Chapter X

Using Action Learning in GSS Facilitation Training

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INTRODUCTION

Although electronic face-to-face meetings are increasingly being used by organizations to improve the productivity of their strategic planning teams, design task forces, quality circles, sales management, and other organizational groups (Alavi, 1993; Dishman & Aytes, 1996), the rate of adoption of the technologies to support these meetings appears to be slowing (Grise & Gallupe, forthcoming). A possible reason for this reduced rate of adoption may be the difficulty in training competent electronic meeting facilitators. These facilitators play a key role in electronic meetings that use computer-based group technologies or group support systems (GSS) to assist the group in tasks such as generating ideas, evaluating alternatives and developing action plans.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how an action learning approach was used to train traditional meeting facilitators in the tools, techniques and processes of electronic meeting facilitation. This chapter begins with a description of action learning, in particular the three schools of action learning. The second section explains the nature of the “experiential” school of action learning and the GSS facilitation training program used in a research project in which 15 facilitators, already experienced in conventional meetings, were trained to become facilitators of electronic meetings. The final sections describe some lessons learned and implications for organizations training their electronic meeting facilitators.
WHAT IS ACTION LEARNING?

The term action learning was coined by Revans (1982) and is defined as “a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change to improve their observable behavior henceforth in the problem field” (pp. 626-627). Revans’ original concept and equation for learning—L = P + Q (i.e., Learning equals Programmed knowledge from the past plus Questioning insight)—have now been extended and applied in information systems education (Avison, 1989; Jessup & Egbert, 1995), information management (Finlay & Marples, 1998) and organizational development (Ramirez, 1983; Gregory, 1994). In these contexts, action learning is a group-learning and problem-solving process whereby group members work on real issues and problems with an emphasis on self-development and learning by doing.

Marsick and O’Neil (1999) identify three different “schools” of thought on action learning: Scientific, Experiential and Critical Reflection. Table 1 provides a summary of the theoretical background to each school of thought.

Marsick and O’Neil uncovered two themes that are common to all three schools of action learning: the group participants (a) meet on equal terms and (b) are engaged in solving unstructured problems where there is no one right solution. The group of four to six participants, known as the action learning “set,” meets regularly and provides the supportive and challenging environment in which members are encouraged to learn from experience, sharing that experience with others, having other members criticize and advise, taking that advice and implementing it, and reviewing with those members the action taken and the lessons that are learned (Margerison, 1988). Many learning sets require the assistance of a “learning coach” and the role of the coach depends on (a) whether the learning set works on one project as a team or the participants work on individual projects and (b) the level of facilitation on group process (Marsick and O’Neil, 1999).

Action Learning and Action Research

Cunningham (1993) describes action research as “a spectrum of activities that focus on research, planning, theorizing, learning, and development …a continuous process of research and learning in the researcher’s long-term relationship with a problem” (p. 4). However, Carr and Kemmis (1986) emphasize the processes of “improvement” and “involvement” in action research.
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