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Action learning and resistance - why some sets are more satisfied with their action learning experience than others and what you can do about it

Facilitating action learning sets with managers or students, we experience over the years that some sets seem to be much more satisfied with their action learning experience than others. Investigating the reasons an interesting pattern is revealed.

In general, managers and students quite naturally go to work with what they define as their project. The reflection part on the other hand is very often a much greater challenge. Most of the participants we see in the sets are little or not at all experienced in doing personal reflections in a group. Of course they have their opinions of what is happening and how it is happening, but very often they are not used to addressing these reflections openly or to putting their theory-of-action into question. So when beliefs are mentioned they are often expressed as a fact and not as an assumption. For many participants, with their stance towards action reflection, it does not seem to be a very pleasant or satisfying task, or something they even would regard as work at all.

However, some sets overcome this barrier and develop a very open atmosphere with in-depth reflection, while others stay reserved for a long time - even the whole action learning cycle - and avoid reflection. But then the attitude towards reflection which is developed in a set seems to be a key element for overall satisfaction with action learning. The greater the openness for constructive reflection a set develops over time, the more satisfied a set is with action learning (and often the more focused the outcome of the project is).

In the article, examples of resistance against reflection in a set are described. The effect of individual attitudes of informal leaders on group culture is highlighted. Finally it is discussed what interventions of a facilitator could help the team to make progress towards a more open reflection behaviour and support them finding their own satisfying action learning path.

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