
ARL™ NEWS

Issue 35

The Action Reflection Learning Newsletter

July 2003

THE CHANGE CYCLE

By Isabel Rimanoczy

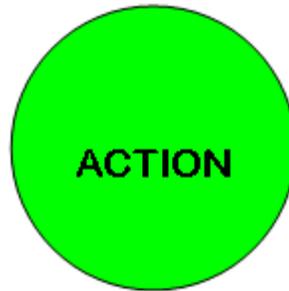
A few weeks ago I was having a conversation with an executive who has to lead his team through an organizational transition. He was preoccupied with the difficulty people have embracing change, and modifying habits and behaviors, and was asking me if people do change and under what circumstances this happens best. This seemed a good just in time opportunity to share with him a few principles that guide our coaching practice, and also a model to understand reality better. The first principle is that we understand learning as **a change of behaviors**. Learning on an intellectual level only, is good for heightening awareness, but as long as the knowledge is not converted into a better way to respond to an actual situation, it is as useful as goods that are packaged and stored in a warehouse.

-I can very well relate to this, he said. A couple of months ago we all went through a workshop that dealt with change and transitions. It was really good! We had great fun, we were put in teams and had to face some outdoor challenges that were very unusual and demanding. Then we debriefed and discussed, and it was amazing to see the wonderful conclusions we were able to draw collectively I cannot remember them now, but we all felt it was a good experience. We learned about how to team better, address challenges and change. But you know what? Now that we are back at work, I don't see that anything has changed in us; I sense a disconnect between what we know about transitions and change and when we have to act

-That's precisely the point, I replied, happy that he had found a real situation that illustrated what I was saying. It is knowledge that is packaged and stored but doesn't impact on our behaviors.

-But how do you make it come to life? he asked.

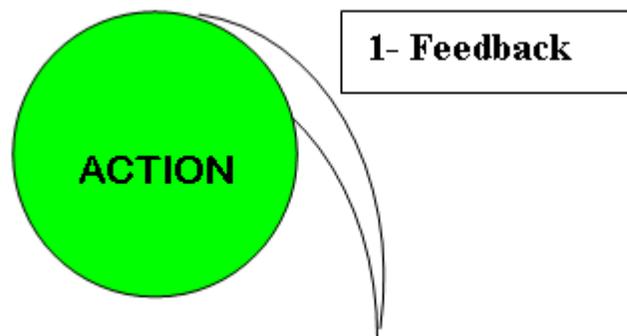
-Well, the first step is identifying **the real action**. Something is happening. We are not just talking about something, we are behaving, acting, reacting. In your outdoor experience, there was an action: the teams had a task they had to perform, and the struggle was the action. The problem is that the action was not a real action in the life of your organization, because your team doesn't have to build rafts or climb trees. It's a metaphor, and as such it's useful but it has its limitations too. It is useful in that it allows you distance; in a playful situation we can more easily realize how we react. The limitation is that we may not remember the metaphor in our next team meeting at the office, when real problems are creating real stress in our interactions.



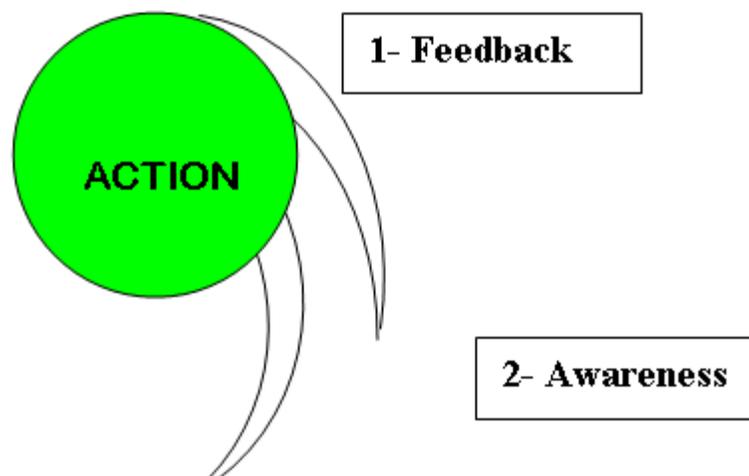
-Indeed that is what happens But how could we make that connection? - he insisted.

-In order to start the learning process, it is necessary to receive **Feedback** about that action, be it through individual reflection, through the result itself or from others. If we don't realize if and why an action was successful, we cannot develop any learning. *We just jump from one action into the next.* In your workshop, you took some time between one task and the next, I am sure, to talk about what happened, right?

- Yes, we analyzed it.



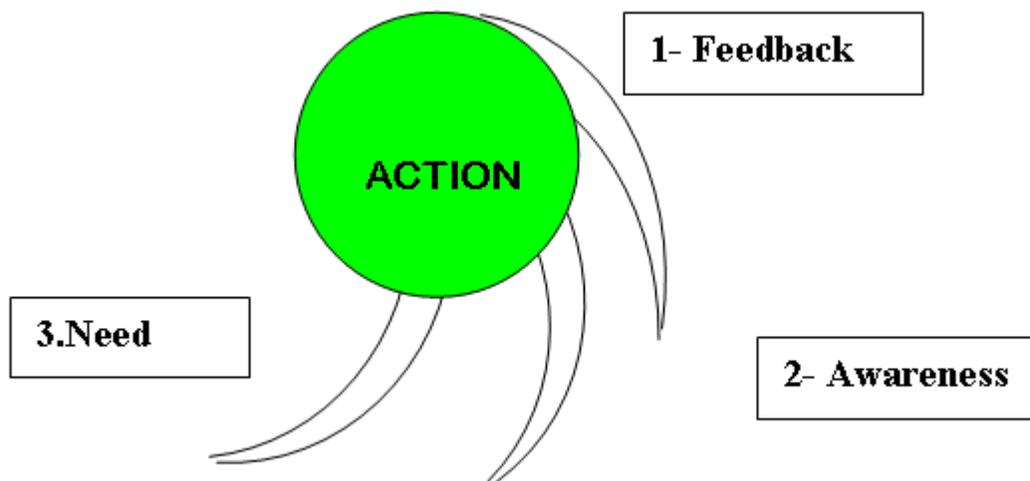
- As you analyzed what happened, you were building **Awareness**, which is the moment where we realize how *WE* contributed to what we obtained as a result of the action. It is not enough to realize how successful or not we were. If we don't discover what our contribution was, we lose our chances to learn.



-However, I continued, the real turning point in the road towards learning is the next step: **the Need**. If we understand what happened, realize how we contributed to it, but don't see any need to change our behavior no learning will occur. *The Need is the engine for change*

- I can relate to that! , he interrupted me. I think you just gave me the clue as to why we didn't use any of the conclusions of that day: we didn't need to, because we don't work as a team climbing ropes!! I think the connection with what happens back in the office was too distant.

-You're probably right. The need is the engine for change, and that means it has to be a REAL need, we have to feel the urgency, the importance it has for us to change a way to react, the impact it would have to improve our interactions, our life, our results. If a person doesn't feel the need to change a behavior, nothing will happen. The energy required to effect behavioral change, to learn something new, to unlearn a pattern of behavior, is directly proportional to the benefits that are anticipated to accrue to the individual making the effort.



-So let me see if understand it, he said. So far we discovered that the metaphor play was not real enough for us to feel the need to act differently because there was no next time climbing a rope

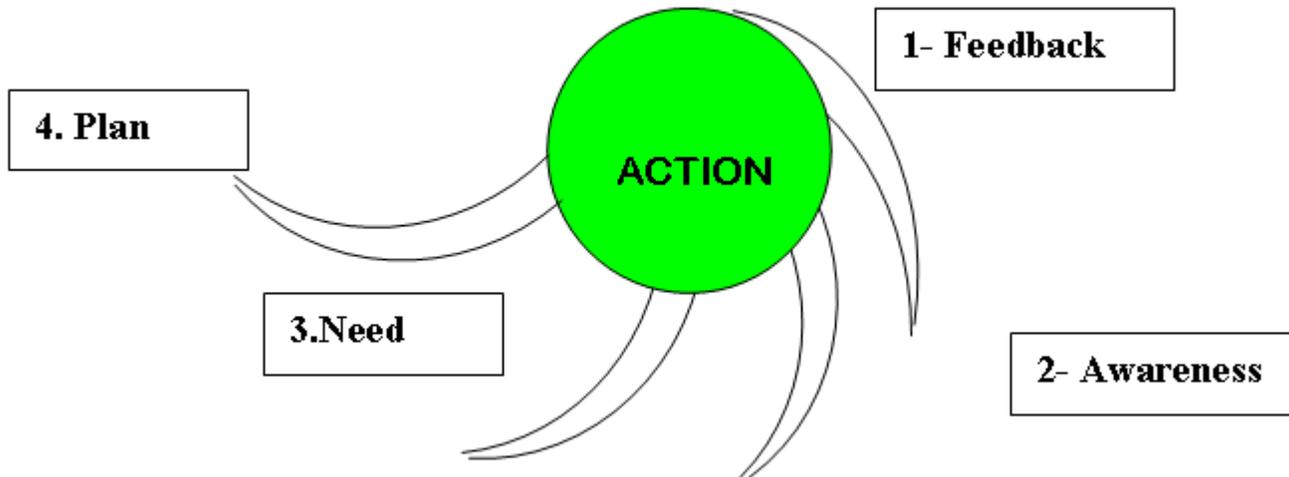
-That's exactly true. It is easier to see ourselves in play, but its also easier to forget what we have been made aware of, when its in play. So the next step is the **Plan**: we may have the wish to change a behavior, but in absence of a plan for making it happen, the risk is failure. The plan connects *what we want* with *what we can do* and control, with what we can influence. If you had had a learning session during your regular team meeting, you still could have acted, analyzed how you were doing, and achieved high awareness of how each team member was contributing to success AND to the problems. You would also have strongly realized the need to change something to get a better result for the sake of your own stress and the productivity of the meeting! The plan would have helped you to answer the question: So what can we do differently? A plan gives us back the power we think we had lost when we feel victims of failure.

- I see what you mean, he replied. -However in a working meeting we normally have a longer agenda than the time to finish it, the pressure is high, and I don't realistically see how we would start planning how to behave differently We are all concrete people, and this

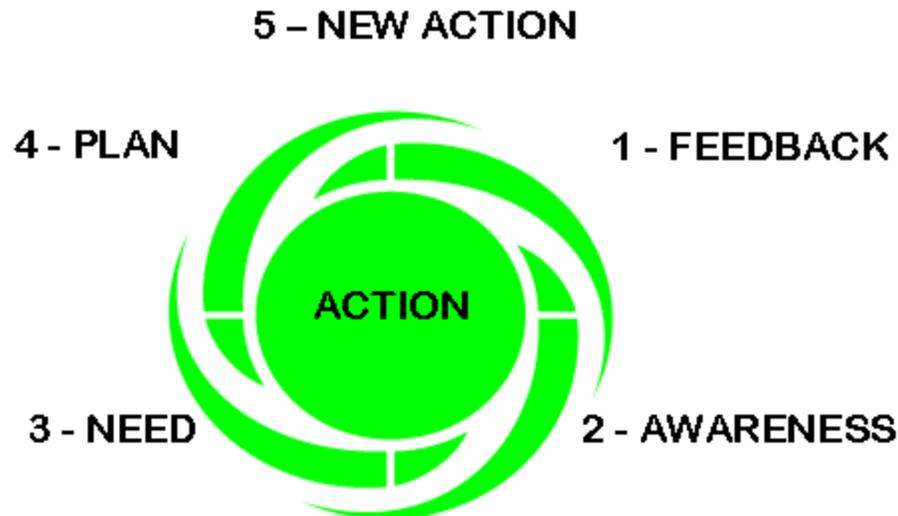
sounds very soft and intangible

- Well, don't view a plan as a huge task like writing the strategic plan of the company, nor something abstract like talking about how we talk. The plan I'm referring to is something very simple. Let me give you an example: You missed important information as you made your last decision. You analyze why this happened, and realize that some extraverts took most of the air time and those that needed some time to reflect, didn't get a chance to give their opinion. Both extraverts and introverts realize how they contributed to the situation. You discover you're missing important input this way, and you need to do something to change this situation. The plan could be that each time you raise an issue, instead of calling for a brainstorming, you give a minute of silent reflection for everyone to collect their thoughts, and then you go around the table hearing everyone, without interruptions until all have said their part. This is a plan; it is a way you find to implement a change. Is this concrete enough, you think?

He laughed. Yes, it is concrete enough for us



-Finally, I continued,- the learning is not really anchored until it is expressed in a changed behavior -- in other words, until the plan becomes a **New Action.**, Stated differently, someone will have to remember, next time you are discussing a topic, to call for that minute of reflection, otherwise nothing will change.



Source: Isabel Rimanoczy, 1998

-If you take a look at these different steps, you will notice that the change cycle could have been aborted if any of those steps didn't take place. If you don't reflect on a real action; or if you don't stop to see what happened; or if you see what happened, but you don't realize how you contributed to it; or if you know what happened, and how you contributed to it, but you don't care!! I had a friend who used to say I know I'm a difficult person to work with, but that's not my problem! That's other peoples problem. In other words, as long as you don't see that your life could be easier if you changed something why change!?! The effort has to be always less than the benefit expected, or it doesn't make sense. Also, if you cannot figure out a feasible, realistic way to implement a little change, it will remain an impossible task. Many of us know we need to have a more balanced life, but without a realistic plan, it remains a dream.

-You just gave me an idea. What if in our next team meeting I ask them to take a minute and think what we need to do better as a team, then listen to everyone's reflections, we just may be able to link our hidden wisdom with our real meeting?

- That sounds like a very good idea, I said. Just a tip: don't forget to ask also what you're doing well and should continue doing. You don't want to lose that, and it is essential to acknowledge what the team is doing well, in addition to what they must change.

Isabel.Rimanoczy@LIMglobal.net



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ARL News is published by **LIM**, Leadership in International Management - 1580 Sawgrass Corporate Pkwy, Sunrise, FL 33323- USA - Ph.: (954) 315-4583 - Fax: (305) 692-1931
E-mail: Info@LIMglobal.net - www.LIMglobal.net