maximized (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt, 1999). The team members are often selected for what they *don't* know. For example, if the problem arises from the engineering department, then people from every department (human resources, accounting, etc.) *except* engineering are considered appropriate to serve.

Action Learning groups are used for employee development and succession planning in addition to solving a pressing organizational problem. Typically high-potential employees are selected to work on the high-visibility, high-stakes issue. Generally, the employees selected are keenly aware that their participation and performance can be a career enhancer or a career killer. As a result, the group members experience—sometimes intense—evaluative pressure (Lewis, 2002).

The culmination of an Action-Learning group's work is generally a formal presentation to the organization's senior leadership, in which the group recommends action to address the problem on which they worked (Lewis, 2002). The executives commit to timely feedback and, after deliberation, either accept or reject the group's recommendations. Sometimes, if appropriate, the group implements the recommended action. The group self-manages and self-directs. Group members learn through active engagement in inquiry, as distinct from learning by passively receiving transmitted knowledge. They actively and critically analyze data, make decisions, and offer recommendations (Marquardt, 1999).

Reflection. The group's use of questioning and reflection processes is a third component. Action Learning is premised on the idea that it is valuable to ask questions to gather data because questions aid in expanding and appreciating the complexity and nuances of the problem (Marquardt, 2005; O'Neil & Marsick, 1994). A critical group member skill in an Action-Learning group is asking effective questions. Questions that begin with *how*, *what*, *where,* and *when* are superior to *why* questions. Questions that evoke specificity are valuable. Questions that challenge, such as, "What's stopping you?" and reflective questions such as "Have you thought of…?" are considered valuable (Marquardt, 1999, 2005). The theory is that Action Learning's strong emphasis on asking questions related to content opens people's minds to receive new data. Likewise, taking time to ask questions and reflect on group process is also valuable. The claim is that when people are challenged to articulate what they have learned with respect to either content or process, awareness is raised and that awareness results in the group's learning being enhanced and reinforced (Marquardt, 2005).

A critical element in *experiential learning* is the process of reflection (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2005; D. A. Kolb, 1984). When people examine their beliefs and values and explore the assumptions upon which they are based, they engage in processes that often result in change and transformation (Lewis, 2002). Because these can also be potentially threatening undertakings, it is important for team members to have a sense of team-level psychological safety so they are willing to open up and honestly confront interpersonal issues and perhaps change their behaviors (Edmondson, 1999).

The questions posed often lead the group to appreciate the complexity of the issue they are dealing with as well as lead to surprising and unanticipated data. Frequently, as a result of the

questioning and reflection processes, the initial problem turns out to be merely a symptom. As the group identifies root causes, it will often reframe its inquiry (Lewis, 2002).

Action. Revans' (1998) premise is, "There can be no learning without action and no action without learning" (p. xix). When the group is formed, a commitment to acting on the problem is made. Action can be intermediary like doing research by asking an expert to present to the group on an aspect of the problem, or by interviewing people affected by the problem. This engagement in research generally increases the employees' motivation and morale, as well as their effectiveness. The actions taken result in a customized approach to problem resolution based on the unique culture and needs of the organization (Lewis, 2002). Action is taken throughout the cyclical process of research and deliberation; the group gathers then considers the resulting data as it continues to problem solve (Marquardt, 2005; O'Neil & Marsick, 1994).

Schon (1983) made the distinction between *reflection-on-action*—a retrospective meditation on one's experience and *refection-in-action* which has the quality of being in the moment and thinking on one's feet. This is the nature of the Action Learning experience of action. Participants are encouraged to generate new ways of thinking about the organization's values, norms and objectives that involves critical thinking and testing taken-for-granted assumptions. In essence, this allows participants to make the leap from single-loop learning, which involves trying various alternatives to what has been tried before, to double-loop learning, which involves group members questioning business strategies on a systems level. Group members examine and perhaps challenge the organization's underlying goals in ways that result in a reframing of those goals. This often changes the way in which the situation is framed and acted on (Argyris, 2002). It is this action orientation that links Action Learning with action science (Lewis, 2002).

Learning. Learning and development by team members and the organization is considered to be as important as the action taken to solve the organization's problem (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; J. O'Neil & Marsick, 2007). At least one person in the group (generally the coach) has as his or her primary assignment to be alert to and point out opportunities for the group to learn.

The participants may engage in miniworkshops, present seminars, or participate in ongoing dialogue among group members, internal experts and external consultants (Lewis, 2002). Some learning opportunities are ad hoc whereas others are deliberately designed using tools and materials developed in response to the needs the group-member learners identify. The goal enables group members to learn how to build constructive working relationships and to learn how to work across traditional organizational boundaries (Lewis, 2002).

Role of Coach. The coach may be a working group member with relevant content knowledge or an outsider who has process consultation skills. The coach helps the group reflect on its learning and on how well it is solving problems. The coach also helps the group improve its listening skills and its ability to deliver effective feedback to group members by intervening and posing questions (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; J. O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; J. A. O'Neil, 1999).

Ground rules. Although some elements of Action Learning may vary based on the particular approach used by different philosophies and different styles, the six elements described above are considered common features or characteristics that are pivotal to successful outcomes (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt, 1999; J. O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Revans, 1998). In addition, there tend to be two fundamental ground rules that coaches employ that contribute to fostering a positive Action Learning environment (Marquardt, 2004):

1. Statements can be made only in response to questions. An essential aspect of Action Learning is its focus on questions. This ground rule emphasizes the power of inquiry by restricting nonquestioning expository. This rule means comments that group members initiate must be in the form of questions. This rule also directly thwarts the behavior Argyris claimed is typical of group members: advocating a position (Argyris, 2008). Shifting from *selling* one's position to asking for data from others creates a very different dynamic in the group. A group member with an answer to a question can make a statement in reply but then must ask a question to keep the dialogue going.

2. The coach has the power to intervene at any time. Group members may complete expression of the thought or question occurring when the coach elects to intervene, but then must defer to the coach. Because it is the coach's job to seek out opportunities for the group to learn, this rule emphasizes the importance attached to the learning process in addition to the importance of problem solving and action taking.

Negative Aspects of Action Learning. Of course, Action Learning is not without its challenges. One problematic issue is that people selected for Action Learning groups are by definition highly skilled and valuable employees who are contributing to the organization in important ways. An Action-Learning assignment is often added to existing duties without completely relieving group members of on-going responsibilities and so balancing an employee's regular roles with the additional responsibilities of the Action-Learning team is sometimes daunting. Another challenge is that the solution the team proposes may not actually be implemented for any number of reasons including a politically sensitive issue for one of the senior managers or simply the business reality that no funds are available for that purpose. Many times teams become demoralized if their recommendations are rejected (Lewis, 2002). A third

challenge is that the goal of Action Learning is to balance the importance of the task with the importance of learning and teamwork development, but in the pressure of an approaching deadline in the final weeks of work prior to the presentation to senior management, often the importance of the task prevails. Finally, the quality of the Action-Learning experience often depends on the skillfulness of the team's coach. If the coach is able to create the right climate and support the team's learning, the full potential of the Action Learning experience can be realized. However, if the coach is not skillful, the experience may not be as powerful as otherwise would be the case (Lewis, 2002).

Recap of Action Learning

Action Learning is a group process design that is used to solve complex organizational problems. Group members are challenged to grow in knowledge and skill as they work in a team environment. Action Learning relies on the five-step problem solving process that is a feature of the functional theory of group decision making. The coach works with the group to be sure each step is carefully and deliberately executed as the group fundamentally carries out an action research project—building on iterative rounds of data gathering, analysis, and action taking.

Action Learning also uses the concepts in action science. Team members are encouraged to practice Model II behaviors: to share their information, to avoid advocating and rather freely debate—engage in task conflict—so group members can arrive at their own informed choice, and to commit to take action on what they learn. All of this problem solving occurs in the context of team members who must rely on each other and establish a climate conducive to learning while under evaluative pressure. The discussion below summarizes research conducted on Action-Learning teams.

Action-Learning Literature Review

Marquardt (1999) indicated that organizations use Action Learning for a variety of purposes: to solve problems, to develop the organization's learning capacity, to build teams, to promote personal development and to develop leadership skills. The section below contains a brief description of studies conducted on different aspects of Action Learning categorized by those purposes.

In the category of studies that looked at Action Learning's capacity to solve problems, Torrence (1997) conducted a case study of a community college that experienced a public health crisis: an outbreak of measles. The college used an Action-Learning team to make decisions and manage the crisis. The researcher generated a decision-making model and analyzed the team's response processes using Janis' (1989) vigilant problem-solving model.

In the category of developing an organization as a learning organization, three studies explored how Action Learning was used to promote organization-wide learning. Adams (2004) conducted a case study implementing an e-learning platform to foster leadership and management education and found that integrating e-learning with work and learning in practical contexts catalyzed a move toward becoming a learning organization. Hicks (2000) sought expert testimony to determine how to design and apply Action-Learning principles. The study identified these essential Action Learning design elements: a real workplace problem, a learning coach, a sponsor, senior management involvement, appropriate program content, diverse groups of participants, program time, presentation of results, and clear goals. Crutcher (2002) conducted an action research intervention in a public agency to help it engage in organizational learning. The Action-Learning team chose two interventions, single-loop learning and dialogue that resulted in a significant positive impact on the organizational climate. Work crew productivity in the public

agency increased and conflict was reduced. As a result of the success, Action Learning groups were instituted at other locations.

Two studies were conducted with a focus on the use of Action Learning for the purpose of building teams. Beskow (2000) examined product development processes and found that an Action-Learning approach helped improve teams' shared frame of reference among disciplines, develop systematic work procedures, collaborate and more efficiently transfer knowledge and learn. Brand (1999) studied curriculum components effective in instilling values in United States' Army basic trainees and found Action Learning that used student participation and modeling was effective in inculcating values.

Five studies examined the category personal development as the manner in which Action-Learning was used. Butterfield (1999) used a case study to document what Action Learning participants believed was their most valued learning and how they applied it to their organizations. Her participants mentioned their ability to ask provocative questions, the increase in accountability and improvement of management style. They applied these skills by better delegating work and coaching others for performance improvement and professional development. Gibson (2000) asked whether action learners progress through specific learning phases during their Action-Learning experiences and found while there were sequences of events, no distinct phases were discernable. She did note a few differences between learning in a corporate setting and learning in an academic setting. Knowlton (1992) conducted a case study of hospital managers who were part of an Action-Learning group to determine how they evaluated their experience as a participant. He found the participants wanted more guidelines to help clarify roles and authority in their group interactions and would have preferred a better introductory overview. His participants reported how important group dynamics were on the sense of success

from the experience and that effective group leadership was critical. Van Schuyver (2004) also interviewed Action-Learning participants to understand their experiences. His participants were students in university master's degree programs that used Action Learning in the classroom. He found that participants reported they did, indeed, learn and that the majority of the learning was derived from insights as a result of questioning. They also reported metalearning, that is, learning how to learn as a result of their experiences. Wilson (1992) examined the relationships among Action Learning, motivation and achievement in ninth grade English classes and found both motivation and achievement increased compared to a control group that used a traditional teaching approach.

By far the greatest number of studies was conducted in situations in which Action-Learning groups were used for the purpose of leadership development. Balog (1993) conducted a case study of noncompeting chief executive officers. He found that Action Learning's use of confidential problem-solving groups aided executive education. Choi (2005) used a case-study approach and found that Action Learning improved managers' coaching skills including listening, questioning, providing feedback, and creating a supportive climate. Holmes (2004) found Action Learning helped managers apply a diversity-management skills framework. A key element in applying the framework was open, honest communication. The openness created the comfort necessary for the participants to experiment with new behaviors. Kim (2003) investigated whether an Action-Learning experience helped managers develop transformational behaviors or characteristics. The study found that an Action-Learning experience *decreased* transformational leadership behaviors. Kim's analysis of this surprising finding was that Action Learning develops collaborative or shared leadership skills and that the transformational leadership model is a top-down, hierarchical model (Marquardt, Leonard, Freedman, & Hill, 2009). Knox (2000) conducted

a case study that explored learning outcomes, behavior change, and overall effectiveness on an executive-level Action-Learning program. The case study suggested tactics to optimize the Action-Learning experience for executives. Lamm (2000) conducted a study of Action Reflection Learning, a variation of Action Learning, to determine whether it fostered the development of transformative learning. Indeed, participants experienced transformative learning with respect to self-understanding, inclusiveness, and reflective action. The participants exhibited more empathy, humility, tolerance, and patience. Lee (2005) conducted a case study to explore changes in leadership behaviors after participating in an Action-Learning group. He found several leadership behaviors were affected: communication skills were enhanced, as were leadership qualities such as being visionary, follower-centered, caring, and confident. Questions and reflection were the Action Learning elements that contributed most to the development of these skills. McNamara (1996) examined Action Learning, combined it with other management development methods, and showed the combination was flexible and effective for busy leaders who needed immediate results particularly in improving their reflective learning skills. Finally, Waddill (2004) examined a management e-learning course that used Action Learning and found that the asynchronous threaded discussions used in the course supported Action Learning's reflective inquiry as reported by the participants.

In summary, research conducted on Action-Learning teams showed Action Learning can be used to develop executive and managerial leadership skills, particularly skills that are collaborative, integrative and that seek win-win solutions. The key features of Action Learning that have been shown to be essential are the development of questioning skills, taking action, and listening. Action-Learning experiences appear to promote feelings of confidence and well-being

and enable people to both create and perform in environments that are conducive to learning (Marquardt et al., 2009).

<div align="center">**Facilitating Small Groups**</div>

A body of literature that is related to the small group literature describes how a facilitator or coach can help groups perform better. However, this literature is largely in the domain of the practitioner rather than the scholar. Although the topics of small group behavior and group decision making have been the subjects of an enormous number of academic studies, the topic of how a facilitator can help groups perform well has not been well studied empirically (Hirokawa & Gouran, 1989; Quinn, 1996).

History of Facilitating Groups

Lewin's (1948, 1951, 1997) work with groups sparked interest in the role of a group facilitator whose job it was to help the group with issues concerning group process. The National Training Laboratories (NTL) was born out of Lewin's work as was the Human Resources Training Laboratories (HRTL; Keltner, 1989). The purpose of these organizations was to provide a training venue to equip facilitators to help groups function better. In 1989, an entire issue of *Management Communication Quarterly* was devoted to research about group facilitation. Several articles surveyed the literature about different aspects of facilitating groups. For example, the articles cited studies conducted to investigate the efficacy of various network communications structures (e.g., Is a chain-structure or Y-shaped structure better than a spoke-shaped structure?), modalities (e.g., Is online communication as efficacious as face-to-face interaction?), discussion procedures (e.g., consensus vs. majority rules), leadership styles, and communication behaviors.

Keltner (1989) indicated the role of facilitator can take several forms. Facilitators can be group members and assume some facilitator duties or can be group leaders who also attend to

group process issues. A third variation is the facilitator as a specialist. It is that role that this research project investigates. "The third and least understood facilitative role is that of the facilitator specialist. The specialist does not deal with group content, but functions either as a nongroup member or as a member with a very special and restricted role" (Keltner, 1989 p. 22).

According to Keltner (1989), these facilitation trainers perform a special function: They keep participants aware of what is happening; they help develop and articulate group norms; they provide an objective perspective on the participant's information; ideally they keep group tension at an optimum level, lend vitality to the group, and act as referee. The role of the facilitator is functionally distinct from a group member's role. "The professional facilitator brings to the group an expertise, a point of view, and observational status, an objective awareness of process, and a set of skills not assumed to be present in the group itself" (p. 24).

A key broadly defined function of the facilitator is to intervene into a group's ongoing behavior with the purpose of enhancing normal group operations (Keltner, 1989). This function is fraught with peril. Having the ability to interrupt group process gives the facilitator a great deal of power in the group. The wise facilitator will exercise that power judiciously and resist the temptation to be the center of attention (O'Neil, 1999). Facilitators' roles have paradoxical aspects. They function both as insiders and outsiders simultaneously. Their objective is to work themselves out of a job—to play a central role in order to help the group learn how to function effectively and independently on its own. The justification for an intervention into group process varies based on the group, the task and the facilitator. The mode of intervention may be "message feedback, nonadvocacy, corrective, directive, interpretative, helping, being a member, and support" (Keltner, 1989 p.27). The facilitator may choose to intervene on the basis of "process, structure, group emotion, process rationale, role functions, diagnosis or protection" (Keltner, 1989

p. 27). "At this point group training is still more an art than a science" (Keltner, 1989 p. 27).

Keltner (1989) asserted "…the essential function of the facilitator is to create and protect the

environment in which group process learning can take place" (Keltner, 1989 pp. 27-28).

Commenting on the state of the literature, communication scholars Hirokawa and Gouran (1989)

asserted:

> Unfortunately, and surprisingly, to the extent that communicative interaction represents
> the principle medium for group decision making and problem solving (Gouran &
> Hirokawa, 1983) a review of the extant literature reveals a general paucity of inquiry
> especially by communication scholars, concerning ways that group performance can be
> enhanced through the facilitation (that is, planned intervention and modification) of group
> processes. (p. 72)

They attribute the reason for this situation to the fact that

> Research in the area of facilitation does not lend itself easily to the use of conventional
> experimental procedures. In other words, it is unlikely that we can learn much by trying to
> control the condition of interaction—especially the facilitator's input—in such a way as to
> allow for direct assessment of individual, or even sets of, communicative strategies on the
> outcomes that decision-making or problem-solving groups achieve. (Hirokawa & Gouran,
> 1989 p. 85)

And Keltner (1989) concluded with this thought:

> The art of facilitation in small task groups, is, for the most part, still developing. A clear
> understanding of the facilitator's role is clouded by the fact that many practitioners see
> their own rationale and style as more justifiable than others…There is no agreement on
> the nature of the facilitator's role in a task group when he or she is not a regular part of
> that group's function. Styles range from the therapeutic at one end to the strictly
> procedural at the other. (Keltner, 1989 p. 28)

Indeed, an abundance of *how-to literature* exists that provides normative approaches to

facilitating in groups, but it is often based on the author's extensive experience as a practitioner

(Argyris, 2008; Schein, 2004; Schwarz, 2002). However, few studies provide support for the

approaches advocated. This research project will contribute to a sparse scholarly literature by

documenting the expert testimony of experienced facilitators (coaches).

The Role of Coach in Action Learning

Although studies do not shed much light on the efficacy of various approaches to facilitating groups, Marquardt's (1999) work with Action Learning both as a scholar and as a practitioner through the World Institute of Action Learning provides clear guidelines. Those guidelines are briefly summarized below. This section is followed by a discussion of the one research study conducted on the role of the Action-Learning coach.

"Facilitation that enables the group to function at its potential in terms of solving problems and developing skills and attributes of its members is what separates action learning from all other problem-solving and development programs" (Marquardt, 1999 p. 213). The Marquardt (1999) model of Action Learning clearly articulated the role of coach. The coach initiates an Action-Learning team experience by creating a climate conducive to learning. The coach orients the group and discusses the six elements cited above as well as the two ground rules. In the initial stage, facilitators act in a firm and directive manner. They direct the learning process and clarify how the group will begin its work (Marquardt, 1999).

The procedures an Action-Learning coach promotes to ensure a group's success are, first, to establish group norms such as confidentiality, being nonjudgmental, being frank and honest, carefully listening, focusing on the problem, and being prepared for each meeting (Marquardt, 1999). Second, the group agrees to share with each other their perspectives, assumptions, feelings, ideas, and biases. Each person gets a fair share of "air time." Third, the group members commit to communicating effectively. They strive for both problem solving—gathering data and analysis—and dialogue—working toward shared meaning, by an exchange of member viewpoints, experience, and information (Marquardt, 2004).

As the group gets experience functioning as a group, the role of the coach becomes more collaborative. The coach begins and ends the session and will intervene as needed (but at least once each session). The focus of the group's members is on the problem. However, the focus of the coach is on the group's learning. Interventions are made when the group is struggling with an aspect of process. The coach asks reflective questions if the group becomes unable to move forward. Examples of the kinds of questions the coach asks are shown in Table 2 (Marquardt, 1999).

Table 2.

Examples of questions coaches ask in Action-Learning Groups (Marquardt, 1999 p. 203)

Problem Analysis Questions
What is the group trying to accomplish?   What is preventing you from accomplishing your goal?   What can you do about those barriers?   What have you tried thus far?   What were the consequences of your actions?   Are there any alternatives?   Who knows what you/we are trying to accomplish?   Who can help us?   Who cares about what we are trying to accomplish?
Group Process Questions
How helpful was that comment (or question)?   Could we turn that statement into a question?   Why did members ignore that point?   What does that really mean?   Does that fit with our ground rules?
Reflection Questions
What questions were the most helpful?   How can we make this group more effective?   How are we doing thus far?   What ideas from this meeting appear to be most important?   What made it easy or difficult for you to learn?   What actions do you plan to take?

Finally, as the group members become more experienced and begin to model the coaches'

behavior, they encourage the group to become autonomous. Increasingly, the group members ask

questions and challenge each other and manage the group's processes among themselves (Marquardt, 1999).

The manner in which the coach behaves throughout the group process is very deliberate. The coach is authentic and responds to questions from group members openly and honestly. By modeling effective interpersonal behavior, the coach encourages group members to deal honestly with themselves and each other. Also, by asking questions and encouraging reflection on the group's experiences, the coach demonstrates effective group behavior for group members to emulate (Marquardt, 1999).

Conversely, certain behaviors are specifically avoided by coaches in Action-Learning groups. Coaches do not provide solutions, do not provide expertise, do not attempt to control the group and do not act in the role of either a teacher or chairperson. In addition to avoiding those roles, the coach uses nonjudgmental questions, not statements. Statements can cause people to become "defensive, defiant and/or dependent" (Marquardt, 2004).

In various other Action-Learning models, acting as a coach can be a role that is passed from one group member to another during different meetings. However, in the Action-Learning group process design, it is critical to have someone play the role of coach because important learning can be missed if someone is not charged with giving priority to the group's learning. Alternatively, as discussed above, the coach can be someone who is not a group member but who is an outsider charged with helping to solve the problem the group is working on. That person can be either internal or external to the organization.

O'Neil Model

Although researchers have conducted few empirical projects on the role of coaches, nevertheless, one study was conducted, not only on coaching, but on how Action-Learning

coaches coach, per se. O'Neil (1999) wrote her dissertation, *The Role of the Learning Advisor in Action Learning*, with the purpose of describing what Action-Learning advisors (also known as coaches) do and how they think about their roles. She formally documented 23 practitioners' wisdom about how they think about and perform their roles. This research project seeks to build on O'Neil's work.

In her literature review, O'Neil (1999) documented a comprehensive history of Action Learning and summarized descriptions of authors who wrote about the role of learning coach, mostly from the perspective of having served in the role of coach. Based on the philosophical approaches of the Action-Learning coaches O'Neil (1999) interviewed, she identified four theoretical schools of Action Learning: Scientific, Experiential, Critical Reflection, and Tacit. Within those schools, the coaches tended to use one of several metaphors for their roles with respect to learning: The Radical—the coach who empowered team members to stand up to power. The Consecrated/Religious advisor felt called to perform this role and acted as a servant leader. A third metaphor was the Mystery Maker, the coaches who used intuition and unarticulated rules to guide behavior in their roles. A fourth metaphor was the Deep Diver. This was the coach who was very intentional about moving beyond the role of a process consultant to be a genuine guide for the group to enable deep learning. Finally, some coaches felt their role was as a Legitimizer—the mostly silent presence and observer in the group that raised team members' awareness, validated them and thereby enhanced members' ability to move to a higher level of group competence and group learning.

O'Neil's (1999) informants reported that the fundamental skill sets required of performance in all these variations on the coach role were process consultation skills—experience working with groups, intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, knowledge of systems theory, and

ability to resist taking up the expert role. Further, the fundamental personal characteristics of the

Action-Learning coach were: maturity; ability to resist being the center of attention; keen

observation powers; ability to help others give and receive feedback; ability to question, support,

and challenge; personal qualities of being genuine, real, and congruent; and, finally, being an

open, frank communicator.

> Practitioners in the Experiential and Critical Reflection schools speak much more
> explicitly about focusing on, and working with group processes. Some of the processes
> mentioned include communication, conflict, consensus building, leadership, and others.
> The view expressed is that groups need to work together effectively in order to be able to
> learn together, and that the learning advisor needs to play a role in enabling the group to
> develop effective processes. (O'Neil, 1999 p. 31)

She further elaborated what exactly these processes entail when she said, "By concentrating on

the participant's behavior, the learning advisor is able to help participants share feelings, learning,

emotional support, and empower people to take responsibility for action on the issues of their

lives" (O'Neil, 1999 p. 71). Interpersonal skill development is imparted by example and by a

learning-by-doing approach. "Learning advisors provide feedback, as do process consultants, and

they also try to work with the group to model and enable participants to give and receive help and

feedback from one another" (O'Neil, 1999 p. 72). To further elaborate on the importance of

bringing the whole person to the Action-Learning team, O'Neil (1999) observed, "Learning

advisors acknowledge and legitimize emotions through interventions and through making

expressing emotions okay by expressing their own" (O'Neil, 1999 p. 73).

In addition to documenting how important modeling interpersonal skills is to effective

Action-Learning coaching behavior, O'Neil (1999) pointed to how critical it is for the coach to

set a climate conducive to learning. The quotes below illustrate the varied ways in which coaches

addressed the learning climate.

In order to help the group accomplish these aims the learning advisor needs to foster a climate in which participants feel comfortable in examining their beliefs, practices and norms; model critical reflection; and put a 'spotlight' on taken-for-granted norms of behavior and thinking.(O'Neil, 1999 p. 69)

In order to promote learning, the learning advisor has to start by creating a physical, i.e., comfortable surroundings, and emotional environment, i.e., accepting, caring, and empathetic, that is conducive to learning—an environment in which participants feel they can challenge the assumptions that will lead to learning. (O'Neil, 1999 p. 74)

Supportive questions were intended to help the group resolve their own problems and issues by helping them focus on what had happened in the past, as well as what was happening in the here and now, and create a safe environment for that work. (O'Neil, 1999 p. 155)

The learning advisor "creates a climate that encourages dialogue, critique, and reflection by stopping the action periodically in order to help participants dig below the surface of their comments and behaviors..." (O'Neil & Marsick, 1994 p. 23).

The importance of climate setting is also highlighted by the words of two of O'Neil's (1999) informants. In answer to how advisors help team members enable learning, one informant said,

Well it's rather simple really, it's getting them to talk. But to get people to talk, they must feel like they've got something to say. And when people start talking and saying things, they've got to feel that they're entirely secure. So I guess I would work a lot at letting them feel secure and supported, valued... and value whatever they say as being important and encouraging them to talk. (O'Neil, 1999 p. 165)

Another participant commented,

The other boundary that we draw is what happens in the group is totally confidential to this group. It doesn't go outside into the organization, so there is that sort of boundary so that people feel again, it's okay. It's permissible. I can make a fool of myself here, nobody outside these five people is going to know about it...The confidentiality involves me, that I don't go and then talk to the client or talk to their managers. (O'Neil, 1999 p. 155)

O'Neil (1999) analyzed Action Learning and the role of coach in terms of two adult-learning theories: experiential learning, based on Kolb's (D. A. Kolb, 1984) theory and most recently articulated by Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985). She also analyzed Action Learning and coaching

behavior in terms of critical theory based on Kegan (1994), Habermas (1971) and Friere's (1970) work and most recently articulated by Watkins and Marsick (1993). She proposed an expanded model based on Boud and Walker's (1996) experiential learning theory to provide a comprehensive description of how Action-Learning coaches promote team learning.

In summary, this review started by describing the categories of team research with a special emphasis on the functional perspective and the action perspective because those perspectives are most relevant to how Action-Learning teams function. The elements of Action Learning were reviewed. Research studies using Action Learning were classified by purpose for which the Action-Learning team was used and described. Next, facilitating literature in general as well as a description of the role of the Action-Learning coach followed. This section detailed O'Neil's dissertation on Action-Learning coaches.

The review now concludes with a discussion of the research on the constructs of interest in this study: the psychological climate of a group, psychological safety, and evaluative pressure, as they interact with a group's ability to learn.

Organizational Climate

Denison (1996) clarified the distinction between the topics of organization climate and organization culture in the context of what he called the paradigm wars that were waged in the organizational behavior literature. He identified similarities in the content of the research studies of both climate and culture, and noted that the main differences come from the different research traditions and methodologies from which each topic arose.

Climate research tradition is grounded in Lewin's (1951) field theory and his basic formulation of the relationship between individuals and their social environments, $B = F(P, E)$ where B = behavior, E = the environment, and P = the person. In this depiction of reality, the

agents (generally management) are easily distinguishable from the subjects (generally employees, workers, or subordinates). Climate is studied as the influence of agents on subjects.

In contrast, the study of culture is grounded in Mead's (1934) symbolic interaction perspective and Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction perspective. This approach depicts organizational reality as multidirectional and dynamic—a constant "see-saw" between the individual and the system as opposed to the impact of the system on the people who reside within it. The individual is embedded in the system and it is difficult to analytically distinguish agents from subjects (Denison, 1996).

Because this study seeks to understand the influence of the Action-Learning coach on the perception of group members, using the climate construct is appropriate. Climate studies take three distinct approaches: first, measurement of the way organizational attributes are perceived—how the individual interprets the organization; second, the dual measurement of objective organizational attributes, along with the measurement of the perceived attributes. Both of these approaches are classified as research which concerns *organizational climate* (Denison, 1996). A third approach is the measurement of the way an individual or team perceives the organization. This cognitive appraisal is classified as *psychological climate* (Denison, 1996). The objective of this study is to explore the psychological climate fostered by an Action-Learning coach in Action-Learning groups.

James and James (1989) emphasized the critical role that valuation plays when an individual in an organization appraises whether the organizational environment "is personally beneficial versus personally detrimental (damaging or painful) to the self and therefore one's well-being" (p. 740). They proposed a model that links cognitions about the work environment with affect and behavior.

James and James' (1989) study reported that the psychological values that serve as standards for assessing organizational well-being are (a) clarity, harmony, justice; (b) challenge, independence, responsibility; (c) work facilitation, support, recognition; and (d) warm, friendly relations among organization members. When these values are experienced in work environments, the psychological climate is perceived to foster the individual's well-being.

Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta and Kramer (2004) examined the impact of leader behaviors on the work environment and, in turn, on the creativity of the groups with whom the leaders worked. Their exploration of creative ways to solve problems is relevant to how coaches in this study promote creativity and foster a climate conducive to learning, because solving difficult problems often requires a creative new way of perceiving the situation. The authors noted the power of the daily, ordinary practices in which team leaders engaged. They found a positive relationship between the perceived work environment when the leader acted in a way that induced positive affect and individual and team creativity. Leader behavior is generally classified in one of two categories: socioemotionally oriented or task oriented. Leader socioemotional support was the key leader behavior that contributed to the perception of a work environment that fostered creativity. Leader socioemotional support was defined as being friendly and acting with consideration, being patient and helpful, showing sympathy and support when a team member was upset or anxious, listening to complaints and problems, and protecting the interests of team members in the larger organization.

With respect to task orientation, leaders who adjusted their monitoring so it consisted of appropriate oversight, depending on the experience and knowledge of the employee, were perceived as positively fostering the environment for creativity. Likewise, leaders who clarified their expectations around roles and objectives were perceived to have a positive effect. Finally,

leaders who consulted the team members and requested input were perceived positively (Amabile et al., 2004).

How Coaches Report They Foster Climate

Wilkens and London (2006) conducted a mixed methods study, using both survey questionnaires and interviews with team members and quality improvement group facilitators, that examined the differences between high-and low-performing quality improvement groups by examining the interaction of group climate, process, and outcome. They used many of the constructs this study seeks to illuminate including self-disclosure, group psychological safety, group learning orientation, conflict, feedback, facilitator's role; and creativity of outcomes.

They found "convergent validity among the measures of group climate, process, and outcomes" (Wilkens & London, 2006 p. 516). The constructs self-disclosure, psychological safety, and team learning orientation were positively related to each other and to the creativity of group outcomes. Likewise, group learning orientation and facilitator role were positively related to group performance.

> Elements of group climate, facilitation, and feedback are important to group functioning and outcomes. Facilitation may overcome conflict and promote feedback among members, taking advantage of members' desire to learn and improving overall performance and outcome creativity. The climate that is created soon after the group is formed and how this develops over time may be vital to the group's eventual performance. (Wilkens & London, 2006 p. 521)

This study built on this important research by examining the behaviors group facilitators (coaches) display to encourage self-disclosure and feedback, and to address task and relationship issues that ultimately enhance the outcome quality and creativity of the groups with whom they work.

Climate and Self-Directed Learning Theory

The climate set by Action-Learning coaches, as well as by other organizational leaders such as the sponsor, can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of an Action Learning group. Another aspect of organizational climate is the extent to which adult learning principles are honored. In the following section, the principles of andragogy—the art and science of helping adults learn—as well as approaches that foster self-direction and a positive climate for learning are described.

Proponents of self-directed learning theories seek achievement of three main goals. The first is to enhance the ability of adult learners to be self-directed. This objective is based on humanistic philosophical values exalting personal growth and acceptance of responsibility, being proactive and honoring personal autonomy and free will (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). A second goal advocated by proponents of self-directed learning is to foster transformational learning by discovering taken-for-granted assumptions about the learning process and using a deliberate process to reflect (Merriam et al., 2007). The third goal some proponents of self-directed learning champion is to promote political awareness and emancipatory learning (Freire, 1970). Their goal is to empower students of self-directed learning to fight for social justice issues and take social action.

Merriam et al. (2007) classified three types of models of self-directed learning processes: (a) interactive models that emphasize the interaction of two or more elements in a learner's life: (for example, opportunities and personality characteristics), (b) instructional models that emphasize the teachers' processes from more directive to less directive, and (c) the self-directive learning model, a linear model that focuses on the step-by-step nature of the learning process.

Knowles' (1975; 2005) model is linear and highlights the manner in which learning occurs in Action Learning groups.

Knowles (2005) spent his distinguished career exploring the nature of andragogy, the study of how adults learn, and proposed several core adult learning principles. First, in order to motivate adult learners, the *facilitator of learning* (p. 64) (rather than a teacher) must explain why the adult learners need to know what they are being asked to learn. Second, adult learners have the need to be self directed. They resist situations in which they are dependent and treated as child-like. Third, it is important to acknowledge the value of the experience an adult learner brings to a learning situation. Adults generally derive their self-concepts and identities from their life experiences. If those experiences are not acknowledged and valued, adults may feel devalued and rejected.

Fourth, adult learning is affected by the adults' readiness to learn. The information should be relevant and usable in order to promote receptivity. Fifth, adults' orientation to learning is task or problem centered, so learning should be contextualized to apply to real-life situations. Finally, adult motivation to learn can be influenced by extrinsic factors like a pay increase or a promotion, but intrinsic factors like self-esteem, job satisfaction, and quality of life are more powerful motivators (Knowles et al., 2005)

These principles describing the nature of adult learners and the needs they have to be effective self-directed learners are the basis of the eight elements of Knowles et al.'s (2005) self-directed learning theory. He emphasized that this theory is a process (rather than content) model of how adults learn. The eight elements of his theory are described below. First, Knowles et al. (2005) noted the importance of preparing adult learners by addressing the difference between reactive and proactive learning and promoted engagement in "learning-how-to-learn" (p. 217)

activities. In addition, he claimed that it is important to provide an opportunity for small groups of adults to discuss the resources they bring, (i.e., their education and life experiences). This discussion also provides the opportunity to establish collaborative, human relationships with one another. Consistent with this element, Action-Learning teams are encouraged to engage in proactive learning by taking advantage of the resources they have available to them, however, consistent with this principle, they must initiate the request (Marquardt et al., 2009).

A second element in Knowles' (2005) self-directed learning theory was the creation of a mechanism for mutual planning. "One of the basic findings of applied behavioral science research is that people tend to feel committed to a decision or activity in direct proportion to their participation in or influence on its planning and decision making" (Knowles et al., 2005 p. 123). For this reason, it is critical to provide adult learners with genuine power to participate in planning. This essential finding from the strategic planners' era in United States' corporate history (Mintzberg, 1994) is applied in Action Learning by encouraging team members to carefully define and perhaps reframe the problem as presented (Marquardt et al., 2009).

A third element in Knowles et al.'s (2005) self-directed learning theory is clearly defining the problem by constructing a model of the problem and the skills or resources necessary to address it. He claimed that it is important for adult learners to identify the competencies—the requisite abilities and qualities—they want to acquire because that gives them "a clearer sense of purpose"(Knowles et al., 2005 p. 125). Action Learning places great value on being sure the team has agreed on the nature and definition of the problem before the team moves into a problem-solving mode (Revans, 1998).

A fourth element in Knowles et al.'s (2005) self-directed learning theory is to assess discrepancies and perform a gap analysis of the difference between the current skill set possessed

by adult learners and the desired one. Ideally, the tools and procedures for assessing this gap are supportive and not threatening to the adult learner. Action Learning focuses team members' attention on what additional information is needed to solve the problem as it is defined (Revans, 1998).

A fifth element in Knowles et al.'s. (2005) self-directed learning theory is the design of the learning plan. Often, "it is a matter of providing supportive environments (usually relatively unstructured groups) in which the participants (learners and trainers together) can help one another grow in existentially determined directions" (Knowles et al., 2005 p. 130). Knowles noted the process of learning is often an organic and evolving interaction between learners and the learning experience. Action Learning encourages team members to be very deliberate about developing plans to move forward and to do it in a supportive context.

The sixth element in Knowles et al.'s (2005) self-directed learning theory is taking action—conducting the learning activities. The Action Learning process is very clear that an essential feature of the learning process is action taking. Theoretical knowledge is of little use in the practical endeavors Action Learning engages. It is only through taking action that relevant feedback is received and that enables course correction, if necessary (Revans, 1998).

The seventh element in Knowles et al.'s (2005) self-directed learning theory is evaluating the program, or engaging in reflection. Reflection is an essential element in Action Learning. The Action-Learning coach invites the team to reflect on its processes at the end of every team meeting. That reflection is the source of information and awareness that enables the team to reach new heights of functionality (O'Neil, 1999).

The final element in Knowles et al.'s, (2005) self-directed learning theory is "establishing a climate conducive to learning" (p. 118). (Knowles placed the element second in a sequential

listing of his process. It is placed here because it is such an important aspect of the process that sets the stage to allow for all the other elements to come into being.)

> In my own andragogical model, climate setting is probably the most critical element in the whole process of HRD [Human Resource Development]. If the climate is not really conducive to learning, if it doesn't convey that an organization values human beings as its most valuable asset and their development its most productive investment, then all the other elements in the process are jeopardized. (Knowles et al., 2005 p. 122)

Knowles et al (2005) cited several schools of theoretical support for this position. They noted cognitive theorists identify the importance "of orderliness, clearly defined goals, careful explanation of expectations and opportunities, openness of the system to inspection and questioning, and honest and objective feedback" (p. 120). Cognitive theorists who advocate "learning by discovery" (p. 120) claim that a climate characterized by experimentation and tolerance for mistakes is essential.

Additional theoretical support for the importance of climate is provided by personality theorists who promote a "mentally healthy" (Knowles et al., 2005 p. 120) climate. Such a climate is characterized by respect for individual and cultural differences, by moderation of anxiety levels, by acceptance of both achievement motivations as well as affiliation motivations, and by honoring the role of feelings in the learning process.

Knowles et al.(2005) also cited humanistic psychologists in his theoretical support for the crucial role of organizational climate. From their perspective, the climate must be "safe, caring accepting, trusting, respectful and understanding" (Knowles et al., 2005 p. 120). In supporting andragogy, the climate could be described as "an Atmosphere of Adultness" (p. 120). Such an atmosphere favors collaboration over competitiveness, support for group loyalty and mutual, informal interactions among group members. Ideally, the Action-Learning coach establishes a

climate conducive to adult learning: a climate characterized by respect, trust and acceptance, all of which come together to create a climate characterized by psychological safety (O'Neil, 1999).

In summary, the psychological climate set by a group's leader or facilitator is a critical aspect of self-directed learning theory. A climate marked by trust and respect contributes to adults' ability to learn. The climate the Action-Learning coach establishes affects the group's ability to learn.

Knowles et al.'s (2005) ideas about adult learning have received a number of critiques. Cross (1981) noted that their intuitive appeal has attracted the attention and allegiance of adult practitioners but that to a large extent his theory is really a theory about teaching, not a theory about learning. Brookfield (1991) noted that andragogy is prescriptive, not descriptive and challenged the assumptions on which it is based. He particularly questioned the premise that adults are intrinsically self-directed by pointing out how many adults live under totalitarian regimes. He also refuted the notion that adults need to be able to apply knowledge in order to be motivated to learn by citing the evidence for adults getting innate satisfaction from the joy of learning for learning's sake. Nevertheless, Knowles' ideas are emotionally appealing to adult educators and have had widespread influence on how learning in adulthood is perceived. It will be useful to examine his ideas in the context of the Action-Learning teams in the workplace.

Psychological Safety Defined

One of the first authors to use the term *psychological safety* was Schein (1998; Schein & Bennis, 1965). He did so in a discussion about how to implement Lewin's (1951) organization change model: unfreeze, change, refreeze. Schein said unfreezing involved creating a motivation and readiness for change: (a) Disconfirmation that the current situation was working, (b) creation of guilt or anxiety as an impetus to change, and (c) provision of psychological safety so the

disconfirmation, and guilt or anxiety would not be too uncomfortable or impossible to accept.

Schein (1998) noted that "the person receiving the discomforting information can *accept* it only if

it does not invite personal humiliation and loss of face or esteem" (Schein, 1998 p. 97). People

must feel safe before they are open to change. But how is this done? Schein (1998) wrote,

> Making a client or subordinate feel psychologically safe so that fairly threatening things
> can be said is probably one of the most complex and artful of human endeavors involving
> real caring on the part of the consultant or manager and a real commitment to helping the
> receiver of the disconfirming information to improve his situation. (p. 98)

Even though Schein (1998) offered no specific guidance about how to create psychological

safety, he did indicate some aspects such as making sure the receiver of the disconfirming

information continued to feel worthwhile, and conversely, did not feel worthless as a whole

person. If the receivers' sense of worth is threatened, it will trigger defense mechanisms, and it

will be hard for them to be receptive to the disconfirming information. For Schein, psychological

safety was an individual-level construct.

The next major instance in which the construct psychological safety gained preeminence

was Kahn's (1990) grounded-theory study. He sought to discover the psychological factors

involved in people's engagement or disengagement at work. Kahn concluded that three conditions

were necessary for engagement. The first was meaningful work, which he defined as the situation

in which employees get "a return on their investment of effort in the currency of physical,

cognitive or emotional energy" (pp. 703-704). A second necessary condition for engagement was

psychological availability, (i.e., "having the physical, emotional or psychological resources to

personally engage at a particular moment"; p. 714).

And, finally, psychological safety was necessary for employees to engage at work. Kahn

(1990) defined psychological safety as people's ability to show and employ themselves "without

fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career" (p. 705). Situations were

experienced as being safe when they were predictable, consistent, clear, and nonthreatening. If clear boundaries between what was allowed and what was not allowed existed and were communicated, situations were regarded as safe.

Kahn (1990) found four factors positively affected psychological safety. (a) If the quality of interpersonal relationships was characterized by openness, and if employees could try and fail without consequences, people experienced psychological safety; (b) If the social system, (i.e., the group and intergroup dynamics), offered a comfortable mentality and acceptable roles, the system was compatible with psychological safety; (c) If managerial styles and management processes were perceived to be competent as well as supportive and resilient, that was consistent with psychological safety. In addition, if management clarified the role demands and reinforced individuals' behavior with supportive feedback in the event of ambiguity that was regarded as compatible with psychological safety. Finally, if the organizational norms consisted of broadly shared expectations, individuals felt psychologically safe. In the Kahn (1990) study, as well as the Schein (1998) literature, psychological safety was defined on the individual level.

Edmondson (1999) found that the construct psychological safety was useful at the team level. For her, team safety was "a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (p. 350) . She found this understanding to be a tacit belief that consists of a "sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up. This confidence stems from mutual respect and trust among team members" (p. 354).

The elements of psychological safety extend beyond the concept of interpersonal trust (Mink et al., 1987). When a group exhibits psychological safety, it generally has a coherent interpersonal climate characterized by the presence of a blend of trust, respect for each member's

competence, and a caring about each other as people. A sense of trust exists, as well, regarding team members' intentions.

Edmondson (1999) distinguished psychological safety from cohesiveness (which reduces members' willingness to disagree) or a careless sense of permissiveness or unrelenting positive affect, but rather the confidence that speaking up will not result in embarrassment, rejection or punishment. The source of this confidence is mutual respect and trust. Psychology safety—as a feature of the team or organizational climate—is a key construct explored in this study. In summary, psychological safety is an important quality because it enables people to be willing to genuinely engage themselves in the task at hand. It is a construct used on both an individual and team level.

Psychological Safety and Climate

The studies reviewed above establish psychological safety as an essential aspect of an effective team environment. This section reviews studies that consider psychological safety and its impact on an organization's climate.

Four studies have considered psychological safety and climate. A representative definition of climate with respect to these studies is "shared subjective experiences of organizational members that have important consequences for organizational functioning and effectiveness" (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000 p. 19).

Abraham (2004) conducted an integrated literature review seeking a link between emotional competencies and performance. Based on the studies she reviewed, she outlined five propositions that warrant empirical studies. One of the five propositions she proposed that should be tested empirically was a study to determine whether the apparent link between an

organizational climate of psychological safety and employee motivation, which in turn leads to job involvement, was supported.

Baer and Frese (2003) studied 47 mid-sized German companies and found that organizational climate mediated a firm's ability to innovate and be successful. They used return on assets and firm goal achievement to measure success. This study examined two aspects of climate: a climate for innovation and a climate for psychological safety. The organization-level construct for innovation was defined as, "formal and informal organizational practices and procedures guiding and supporting a pro-active, self-starting and persistent approach to work" (Baer & Frese, 2003 p. 46). Other related expressions of this behavior include taking charge, which has been shown to be related to felt responsibility, self-sufficiency, and perceptions of management openness to innovative behaviors (Baer & Frese, 2003).

The Baer and Frese (2003) study defined a climate for psychological safety as the "formal and informal organizational practices and procedures guiding and supporting open and trustful interactions within the work environment" (p. 47). They suggested the mechanisms by which a climate for psychological safety produces a higher level of firm performance were the result of the ease and reduced risk in presenting new ideas, better team learning, higher level of job involvement, and therefore a greater exertion of effort and smoother collaboration in solving problems.

Brown and Leigh (1996) built upon the work James and James (1989) did regarding how an organization's environment takes on personal and emotional significance through valuation. They went further and took the four values James and James identified and broke them down into six dimensions of psychological climate, three for meaningfulness, and three for safety. This study focused on the three safety dimensions that include (a) Management is perceived as being

flexible and supportive (employees are given control over their work and have latitude regarding the methods they use to accomplish it); (b) role clarity (role and norm expectations are clear to employees); and (c) freedom of expression (employees can express both their true feelings as well as self-concept as they perform their work roles, Brown & Leigh, 1996). Their study supported the diagram in Figure 3:

| Psychological climate⇨ | Job involvement⇨ | Performance |
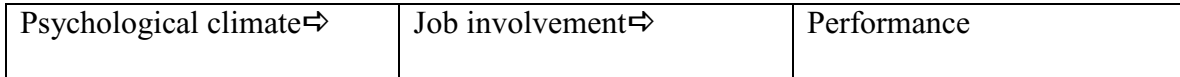
Figure 3. Relationship of psychological climate to performance.

Wilkens and London (2006) conducted a study in which they examined the relationships among group climate, group processes, and group performance in quality improvement groups in a hospital setting. The features of group climate they measured were (a) inclination to self-disclosure (the willingness of group members to share information about themselves with other members); (b) assessment of psychological safety (the determination that the group is a safe place for undertaking interpersonal risk); and (c) group-learning orientation (the desire of a team to gain new skills, improve competence and master new situations). These features of climate were examined with respect to three group processes: giving and receiving feedback, managing task and relationship conflict and determining the extent to which the group leader structured the group's process.

Results of the study indicated high-performing groups have active leaders who foster a climate that encourages self-disclosure, is perceived to be psychologically safe, and that promotes a group learning orientation (Wilkens & London, 2006). These variables were significantly interrelated, but had only moderate strength in their relationships to each other, which suggested they are not redundant. The more the group members reported that they self-disclosed and felt psychologically safe, the fewer task and relationship conflicts they reported and the more they

gave and received feedback. The greater the learning orientation group members reported, the more they gave and received feedback and the more they reported the facilitator played an active role in the group. The overall conclusion was that group performance, as assessed by indications of creativity and quality, is related to a facilitator who promotes a positive group climate that consists of a willingness to self-disclose, psychological safety, and a group learning orientation. In addition, high-quality interpersonal processes indicated by giving and receiving feedback and task and relationship conflict resolution contributed to effective group performance.

In summary, this section reviewed studies about psychological safety and climate. The consistent conclusions were that a climate characterized by psychological safety was associated with a higher level of individual, group, and firm performance.

Psychological Safety and Learning

Theorists and researchers posit that the ability of individuals and groups to learn—and in turn to contribute to organizations that can learn—is essential for high-level performance (Argyris, 2002; Edmondson, 1996; Senge, 1994). It is therefore critical to understand the conditions that foster learning. The studies cited below identify psychological safety as such an essential condition. In these studies, psychological safety is a feature that can be a characteristic of an individual's assessment of a situation or a feature of the climate of the work team or organization.

Edmondson (1999, 2002) and her colleagues conducted several studies whose purposes were to investigate the link between psychological safety, interactions at both the individual level (intrapersonal) and team level (interpersonal), and learning. These studies were conducted in a variety of contexts. Some studies were undertaken in manufacturing organizations (Edmondson, 1999; 2002) and looked at teams at all hierarchical levels. Another study was conducted at a large

banking institution. Several studies were conducted in hospital settings and examined psychological safety and learning through the lens of drug errors (Edmondson, 1996), technological changes and status differences among team members from different medical professions (i.e., doctors, nurses and respiratory therapists; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). .

"Engaging in learning behavior in a team is highly dependent on team psychological safety" (Edmondson, 1999 p. 376). The presence of psychological safety means that team members believe they will not be punished for well-intentioned interpersonal risk . That belief engenders a willingness for the members to engage in learning behavior (Edmondson, 1999). She concluded that a substantial relationship between team psychological safety and learning existed. In turn, the learning affected team performance. The study identified two mediating relationships. First, learning behavior mediates team psychological safety and team performance. Second, team psychological safety mediates "the effects of context support and team leader coaching on learning behavior" (Edmondson, 1999 p. 376).

A key aspect of an organization's or team's ability to learn is the practice of engaging in reflection and evaluation. Examples of reflection include sharing information with the group, seeking feedback about team performance, discussing errors or problems, and experimenting to gain insight (Edmondson, 2002). Criticism and negative evaluation is inherently psychologically threatening, so it is critical to high-quality evaluation and reflection for a climate of psychological safety to be present. When leaders generated fear and not psychological safety, reflection and evaluation were conducted at superficial levels in deference to the powerful leader.

Evaluation and reflection, however, did not lead to learning if the people who evaluate and reflect fail to make changes and follow up with action taking. Examples of action taking are: achieving closure on a decision, implementing results of an experiment, finalizing a plan,

improving performance, and transferring new knowledge to others (Edmondson, 2002). "People's fears of offending those with power inhibit the collective reflection process" (Edmondson, 2002 p. 140). It appeared to be reflection, but no action was taken as a result.

Conclusions drawn from Edmondson's (2002) study indicated that when leader behavior induced fear and not psychological safety, team members' willingness to contribute their ideas, evaluations, and suggestions were limited. In contrast, when leader behavior encouraged input and discussion, that led to the perception of psychological safety, and that, in turn, resulted in "healthy reflection and action that enabled progress on organizational goals" (p. 144.)

In another study, researchers (Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001) examined cardiac surgery medical teams that were undergoing a change in their work routines as a result of the adoption of new technology. The old technology involved cardiac surgeons playing the role of dictator: unilateral, highly authoritarian rulers who coordinated the team members' activities around their needs as they performed surgery. In contrast, the new technology, minimally invasive cardiac surgery (MICS), required a coordinated team effort. Edmondson (2001) found that teams that successfully adopted the new technology, hence who had successfully engaged in a collective learning process, followed key procedures. Among them were creating psychological safety by having the team leader, in this case the former dictator, signal openness to feedback about how the changes being implemented were proceeding and by communicating the rationale for each change the team members were asked to make. In addition, the team leader initiated discussions and invited the group to reflect on how it was doing by asking "What are we learning?" This enabled the team to collectively process its experience.

Tjosvold, Yu and Hui (2004) studied teams from across industries in Shanghai, China. They studied competitive versus cooperative approaches to learning from mistakes. They found

that cooperative goals facilitated group problem solving and hence team-level learning. The presence of psychological safety among team members was a key contributor to their ability to use a problem-solving approach to learning from mistakes.

Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) studied interdisciplinary teams in a neonatal unit and found that the high-status physician leader had enormous influence over the team climate and, in turn, the team's learning orientation. They found that if the team members felt the team climate was psychologically safe, even the lower status members (nurses and respiratory therapists) were willing to question current team practices, share provocative ideas, and challenge the group to develop creative solutions to the problems they were encountering. A key finding in this study was the positive association of psychological safety and engagement in quality improvement work (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). The researchers defined learning as the insight gained by experimenting with a trial-and-error process. They claimed learning through experimentation was the kind of problem solving necessary when information is unavailable and outcomes of one's actions are uncertain. They found that an organization that aligns its reward system with its objective of encouraging creative problem solving resulted in a climate of psychological safety. That climate helped employees feel safe enough to be willing to take risks, admit errors, and ask for help in teams. In summary, psychological safety was consistently found to be a necessary property of individual perceptions within teams if the teams were able to gather relevant information, reflect on it, and use it to take appropriate adaptive action, that is, to learn.

Psychological Safety and Intrapersonal Behavior

Several studies examined the impact of an organizational climate of psychological safety on intrapersonal behavior. For the purpose of this study, Argyris' (1993) definition of intrapersonal behavior is the method by which an individual manages his thoughts and feelings is

used. Thoughts and feelings result from reactions to organizational occurrences. The more defensively one reacts, the more fear, distrust, and disengagement is generated. The more cooperatively one reacts, the more openness, trust, and engagement is generated.

Argyris (1995) claimed that humans have a master program or theory of action they use to decide how to behave in a manner that will achieve what they want. He posited that the theories of action people use to make those strategic decisions are based, fundamentally, on a set of values. His research indicated these values are found as the basis for a theory of action in a wide variety of geographic locations and cultures: in "North America, Europe, South America, Africa, and the Far East. We also found it to be the same whether individuals were young (12 years old) or old, poor or wealthy, well or poorly educated, male or female, and of any skin colour" (p. 2). As cited above in the section on the action science, and repeated here for emphasis, the four governing values are as follows: (a) Achieve your intended purpose; (b) maximize winning and minimize losing; (c) suppress negative feelings; (d) behave according to what you consider rational (p. 3). These governing values lead to the following action strategies: "1) Advocate your position; 2) Evaluate the thoughts and actions of others; 3) Attribute causes for whatever you are trying to understand" (p. 3).

Arygris (1995) pointed out that these values are derived from life experience because people want to avoid threat and embarrassment and want relationships that are caring, supportive, honest and have integrity. But, in practice—in action—as a *theory-in-use* they actually lead to lack of caring, distancing, and designed dishonesty. These consequences are covered up and then the cover up is covered up. This represents a defensive routine that is "anti-learning" (p. 4).

In contrast to these values as the basis for individual (intrapersonal) thinking, Argyris (1995) proposed the following values: (a) Offer valid information; (b) create opportunity for

informed choice; and (c) vigilantly monitor implementation of the choice so error can be detected and corrected. These values also lead to action strategies expressed as advocating, evaluating, and attributing, but this approach enables the actors to discuss how they reached their evaluations and attributions. By sharing their information, reasoning, and assumptions, others are invited to ask questions and test the logic. The antilearning, defensive routine is minimized. So instead of embarrassment or threat being covered up, the situation is addressed forthrightly. As a result, people have the opportunity to learn from the situation.

Employee Voice

An aspect of intrapersonal behavior regards the decision about when and if to speak up at work. Detert and Burris (2007) hypothesized that the presence of psychological safety was the mediating factor in employees' decisions to speak up and express improvement-oriented voice because that determined that speaking up would not lead to personal harm. Their study supported the hypothesis that leaders' displays of openness (a factor of which is a climate characterized by psychological safety) is positively related to improvement-oriented voice.

The Nemhard and Edmondson (2006) study cited above looked at interdisciplinary medical teams consisting of physicians, nurses and respiratory therapists. They cited studies which showed low-status team members were more likely to experience low self-efficacy and as a result underestimate the potential value of their contributions. The consequence of this intrapersonal behavior was withholding of valid information, deferring decision rights to others, speaking less, and limiting their participation in the organization. Low-status team members experienced a sense of threat or risk with respect to participation (i.e., the situation lacked psychological safety).

To counteract these tendencies, Nemhard and Edmondson (2006) found that high-status leaders who both invited participation and then expressed appreciation for that participation (exhibited leader inclusiveness) successfully led groups with across-status participation. Their study concluded that leader inclusiveness moderated the relationship between status and psychological safety. Leader inclusiveness was shown to be associated with employee willingness to engage in quality improvement efforts.

Lee et al. (2004) showed that when a climate of psychological safety existed, people were willing to engage in experimentation and therefore risk failure. The climate of psychological safety affected the level of anxiety people felt when they confronted ambiguity and uncertainty. In summary, psychological safety plays a role in how people manage their thoughts about the organizations in which they work, and whether they elect to speak up to add their voice to quality improvement efforts.

Psychological Safety and Interpersonal Behavior

The studies discussed above demonstrate how psychological safety affects intrapersonal behavior. Studies that demonstrate in what ways psychological safety is also relevant when examining the interactions between and among people—their interpersonal behavior—are reviewed below. Baer and Frese (2003) emphasized how psychological safety operates on both these levels by defining psychological safety as both a psychological—individual level— construct and a sociological—team level—construct. Thus, in addition to a psychological definition of psychological safety that indicates how it affects people on an intrapersonal level, Baer and Frese (2003) included a sociological definition of the construct of psychological safety that indicated "interpersonal practices, intersubjectively-developed meanings, and policies and practices, and not as a mere aggregation of psychological climate" (Baer & Frese, 2003 p. 46).

Edmondson (1999) defined psychological safety as "a shared belief that a team is safe for taking interpersonal risks" (p. 47). At this level, psychological safety becomes a team-level construct.

Baer and Frese (2003) extended the application of the construct psychological safety from teams to organizations. They defined it as, "Climate for psychological safety refers to formal and informal organizational practices and procedures guiding and supporting open and trustful interactions within the work environment" (p. 47). Process innovations—the central focus of the Baer and Frese study "are characterized by an increased focus on interdependency" (p. 51). The study concluded that the "centerpiece of any change process in companies should be to increase climate factors such as psychological safety and initiation before larger changes and innovations are tackled" (p. 52).

Although some (Cohen & Ledford, 1994) have argued against an examination of interpersonal factors as a source of team effectiveness, Edmondson (1999) cited the organizational learning research to dispute that position. She noted Argyris' (1993) work that clearly showed the connection between beliefs about interpersonal interactions, the negative impact on learning behavior, and the consequent reduction in effectiveness..

The very definition of psychological safety invokes concepts about interpersonal behavior. "Team psychological safety should facilitate learning behavior—it should alleviate excessive concern about others' reactions to actions that have the potential for embarrassment or threat" (Edmondson, 1999 p. 355). Further, psychological safety implies related beliefs about the team's interpersonal context: the "belief that others won't reject them for being themselves," (Edmondson, 1999 p. 361) the belief team members care about and are interested in each other as people, the belief that other team members have positive intentions toward them and finally, the belief that the team members hold respect for each other's competence (Edmondson, 1999 p.

361). All these beliefs directly relate to the expectations team members have about how they should treat others and, in turn, how they will be treated and what other's intentions toward them are.

These beliefs about interpersonal interactions result in a confidence that well-intentioned risk will not be punished, which, in turn, enables learning. Confidence that learning can be performed in a psychologically safe environment was shown to be more powerful a factor than a sense of team efficacy (i.e., confidence the team is capable of doing its work; Edmondson, 1999)

Edmondson (2002) noted that negative beliefs about power and psychological safety can inhibit team members' willingness to actively engage in contributing ideas or evaluations that provide insight into the interpersonal nature of organizational learning. Group-level learning actually occurs through interactions among a small number of individuals (Edmondson, 2002). When the team leaders encouraged input and reflection they established a climate of psychological safety. It was that climate that then opened the way for the kinds of interactions that resulted in learning. "In the face-to-face setting of the team, individuals make sense of their organization—its interpersonal climate, norms, goals, and how it serves its market" (Edmondson, 2002).

A lack of psychological safety causes members of organizations "to be concerned with the interpersonal risks of failure and to be reluctant to engage in experimentation" (Lee, Edmondson, Thomke, & Worline, 2004). Indeed, they found that "interpersonal costs of failure are exaggerated when people lack psychological safety" (Lee, Edmondson, Thomke, & Worline, 2004 p. 311).

May, Gilson and Harter (2004) found that three qualities were determinants of psychological safety: supervisor relations, coworker relations, and behavioral norms. The

interpersonal factors involved with rewarding coworker relations were interpersonal trust, cognitive trust and affective-based trust. The cognitive-based trust referred to individuals' abilities to count on others to be reliable and dependable. The affect-based trust referred to positive emotional relationships between people at work. The study concluded trustful cognitive and affective coworker relations contributed to the engagement of the human spirit at work. Indeed, they found that psychological safety is positively related to engagement at work (May et al., 2004). A key finding of the study conducted by Nembhard and Edmondson (2006), was "the identification of an interpersonal strategy for improving the climate for learning within cross-disciplinary teams" (p. 958) by promoting leader inclusiveness and encouraging team leader coaching behavior.

Edmondson and her colleagues (2001) studied cardiac surgery teams who were adapting to a new technology (cited above). This shift from a leader-driven model to a team-driven model required collaborative, interdependent work that could succeed only if collective learning occurred. Collective learning has three components: cognitive, organizational, and interpersonal. The study found that the presence of psychological safety played an essential role in establishing an interpersonal climate that affects collective learning. It was only when the team held a shared belief that "well-intentioned interpersonal risks" (Edmondson et al., 2001) would not be punished that the learning behavior was fostered. The interpersonal behaviors concerning practicing communication and encouraging all team members to communicate across status levels and functions were the greatest interpersonal factors contributing to collective learning.

In Kahn's (1990) grounded-theory study of the basis for employee engagement at work, he identified three key variables: meaningfulness, psychological availability, and psychological safety. In turn, he identified two factors that affected psychological safety: (a) the nature of

interpersonal relationships, and (b) group and intergroup dynamics. He described the nature of the interpersonal relationships to be supportive and trusting. As a result, people could try and fail without negative consequences. The climate of the organization was characterized by openness and supportiveness and enabled people to experiment on behalf of the organization (Kahn, 1990). The other two factors that contributed to psychological safety were management style and process and organizational norms.

In summary, the studies reviewed in this section examine psychological safety from a sociological perspective. They established that when people perceive an interpersonal climate in their organization that gives them permission to take risks and take well-intentioned actions even if these actions result in what later is seen as a mistake, they are able to both contribute and learn how to improve their performance.

Evaluative Pressure

The studies reviewed above concentrate on team learning and a climate of psychological safety. In contrast, I now turn to a discussion about the effect of a coach who instead focuses attention on a different aspect of reality in Action-Learning teams: the fact that they are often used as a laboratory to observe potential leaders of the organization, as they solve intractable human problems within the organization. In this respect, team members are being critically evaluated for their ability to excel while they contribute to the group's productivity. Evaluative pressure is a nearly universal phenomenon in business settings and its effect deserves to be examined and understood.

In contrast to the numerous studies that have contributed to the well-developed construct of psychological safety, evaluative pressure has been systematically studied far less. It is

necessary, therefore, to cobble together studies that are related to evaluative pressure in the absence of a more mature literature.

Evaluative Pressure Defined

Evaluative pressure "refers to the degree to which salient others are seen as judging rather than enabling one's performance" (Lee, Edmondson, Thomke et al., 2004). Individuals who experience a high degree of evaluative pressure receive intense scrutiny the purpose of which is to rate performance, in contrast to providing helpful feedback. The consequence of "close and constant evaluation intended to identify and expose failures" (Lee, Edmondson, Thomke et al., 2004) has several documented consequences. Under conditions of high evaluative pressure, people's creativity is inhibited (Amabile et al., 2004), novel or unfamiliar tasks are more difficult (Zajonc, 1965), willingness to admit error is inhibited (Edmondson, 1996), and help-seeking is reduced (Lee, 1997). All of these consequences serve to impair people's ability to learn. In contrast to high evaluative pressure, people who experience low evaluative pressure receive useful feedback and support from superiors and have relationships characterized by supportive coaching. Scrutiny is undertaken for the purpose of facilitating performance, not judging it.

When individuals experience high evaluative pressure (i.e., they are undergoing evaluation), a psychological burden is created because they become keenly aware of how they are performing and the impression they are making on the evaluator. This awareness taxes mental energy and attention. It can prevent the in-depth processing that is essential in learning and reflection (Lee, Edmondson, Thomke et al., 2004). It appears high evaluative pressure may result in behavior that is inhibited, fearful, narrowly-focused, and rigid.

Evaluative Pressure and Climate

Gibb (1991) was a psychologist who studied trust and its opposite, fear. He analyzed recordings of small-group meetings and identified the qualities of a small group's climate that generated a reaction of defensiveness. He defined defensiveness as "that behavior which occurs when an individual perceives threat or anticipates threat in a group" (Gibb, 1988). When people perceive or anticipate threat, several behaviors typically ensue. The threatened individual puts his energy into defending himself by focusing on how he appears to others, how he can win, dominate, or escape punishment and how to avoid an attack (Gibb, 1988). This reaction is displayed through posture, facial expressions, and verbal cues which, in turn, generate defensiveness in the original communicator, thereby setting off a cycle of defensiveness. This impairs listening and the ability to translate observed emotion, so motives and values are easily misinterpreted (Gibb, 1988). Misattribution often results.

Gibb (1988) identified six situations that evoke defensiveness. The first is *evaluation*, the sense that a person is being judged. Next, being *controlled* evokes defensiveness, especially when it is covert and not overt, on the part of the person who is the target of control. Third, *strategic engagement* (i.e., playing a role in order to manipulate someone) elicits a defensive reaction. Fourth, a *detached, impersona,l and neutral communication* arouses defensiveness. Fifth, *asserting a sense of superiority regarding one's wealth, power, attractiveness, or intelligence* arouses defensiveness. Finally, *dogmatism and needing to be right* generates defensiveness. When the leader of a small group engages in any of these behaviors, it generates defensiveness on the part of group members. That defensiveness impairs the ability of group members to communicate with one another and learn from one another. Evaluative pressure involves several of these climate-affecting qualities that create a defensive reaction. Defensiveness in response to

the above behaviors is similar to typical reactions to evaluative pressure. In both situations, free, open, and respectful communication is made harder.

James and James (1989; discussed above with respect to psychological safety) proposed a model of a general factor of psychological climate that consisted of four elements: leadership support and facilitation, role stress and lack of harmony, job challenge and autonomy, and workgroup cooperation, warmth, and friendliness. They collected data that supported their hypothesis that employees assess these factors and then cognitively appraise the psychological climate and reach a conclusion that the factors will either be personally beneficial or personally detrimental. In a hypothetical situation, they found that leaders who (with respect to leader support) (a) emphasized the organization's hierarchy and their role as evaluators, (b) who (with respect to role stress) provided only vague and ambiguous cues about performance expectations, (c) who (with respect to job challenge) micromanaged the employee, and (d) who promoted competitiveness and not cooperation among work group members, would likely have employees who appraise the psychological climate as detrimental to their organizational well-being.

Evaluative Pressure and Learning

Historically, the evaluative pressure construct was used to investigate the phenomenon of the feelings school children experienced when they took exams. Many empirical studies examined the negative impact of fear and anxiety on test performance (Cassady, 2004; Sarason, Mandler, & Craighill, 1952). This study seeks to explore the same phenomenon, but in the context of adults in the workplace. Few explicit studies of the construct evaluative pressure and learning have been conducted in the workplace. An exception to this statement was the study conducted by Lee et al. (2004) which examined the effect of inconsistency of workplace rewards and evaluative pressure on employees' willingness to innovate. In addition to Lee and her

associates study that explicitly addressed evaluative pressure and learning in the workplace, the literature contains a long and rich history of studies about more general, but related constructs: threat, anxiety, and fear. Evaluative pressure is experienced when an employee feels he is being critically scrutinized in order to be judged. As a result, defensive feelings of being threatened generate anxiety. This anxiety has been described as manifesting "feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, heightened somatic reaction, anticipation of punishment or loss of status and esteem" (Mandler & Sarason, 1952 p. 166). This early study, as well as several related studies (DiMattia, Yeager, & Dube, 1989; Gibb, 1991), distinguish between anxiety that is self centered and anxiety that is task centered.

Self-centered anxiety impairs subjects' performance on a variety of tasks that require learning. This is the kind of anxiety evaluative pressure evokes. In contrast, the studies found that task-centered anxiety served to motivate the subjects and improve performance. In more recent work conducted in modern work environments, Rosen (2008) reached similar conclusions: too little or too much anxiety is not as productive as having *just enough anxiety,* which serves to energize a leader and an organization.

Anxiety is associated with organization leaders who are egotistical leaders: arrogant, dismissive, pretentious, self-absorbed, entitled. They tend to be perfectionistic leaders who are obsessive, intrusive, mistrusting, over-controlling and rigid. Finally, they are volatile and can be abusive, manipulative, and unpredictable. Clearly, all these behaviors exhibited by someone who is in authority over an employee's professional future can create anxiety. These types of leaders do not hesitate to harshly criticize their subordinates. Rosen (2008) cited as an example the leader of Quest Communications who is now serving time in jail for his illegal financial acts as CEO, as an example of a fear-inspiring, highly evaluative leader.

Another example is Frost's (2004) work on *Toxic Emotions at Work*. He cited leaders who led with fear and intimidation. The consequence was impaired performance of the people around them. People who experience a sense of threat in an atmosphere of anxiety are distracted by these features of the environment and have diminished access to their higher-level cognitive functions—the ones they need to be able to be creative and to learn.

Evaluative Pressure, Intrapersonal, and Interpersonal Behavior

One of the realities of organizational life today is the highly differentiated distribution of power throughout the organization's hierarchy. Bosses are required to conduct performance reviews, typically, at least annually, and subordinates are expected to use the feedback to improve their job performance.

Both sides of that process have the potential to impair learning and optimal functioning within the organization or the small group to which one contributes. Being the recipient of an insensitive and critical evaluation generates fear and threat, just as the process of being held accountable (i.e., having to justify one's beliefs, feelings, and actions to someone else) triggers very similar processes (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999).

A series of studies enlighten what may be happening in those performance evaluation meetings. Lazarus and Folkmann (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) have put forth a four-step theory of coping with an evaluative event. First, the individual appraises the situation: "Am I in trouble?" The event is scanned to determine whether it implies harm, threat, loss, challenge, is irrelevant to one's well-being, or is benign. Then a second appraisal occurs: "What should be done in response to this appraisal?" The individual examines coping options, efficacy

expectations, and the resources available. Finally, coping mechanisms are engaged. They are of two types: problem-focused efforts and emotion-focused efforts.

Carver and White (1994) built on Gray's (1987) work and generated measures for two human systems that are activated by environmental events. One system is Behavioral Activation System (BAS) and the other is the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS). The activation system regulates appetitive motivation and is sensitive to positive affect and produces hopeful, elated affect. The inhibition system regulates aversive motivation and is sensitive to anxiety and evaluation; it scans the environment for signals of punishment. Thus, the observed results of people choosing to withdraw and shut down when faced with an environment high in evaluative pressure may be through the mechanism of a coping system that triggers the Behavioral Inhibition System. This behavior is consistent with Argyris' (1990) observation of people opting for self-sealing behavior of having undiscussable topics and fear responses, instead of speaking up and sharing their thoughts and opinions about how to move forward.

Facilitating the move from Model I to Model II

Argyris (2002) studied the difference between people's espoused theory of action versus their theory-in-use. His research showed that people actually act on four basic values motivated by the desire to retain unilateral control, maximize winning, minimize losing, suppress negative feelings, and be as rational as possible. He concluded, "The purpose of all these values is to avoid embarrassment or threat, feeling vulnerable or incompetent. In this respect, the master program that most people use is profoundly defensive" (Argyris, 2008 pp. 25-26).

Argyris experimented with a technique to move people from this defensiveness to a more productive way to reason by having leaders prepare a case study based on their own experience in the context of their own position with the people with whom they deal every day. The case was to

be written using a special technique. Argyris (2002) asked executives to write the case on a paper divided into two halves. On the right side, executives wrote a script for an interaction—what they would say and then what they imagined the other parties to the conversation would say. On the left hand side, the executives wrote unspoken thoughts and feelings. Argyris (1974) then directed the executives to analyze the interaction and look for evidence of attempting to maintain unilateral control, maximizing winning and minimizing losing, suppressing negative feelings and maintaining rationality. Argyris (1990, 2002) summarized these behaviors as *defensive reasoning*. Inevitably, the executives found all these qualities in their own behaviors. Argyris (1974, 2002) then had the executives consider how to change their behaviors in accordance with these three basic values: offer valid information, create opportunities for people to make informed choices, and carefully monitor implementation. Typically, Argyris (1993) claimed that it can require up to five years of these kinds of exercises to bring about the changes in thinking he seeks. The author thinks the reason for this long process is that he is not using the best approach.

Argyris' (2002) own analysis is that people are feeling threatened and defensive when they work in an environment in which leaders are trying to maintain control, win competitively, and refuse to share their feelings. Rather than address their feelings, Argyris (2002) directed attention to what he calls defective reasoning. His focus is on how people think. He wants to change how people feel by teaching them a different way to think, by striving for better quality reasoning. A better approach to helping people change their behavior (i.e., to learn new ways of doing things) is to fight the negative effect of those feelings with a direct relief of those feelings.

Maslow's Depiction of Movement from Need (Fear) to Higher-Level Functioning

Maslow (1968) proposed a model of human behavior that he called the hierarchy of needs and depicted it with a pyramid as shown in Figure 4. It provides another perspective on how

humans may transition from being needy to being able to transcend neediness and achieve higher level functioning. At the base, the most fundamental needs are physiological needs for food and shelter. Maslow's (1968) widely acknowledged and partially supported theory (Harbaugh, 1972) indicated that an individual will be able to enjoy and strive for the next higher level needs only when lower needs are met. After food and shelter are obtained, the need for safety, (i.e., for security, stability, and freedom from fear) becomes salient and sought after. Note how fundamental a need this is as indicated by its place on the second rung of the hierarchy of needs ladder. People must have their needs for safety met before they can progress up the pyramid. Only after safety is achieved can the needs for love, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization be pursued. It is not consistent with what social scientists know about the hierarchy of needs to expect people to be able to combat a sense of being threatened (i.e., fearful) by using a purely cognitive approach to addressing the fear (Ashkanasy, 2003). Instead, the fear, with its negative consequences for learning, should be addressed by satisfying the fearful individual's or team's need for safety—in this case, psychological safety.
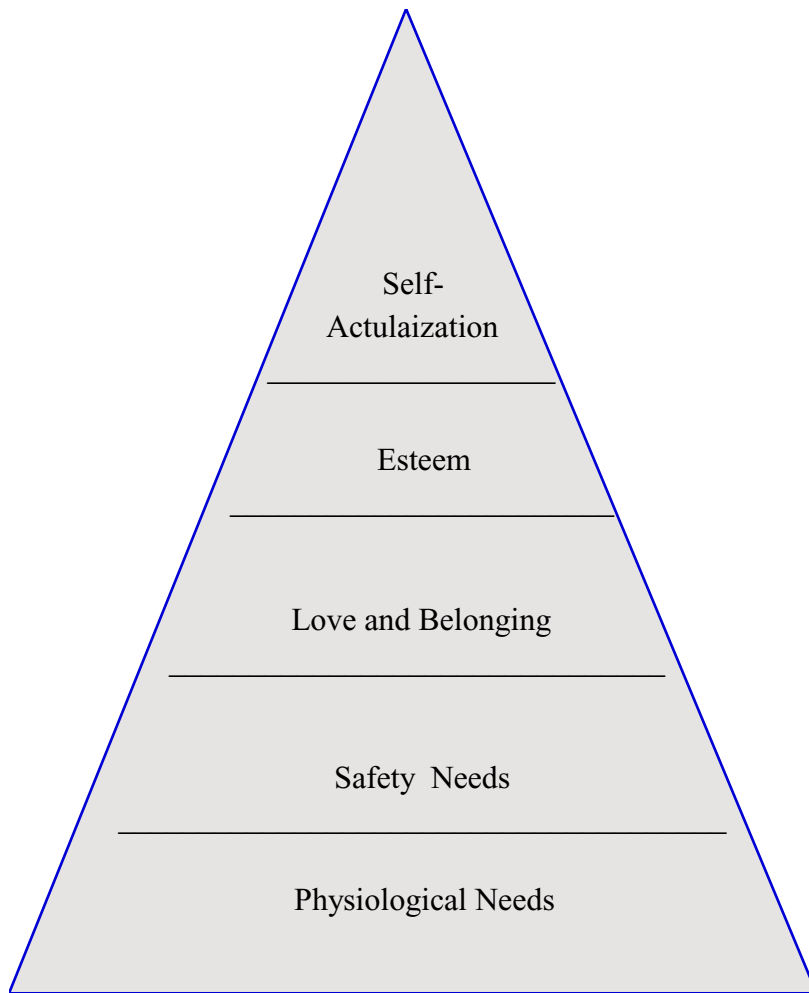
Figure 4. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Neurological and Physiological Research Findings

And yet another problem with Argyris' (1993) approach is recent research about the

human brain and emotion. LeDoux (1995) researched fear and the human brain and argued that

fear is the most fundamental emotion because it is so essential to human survival. Fear can be

externally or internally activated (i.e., through sensory perceptions or through memories and

experiences). Ashkanasy (2003) explained in a very accessible way the physiological reason that

it is so difficult "for fear to be unlearned through cortical input, and why it is so much more

difficult for us to control our fear reactions than it is for fear to take control of our cognitive

functions" (Ashkanasy, 2003 p. 15). The reason is that whereas the connections between the amygdala (the central processors of the fear system) and the cortex (the higher-level, logical thinking part of the brain) are reciprocal, there are more connections from the amygdale to the cortex than from the cortex to the amygdale (LeDoux, 1995).

Argyris (1993) suggested that the most fundamental emotion to which human beings apparently are hard-wired for receptivity, fear, can be adequately addressed and controlled by pointing out that the feelings and the resulting thought and strategies are illogical. This does not seem to be valid (LeDoux, 1995) and possibly explains why it takes such an extended period of time for his training intervention to show any results.

This study explored the weaknesses in Argyris' (1993) method to move people from Model I thinking (win-lose) to Model II thinking (win-win) through analysis. Instead, this project examined how experienced coaches managed the sense of fear and threat people experience when they are evaluated. This study investigated how an Action-Learning coach introduces a climate of psychological safety in the context of evaluative pressure.

This research seeks to discover how Action-Learning coaches foster a climate conducive to learning—a climate characterized by psychological safety. A psychologically safe climate is a climate in which people are not threatened and are not worried about being embarrassed. By definition, it is a climate in which people are willing to admit having made a mistake or not knowing something and simultaneously believe others will not diminish their regard for them. This research contributes to knowledge about how to invite people to learn to change their unproductive behaviors.

This section reviewed the definition of evaluative pressure and the features of a climate characterized by evaluative pressure. It also reviewed the impact of evaluative pressure on

organizational climate, learning, and on how evaluative pressure affects intrapersonal and interpersonal behavior. The section concluded with a summary of the deficiencies of Argyris' method to help people overcome their sense of being threatened and defensive.

Conclusion

The literature review began with an overview of the decision-making team literature that served as a backdrop for understanding decision-making groups. Two perspectives, the functional perspective and the action perspective, were reviewed in detail because they describe features of how Action-Learning teams function. Specifically, they very deliberately approach the problem-solving process particularly regarding care in defining the problem. A review of action science also provided insight into why Action-Learning teams have been successful: because they use reflective action taking and clear group communication strategies to support effective problem-solving behavior. The elements of Action Learning were described followed by a summary of the research conducted on Action-Learning teams. The sparse empirical facilitation literature was described in general, and the O'Neil study was summarized in detail because it documented the role of the Action-Learning coach.

All this material served as a context for examining group dynamics in a workplace setting. Action-Learning teams are charged with addressing and solving intractable human problems in organizations. That charge requires that teams be able to learn to interact creatively and to solve problems experimentally. The problem solving requires that group members be able to communicate effectively and to learn. In addition to solving problems, Action-Learning teams are also used to evaluate high-potential employees' readiness for advancement. This makes Action-Learning teams an ideal venue to study the factors that enable learning and creativity in the

context of evaluation. The Action-Learning coach's role is to set the group climate, to model effective interpersonal behavior, and to support the group's engagement in self-directed learning.

The literature on organization climate, self-directed learning theory, and psychological safety was reviewed. The review discussed how coaches affect those constructs and how that behavior in turn affects how team members process information and mange themselves and how team members relate to each other. Next, organizational climate and evaluative pressure and how it affects learning, processing information, and interaction among team members was discussed. The literature reviewed on organization climate indicated that a climate characterized by psychological safety enables teams to learn, whereas a climate characterized by evaluative pressure tends to discourage engagement and participation.

Because Action-Learning teams have had real-world success in solving difficult workplace problems, knowing how the coach in those teams fosters a climate conducive to learning makes an important contribution to knowledge about how coaches can support group effectiveness. Argyris' theory of action and Knowles' theory of self-directed learning served as the conceptual framework or lenses through which the author looked to answer the research question "How do Action-Learning coaches report that they foster a climate conducive to learning?"

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study, key words are defined as follows.

Action Learning is a group process design in which teams of four to eight people work together to generate solutions to intractable human problems encountered in organizations. The teams are served by a coach whose job it is to attend to the team's process and learning. The problem is often identified by senior leaders in the organization.

Leader-related terms

Coach, facilitator, consultant, and learning advisor are terms found in the literature that address the phenomena with which this study is concerned. For purposes of clarity, I will use the term coach when referring to the person in an Action-Learning team charged with helping it learn effectively.

Climate-related terms

Climate for evaluative pressure is defined as formal and informal organizational practices that emphasize competition and evaluation (Lee, Edmondson, Thomke et al., 2004).

Climate for psychological safety is defined as "formal and informal organizational practices and procedures guiding and supporting open and trustful interactions within the work environment...a work environment where employees are safe to speak up without being rejected or punished" (Baer & Frese, 2003).

Organization climate "refers to a *situation* and its links to thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of organizational members. Thus it is temporal, subjective, and often subject to direct manipulation by people with power and influence" (Denison, 1996).

Psychological climate is the cognitive appraisal of the group's environment (Denison, 1996).

Team climate is "shared subjective experiences of organizational members that have important consequences of organizational functioning and effectiveness" (Ashkanasy et al., 2000).

Behavior-related terms

Interpersonal behavior is defined as the manner in which one individual interacts with another individual, for example, how one listens and speaks to others (Edmondson et al., 2001)**.**

Intrapersonal behavior is defined as the manner in which one manages oneself through mental decision-making rules and modes of thinking (Argyris, 1993).

Learning-related terms

Learning is defined as "the act or process by which behavioral change, knowledge, skill and attitudes are acquired" (Knowles et al., 2005).

Self-directed learning is defined as "taking control of the goals and purposes of learning and assuming ownership of learning" (Knowles et al., 2005).

Group learning orientation is defined as "the desire of a team to gain new skills, improve overall competence, and master new situations" (Wilkens & London, 2006).

Emotional-condition-related terms

Evaluative pressure is defined as "the degree to which salient others are seen as judging rather than enabling one's performance" (Lee, Edmondson, Thomke et al., 2004).

Psychological safety is defined as an "employee's sense of being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career" (Kahn, 1990)

Team psychological safety is defined as shared perceptions of the sense that it is safe to be one's self in the context of the team (Edmondson, 1999).

Conceptual Framework Revisited: Model II and Self-Directed Learning

It appears that Action-Learning coaches facilitate groups' transition from defensive Model I reasoning to the more functional Model II reasoning which enables them to engage in double-loop learning. The author will look for evidence of how coaches support this transition.

Self-directed learning occurs in an *Atmosphere of Adultness.* The author will be attentive to the means by which coaches enact the atmosphere that supports self-directed learning

(Knowles et al., 2005). The next chapter describes the methodology used to gather data from

Action-Learning coaches and to analyze them.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Chapter 3 contains a description of the method used to conduct this research project. It is a qualitative study that sought expert testimony from experienced practitioners about a phenomenon that is not well understood. The research question was, "How do Action-Learning coaches foster a climate conducive to learning?" The goal was to explore how Action-Learning coaches manage competing group dynamics in a manner that results in a group's ability to learn and to produce creative solutions for intractable business problems.

Methods

This chapter addresses participant selection, how participants who met the criteria were identified and contacted, and how data were gathered and then analyzed. In addition, the documents used to contact participants are referenced, as is the informed consent forms provided to the participants, as well as the safeguards employed to protect the participants from coercion and distress.

Participant Criteria

The criteria used to select interviewees were Action-Learning coaches who (a) had experience coaching Action-Learning teams for a minimum of three full cycles (formation of the group to its resolution when it either made recommendations or took action) and (b) worked with Action-Learning teams that operate in large (>500 employees) for-profit businesses or government environments. The purpose for this criterion was to identify people who were working in generally competitive environments and in organizations that are likely to have formal succession plans.

Finding Participants

Potential interviewees were identified by making contact with people who have made presentations, written articles, dissertations, or books about Action Learning and asking them to make themselves available to be interviewed about their coaching experiences. They were also asked to nominate other experienced Action-Learning coaches.

Contacting Participants

Appendix A contains the letter used to contact people who were known through their public-domain work on Action Learning. The letter requests referrals to people they know or have trained in Action Learning. The letter used to contact the people who are referred is in Appendix B. Appendix C contains the letter addressed to people who do not meet the study criteria thanking them for their interest and explaining that they do not meet the criteria for this study. Those meeting the study criteria were provided (by e-mail or hard copy, their preference) with copies of the informed consent form in Appendix D.

Data Gathering

Semistructured interviews were used to gather the data about the expert experiences of these coaches. At the beginning of the interview, the participants were provided with the informed consent form in Appendix D (if they had not already received it and returned it prior to the interview) and told that they could stop the interview at any time without negative consequences to them. No participants became uncomfortable or distressed during the interviews so the procedures to discontinue were not used.

Site and Number of Participants

For the face to face interviews, the author traveled to the locations of the participants. The author met participants at locations they designated. Some interviews were conducted in the

informants' homes and some took place in restaurants. The balance of the interviews were conducted over the telephone.

The initial target number of participants was 20. Interviews were conducted until saturation was achieved, defined as consistent repetition of themes and topics with no new data being added to the information already collected. That condition was met with 16 participants.

Interviewing Participants

Most of the interviews lasted about one hour, although a few were 2 hr or more in duration. The interview protocol (Appendix E) was derived from theoretical and empirical findings in the literature about climate setting and features of group climates including psychological safety and evaluative pressure. The coaches were invited to articulate, to the extent possible, their demeanors, verbalizations, and behaviors as they lay the groundwork for the group's climate. The information sought was largely tacit knowledge, thus although these people were experts, they were not necessarily accustomed to reflecting on and articulating what they do to set the group climate. The interview protocol was designed to direct attention to the coaches' largely intuitive-level behavior and intentions.

Although the interview questions were informed by the literature, the author was also open to and probed for information that took the conversation in a different direction. Some questions were more open-ended and sought information about the coach and the coach's experience, philosophy, and objectives when coaching Action-Learning teams. The author attempted to broaden the inquiry beyond only the topics found in the literature so the ability to discover new experiences and perspectives was not precluded, while at the same time retaining a focus on the coach's role in the learning that occurs in Action-Learning teams.

Process for Management and Analysis of Interview Data

The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed by a commercial service. The confidentiality agreement the transcribers signed is in Appendix F. The transcriptions became word-processing files 15-20 pages in length.

The process for analyzing the data was highly iterative. First, the interviews were listened to while reading the transcripts to verify that the transcription was accurate. Minor modifications were made. Then each interview was listened to at least twice to access the emotion, intonation, and inflections that infused the words with additional meanings.

The next step used deductive logic to identify themes that the literature review indicated would be present. Examples are psychological safety, evaluative pressure, and factors that affect group climate. Altas.ti, a qualitative software program, was used to label the transcribed passages that illuminated the topic.

The next pass used inductive logic to identify the themes raised in the interviews. Each transcribed interview was analyzed paragraph by paragraph to make sure every topic raised by the interviews was identified and labeled. Each passage was labeled with the theme it addressed. Thematic analysis was used to bring a coherent story into focus.

After the extensive linking process that sometimes resulted in the same passage being linked with several themes, the author used the software function that allows the user to list all the themes and topics and then manipulate them in a manner similar to what is done with mind mapping software. Using this technique, the author was able to group together the 50 themes that emerged from the data into a more manageable number of categories and organize them in such a way that they told the story described in Chapter 4. The software also enabled the author to printout all the passages that were identified with a particular label providing the ability to easily

read the passages together and obtain a sense of the multidimensionality and detailed nuance of the coaches' comments.

Pilot Study

The pilot study consisted of interviews with three Action-Learning coaches. The interview questions yielded answers primarily around techniques and not as much about the coaches' philosophy, intent, and lived experience as the author had hoped. As a consequence, comments that helped to contextualize the questions were added, and some of the questions were changed to ask explicitly for information about the topics of interest.

Methodological Limitations

The results of this study are not generalizable to other populations due to the way the participants were selected. Nevertheless, the findings add to what we know about how experienced coaches manage group dynamics in service to learning.

Summary

Expert testimony about climate setting in groups that experience conflicting psychological forces was sought. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain information about the coaches' philosophies and experiences in their roles as coaches in Action Learning groups. The interviews were analyzed using interpretative techniques and qualitative research software.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews conducted with experienced Action-Learning coaches. The purpose of the interviews was to discover the answer to the research question: How do Action-Learning coaches report that they foster a climate conducive to learning? The rationale for seeking the answer to this question from experienced Action-Learning coaches was to obtain expert testimony about what they do to set in motion group dynamics that result in the creative and productive outcomes Action-Learning teams produce. The goal of this research was to articulate and codify the tacit knowledge skilled practitioners engage when they act in their roles as coaches (Polanyi, 1958).

The chapter is organized by first describing the experience and background of the 16 coaches who were interviewed. Second, the findings are summarized into three categories. The three categories are, broadly, unfreezing (how the tendencies to be defensive and to drive to solution are disrupted), change (how the coaches use the elements of Action Learning as well as themselves as instruments to effect change), and refreezing (the new behaviors team members develop and carry forward).

The Coaches

Sixteen highly skilled and articulate coaches were interviewed. Five of the interviews were conducted in person and 11 were conducted over the telephone. Most were completed in 1 hr, although several were over 2 hr in duration. Twelve of the 16 participants held doctorate degrees in management or social science. Six participants served in academia and conducted research, taught and consulted. The remaining 10 were independent consultants or individuals who held positions in industry. Eight interviewees were men and eight were women. Each of the three major groups that advocate for Action Learning in the United States was represented,

including coaches influenced by Dilworth (Willis & Dilworth, 2003) and Willis (1999) of Virginia Commonwealth University and Georgia State University, respectively, Marquardt (Marquardt et al., 2009) of World Institute of Action Learning (WIAL) and George Washington University and Marsick (2009) of Teachers College Columbia University.

Cumulatively, these coaches have published over 20 books on Action Learning, nevertheless, these interviewees were practitioners, not theorists. One coach had in excess of 15 years of experience working in Action-Learning teams, seven had between 10 to 15 years of experience and 8 had 9 years or less. The least experienced Action-Learning coach had been practicing for 2 years. In spite of that relatively short time, he had clocked in excess of 50 contact hrs acting as a coach in Action-Learning teams. Obtaining expert testimony from experienced coaches provided an opportunity for scholarship to be informed by the life experience and insight of practitioners. The goal of the research was to articulate what the expert does, often instinctively. To maintain the coaches' anonymity, they are simply identified by the letters A-P assigned by the chronological order of the interviews.

Two of the coaches made a distinction between the role they play as project manager, i.e., proposing Action Learning as a tool to a client's senior management and working with them to select the problem and the participants. These coaches evolved their practice into the pattern of training members of the employer's staff to play the role of coach on the team. People on the employer's staff selected to be trained as coaches were generally human resources training staff members or experienced managers with exceptional communication skills. Nevertheless, these coaches, too, had extensive experience as coaches in Action Learning groups. The participants in this study were indeed the experts from whom the author was seeking to learn.

Unfreezing: Coaches Open a Space for a Different Group Dynamic

The purpose of using Action Learning in an organization is to provide team members with an experience that will, among other things, help them learn how to be highly effective team members. This learning basically involves a change in behavior. Schein (1998) building on Lewin's (1948, 1951, 1997) theory articulated a three-stage model that starts with unfreezing, (i.e., creating a willingness to change). The coaches noted people's tendency to behave in groups prior to the Action Learning experience, colloquially, as *business as usual.* The coaches described two business-as-usual behaviors in groups that make it hard for the group to function as an effective Action-Learning team and thus described the behaviors that need to change. One was defensive behavior and the other was the drive to solution. In order to change, team members must shift out of business as usual. The coaches described how they were able to reduce defensiveness and discourage premature drive to solution that served to unfreeze team members' behavior.

Coaches Change the Climate to Reduce Defensiveness

An often-unacknowledged atmosphere of judgmental evaluation prevails in workgroups. As a result, the ideas and suggestions offered by group members often set off a chain of competitive responses. This climate seems to invite group members to posture and preen. They operate from a defensive stance that positions them to retain control, maximize winning, minimize losing, and avoid embarrassment (Argyris, 1995). As a result, team members advocate their positions, evaluate others, and attribute causes to what they are trying to understand. These behaviors create an atmosphere characterized by evaluative pressure. The result is that people feel threatened and unwilling to make themselves open to new information and new ways of

behaving, (i.e., learning). In this sense, business as usual is antilearning. One participant characterized a typical team member attitude this way.

> What I think is you'd be crazy to show up without your armor. Right? "You're being defensive," I'm like, "Why would you not be defensive? What the hell is that?" "You're so defensive." Damn right I am. [If] it's not safe that's exactly what I am, is defensive. (Participant P)

Defensiveness also results from aggressive team members who attack other team members. In business as usual, that aggressive behavior is typically ignored. Participant M commented that groups are usually seen as a zero-sum game in which there is "unlimited need for power and limited power." As a result, members use "a variety of aggressive tactics, or…manipulative tactics or grabbing tactics" to accomplish their agenda.

The coaches change the group climate to reduce defensiveness when they call out factors that cause people to become defensive and address them forthrightly. Through skillful questioning, they help the team members to access their tacit knowledge and then help them draw conclusions about how to work more effectively as team members. Quoting a dialogue between a coach and team members,

> "Alright, well when he asks questions like that it really shuts me down." "Okay so how can we decide that we can phrase our questions to help each other?" "We stay in the positive." "Well, we cannot ask nasty questions." "'Why is it important that we don't shut somebody down?" (Participant C)

By specifically asking questions about the negative impact of actions that cause people to need to defend themselves, the coach invites team members to reflect. The team members reach their own conclusions about the importance of conducting discussions in the team in a manner that reduces people's need to be defensive.

Coaches Discourage Premature Drive to Solution

A second feature of business as usual the coaches reported frequently observing was that when teams are presented with a problem to solve, the members tend to react by accepting the problem as defined and then energetically beginning to generate solutions.

> A lot of times they'll jump right to solutions and fixing things, so right off the bat, the team is going to derail….I want them to learn how to think strategically, think divergently, learn how to frame issues before jumping into them. (Participant I)

The coaches speculated that the reason for this tendency to focus on solutions is that it feels inherently satisfying because it is positive and action-oriented.

> I understand where it's coming from…the business model that most of them operate in is that they have to make these very fast decisions. Here we want them to have this other kind of thinking process going on because as the challenges become more complex, they're probably not going to be able to make snap decisions. (Participant A)

The reason there is a tendency to jump in and start focusing on a solution is, "They know they get paid to do a job, they get paid to think, they get paid to solve a problem…They rush to the solution" (Participant H). However, that urge often leads to very unsatisfactory outcomes. Often the most difficult part of addressing an intractable human problem in an organization is defining it accurately so the solution addresses the real, fundamental issue and not merely a symptom (Revans, 1998).

In summary, the coaches reported that group members behaved defensively to maintain control and protect themselves from aggressive behavior in business-as-usual mode. Additionally, groups often eagerly began generating solutions without carefully analyzing the way the problem was framed and defined and, therefore, failed to assess whether they were solving the right problem. The coaches reported that to a large extent, the structure of an Action Learning program shifted people out of the defensive and unproductive tendencies of business as usual. Below are

the features of the Action Learning structure that the coaches reported introduced change into the team and encouraged people to operate successfully as a team.

Change Part One: Coaches use Action Learning's Elements to Foster a Climate Conducive to Learning

The coaches reported that eight elements of the structure of an Action Learning program helped shift team members out of business as usual and opened them to a willingness to change. Several features of Action Learning as a group process stop habitual behaviors and set the stage for different behaviors to emerge.

In response to a question about how coaches negate defensiveness and set the tone that enables learning to occur one coach commented,

> I actually think that the structure of the method creates conditions that allow that to happen and that, in a way, insist on it happening. Now, obviously, no one is going to jump in, in any case, with their full self immediately, they're going to need to know that it's safe…it's about creating safety. And I think that [the] structure of Action Learning creates safety for people. And when people are safe, they will show up with themselves. And when they aren't safe they show up with their armor. (Participant P)

The coaches specifically cited eight features of Action Learning that contribute to the development of teams that learn how to learn together and function at a high level: attention directed to the importance of an accurate problem definition, use of the sponsor to raise the stakes, fostering an attitude of inquiry; using questions to promote reflection, commitment to action, exploiting the team's diverse composition, use of feedback, and the judicious exercise of the role of the coach.

Coach Directs Attention to the Importance of an Accurate Problem Definition

Accurately defining the problem and reaching team consensus on the definition of the problem is a critical way Action Learning shifts people out of business as usual. "Have you questioned assumptions? 'If you were your five-year-old child, how might you look at this

problem, or this challenge?' Those are the kinds of things the coaches will do to keep them from

starting to converge" (Participant B). After the coach provides a brief introduction about Action

Learning, the sponsor or a team member presents the problem the group will work to try to solve.

The problem presenters typically are given an intentionally limited opportunity to describe the

problem as they perceive it. This design element of Action Learning structure introduces some

ambiguity and under-definition of the problem from the start. After group members have asked an

initial round of questions, the coach asks group members to write down what their definitions of

the problem is at that point in time. The coach then asks the group members to—literally—read

what they wrote down. Coaches remarked on the frequent experience of astonishment among

group members as they hear how exposure to the same information can be interpreted so

differently. This adds further insight into the complexity and ambiguity of the problem definition

and helps group members begin to understand the critical importance of defining the problem

accurately before attempting to generate solutions. One coach said it this way,

> We don't always get to the core problem when we're problem solving. We often just skim the surface of it, and we begin to find solutions before we really have clarified what the issue is that we should be working on…so we've got to make sure that we're lasered in on the right thing, because I just see that so much when problems keep coming back and back and back. And that just means we're not solving the real problem. (Participant G)

Depending on the time frame the team must work within, as well as the complexity of the

problem, the coach may ask for definitions of the problem to be written down and then read

numerous times before the group can answer the coach's question, "Is there agreement on the

definition of the problem?" affirmatively.

> "So what is the problem?" You've got to get that first round to be sure to put it into a problem form…at least they're starting to see what part of the elephant they're touching or feeling, etc… If I hear people getting some clarity and movement, I will say, "Write it down, what is the problem?" (Participant M)

Several coaches commented on a frequently-occurring feature of Action-Learning teams: They become invested in the problem they work on and as a result, display high energy and enthusiasm for solving it. The coaches cited two reasons for this engagement with the problem. One is that the problem itself is significant and its resolution will, indeed, be of consequence to the organization.

> One of the senior sponsors was saying that to him the magic [of Action Learning] was the tremendous ownership that he saw of this problem. That really brought the energy and engagement to a much higher level. (Participant E)

The other reason coaches cited for the high degree of engagement and problem ownership is that because the group is made to focus its attention on reaching consensus around the definition of the problem carefully and accurately, the problem is often reframed by the group. As a result, the newly crafted problem becomes the creation of the team, and a natural sense of ownership results.

> And I heard it from the people, as well. "We owned this problem. It was our problem more than it was [the problem owner's] problem. And the reason was that step that we've defined the problem, we didn't throw [the problem owner's definition] out. But we reframed it in a way that was in our mind more powerful and compelling and useful, and we all owned this. (Participant E)

Another coach commented on the same phenomenon.

> And I'll say, "What's the question?" And they'll say, "Here's the question." And I'll tell them, I'll say, "Well you think this really is the question?"… I'll say, "Then your job is to reframe the question. So tell the sponsor that he's asking the wrong question. And do you think this was the better question? And if you believe, if all of you believe that, then that's the first step. You reframe the question, say this is what we want to be working on." And so the sponsor, he has to, or she has to, get into the process as well. And that's a very empowering feeling that the team has once the sponsor says, "You know, you're right. You're absolutely right. This is the wrong question. Your question is better." It's a powerful piece. (Participant H)

The problem drives the content of the learning the team pursues. The team is made up of highly diverse individuals who are not experts. However, the team is not restricted from seeking expertise from resources that lie outside the team. If the coaches observe the team floundering for

lack of information relevant to the problem, they may ask, "Who *does* have the expertise?". The significant problem becomes the driver for any educational material or presentations from experts the team may request to help them bring relevant information to bear on the problem. Several coaches called this kind of information exposure *just-in-time learning.*

Coaches Use the Sponsor to Raise the Stakes

A second element of Action Learning that shifts people out of business as usual and opens them to change is the role of the sponsor. "So in terms of, again, setting the tone, creating a climate for learning,…we make use of the sponsor …the experience not being business as usual,…comes from the sponsor as well as any of the executives that are [participating] in the program."

Several coaches commented on the important role the problem sponsor plays in the development of an effective Action-Learning team. Typically, smaller organizations' highest-level executives or larger organizations' executives several levels above the rank of the team members identify and introduce the problem to the team. They are also the people to whom the team presents at the conclusion of the process.

> Well, having senior leadership sponsorship is critical in any organization. Lots of times we have task forces then we have people who are charged with team-based initiatives. But it is rare to have senior leadership engaged in the way that it's possible in Action Learning. And with that kind of sponsorship I believe that door is open [so] that people get a chance to develop skills that they never have otherwise. There are commitments of dollars and attention and time. All of which are rather unique. (Participant J)

Having high-profile attention elevates the importance of the group's work in the eyes of the group members. The coaches often work with the sponsors in advance of the team launch. The coaches buffer the team by encouraging sponsors to suspend their natural impatience for results. They remind the executives that they are inviting the team to be creative and that invitation may result in generating divergent viewpoints and recommendations. Coaches

encourage the sponsors to change their inclinations to be directive and instead also work to ask great questions.

> There is high-level support. Because, obviously, the more they see that the executives consider this important, the more opportunity you'd have as a coach for pushing them to take risks, for challenging them about their learning. We in team-based projects always contract with a sponsor…of the project. (Participant K)

The coaches encourage sponsors to communicate the value they place on team members' learning in addition to generating useful research and problem solutions. This explicit commitment to learning makes the time the team devotes to the process of teaching themselves new team-work behaviors and using reflection legitimate and sanctioned.

Finally, Action-Learning teams represent tangible evidence of the investment of time and money an organization is willing to make in the development and growth of team members. Often, being selected for participation on an Action-Learning team is considered a privilege and an indication that the employee is expected to excel. The sponsor's attention and involvement with the team members affirms Action Learning's importance and raises the profile of participation.

Coaches Foster an Attitude of Inquiry

Use of questions is the third way people are shifted out of business as usual and is another feature of Action Learning that contributes to a change in climate that fosters learning. One of the fundamental rules of the group process is: statements can only be made in response to a question. One coach said, "I think the magic…is the absolute focus on the primacy of questions over answers" (Participant E). Coaches reported that this shift to an attitude of inquiry and the deliberate cultivation of a sense of genuine curiosity opens the team members to new information and new ways of configuring the information they have. One of the questions coaches often ask is, "How can we ask better questions?".

So as long as I ask great questions, they're asking questions about the topic or the problem, I'm asking questions that get them to reflect on how they're working together. And some questions are never fully answerable like 'What could we do better as a group?' is never fully answerable, so once I ask that question, their subconscious never forgets it, and it's always searching. (Participant M)

Another coach remarked,

And I think that the ability to ask good questions is the other piece that makes Action Learning as a training tool and a learning tool so valuable, because I think most leaders don't do a good job in that arena.… I'm constantly working on how could I have asked a better question or a different question, because…I notice…movement and progress and real thinking occurs when you ask those powerful questions. (Participant G)

Questions can also surface assumptions in a non-threatening manner. Several coaches

remarked on the usefulness of the concept Argyris (1982) introduced, the *ladder of inference*.

Argyris advocated starting low on the ladder of inference, meaning that it is prudent to verify

conclusions one draws from what one observes, and not to make leaps to judgment based on

unverified assumptions.

Through Action Learning we learn to ask very powerful questions. We then recognize the simplicity of just going and asking somebody. Don't assume…a lot of the groups, in general, are dysfunctional in terms of "So and so is doing an ugly." "He's trying to build his empire." "She's stabbing me in the back," sort of thing. But when you put it out on the table and then start asking the questions on "What was your intention?" you find out they're coming from this very positive place. "I was doing this to help you. Now that you tell me how it felt from your perspective I can see where you would have interpreted my actions that way." And so learning how to ask a question to open the conversation to understand where the other person was coming from before making judgment… if you can go to somebody that you're fuming at with an open mind that maybe they're coming from a good place and just ask the question. (Participant C)

A simple question such as, "Why did you do that?" asked with genuine curiosity often reveals the

actor's good intentions. Coaches noted the interpretation of behavior as offensive was often based

on unverified assumptions that can be assessed through the use of direct questions. Further,

questions are the mechanism by which each team member has a voice.

Part of it is that everyone has a voice to their question. And what do I mean by that? A story about my son who went into the business world several years ago, into a new

project, and he said "Dad, I'm sitting at the table and there [are] all these seasoned, smart people around, what can I offer?" I said, "A lot of great questions." And so I think, inevitably, this invites everyone into the conversation. Because everyone can ask a question, and strive to ask great questions. And no one has to have an answer…there isn't an emphasis on "Please give me the answer." (Participant E)

Questions also reduce defensiveness.

They learn the safety of questions, that by going to somebody and saying, "You know you really screwed up here." They're going to shut down. By going to somebody and saying, "What was your thinking that had you take this path?". (Participant C)

Another coach commented,

So if we can operate with the use of questions that are genuinely curious questions…you have voice inflection, too. So even if they ask you a "why" question, if I ask it to you in a very compassionate and curious tone to my voice, you hear it in a way that enables you to want to share, because I hear your sincerity in your question….I don't feel defensive. I feel like you are genuinely curious. (Participant G)

A further comment,

I think the other thing that creates psychological safety is…that when we introduce [Action Learning], we talk about the value of the beginner's mind or the pizza man story? And so we talk about the value of the stupid question and the value of asking the best questions and what is the best question…. And so I think that changes people's way of thinking about what they're going to be about. That instead of being so smart and having answers, they're going to be about asking questions and then therefore, how they're going to interact with other people is not going to be showing about how smart they are….So that creates a whole safety for people. (Participant P)

Coaches Use Questions to Promote Reflection

One of the results of the extensive use of questions is reflection. Deliberate and consistent use of reflection shifts people out of business as usual. Reflection is related to good-quality questions and complements that skill.

Well, if you ask a good question, how can you not reflect?. That's a natural consequence of a question, reflection. Even a lousy question evokes some reflection….I wouldn't encourage the team to sit down and reflect on what's going on right now…I wouldn't say that. I would ask a question that would require reflection in order to answer. (Participant F)

The coaches reported that they work hard at generating thought-provoking questions that lead team members to consider how they are functioning on individual, team, and organizational

levels. However, despite the enormous benefits of taking time to stop and process what people are

learning, introducing reflection to a group process is not without its challenges. One of the things

a coach must conquer is,

> Not being afraid of things that organizations don't like to do. For example, time is a
> variable in organizations, right? Never enough time for anything. So if you were a driver
> who believes in running an organization based on time, then asking people to reflect,
> whoa, that's antithetical to the culture. And so how can you …help people to appreciate
> the value of reflection? Or how can you work with people and find people who are willing
> to do something that's kind of counter-cultural? Because in that thrusting forward that
> becomes a way of life in organizations many times….[Action Learning introduces] the
> gradual process of …change…But at the front end, it's a tough thing. (Participant J)

> Asking questions and creating the space for reflection add to what Knowles et al. (2005)

referred to as an "Atmosphere of Adultness" (p.120). Adults learn best when they seek out

information and are permitted to draw their own conclusions about what they discover through

their inquiry. Conversely, being told what to do or how to think infantilizes adults. Regarding the

benefits of reflection,

> Action Learning is a very elegant and deceptively simple approach. And it takes a long
> time before you're really comfortable in using this inquiry-reflection process. But I found
> increasingly, the more I used it, the more that inquiry-reflection process enabled people to
> really not only get their work done, but learn a lot more about themselves and about
> teamwork and about their organizations. (Participant D)

He further elaborated on how reflection can lead to better team functioning:

> And invariably it leads to creating new norms. I'll give you a couple of other examples.
> We can use that same approach if somebody or a couple of people consistently come into
> team meetings late. Or if they come in, and they leave their cell phones on, and the team
> is interrupted because the cell phones are going off. So it all has to do with identifying
> little blips that occur in the team, and you get the group to reflect on it, through inquiry.
> You know, the coach is not standing there saying, 'Thou shalt not.' It's up to the team to
> make an informed decision based on their own reflections. For example, in one team,
> somebody's phone went off, and I made the intervention. 'I noticed that somebody's
> phone went off. Did anybody else notice that?' 'Yes.' 'Well what impact did that have on
> the team?' 'Well it's distracting, it interrupted us, blah, blah, blah.' 'Okay fine.' So then the
> question, implicit question on the table was, 'What are we going to do about it?' …they
> decided everybody was going to turn off their cell phone. (Participant D)

Coaches Structure Commitment to Action

"There can be no learning without action and no action without learning"(Revans, 1998).

Action-Learning teams act their way into learning. The coaches reported a consistent process:

Team members commit to actions at the end of the working-session phase of their meeting (prior

to the last phase of reflection and feedback, see Tables 3 and 4). The next working session phase

of the Action-Learning team meeting begins (after selection of a leadership skill to work on in the

meeting) with a report from each member about the result of the action they took.

Table 3

Order of initial Action Learning meeting

Introduction and guidelines
Individual team members select leadership skill to work on during meeting
Problem owner presents problem
Team members ask questions (may be iterative)
Coach intervenes to test whether the team has reached consensus on what the problem is (may be iterative)
Consensus reached on initial definition of the problem
Problem solving through the use of questions
Coach intervenes to wrap up problem solving
Coach asks reflective questions about what the team learned in that session
Coach polls each team member about how well they exercised their leadership skill
Coach asks team to comment on each team member's demonstration of the selected leadership skill

Table 4

Order of subsequent Action Learning meetings

Individual team members select leadership skill to work on during meeting
Team members report the outcomes of the actions they took since the last meeting
Team members ask questions
Problem solving through the use of questions
Coach intervenes to wrap up problem solving
Coach asks reflective questions about what the team learned in that session
Coach polls each team member about their leadership skill
Coach asks team to comment on each team member's demonstration of the selected leadership skill

The coaches reported the commitment to action-fostered learning and kept the team moving forward. The structural aspect of committing to action then reporting on the consequence of action builds a very clear accountability of team members to the team and the problem on which they are working. Learning that occurs in an Action-Learning team is experiential learning. Team members act, then learn as a result of their reflection on the action and its consequences.

> But [I'm] also a believer that great actions will solve different problems….There might be two or three different problems….So if they're close, …that's good enough for me because the action, the great action, will solve all these different parts of the problem. ..And sometimes as you work on action you go back to the problem, it becomes clearer… you have to lead with actions. (Participant M)

Another consequence of emphasizing the importance of consistently taking action as the team works through the problem is that it builds in accountability. The team learns how to make sure that people do what they say they are going to do. One coach introduced Action Learning to a department that he said was notorious for not valuing and hence disregarding accountability. He remarked,

> The other element that I found extremely useful is the accountability, and sure enough and that's how it worked….Everyone went through the checklist and they said "Talking to so and so?" "Yes, I did that. This is what they said. I won't have an answer till next week." Fine. "Did you talk to so and so?" "Yes, and I did this and I did that, and I changed the

code on that." And then I'm looking at the list, there was a thing about contacting the graduate school, so when we went through it, as the coach I went back and I said, unless I'm mistaken, there was a contact with a graduate school that was supposed to be made. Was that made? Nobody asked about it. It was in the minutes but nobody asked about it…I said, "What are the implications of that?" (Participant N)

This was an example of how the coach, by making an observation and then following it with a question, can help make visible an organization's blind spots. Once the team members are able to see the dysfunction, they can reflect on it and address it. Emphasizing the importance of consistently taking action and using the action to enhance learning helps the team's momentum and its accountability.

Coaches Use the Diversity on the Team

Having a team composed of highly diverse individuals and a process that uses that diversity to evoke participation from each team member shifts people out of business as usual and creates the potential for change. When members of an Action-Learning team are selected, one coach commented, the goal is "max-mix," meaning members with a wide variety of backgrounds, departmental affiliations, and perspectives born from different qualities such as age, gender, and ethnicity as well as education and experience are sought. A deliberate effort is made to exclude anyone who has specific expertise on the problem topic. The purpose of these guidelines is to bring to bear the greatest diversity of fresh eyes and unbiased perspectives as possible.

Several coaches commented on how companies often seek out employees with diverse qualities and then proceed to homogenize them into people who have the same kind of thinking and way of approaching problems.

> In most business organizations, now-a-days they say, 'We're looking for diversity.' And they go out and recruit people who are in some obvious way diverse. And then they bring them into the organization and then formally or informally they then acculturate those people. So that within a relatively short period of time, they're all looking and sounding and acting alike…Defeats the whole purpose of diversity. (Participant D)

Action Learning is structured and conducted to honor and make use of the rich diversity of viewpoints the team members bring. One consistently employed technique is to poll each member of the group regarding the question on the table or the judgment call required of the team. Initially, the coach asks each person for a response. Over time that function is taken up by team members. The emphasis on learning and the value placed on inquiry motivated by genuine curiosity enables differences in perspectives to surface and be addressed in a productive manner. Rank in the organization is intentionally disregarded. An Action-Learning team is democratically organized with each person having an equal voice. One coach commented about how she invites team members to observe the value of diversity in the team,

> But at the very beginning there is a little exercise I do which...I think helps set the tone. And the exercise is a very simple one. When they first get their project, we ask them to explore the assumptions around the project, to question. And one of my assumptions is that people in the group may have heard the project differently….so I'd say, 'Well, I want you to write on a piece of paper what you think your sponsor is asking you to do in your own words.' And then I just have people go around the room and read off what they heard. And what that does is sets the tone that you really need to hear everybody. You need to hear from everybody on the team. But you could see that right away that some people heard different things than somebody else. (Participant A)

Another commented,

> They'll give you exercises about the value of diversity, but sit a bunch of adults down with a real problem and have them do [the exercise above], and holy cow, now they get it…'How could we have so many different perceptions?' (Participant N)

The coaches concurred that it is important to achieve full participation in order to give each team member a voice,

> I don't particularly like sport metaphors, but…you will have some people who make more baskets or who run for the touchdown, but basically the whole team is required in order to win the game. And the trick is to help people understand the different contributions and make sure that everyone has a chance to do that. (Participant J)

Exploiting the power that diversity brings to a team in a constructive way helps Action-Learning teams use the knowledge, skills and talents of each team member.

Coaches Use Feedback Constructively

Constructive use of feedback shifts team members out of business as usual. Another feature of how Action-Learning teams are generally structured is the practice of beginning team meetings by identifying the leadership skill each team member wants to work on during the course of the meeting.

> I think having them establish the leadership goals that they're going to work on, each time, in the group, and then asking them at the end of the group to reflect, to directly reflect on those leadership goals, even if it's been… not the best [meeting]. I think it forces them to have a reflection on something and by asking the rest of the group to comment on that person's behavior, or comment on their skills, which is a kind of reflective process. Because when you're thinking about somebody else's behavior you're also thinking about yours. (Participant P)

Examples of skills team members select are improved listening skills, asking good-quality questions, and expressing ideas clearly. The skills are listed next to each team member's name and left on display on an easel or chalkboard for the duration of the meeting. At the conclusion of the meeting, the coach asks the team members, one by one, how they think they did on their leadership skill. The team member comments, generally in a self-deprecating manner, then the coach invites other team members to provide feedback including comments with examples of the behavior the comments refer to. The coaches report that this feedback is almost always very positive and affirming.

> Actually I think that's one of the most powerful things in the group forming. Because I think that having people articulate positive things towards each other, just does such good things for the group morale, and the group cohesion. And…you ask them, "What do people do well?", and "What can they do better?" But mostly they talk about what they did well. (Participant P)

This process of providing feedback is a very powerful reinforcement because the feedback is so specific and conveyed so soon after the behavior occurs. One of the coaches commented that this practice follows the principles Donald O. Clifton, former CEO of the Gallup Organization, established in his study of positive psychology. He said,

So it's this whole business about work on your strengths rather than try to eliminate your deficits. And one of the things that Don used to talk about a lot was, when you go through your organization, find a way to fill somebody else's bucket. You know, take the water from your bucket, and fill somebody else's bucket. And so how do you feel when somebody fills your bucket? How do you feel when somebody asks you a question and really is interested in what your answer is?

Another coach commented about the feedback people receive at the end of an

Action Learning session.

So usually the person [says], "Well I think I did okay," or "I didn't do very well at all" So you set it up that way, then you ask the group so, "You know, can any of you give some examples of how this person did these skills?" It's a positive appreciative inquiry question. So they're only going to give positive things. And I have some positive things… And [the] person is, "Pretty good, I feel pretty good, thank you." That makes everybody very positive and, and get their glass filled and so forth. And then they fill others…Because you don't develop a skill by what you didn't do, you develop a skill by what you did do.

Receiving feedback in the process of reflecting on what people learned from the Action Learning

session reinforces learning and builds team cohesiveness.

Coaches Exercise Their Roles on the Team Judiciously

The eighth and final feature of Action Learning that helps shift teams out of business as

usual and creates the opportunity for change is the role of the Action-Learning coach. The coach

does not act as a facilitator in the traditional sense.

And then equally important I tell them what I'm not going to do. I'm not going to be a subject matter expert. I'm not going to be the team leader. I'm not going to facilitate the problems. I'll ask questions. I'm not going to stand up and write stuff on a board or a pad or whatever. If you want to take notes, you can keep track but that's your assignment. And I'm not going to evaluate or assess other team members. I'm not going to do it. And, most important whatever happens in this room, is going to stay there. I'm not going to say one thing to anybody in your organization unless you want me to about what's going on in this group. (Participant H)

The coach is generally an outsider to the organization and is able to contribute because of

the objectivity he or she brings to the role of coach. The coach above commented, further:

And my strengths and my power is because I'm a tangential observer. My power comes from sitting out, and watching people work. My strength is I don't know the policy. I

don't know who's sleeping with whom in the executive committee. Whatever. And I find that when I try, I deliberately try very hard not to get involved in the weeds. If I lose my objectivity, that's not helpful [to] the team or the organization. (Participant H)

The coaches set an example through their behavior in the team about how to ask effective questions and how to interact with other team members. This is a key point because the coaches are not telling people how to be a better leader or team member. They are teaching through example and through inquiry. The team members are left to draw their own conclusions and take actions as they see fit.

> And the most critical role of the coach is to ask questions or to help ensure there is balanced participation within the group and that the group takes responsibility for its learning, for its productivity and for its outcome… And that's what I see when we talk about coach as facilitator. Not facilitator of when the meetings will be held, how to get from here to there, but process facilitator...The bottom line is that a good Action-Learning coach works him or herself out of a job. Because if you're a good role model for the group, producing group members understand how to do the same thing you're doing. (Participant J)

Another coach commented about the role of the coach in terms of the explicit objective of leadership development.

> So the reason I ask questions, not only [to] improve the performance of the group, but to help you develop your leadership skills. Because whenever I ask them a question about the project, I'm developing their leadership skills….We know we're here for leadership development, "Okay, help us." And usually after the first session they say, "Wow, this is great. I get leadership skills, we move along well, we kind of liked each other, we're focused for a change," and all these kind of things. And they quickly see the benefit of the coach.

In speaking about how the Action-Learning coach promotes leadership development, one coach commented that the coaches' prompting to reflect on experiences within the team was essential to the experiential learning.

> I think…first of all, the distinctions of what I would consider really a valid Action Learning program is that…first of all, you have a group that is working as a learning community and by that meaning that there's a strong emphasis through reflecting on their experience that it's not a transfer of content kind of thing…But, that the focus is really from the beginning…on reflecting on their experience and working on the projects, reflecting on how that plays back with how they have experienced their work within the

organization, and the role of the learning coach is not so much to facilitate as it is to periodically intervene to encourage that kind of learning. (Participant O)

Another coach added,

> I have to role model behaviors that I want them to follow not only in this meeting but when they go back to work, because that's my job. My job is to work myself out of a job. (Participant H)

The skills necessary to enable the coaches to execute their role effectively are complex.

> All people who do this work…[use] keen observational skill. So that tacit knowledge comes into play, it's something, that manifests differently for each of us, but nonetheless, it is core….Becoming an Action-Learning coach is a function of having certain characteristics… I have worked many, many times with managers who make the best Action-Learning coaches because they have these skill sets. They have the ability to watch a group dynamic or to use their keen observational skills to help the group become successful. (Participant J)

In summary, the eight features of the structure of Action Learning break dysfunctional group members' habits and open team members to new ways of behaving. The coaches use the openness to change to introduce a group climate that invites team members to learn on a number of different levels. The next aspect of using Action Learning to introduce change is the manner in which the coaches use themselves as instruments to foster a climate conducive to learning.

Change Part Two: Coaches Use Themselves as Instruments of Change

The second major way coaches introduced change in Action-Learning teams was to use themselves as instruments. The coaches reported they changed the climate, or more colloquially, the tone, in the teams they coached in three major ways. First, the coaches' entry into the Action-Learning team was critical, second, the coaches' beliefs and demeanor played an essential role, and, third, the coaches' management of situations that arose in the groups changed the climate or tone on the team.

Coaches Launch the Team Decisively

Knowles and his colleagues (2005) claimed that establishing a climate conducive to learning was critical to creating the conditions necessary for adults to learn optimally. The research question this study sought to answer is "How do Action-Learning coaches report that they foster a climate conducive to learning?". One part of the answer, discussed above, is that eight features of the Action Learning group process shifted people out of business as usual mode and set the stage for an openness to a different experience and a willingness to learn different behavior.

In describing the manner in which he begins his work with an Action-Learning team one coach commented,

> It made me realize how important it is for the coach, right up front, to really establish that you are the Almighty and you're not an invited guest who appears sometimes. You are the Almighty and they cannot operate without you unless it's a group decision….And I know that sounds a little draconian, but …it's a dilemma, as I describe coaching, you have to go from being visible to invisible. But if…you never establish the visible, Almighty, role up front, it's almost impossible to get back in….you haven't set the mold, you've got to set that mold right up front, 'This is the way it is.' (Participant E)

The coaches reported that getting the team started effectively was critical to an Action-Learning team's success. Several coaches commented that talking about Action Learning and providing a brief description was a necessary step, but generally much less effective than explaining crisply what the guidelines were and simply starting the process.

Variation about the first activity existed. Some coaches used a warm-up activity or ice-breaker such as posing the question, "What has happened in your life that brings you to this room?".

> So the protocol has been there's some…type of exercise that they do as a team and at *X* it was not just ice breaker questions but asking people to share questions that answered, "How were you formed?" Like what formed you, your family, friends, education, and they talk a little bit about some important people or events in their life with each other at that first meeting. (Participant A)

The coaches want to create an opportunity for the team to begin to establish relationships and begin to enable trust and vulnerability to develop.

> Before we get there, let's go around the table, "Who are we?" "But, we know each other" Yes, I imagine. They say, "I didn't know you were divorced." Let's relate some experiences. I'll take 3 or 4 minutes and tell them something in my life. Blah, blah, blah, and I find it such a beautiful way of bonding a team, They may work with each other and they don't know anything about each other as people. It's a very powerful way of getting a bond in a group…and at the end of the program people have said to me, you know what's really great, is the first morning we were together, you said your little sign-in, those little things to each other.…And that begins to build trust. (Participant H)

Another coach agreed, saying "Building this trusting environment, that just feeds so much of the whole, it's such a foundational piece and you can't overlook it" (Participant E). Further,

> We often in our programs do a lot of work with…not just the project work but personal development.…[M]any of the processes we use for that really require people to feel comfortable with each other, to trust one another enough to be able to challenge one another. (Participant K)

In contrast, other coaches said that if the team needed to know more about the background of its members in the course of solving the problem it was working on, it would figure out how to do that for itself. Those coaches immediately got down to the business of dealing with the problem.

There was universal consensus, however, that the coach begin by being firmly in control and very directive about what the team would do and how it would do it. They commented that it is critical for the coach to let team members know that the team experience would not be just another task force with members behaving as they usually do, but, on the contrary, that this team experience would be different. The goal was to create the conditions under which the team would be successful. In answer to the question about what he does to set the tone in the beginning, one participant stated,

> Well, I think it's important to prepare people for what is going to amount to a different experience and there's way of doing that.…We prepare them by letting them know it will be different. I try to get validation from senior members of the organization of which they are members. These things typically, Action Learning programs very often can be more expensive than straight standard training programs. And it's really important to get the

President or divisional leaders of the organization onboard. Get him or her onboard with the work you do. (Participant H)

One coach talked about what it is important *not* to do.

But making sure that early on, you don't set the kind of tone that everybody's used to, which is the traditional executive tone….You have the expert at the front of the room, who comes in and does the dog and pony [show]…because that…starts to set the entirely wrong frame. And I think the sooner you introduce the concept of reflection and dialog even though initially, you're not going to get a lot of deep stuff, the more important it is. (Participant O)

Most coaches described what their roles would be: the proponent of learning and the person who would monitor time. The coaches' roles are outside the team; they do not function as team members or subject matter experts. Their focus is on group process. They also do not act as a leader of the team. This point is important and may appear to be contradictory. The coaches concurred that it was important to be very directive and authoritative at the beginning so team members would begin behaving in accordance with Action Learning guidelines, however, they were also very clear that the ultimate goal was to work themselves out of a job.

Well it's very critical your first 10 minutes be clear, comfortable, confident, so on. You really have to know what you're going to say when you begin. So that they're really clear …"Okay we're here…to work on a problem and to develop good leadership skills. We're going to use the process called Action Learning in which we will be learning how to work as a team, how to solve problems, how to develop leadership skills while we take action. And it's one norm…that we use for this to work. And we use questions….Questions will help develop your leadership skills, will help us become more focused and creative, solve the problem, and so forth. And then I explain my role. 'My role is to help you become great leaders and help this become a great group that…comes up with break-through thinking. So does everybody understand how Action Learning works?' I don't ask them if they agree with it. I just ask if you understand. "Everybody clear? Good, okay." (Participant M)

The coaches wanted to go from having a high-profile and significant influence on the team to being superfluous to the teams' effective functioning. As team members observe what the coach does in the team and how effective that behavior is in helping the team function well, they begin

to follow the coach's example and to assume that role on the team. As that happens more and more, the coach plays a decreasingly active role in the team's functioning.

The coaches reported that in their introductory remarks to the team they often encourage team members to trust the Action Learning process despite the fact that they probably will feel awkward in following the guidelines about making statements only in response to questions in the beginning. Some coaches prime the pump by making statements such as, "If I were in your shoes, I'd be feeling frustrated and uncomfortable"(Participant E). This kind of statement gives team members permission to acknowledge those feelings to each other and begins the willingness of team members to be open and vulnerable with each other. That openness, over time, usually transforms into a high level of trust among the team members.

After describing the coach's role and acknowledging that following the guidelines of Action Learning may feel awkward at first, most coaches then focus on how the team members will work with one another. Again, there were two different approaches to the issue of setting norms in the team. Some coaches suggested that these are general areas most teams find useful to have norms around such as "turn off cell phones" and "close laptop computers." Whether the team will have a confidentiality agreement is also a common norm teams address. Other coaches do not initiate a discussion about norms, but wait until a problem arises in the group and intervene in the group process, asking, for example, "What is the impact on the team when cell phones ring during the meeting?". That question focuses the attention of the team on the issue in real time and generates a discussion about what norms the team wants to create to enhance its functioning.

Coaches Foster a Climate Conducive to Learning by Embracing Thoughts of Unconditional Positive Regard

The coaches reported that they enter Action-Learning team meetings with clear beliefs and expectations about the teams with whom they'll work. Although coaches start the teams

decisively, they are never punitive, but conversely, are warm and welcoming to team members. People are treated with respect and the environment is egalitarian so every team member's ideas are valued. The coach consistently polls each member of the team to ensure full participation.

> But if you start off in a very confident manner, what you're saying is I have every confidence that this team 1) has the resources that it needs or can get, that 2) wants to solve the problem, and that they can dramatically increase their performance. And then that's all they would have to believe. (Participant F)

> Well, I think part of it is your mind-set. You believe that everyone deep down is a good person. Even though they may treat you negatively…you recognize deep down they're fine people. (Participant M)

Coaches remind themselves that new team members are entering a unique situation full of unknowns and they make an effort to address the uncertainties or anxieties members may be experiencing and provide reassurance that the coach is experienced and in charge.

> So the first thing I do before even thinking about preparing the participants, is I remind myself that for these people this is a new experience, for these people, they don't know the structure or the path ahead. For these people they may be more visible in this process than in other processes and so there may be elements of fear and concern. And those elements of fear and at least the unknown, they provoke them to the fear-based side of their self-perception. (Participant L)

> The coaches are very mindful of respecting the psychological boundaries of team members both as individuals and team members as an aggregate. The coaches report they are clear that they are not task facilitators and do not try to steer the group. The coaches do not impose their perceptions about what is going on in the group, but ask questions with genuine curiosity in order to discover how the group feels it is doing. The coach may make an observation, such as, "I'm observing people talking over each other and I wonder how that impacts your ability to listen to each other." The coach makes implicit behavior such as overtalking explicit and asks a question, but then leaves the team unconstrained to reach its own conclusions.

I find it very disarming when I come into a team who is working on a very complex problem and say to them, "I have nothing to teach you. I'm not here to promote any particular point of view or approach. If you succeed it's going to be on your own efforts by using the skills, abilities, and perspectives that you already have…." We feel that in the process of doing our job people will see it's self-evident that this is more effective, more satisfying, etc. and that will generalize to other situations. And we don't have, other than the power of asking questions, we don't have any theory. We don't have any dogma. We have nothing to teach people…We can't teach anybody anything, but they can learn, they can learn. (Participant F)

The coaches believe the team possesses, in the aggregate, the skills necessary to solve the problem on which they are working. These skills are distributed throughout the team. "The magic, really, is that by asking questions you're unleashing potential that people already have…It's already there. You don't have to add anything. It's already there" (Participant F). The coaches believe that the teams should not follow any particular formal process, but that they will make up their own process as they work together, learn from that, and then generalize those lessons to other situations. This careful respectfulness and consistent message of confidence in the group's abilities communicates the coach's expectation of group success. Several coaches commented that in other group processes when a group facilitator manipulates and steers a group or lectures to them the implication is "I'm smarter than you are and if I weren't here, you would fail" (Participant F). That attitude makes people defensive and less willing to be honestly vulnerable and open to learning. Trusting the group to make good decisions sends a very different message.

So you have to be truly and truly and truly Socratic. You have to be truly humble like Socrates would say, and you have to really and truly be in an inquiring mind-set. Now you have a process you're following right? But you ask questions you don't know the answer for and if you find yourself asking questions you know the answer for, …you need to shake yourself and step out and recalibrate because you're manipulating at that point. (Participant L)

Some coaches commented that they believe that people in Action-Learning teams reveal what they need to learn. This belief leads them to interpret behaviors which could be regarded as disruptive or dysfunctional in a sympathetic and constructive manner.

Actually, you know, here's the deal, what does Action Learning teach, if not about more about ourselves? And that's what that person needs to learn. You know [if] that person learns nothing about what the Action Learning project is aiming at solving, but they learn that they tend to seek attention within the group by doing these negative behaviors, did they not learn something that will make them more successful in the future? Yes. So people provoke what they need to learn. And these behaviors, if you look at them, instead of being group disrupters, and more as learning need, learning need, learning need, learning need. (Participant L)

Action Learning becomes a valuable microcosm in which people create the opportunity to learn what they need to learn.

Yes, and they will recreate the opportunity to learn it over and over and over again in the group. Because they're doing it again in their life too…that's why we do the same things over and over again until we experience it, and then critically reflect on it, and then put away the power to make it drive our behavior. We will continue to put things in our life that makes us learn things that we need to learn. And it comes out in Action Learning. And if we don't know that, we are kidding ourselves and we shouldn't be doing this because we're treating this like a game, like an educational game, like a simulation you know? It's not like real life, it *is* real life. (Participant L)

Although the coaches' beliefs made them careful to be respectful and careful to avoid being controlling toward team members, they reported that they used themselves as sources of data about what might be occurring in the team.

I'm not saying that intuitive thinking is superior, but I find it invaluable and you may have actually heard the expression of *self as instrument* meaning if I'm feeling something is going on in the group, it's a pretty damn good likelihood that somebody else is feeling it. And I'm using myself as the instrument for making my intervention. (Participant H)

In summary, the consensus among coaches was that it was important in their role to keep in the forefront of their minds that regardless of behavior, the people with whom they were working were fundamentally good people who deserved to be treated with respect and protected from harm. In addition, they held the beliefs that the team possessed the skills necessary to accomplish their objectives, that coaches should deliberately resist controlling the team, and that any disruptive group behavior was an indication of the learning need that team members carried

into the group. Finally, the coaches used their observation skills and self-awareness to guide their interventions.

Coaches' Employ Deliberate Strategies for Building a Safe Environment

The objective going into an Action-Learning team experience is to have the team learn together, bring the best of themselves to bear on a challenging and important problem, participate in producing a solution, and presenting the solution to the problem sponsor. In order to accomplish those goals, the coaches reported that the team environment must be a safe environment.

"Action-Learning coaches do what great leaders should do: they are stewards of the context, protectors of the safety of the people, and chief learning proponents" (Participant E). The coaches reported that a consequence of their clear, strong initial role and their beliefs helped create the context within which the team could learn and flourish. Several coaches commented that they believed building a safe environment was a big piece of why Action-Learning teams have been successful. How is that done?

> The first thing is never embarrass anyone in a group. Just take great care. If someone is feeling uncomfortable…raise the red flag…I, as a facilitator, have to be extremely cognizant of the group dynamic so that no one is ever backed into a corner. And no one is ever blamed for something. Those things are very, very critical so this becomes a safe environment for people. And the minute it comes on the shoulders of any one individual…it's time out, and then it's process [time]. (Participant J)

Another coach concurred with these principles.

> You have to do the right thing, and do your job no matter what..You've got to be a leader, ready to take the arrow…So I think the mind-set is very important and you don't let anybody, even the one who's attacking you, you don't let anybody hurt anybody. You come in, [if] anybody attacks anybody or does something that hurts anybody, you step in right away, immediately and handle it. And you don't handle it by you taking care of it, you help the group learn how to handle it, which is key. You could do it but then you have to do it all the time and it's not as valuable, or as powerful as if they do it.

Whenever a team member attacks or is hostile toward another member, the coach immediately intervenes and asks the group to process the exchange by reflecting on it. One coach gave an example of how he does this. Paraphrased, the coach said, "I'm observing one team member attacking another." (His gaze is on the entire group, not singling out one person.) "What effect does one team member attacking another have on how well a team functions?" It is that coach's belief that the people who are aggressive learn things about the consequences of their actions they never knew before. They are able to hear the information because it is about a situation, not about them as individuals. The coach commented that sometimes the attacker will chime into the discussion and contribute, as well. The coach then asks, "What could a group do to handle such a situation in the future?" As a result, the group builds norms about how to handle similar behavior in the future.

This is also an example of how a coach can help a team learn how to directly talk about what is happening in the team—making what is often treated as implicit data explicit so it can be managed by the team. A coach commented that the first time a coach does this in a team meeting it creates a *pivotal moment* in the team's development. It begins a new level of intimacy among group members and opens the way for authenticity among group members. "When people are safe, they will show up with themselves" (Participant P).

Participant G commented that if someone dominates the conversation she asks each team member to rate his or her interest level in the current part of the meeting on a 1 to 10 scale. Typically the dominator will rate the conversation, as an 8 or a 9, but the other, shut-out members will rate the conversation as a 2 or 3. The coach then asks the group to reflect on this information. So instead of calling a person out and saying, "You're talking too much" the coach invites the group to share information about how people are experiencing the process. Everyone is able to

hear the information because it is directed at the group and how it is performing—something of interest to everyone—and not a critical comment about one person that would evoke defensiveness.

The coaches reported that trust and safety and learning are intertwined. One of the coaches talked about an organization he worked with in which the culture led people to cover up deficiencies because of a widely-held belief that to admit to need help would appear to be an admission of incompetence. He said introducing Action Learning helped begin to build trust in that organization. He used the version of Action Learning in which each successive member of a team had a turn at presenting his or her own problem in order to get the group's help. He said the practice of asking good questions and sharing the vulnerability of asking for help improved trust among team members and, in turn, increased trust throughout the organization.

Another coach linked trust and safety. "What is trust really? Trust says I can be safe with you." Further, an organization cannot "have diversity without safety, and the only way to have safety is not to…have that notion of evaluation always present" (Participant P). Another coach commented that getting feedback in the traditional organization's environment—being told how to improve or be different than one is—implies the speaker feels superior and that creates a threat response. However, if one is asked a question—even a *why* question—with a voice characterized by genuine interest and curiosity, that threat response is not evoked. Asking questions about others' intentions instead of making a leap up the ladder of inference (Argyris, 1982) provides useful information on which to base a judgment. "If you're defensive it's because I've not made you safe" (Participant P). The coaches' efforts to protect team members creates a team climate that invites honesty and vulnerability. Team members do not have to be defensive because someone else is attending to their safety.

In summary, a coach sets a climate conducive to learning by being very directive and strong at the beginning of the team's formation and development, entering the team with a set of beliefs that creates a demeanor consistent with respectfulness and confidence about the team's ability to be successful. Finally, the coach creates a safe context within which the team can develop. The coach accomplishes this by intervening whenever a team member is attacked or made uncomfortable, stops the attack, and then helps the team reflect on the encounter and learn from it. In the final section of Chapter 4, I discuss the outcomes the coaches noted in participants and teams who engaged in Action Learning.

Refreezing: Outcomes from Action Learning

As a result of their experiences in Action-Learning teams, the coaches commented on some of the outcomes they observed in the people with whom they worked. These comments help answer the question, "Do these findings matter?" The answer lies in the consequence of people's experiences in the kind of learning climate Action-Learning coaches foster.

The coaches reported that team members became better leaders. However, the leadership skills that develop are not the traditionally cited ones requiring dominance or persuasion, rather they are skills most suitable to self-directed teams. "It's my job to create the context for success…to create the conditions for this group of people to succeed…ultimately, to follow that dictum that I often quote to them, Lao-Tzu's level five, 'The people did it themselves.'" (Participant E; The full quote is, "A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves" (Schipper, 2000).

> They're getting it if they're doing the listening and questioning assumptions…The key to real leadership is: Are you actually listening to people? (Participant N)

The coaches reported seeing development of critical teamwork skills. As team members work together to problem solve, the coach intervenes to ask questions about how well the team is

working together and how they could improve. Over time, the team members begin to assume the role the coach plays in providing a safe context in which to work and developing skills in asking questions and challenging unverified assumptions. They come to value the improvement that taking time to reflect on group process brings and practice it not only in the team, but in other contexts as well. The team members grasp the concept of using themselves as instruments to determine when it would be prudent to inquire about others' thoughts and emotions. Coaches report all these skills enhanced team members' ability to work collaboratively and productively in the team.

The coaches remarked on the self-knowledge participants said they acquired. The feedback they received from other team members, as well as the freedom and safety to break out of old molds of behavior and to experiment with new and productive ones, was deemed to be invaluable.

> But probably the deepest learning is when you go into, "So what are you learning about yourself as a leader?"...you're creating model leaders through this process. Because leaders themselves and the way they act differently by leading through questions, to put it in shorthand, are going to influence the organization. I mean, yes, having more Action Learning, no question that would be useful but there's also value in, "I'm now going to see you, leading through questions and people are going to know, gee, you know, Sara she seems to lead in this way and it's good." (Participant E)

The ultimate result of these conversations leads team members to reflect on the implications of this kind of leadership in the organization, as well as at the individual and team level.

> But inevitably people's leadership challenges generally get translated through our conversations at the end about the organization writ large. "So what's enhancing leadership here? What's getting in the way of good leadership here? So, what can be taken back to your organization?" (Participant E)

Another aspect of how Action Learning impacts the organization at large is addressed by this comment,

> How do we sell Action Learning? Because it's this sort of odd technique that everyone likes when they do it, but it doesn't necessarily,… exactly fit in a typical general training

mind-set or even in a facilitative kind of mind-set. And one of the recent "aha's" was that it very much helps with collaboration and silo-busting. …Where so many leaders in an organization are not working cross-department…Action Learning teaches people to talk and collaboratively discuss problems that may be mine in ownership but certainly you affect it and someone else affects it, and how do we talk as peers about our problems, in a constructive way? (Participant G)

Another outcome the coaches remarked about was the gratitude team members reported they felt toward the organization and their motivation to repay the investment in the team members' development. "There's a distinctive sense of obligation to give the organization a return on its investment" (Participant H). One coach discussed how he often sees team members develop long-term relationships with one another. As a result of their bonding experiences in an Action-Learning team, they acquire an ongoing network of trusted advisors.

The Action Learning experience served as a confidence booster for some participants. They had gone into a group of diverse strangers, tackled an intractable problem that was critical to the organization, and developed expertise in an arena that they had no prior knowledge of or experience with. In the process, they learned important team work skills and gained self-knowledge and insight. Most participants reported to the coaches that Action Learning was a very positive experience.

In summary, the coaches remarked about the participants' comments when Action Learning experiences were debriefed. The Action Learning experience increased leadership skills on an individual, team, and organization-wide level, improved teamwork skills, developed valued professional networks, led to organization loyalty, and boosted confidence.

Summary of Findings

The findings from this research study indicate that Action-Learning coaches report that they foster a climate conducive to learning by unfreezing team members' behavior. The coaches accomplished the unfreezing by reducing defensiveness and discouraging a drive to solution. The

coaches introduced change by effectively using eight elements of Action Learning and by using themselves as instruments of change. Finally, after team members try out behavior change and experience success as a result, they refreeze so the new behaviors become a stable part of the team members' behavioral repertoires.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study about how experienced Action-Learning coaches create a climate conducive to learning produced several important findings. First, it is necessary to shift people out of their habitual, business-as-usual behavior in order to unfreeze that behavior to reduce defensiveness and discourage the drive to solution.

The second finding regarded how the coaches introduced change; it has two parts. The first part had to do with how the coaches used eight elements of the Action Learning structure to introduce change. The coaches (a) direct attention to the importance of an accurate problem definition, (b) use the sponsor to raise the stakes, (c) foster an attitude of inquiry, (d) use questions to promote reflection, (e) structure commitment to action, (f) use the diversity on the team, (g) use feedback constructively, and (h) exercise their role on the team judiciously.

The second part of introducing change was the manner in which the coaches used themselves as instruments of change. The coaches reported that they created a climate conducive to learning by the way they started the Action-Learning teams: They were assertive and authoritative. However, their goal was to work themselves out of a job and they relinquished their strong control as team members began to emulate the role the coach played, particularly by attending to group process. The coaches were very aware of the attitudes they held toward team members as they entered the teams. The attitudes were marked with a respectful, almost tender, regard and with the notion that team members were people who deserved to be treated well, sometimes in spite of their behavior. The coaches honored their own psychological boundaries and the boundaries of their team members by being careful to pose open-ended questions and to resist controlling or manipulating team members. They kept team members safe by intervening in the team's process whenever an aggressive or hostile act occurred. They monitored the team's

interactions and insured that each team member had a voice in the team's functioning. These actions created a safe environment that neutralized the negative and dysfunctional effects of evaluative pressure that are generally present in business environments.

Finally, after the Action Learning experience, the coaches reported a refreezing as the participants discovered how well their team experiences generalized to other environments. They reported that the participants commented that they were both better questioners and listeners as a result of their experiences.

Research Implications

Previous studies have noted that establishing a safe and inclusive climate correlates with many positive outcomes such as more participation in quality control efforts (Edmondson, 1996; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Wilkens & London, 2006) and higher creativity (Edmondson, 1999). The focus of this study was to investigate specifically what behaviors are involved in establishing such a climate. This section of Chapter 5 is organized in accordance with one of the many profound comments the study respondents made: "Action-Learning coaches do what great leaders should do: they are stewards of the context, protectors of the safety of the people, and chief learning proponents" (Participant H).

Stewards of the Context

Establishing a climate or setting the tone in a team invites certain behaviors and discourages others. A climate conducive to learning requires that people are receptive to new information and are willing to admit they do not know all the answers and perhaps even admit they have made mistakes. That is, they must be willing to stop being defensive and be willing to become vulnerable with one another. Another way to say this using Argyris' parlance is they must move from Model I behavior to Model II behavior.

From Model I to Model II. The experience people have in an Action-Learning team enables them to move from the defensive behaviors Argyris (2002) cited: maintaining control, maximizing winning, minimizing losing, and avoiding embarrassment by advocating, attributing, and evaluating. The goal is to replace those behaviors with more productive behaviors that enhance teamwork: Share all valid information, promote free and informed choice, and commit to action. In other words, the Action Learning experience shifts people from Model I to Model II, and it generally does so in the time frame of the Action Learning project—ranging from 1 week to 6 months or more. Because the coach creates a climate conducive to learning, the participants feel safe enough to discontinue their typical defensive behavior and instead focus on the problem. This is a more efficient process than the one Argyris (2002) proposed, one that often took up to 5 years for people to accomplish. His process used rational thinking and logic. By creating a safe and inclusive climate in which each individual has a voice, Action Learning enables people to reach their own conclusions about how to be an effective team member

The consequence of this shift is the ability to make the leap from instrumental learning to double-loop learning (Argyris, 2002). Double-loop learning allows team members to think on a systems level and therefore to question larger issues such as the organization's value system and culture. The problem the team works on can be seen in the context of the forces that sustain it (Lewin, 1951). This perspective is a valuable one to inculcate into the organization's future leaders.

A safe climate opens the possibility of what kinds of things are discussable. Argyris (1982) noted that Model I mentality makes many topics undiscussable. After a shift to Model II, behaviors that get in the way of team productivity—such as relationship conflict (Jehn & Mannix, 2001)—can be addressed by the group. Because the coaches intervene to stop any adverse

behavior without being critical of the perpetrator, all parties in the interaction are kept safe. The focus of attention is on the behavior and the impact of that behavior on the team's well-being and functionality. The conversation centers around a topic all team members are invested in. The coaches reported that this kind of conversation serves to build team solidarity.

Knowing how to establish a climate conducive to learning requires an intuitive understanding about how people are reacting to the group events on a moment-by-moment basis. The coaches have access to their own internal reactions to group events, and they use that information to understand reactions among group members. In addition to being keenly aware of what is happening, the coaches articulate their observations and then pose questions that encourage the team members to access their intuitive intelligence and awareness (Claxton, 1997). Goleman and Boyatzis (2008) conducted research on social intelligence that explored leadership behaviors such as empathy and attunement and contemplated the role of mirror neurons in human's ability to not only perceive one's own emotional state, but the ability to perceive and act on others' emotional states. Use of questions and taking time for reflection enables team members to slow down and pay attention to information they already have, but often are not able to access, because they operate in climates that prevent them from doing so.

Dealing with Emotions in Organizations

Introducing change in an individual context or an organizational context is often met with resistance from many sources. One significant source of resistance is emotional (Isabella, 1990). Transforming an organization through a learning process that results in change can evoke strong emotions (Bartunek, 1993). Argyris argued that individuals and organizations can introduce transformational change by shifting their thinking from Model I to Model II, and his solution to working through the emotional resistance was to use cognitive confrontation. In the section below

the author analyzes this solution and discusses an alternative to Argyris' solution that this study revealed.

Argyris (1993) acknowledged that participants legitimately react by feeling angry, embarrassed, and threatened when new learning reveals the previously obscured values and assumptions on which they are acting. However, he argued that it is not useful to *collude*[1] with those feelings. He also argued that when people who are challenged by change are made psychologically safe, they will use that distance as an excuse to avoid exploring their thought processes.

> We strive not to collude with these feelings, nor should the participants, if we were
> to help them learn. Therefore, our next step is to help the participants explore the reason
> for their feelings…I agree that having some [emotional] space or safety is important. I
> also believe it is important to see what the individual does with that safety. In the case of
> which I speak, the professionals used the space to distance themselves from examining
> their reasoning processes. (pp. 61-62)

Seo (2003) noted that Argyris himself based his theory on an implicit assumption: that "to generate double-loop learning, emotions can and should be overcome by cognitive confrontation" (p. 10). Further, he argued this assumption is supported by two untested attributions: (a) that strategies designed to avoid embarrassment and threat are the source of the defensive reactions to negative emotions and (b) that these reactions can be challenged directly by interrupting them and reeducating the perpetrator. Basically, Argyris claimed that people can think their way out of feeling threatened.

There is some support for this position. However, it applies to circumstances far different than the circumstances in which Argyris attempts to apply it. Cognitive behavioral therapy has enjoyed success, to a large extent, by doing just that: helping people think their way out of feeling

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[1] The use of the word *collude*—meaning to conspire together, especially in planning a fraud, clearly disparages engagement with these emotions.

threatened. It is used for a wide variety of disorders including panic disorder and generalized

anxiety disorder (Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006). These disorders are the result of too

much emotional response to threatening situations. Cognitive behavioral therapy helps those who

suffer from, for example, excess anxiety, to reason through the probability of a feared event

happening and to generate other equally plausible futures in addition to the feared one. This

therapy helps people who are overwhelmed by the intensity of their emotional response to

achieve a more balanced and rationally thoughtful response to feared, anticipated situations.

The therapeutic context that addresses excess emotion is very different from the business

environment Argyris operates within. People in business lead with their rational minds and,

consistent with Argyris, suppress excess emotion. Argyris understands this and is therefore,

appropriately, cognitively oriented. However, recent research reveals that emotions and

cognitions are interdependent and it is impossible to elevate one at the expense of the other and

still have a high-functioning person.

"Emotion is a fundamental adaptive mechanism of human beings" (Seo, 2003 p. 10).

Neurological and psychological research studies have established that emotion plays an important

role in cognitive processes (Damasio, 1994; Izard, 1992; Solomon, 2006). Emotion is a critical

component of perception, decision-making, and behavior (Damasio, 1994; Grim, 2008).

Emotion is also a necessary element in high-level thinking. However, emotions cover a

broad spectrum of human experience. For purposes of this discussion, the author will simply

consider negative emotions and their impact on the thinking necessary for transformational

learning and change and then positive emotions and their impact on transformational learning and

change. One explanation of the effect of negative emotions, such as feeling threatened or fearful,

is that they evoke a specific and narrow response, known as specific action tendencies

(Fredrickson, 2001)—some variety of fight or flight. This narrowed repertoire is evolutionarily

adaptive by enabling a very fast response to a potentially life-threatening situation. The response

is fueled by physiological readiness, including increased heart rate and respiration.

Argyris uses cognitive confrontation to try to get people to engage in double-loop

learning. The author argues that this confrontational approach diminishes the participants'

abilities to use the higher-level thinking that double loop learning requires.

> There is a wealth of evidence to confirm the common impression that when people feel
> threatened, pressured, judged or stressed, they tend to revert to ways of thinking that are
> more clear-cut, more tried and tested, and more conventional: in a word, less creative.
> (Claxton, 1997)

Emotion is evoked when an individual's self-esteem is implicated. Claxton (1997), for example,

cited numerous studies that indicated that an important role of the conscious mind is to filter

information that may be damaging or threatening to an individual's self-image. When Argyris

confronts his participants with the demand they recognize they are being defensive and using

fallacious reasoning, he further threatens them by impairing their self-esteem.

The Action-Learning coaches interviewed in this study used an approach far different

from Argyris' cognitive confrontation. Rather than eliciting threat and the resulting fear-based

narrowed behavioral response, they established a group climate characterized by psychological

safety and positive, supportive emotions. The coaches did not confront, rather they invited

people to broaden their thinking and operate in a climate in which it was safe to act in new

ways—to experiment with new, more effective, collaborative behavior.

The mechanism by which this change is imparted may be the broaden-and-build theory

(Fredrickson, 2001). That theory suggests that in contrast to the narrowing that results from

negative emotions, positive emotions cause a diffuse and expanding response that invites

openness to new ideas and creativity by expanding the array of thoughts and actions to which an

individual has access. Positive affect encourages approach behavior and facilities engagement with the environment (Fredrickson, 2001). Such exploration of novel situations is also considered evolutionarily adaptive.

The broaden-and-build theory suggests that positive emotions not only indicate an individual is flourishing, they also produce flourishing. "Positive emotions may fuel psychological resilience" (Fredrickson, 2001). By broadening attention and cognition that produces creative and flexible thinking, individuals' personal coping and resilience resources are enhanced.

The results of this study provide further evidence in support of the two tenets of the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotion. First, the coaches indicated that the safety and trust group members develop enabled them to think in highly divergent and creative ways.

Second, the coaches commented that after the positive experiences of affirmation and supportive feedback in Action Learning, people's resources were augmented. People maintained the relationships they developed in Action-Learning teams, and those relationships became part of their permanent support systems. People gained confidence and became skilled in both inquiry-focused interactions and in listening skills. All these factors enhanced their long-term capacity to cope with adversity and to excel in the business environments to which they returned.

Socially Constructed Meanings in Action-Learning teams

Broadly speaking, Action Leaning coaches behaved consistently with a view of social science known as social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This view posits that the facts of a social situation *underdetermine* how they can be interpreted. Therefore, in order to make sense of social situations, humans bring their life experiences, their perspectives and biases,

and their expectations and intentions to bear. The result, social constructionists argue, is a unique creation of a coconstructed reality.

In-the-moment reactions are what Schon (1993) referred to as *reflection in action* as opposed to *reflection on action,* meaning a retrospective look at past actions. Much of the skill the coaches displayed involved their ability to read the social situations with which they were working and, using the tenets enumerated above, act into them in a spontaneous, real-time manner. Deconstructing that skill set to a further extent is challenging due to its complexity and variability.

Other Climate Studies. This study extends and amplifies the findings of several studies relating to a climate of psychological safety. The Baer and Frese (2003) study defined a climate for psychological safety as "formal and informal organizational practices and procedures guiding and supporting open and trustful interactions in the work environment." This study identified what practices and procedures promote "open and trustful interactions in the work environment:" (p. 47) being clear and directive in the beginning of the formation of the team, showing respect and care for each individual, exercising clear psychological boundaries, providing an opportunity for each person to have a voice and protecting members from attack or criticism.

The Wilkens and London (2006) study found that high-performing groups have active leaders who foster a climate that encourages self-disclosure, is perceived to be psychologically safe and that promotes a group learning orientation. This study revealed what Action-Learning coaches actually do to set in motion dynamics that result in the correlations that the Wilkens and London study identified.

Protectors of the Safety of the People

The coaches were very clear and deliberate about acting in the literal role of protector of the people on their Action-Learning teams. They noted that it is not uncommon for team members to attack or criticize other team members. The coaches immediately intervene and begin asking questions about how such behavior impacts the functioning of a team. They do this without retaliating against the perpetrator and without aligning with the person who was the target of the comment, so they protect everyone. By stopping the action and helping the team process what happened, they set the context for the team members to build norms that discourage dysfunctional team behavior.

We know from the literature (Simons & Peterson, 2000) that good-quality decisions result when group members have high-quality interaction and communication. We also know that task conflict, cognitive-based conflict regarding the group's work or task, is positively related to group effectiveness (Cummings & Ancona, 2005), whereas relationship conflict which tends to occur in the absence of trust among group members, reduces group effectiveness (Simons & Peterson, 2000)

A safe climate on the team level has the element of positive intentionality toward each person (Edmondson, 1999). By being protective, the coach displays the intention to provide safety. The clarity of the coaches around their roles also contributes to their ability to exhibit clear intentions: They are not team members or subject-matter experts who have a stated position about what they think should happen. Their role is solely to help the team perform better by attending to its processes.

A principle of Model II is promoting free and informed choice. The coaches exercise decisive authority, particularly at the beginning of the team's formation. However, the authority is

exercised without invoking psychological control which is defined as behavior that is controlling, demanding, constraining, manipulative, or infantilizing (Barber, 2001). The coaches are clear in their beliefs about the competence and capabilities of the team members. They are clear also regarding their roles as observers and their function as a mirror to the team. The choices and the power to implement them lie with the team members.

An important finding in this study extends what is known about psychological safety. One aspect of creating a safe environment that the coaches reported regarded their clear intention to establish a positive, helping relationship when they interacted with members of the Action-Learning team. One aspect of this position has to do with the clarity the coaches maintain regarding their own roles. They are very deliberate about what they will do and what they will not do as coaches. Rogers (1961) referred to the notion of congruence among how a helping person experiences a situation, maintains awareness of that experience, and communicates about it. For Rogers, sustaining congruence was an essential aspect of building trusting relationships.

Being very deliberate about not attempting to control or manipulate other people is another expression of respect for the other. A controlling person often attempts to mask the behavior and so deceive the person he or she is attempting to control in order to make the influence being exerted less obvious. That introduces an element of dishonesty and deceitfulness to the interaction (incongruence), and that fact changes the nature of the relationship from honesty between equals to power exertion from a person who wants to dominate another. This approach is fundamentally disrespectful. Resisting any urge to exert psychological control over team members is another aspect of establishing a safe environment. The coaches exercise authority in a way that allows others to maintain their identities and their dignity.

A construct related to psychological control and identity is a psychological boundary.

A boundary is a border, a fence, the start of one distinct thing or the end of another. A psychological boundary is an invisible *fence* that surrounds an individual (Bluestein, 1993). Healthy emotional boundaries enable people to determine their feelings about any situation or person. Healthy intellectual boundaries enable people to critically examine information before they accept it as truth. Boundaries provide clarity about what is wanted or needed and whose wants and needs are being considered. "Boundaries let the world know your limits: who you are, what you're comfortable or uncomfortable with and what you are willing to do, accept or take responsibility for" (p. 37).

Again, Rogers (1961) has instructive comments. He says that it takes strong and secure persons to be who they are and simultaneously permit other persons to be whoever they are in the interactions. Rogers' claim is that it is only in the presence of unconditional positive regard that people feel safe enough to be open to change. This is the kind of presence the Action-Learning coaches described. They had positive intentions toward team members and they accepted them as they were while believing in the potentialities they possessed. This represents a respect for the psychological boundaries of both parties. The coaches stayed "in their skins" and maintained their roles and duties and simultaneously permitted the team members to be who they were.

Action-Learning coaches demonstrate very clear psychological boundaries because they have clarity about their roles. They respect the psychological boundaries of the team members when they use a Socratic approach and make it clear that they believe the team has the necessary resources to accomplish its task successfully. Respecting team members' psychological boundaries is an important element in creating a safe environment.

Another aspect of being very clear about allowing team members to draw their own conclusions is that it enables a higher degree of honesty. Seashore (Seashore, Seashore, &

Weinberg, 1991) made the observation that if one provides pure feedback to other people without demanding compliance or attempting to change their behavior, then very powerful messages can be transmitted without arousing defensiveness or threat. Action-Learning team members report to the coaches that they gain self-knowledge as a result of the feedback they receive. The practice of giving and receiving honest feedback in a safe and respectful environment is a valuable management skill.

Another aspect of safety the coaches impart is the way the coaches monitor and intervene around balanced participation among the team members. By making sure each person has a voice and contributes to the team's decision making, the coach provides another level of both safety and respect. Because safety is recognized as important and valuable, the evaluative pressure that is generally present in American business environments is neutralized. The emphasis of questions over answers reduces the sense that team members must appear to know all the answers.

In summary, Action-Learning coaches protect the people by establishing a safe environment. Several features contribute to its qualities: demonstrating positive intentions, exercise of authority without exerting psychological control, respecting psychological boundaries, using a Socratic approach to inquiry, providing pure feedback, and insuring balanced participation.

Chief Learning Proponent

By valuing the process of learning and the related open and vulnerable mentality that fosters learning, Action-Learning coaches invite a different kind of leadership to evolve. This kind of leadership involves seeking information from each member of the team because it is presumed that each person has a unique and valuable contribution to make. This seeking also requires careful and active listening. When people are carefully listened to, they feel affirmed

(Rogers, 1961). The sense of affirmation results in the kind of engagement and investment of effort for which Action-Learning teams are noted.

Practical Implications in Business Settings

Many organizations claim to value the role of learning as a contributor to their success. Many large organizations have established the role of Chief Learning Officer (Dutra & Bacon, 2010) as a way of emphasizing and elevating the important role of learning in the organization. *Learning organizations* have been the topic of management books since the 1990s (Garvin, 2000; Kenny, 2006; Senge, 1994; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). This study speaks to what organizations should do if they truly want to introduce a climate conducive to learning in their organizations. Although not every team meeting will (or should) use Action Learning as a format, aspects of what contributes to Action Learning's successes can be incorporated into an organization's day-to-day life.

Training Opportunity: Create Safe Environments

Managers should be trained to understand the critical role of having a safe environment when they ask their employees to become open and vulnerable by admitting they do not know something and taking action to address that fact. Management training should consist of the methods Action-Learning coaches use to create a climate conducive to learning: exercising their authority without resorting to psychological control tactics and having clarity about their opinions of the people with whom they work and the intentions they have toward those people. Finally, they should become skillful in intervening in situations in which people are potentially embarrassed or humiliated to protect everyone concerned—perpetrator and target. If handled well, those situations can become learning opportunities for building strong and cohesive teams. Because so many organizations now rely on self-directed work teams to produce the timely and

highly skilled results that modern businesses require (Tata & Prasad, 2004), developing the kind of leadership skills that enable teams to learn together and work well together is essential.

Training Opportunity: Problem Definition Process and Value of Diversity

Diversity training that pays lip service to how differences among people are valuable to organizations without demonstrating that fact has been ineffective (Alderfer & Weiss, 2003; Boss-bicak, 2008). Training managers should (a) attend to the importance of the context of the problem they are trying to solve, (b) define the problem carefully using Action Learning's technique of having people write down their understanding of the problem and then reading each person's response clearly demonstrating how different people hear different messages, and (c) ask the group to arrive at consensus of the problem definition thereby aiding problem solving. The coaches commented that even for people whose careers involved promoting diversity, participating in this exercise was often the first time team members really understood the power and value of diversity in their organizations.

Training Opportunity: Use of Reflection

Taking time to reflect on team processes is antithetical to fast-paced business environments. Yet the coaches reported that when a team purposefully invested time in reviewing what they did well in that working session, what the team learned is made salient and therefore more accessible to the team members in the future. Practicing giving and receiving feedback to group members with a focus on positive aspects of performance also helps to create an appreciative inquiry ethic in the organization and helps to build strong and effective teams. This practice also reduces the evaluative pressures that contribute to organization dysfunction.

Training Opportunity: Commit to Action

The coaches remarked on how critical it was to act on the learning that occurred in the teams and how ending meetings (before the reflection phase) with a commitment to taking action, then starting the next meeting with a report on the learning that occurred as a result of that action, built accountability among team members that cascaded throughout the organization.

Research Limitations

These Findings Are Not Generalizable

The small number of participants and the participant selection process make it impossible to claim that the study results are generalizable to populations beyond the participants themselves. Nevertheless, the goal of seeking out expert testimony about how experienced Action-Learning coaches fostered a climate conducive to learning was accomplished. Qualitative studies are appropriate when not much is known about a specific phenomenon. Accessing expertise and documenting what the experts report are their practices offer up data on which to build and extend theory.

These Findings Are Probably Limited to American Business Culture

What constitutes a safe climate is highly likely to be a culturally dependent construct. This idea is intertwined with what people find threatening, what is embarrassing or humiliating and what is acceptable behavior in the context of the workplace (Cho, 2010).

Researcher Subjectivity and Bias

The author has extensive experience facilitating small groups and has a strong belief that creating a safe environment contributes to the success of a group developing trusting and productive relationships. The author also believes that evaluative pressure is a destructive force in business organizations. It is possible that these beliefs influenced the coaches who were

interviewed and also the manner in which the findings were interpreted. To mitigate this

possibility, the interview protocol was carefully followed and a journal was kept in order to keep

sensitivity and awareness high.

Peshkin (1988, 2001) noted that as long as researchers stay aware of the dangers of bias,

familiarity and experience with the topic can add depth and insightful understanding to the

subject at hand. The author believes experience both with the topics and the efforts to stay aware

of possible bias contributed to the ability to accurately report and interpret the findings.

Self-Report

The questions asked of the experienced Action-Learning coaches mainly concerned their

behaviors in the teams and the ideas or principles that guided those behaviors. These were self-

report accounts. Polkinghorne (2005) noted that people do not always have full and unfettered

access to their inner processes and that researchers must not misconstrue self-report evidence as

an accurate reflection of inner experiences. Also, any account is relayed with the mediation of

language that has its limits and potentially introduces distortions. Although self reports have

limitations, qualitative research is powerful because it can access detailed and nuanced human

experience so it can be described, analyzed and understood (Creswell, 2003).

In addition to using self-report data, another limitation in this research is that the behavior

coaches were asked to describe is largely tacit knowledge. Accurately accessing and then

describing tacit knowledge is challenging. Nevertheless, the coaches seemed to be able to

verbalize the answers to the questions and provided rich details and examples.

<div align="center">Future Research</div>

Action-Learning teams are microcosms of self-directed teams that illustrate the factors

that are essential to their success. Self-directed teams require that a special kind of leadership be

shared among all members of the team. That style of leadership is not directive but rather is cooperative and built on achieving mutual success. A useful line of research to build on the current study would be to examine further the kinds of leadership skills that develop in the climates the coaches create. Social constructionism and the influence of that line of thinking on leadership studies has the potential to produce new and productive approaches. Likewise, the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, particularly in a business context, offers new and interesting topics to explore.

Finally, this study revealed a new connection between two constructs that warrants additional research. The link between psychological safety and psychological boundaries merits additional exploration particularly with respect to the exercise of authority.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to document and analyze expert testimony about how experienced Action-Learning coaches reported they established a climate conducive to learning. The stories the coaches told me concerned people operating in highly competitive business environments, and how the coaches created experiences in Action-Learning teams to create an opportunity for them to be safe enough that they could be honest, vulnerable, and open to learning about themselves as human beings and leaders and about leading their departments and their organizations as a whole. It is my hope that I have faithfully reported the valuable lessons they have to teach and that their message will contribute to both a humanization of the business world and an increase in its productivity.

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Appendix A

Recruitment material

Request for referrals

Dear _____,

As I indicated in our conversation, I am a doctoral student at the Fielding Graduate University and in the process of doing the research for my dissertation. Thank you for agreeing to assist me in identifying experienced Action-Learning coaches for my study on how Action-Learning coaches foster a climate for learning. The study involves an interview of approximately 60 minutes in duration that I will conduct over the telephone or face-to-face. I am seeking participants who are experienced Action-Learning coaches, who, at a minimum, have coached three teams through full Action Learning cycles, (i.e., start to finish), in a for-profit business or government environment. During the interview I will ask the coaches about their experiences and their philosophy with respect to their role in Action-Learning teams.

Although any Action-Learning coaches you refer to me will be told you are the individual who nominated them for the study, I will not disclose to you their decision of whether or not to participate. I will provide a brief report of the research findings to you (as well as the participants) once I have completed my dissertation.

Thank you for your help in identifying suitable participants for this research. It is my hope that my findings will contribute to the important work being done to advance Action Learning. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at 210-213-8386 or saragibsonmba@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

Sara Gibson

Appendix B

Recruitment letter

Date

Dear prospective participant,

I am conducting a study of how Action-Learning coaches foster a climate conducive to learning as part of the requirements to complete my PhD from Fielding Graduate University.

I want to interview experienced Action-Learning coaches (people who have completed at least three full action learning cycles in a for-profit business or government environment) and ask them about how they operate as coaches. The interviews will be conducted either in person or over the telephone. They will be audio taped and later transcribed to enable me to carefully analyze what is said in response to the questions I will ask.

Your participation will be kept confidential and nothing you say will be attributed to you in a manner that would permit your individual identity to be revealed. In addition, I will obtain your permission to use any direct quotes from your interview in any publication that results from this study. The interview should take approximately 60 minutes of your time to complete.

Please send me an email at: saragibsonmba@gmail.com; call me at 210-213-8386, or send me a letter at 3226 Litchfield Street, San Antonio , Texas 78230 if you would be willing to be interviewed. When I hear from you, I will contact you to set up a mutually convenient time to conduct the interview.

Sincerely,

Sara Gibson

Appendix C

Letter to Those Who Do Not Meet Criteria

Date

Dear_____:

      Thank your for your interest in participating in my study on Action Leaning coaches. I appreciate your willingness to talk with me and consider my request. However, after our discussion, it appears you have not had the specific experience I am trying to investigate in this particular study.

      I will be happy to send you an electronic copy of my Findings and Conclusions after I have completed my dissertation. If you are interested in receiving that information please complete the contact information below.

Thank you again for your time.

Best wishes,

Sara Gibson

_____

NAME (please print)

_____

e-mail address

Appendix D

Fielding Graduate University
Informed Consent Form

How Action-Learning coaches foster a climate conducive to learning

Dear_____:

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Sara Gibson, a doctoral student in the School of Human and Organization Development at Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, CA. This study is supervised by Dr. Barbara P. Mink. This research involves the study of experienced Action-Learning coaches and is part of Ms. Gibson's Fielding dissertation. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as someone who is an experienced Action-Learning coach.

The study involves an interview concerning your experience as an Action-Learning coach. The interview will be arranged at your convenience. This will last approximately 60 minutes. In addition, you will be asked to review the transcript of your interview for accuracy. It is estimated that the review will take approximately thirty minutes. If the Researcher wants to use any direct quote from the interview, she will contact you for your consent prior to using the quote. The total time involved in participation will be up to two hours.

The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. The informed consent forms and other identifying information will be kept separate from the data. All transcripts will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the Researcher's home office. The tape recordings will be listened to only by the Researcher, possibly her Dissertation Chair, and the transcriber and possibly two confidential Research Assistants, who have signed the attached Professional Assistance Confidentiality Agreement. Any records that would identify you as a participant in this study, such as informed consent forms, will be destroyed by the Researcher approximately three years after the study is completed.

You will be asked to provide a different name for any quotes that might be included in the final research report. If any direct quotes will be used, permission will be sought from you first.

The results of this research will be published in the Researcher's dissertation, and possibly in subsequent journals or books.

You may develop greater personal awareness of your coaching techniques as a result of your participation in this research. The risks to you are considered minimal; there is a small chance that you may experience some emotional discomfort during or after your participation.

The security of data transmitted over the Internet cannot be guaranteed; therefore, there is a slight risk that the information exchanged via e-mail will not be secure. The collection of such data is

not expected to present any greater risk than you would encounter in everyday life when sending and/or receiving information over the Internet.

You may withdraw from this study at any time, either during or after your participation, without negative consequences. Should you withdraw, your data will be eliminated from the study and will be destroyed.

No compensation will be provided for participation.

You may request a copy of the summary of the final results by indicating your interest at the end of this form.

If you have any questions about any aspect of this study or your involvement, please tell the Researcher before signing this form. You may also contact the supervising faculty if you have questions or concerns about your participation in this study. The supervising faculty has provided contact information at the bottom of this form.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, contact the Fielding Graduate University IRB by email at irb@fielding.edu or by telephone at 805-898-4033.

Two copies of this informed consent form have been provided. Please sign both, indicating you have read, understood, and agree to participate in this research. Return one to the Researcher and keep the other for your files. The Institutional Review Board of Fielding Graduate University retains the right to access the signed informed consent forms and other study documents.

_____
NAME OF PARTICIPANT (please print)

_____
SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

_____
DATE

Dr. Barbara P. Mink, Faculty Advisor   Sara Gibson, Researcher
Fielding Graduate University   3226 Litchfield Street
2112 Santa Barbara Street   San Antonio, Texas 78230
Santa Barbara, CA 93105   sgibson@email.fielding.edu
805-687-1099   210-213-8386

Yes, please send a summary of the study results to:

NAME (please print)

Street Address

City, State, Zip

E-mail address

Fielding Graduate University
Informed Consent Form
(Identifies referral source)

How Action-Learning coaches foster a climate conducive to learning

Dear_____:

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Sara Gibson, a doctoral student in the School of Human and Organization Development at Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, CA. This study is supervised by Dr. Barbara P. Mink. This research involves the study of experienced Action-Learning coaches and is part of Ms. Gibson's Fielding dissertation. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as someone who is an experienced Action-Learning coach. You were referred to the Researcher as an experienced Action-Learning coach by _____. Your choice of whether to participate in this study will not be disclosed to _____.

The study involves an interview concerning your experience as an Action-Learning coach. The interview will be arranged at your convenience. This will last approximately 60 minutes. In addition, you will be asked to review the transcript of your interview for accuracy. It is estimated that the review will take approximately thirty minutes. If the Researcher wants to use any direct quote from the interview, she will contact you for your consent prior to using the quote. The total time involved in participation will be up to two hours.

The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. The informed consent forms and other identifying information will be kept separate from the data. All transcripts will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the Researcher's home office. The tape recordings will be listened to only by the Researcher, possibly her Dissertation Chair, and the transcriber and possibly two confidential Research Assistants, who have signed the attached Professional Assistance Confidentiality Agreement. Any records that would identify you as a participant in this study, such as informed consent forms, will be destroyed by the Researcher approximately three years after the study is completed.

You will be asked to provide a different name for any quotes that might be included in the final research report. If any direct quotes will be used, permission will be sought from you first.

The results of this research will be published in the Researcher's dissertation, and possibly in subsequent journals or books.

You may develop greater personal awareness of your coaching techniques as a result of your participation in this research. The risks to you are considered minimal; there is a small chance that you may experience some emotional discomfort during or after your participation.

The security of data transmitted over the Internet cannot be guaranteed; therefore, there is a slight risk that the information exchanged via e-mail will not be secure. The collection of such data is

not expected to present any greater risk than you would encounter in everyday life when sending and/or receiving information over the Internet.

You may withdraw from this study at any time, either during or after your participation, without negative consequences. Should you withdraw, your data will be eliminated from the study and will be destroyed.

No compensation will be provided for participation.

You may request a copy of the summary of the final results by indicating your interest at the end of this form.

If you have any questions about any aspect of this study or your involvement, please tell the Researcher before signing this form. You may also contact the supervising faculty if you have questions or concerns about your participation in this study. The supervising faculty has provided contact information at the bottom of this form.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, contact the Fielding Graduate University IRB by email at irb@fielding.edu or by telephone at 805-898-4033.

Two copies of this informed consent form have been provided. Please sign both, indicating you have read, understood, and agree to participate in this research. Return one to the Researcher and keep the other for your files. The Institutional Review Board of Fielding Graduate University retains the right to access the signed informed consent forms and other study documents.

_____
NAME OF PARTICIPANT (please print)

_____
SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

_____
DATE

Dr. Barbara P. Mink, Faculty Advisor   Sara Gibson, Researcher
Fielding Graduate University   3226 Litchfield Street
2112 Santa Barbara Street   San Antonio, Texas 78230
Santa Barbara, CA 93105   sgibson@email.fielding.edu
805-687-1099   210-213-8386

Yes, please send a summary of the study results to:

_____
NAME (please print)

_____
Street Address

_____
City, State, Zip

_____
E-mail address

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

TQ 1: What is the coach's background? Insight into values?
IQ1.1. How long have you been coaching Action Learning groups?
IQ1.2. How did you get into Action Learning?
IQ1.3. Why did you choose Action Learning?
IQ1.4. What are Action Learning's attributes?
IQ1.5. How does it compare to other processes?

TQ 2: In what ways does the Action-Learning coach create a climate in the group?
IQ2.1. How do you communicate that this Action Learning experience will not be "business as usual?"
IQ2.2. What do you do to set the tone in the group?
IQ2.3. What is your goal for what the tone should be—what is the ideal you strive for?
IQ2.4. Can you think of a time when the tone was just what you wanted it to be? What seemed to contribute to that ideal atmosphere in the group?
IQ2.5. Action Learning groups are exceptional for how they teach people how to be functional in groups: how to be honest and constructively confrontational. How does this happen?

TQ 3: Please give me examples of problems which arise when you coach a group.

TQ 4: How does the Action-Learning coach manage the typical defensive and evaluative behavior Argyris states is universal and encourage people to move to more productive behaviors? How do you deal with these particular problems:

IQ4.1. What do you do when a team member is critical or attacks another member?
IQ4.2 .Typically people are defensive and competitive instead of cooperative in groups. Do you find this is true in general? Is behavior in Action-Learning teams different? How is it different? What do you do to make it different?
IQ4.3. How do you handle "bad behavior" in groups? What is an example of "bad behavior" you had to deal with and what did you do to address it?
IQ4.4. A feature of Action Learning groups is that they are used to evaluate people. Evaluation often shuts people down. Do you agree? How do you manage those forces? I.e., how do you handle the high-potential employee evaluation aspect of the Action Learning experience?
IQ4.5. Do you have rules for yourself so you model effective interpersonal behavior? What are they?

TQ 5: How does the coach invite team members to reflect on their experience?
IQ5.1. Do you agree that reflection is a critical aspect of learning in an Action Learning group experience?
IQ5.2. Do you encourage people to talk about their feelings?

IQ5.3. Do you find people are willing to disclose information about what they are experiencing in the group? Do you support that? How?

IQ5.4. Do you think these kinds of reflections contribute to what people are able to learn in these groups?

IQ5.5. What do you do to make it safe for people to explore their experiences on a deep level?

IQ5.6. How do you manage trust vs. fear in your group?

IQ5.7. Do you ever have to deal with team members who are passive (vs. empowered)?

IQ5.8. Is there any other information you would like to share about your experiences regarding learning and group dynamics in Action Learning groups?

Appendix F

Professional Assistance Confidentiality Agreement

Title of Project: How Action-Learning coaches foster a climate conducive to learning
Name of Researcher and Affiliation with Fielding: Sara Gibson, Doctoral Student

I have agreed to assist Sara Gibson in her research study on how Action-Learning coaches foster a climate conducive to learning in the role of transcriptionist.
I understand that all participants in this study have been assured that their responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. I agree to maintain that confidentiality and anonymity. I agree that no materials will remain in my possession beyond the operation of this research study. I further agree that I will make no independent use of any of the research materials from this project.

Signature_____

Date_____

Printed Name_____

Title _____