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Dear Reader,

Are you familiar with Action Learning? More and more corporations globally are choosing this approach as a development process for their people. In this issue we interviewed Dr. Judy O'Neil^[1], co-author with Prof. Victoria Marsick of their newly released book [*Understanding Action Learning*](#).

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

"If you don't know where you are going, be ready to be surprised."

Uncle Wilbur

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UNDERSTANDING ACTION LEARNING An Interview with Author Dr. Judy O'Neil

LIM News: What decided you to write this book?



JON: Learning at the individual, group, and organizational levels has been heralded as an important source of competitive advantage. Both scholars and practitioners are increasingly asked to develop interventions and infrastructures that help people and organizations learn. About 80% of such learning is estimated to take place informally. Yet much more is known about effective training and education than is known about just-in-time learning outside of the classroom. So we thought to compile state-of-the-art knowledge about a common intervention that is built around informal learning, Action Learning.

LIM News: How do you describe what you mean by Action Learning?

JON: Despite its growing popularity for developing leaders, Action Learning means many things to many people. In recent years, Action Learning has gained currency as an approach to developing people by using work on an actual project or problem as the way to learn. Action Learning helps people grow on the job by building a learning environment around meaningful challenges they or the organization need to address. We've decided to write this book to help readers understand the essence of Action Learning, decide if and how to use it in their setting, and

benefit from what is known about its effective implementation.

LIM News: Is leadership development the main application of Action Learning?

JO'N: There is certainly an increasing demand for strategic leadership development, and Action Learning is used driven by line management to meet strategic goals and objectives. But there are many ways that it can be implemented. Action Learning must be adapted to suit the business needs, culture and context of each organization. We don't assume that a particular version of Action Learning is optimal or the only way to use it.

LIM News: What were your goals for this book?

JO'N: We had three key goals in mind: One was to help readers decide when AL is a good choice for their needs and if so, how to decide on the best AL design to address their needs — given their goals, characteristics of their organizational and industry cultures, and the needs of participants. Then we wanted to share templates, tools, and examples from real world practice so that readers could better understand what AL is and how it can be implemented. Finally we wanted to provide insights based on theory and research to enable readers to ground decisions and choices in what is known through scholarship.

LIM News: Do you have a preferred definition of Action Learning?

JO'N: We think Action Learning is an approach to working with and developing people that uses work on an actual project or problem as the way to learn. Participants work in small groups to take action to solve their problem and learn how to learn from that action. Often a learning coach works with the group to help the members learn how to balance their work with the learning from that work.

LIM News: What are the different types of Action Learning you've identified?

JO'N: We think about the various kinds of Action Learning as organized in four schools. These four schools are categorized by the way in which practitioners view that learning takes place during Action Learning. These schools are created to understand core similarities and differences and are not intended to label practitioners in any way. The categories have been inductively derived, based on the literature and interviews with AL practitioners in the United States, England, and Sweden, so others may categorize them differently. The different schools have much in common, but the key difference is in the view of how learning takes place.

These four schools are the Tacit school, the Scientific school, the Experiential school and the Critical Reflection school. In the Tacit school the focus is primarily on action and results through the project. The Tacit school assumes that learning will take place as long as carefully selected participants work together, some team building is done, and information is provided by experts from within and external to the company. Explicit attention is not necessarily placed on the process of learning, which makes the learning primarily tacit and incidental.

The Scientific school is rooted in the work of Revans, who described his method for achieving managerial objectives as consisting of systems Alpha, Beta and Gamma. Given his early background as a physicist, these systems have a basis in the scientific method. System Alpha refers to the strategy that a manager must devise when confronting a decision. System Beta is the negotiation and implementation of that designed strategy and System Gamma refers to the manager's mental predisposition that he/she brings to the situation. Learning occurs through asking questions, which leads Revans to a learning formula, $L = P + Q$ (L = learning, P = programmed instruction, Q = questioning insight.) "P," programmed instruction, is "the expert knowledge, knowledge in books, what we are told to do because that is how it has been done for decades." "Q," questioning insight, has been described as "discriminating questions."

As part of the Experiential school, many proponents of AL see Kolb's learning cycle as its theoretical learning

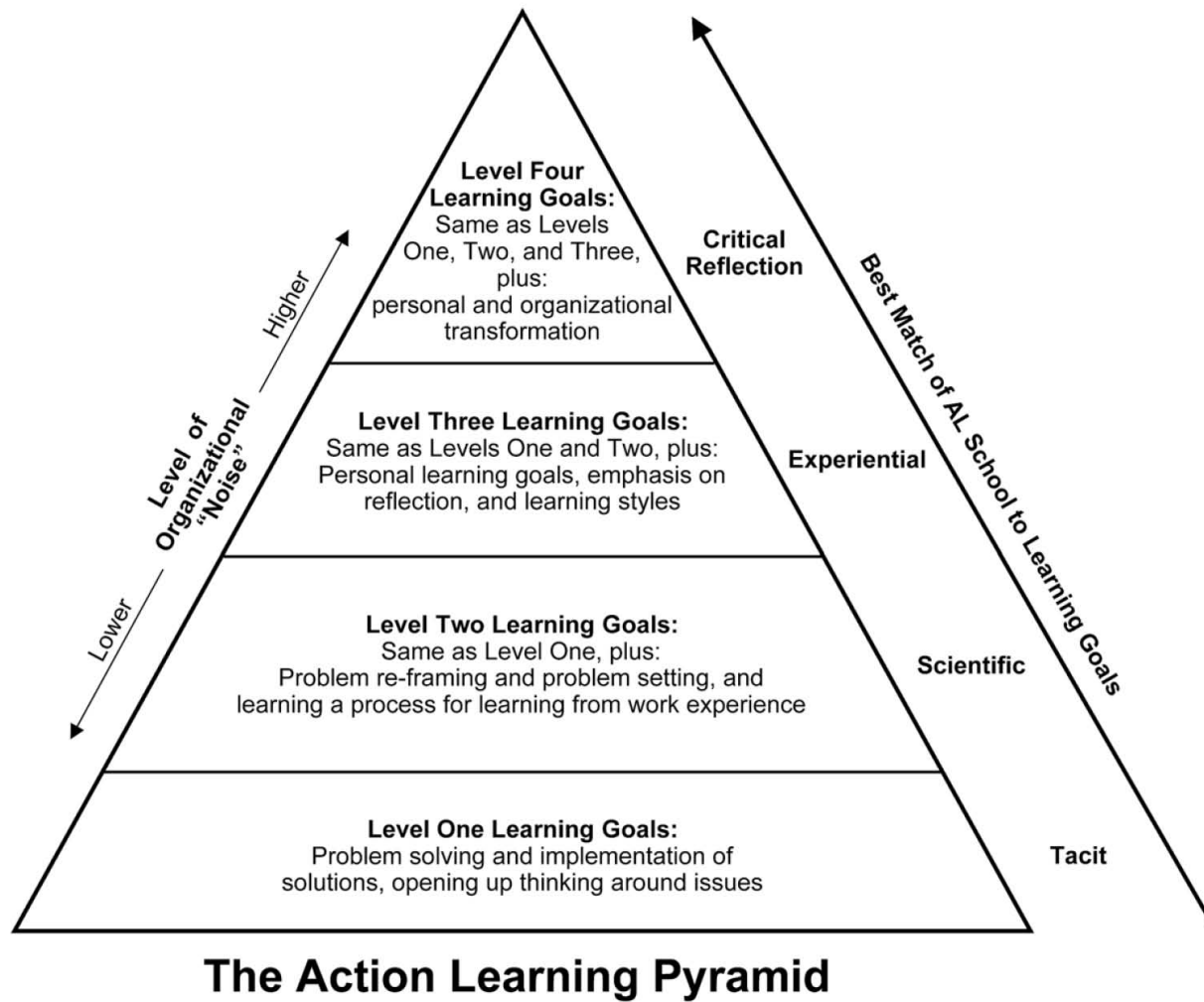
base. Kolb emphasizes the cognitive and whole-person learning dimensions of taking in information and transforming information into knowledge through learning. Kolb's cycle emphasizes learning by first experiencing something (or bringing it to mind via a simulation of experience), reflecting on that experience and sharing perceptions of the experience, checking these perceptions against theory that helps to explain what happened, applying what is thus understood to practice, and experimenting with new ways of thinking and working and being that generate a new cycle of this kind of learning. AL enables learning in each stage of the experiential learning cycle. As a result, action plus reflection on the action produces an increased awareness of how work is getting done, giving participants and the team more choices for expanded repertoires for working effectively.

Finally, practitioners in the Critical Reflection school believe that AL needs to go beyond the simple reflection found in the Experiential school to focus on "critical reflection," on basic premises that underlie thinking. That is, people recognize that their perceptions may be flawed because they are filtered through uncritically accepted views, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings inherited from one's family, school, and society. Such flawed perceptions often distort one's understanding of problems and situations. Critical reflection can also go beyond the individual and can lead to the examination of taken-for-granted organizational norms. Through this school, participants can learn to ask good questions rather than always thinking they need to provide answers, make better decisions when there is no one right answer, experiment with new ways of doing things, think more strategically, and work with different points of view.

LIM News: What makes one type of Action Learning more appropriate than another?

JO'N: We (meaning Lyle Yorks, Victoria Marsick and myself) have built the Action Learning Pyramid (*see below*) to help practitioners make choices among different AL schools and programs based on readiness and desired outcomes. To effectively use the pyramid, it's important to consider three elements. First, consider the organization's readiness for AL. Second, identify the learning outcomes desired for the program, participants, and the organization. Third, determine the organizational impacts wanted from the program outcomes.

The pyramid orders the schools in terms of kinds of learning and program outcomes desired. In short, as one goes from the bottom of the pyramid to the top, the learning and program outcomes that can be achieved become more complex, critical, and contextual. This kind of learning produces more noise in the system, and therefore, potentially both more leverage for organizational change as well as more resistance to the process.



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LIM News: What do you mean by "noise"?

JO'N: Noise can be participants' comments that challenge the program as they are asked to reflect on deeply held assumptions, mental models, and issues that the organization would not have previously treated as items for discussion. The more potential noise produced by a program, the more important readiness for AL and change in the organization becomes.

LIM News: What are the indicators of "readiness"?

JO'N: Our pyramid suggests some questions that can be asked to determine readiness — particularly readiness for Action Learning that may create more critical thinking. Questions such as, "Do the desired formal learning outcomes of the program include transformational individual and organizational learning?" and "Are senior leaders prepared to learn?" If people within an organization can respond 'yes' to these and other similar questions, that is a good indication of readiness.

LIM News: What advice do you have to someone who would want to start an Action Learning program?


JO'N: We advocate a process called co-design. Co-design in Action Learning means that an AL consultant, either external or internal, the human resource or organizational development client within the organization, and the field organization are all involved in bringing specific knowledge and support to the design of the AL program.

Each AL program should be co-designed to be unique to the needs and capacity of the organization. The design produced must match with both the corporate culture and the issues and objectives of the program. Since AL is intended to create change and sometimes transformation, it is important that the organization, through both the HR/OD client and the field organization is involved in decisions regarding what and how this is accomplished. Through this involvement, the field organization also begins to build the participant ownership necessary for the success of the program. Co-design also enables the AL consultant to ensure the design will stretch the organization, but not to the breaking point.

LIM News: Considering the intense involvement required, how long does such a program generally last?

JO'N: The length of a program can differ by the school and the ideal balance between the time needed for project work and development, and organizational capacity. Organizational capacity includes readiness for the program within the organization and the ability to sustain the program needs. The amount of time for an Action Learning initiative varies widely. In some designs, participants meet one day at a time over the course of several months. In other designs teams meet for several days at a time, spread out over several months; and in yet other designs the teams meet for several days, but just once.

LIM News: Judy, what is it that made you so passionate for Action Learning?

JO'N: I first learned about Action Learning from my teacher, advisor, friend and partner, Victoria Marsick. She helped me co-design a program at AT&T many years ago. It was in that program that I first began to understand how deeply people were impacted by the kind of learning that could result from Action Learning. I recall one young man in an Action Learning team who said that he was amazed to learn that people with whom he worked closely didn't think and understand the world in the same way he did. He had discovered that his assumptions differed from those of others and it had changed the way that he looked at himself, others and the world around him. My realization that Action Learning could have such a profound outcome helped fuel my passion. 

[1] Dr. Judy O'Neil is President of Partners for Learning and Leadership, Inc.

Visit the new site of the International Foundation for Action Learning USA (www.ifal-usa.org) for more information about Action Learning and related action technologies.



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LIM News is published by LIM, Leadership in International Management LLC
Editor: Isabel Rimanozy - Editing Support: Tony Pearson
21205 Yacht Club Drive, Suite 708, Aventura, FL 33180 - USA - Ph/Fax: +1 (305) 692-4586
E-mail: newsletter@LIMglobal.net - www.LIMglobal.net