# LIM NEWS

# Developing High Performing Teams using Action Reflection Learning
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**M**ost of us are members of several teams. In fact, a good portion of our working time is spent in team meetings leaving little time for "real work". So building, leading and maintaining high performing teams is vital to accomplishing our business objectives as well as improving organizational productivity and enhancing our self-esteem. We have found that the best way to help teams accomplish their objectives and improve their performance is to coach them while they are working – on real issues in real time for real results. This is the essence of Action Reflection Learning – developing teams while they develop their business.

We approach every team development challenge from a systemic perspective, defining the outcomes at five levels:
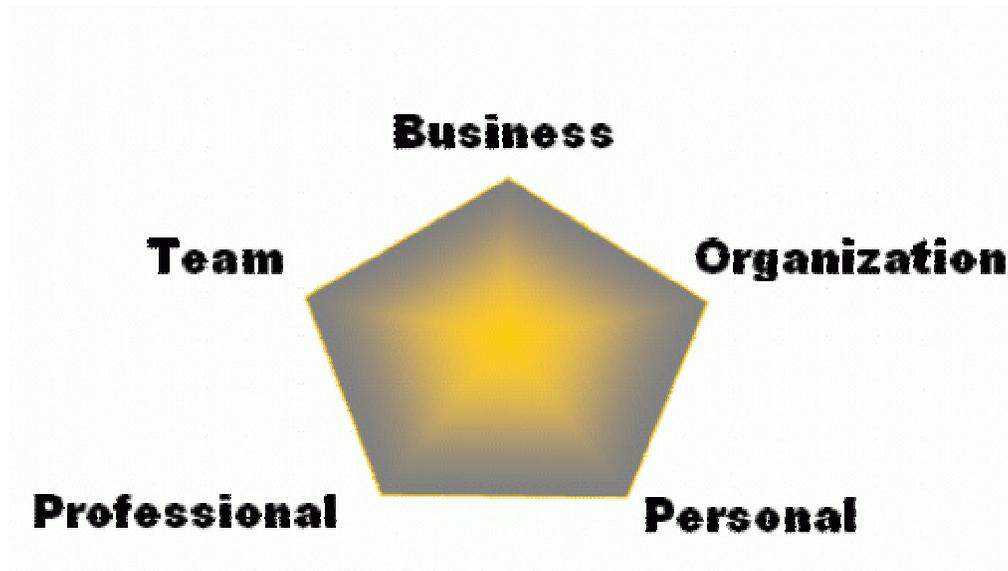


We have identified a set of twelve Team Processes, that help improve their performance

- Charting (clarifying mission and vision)
- Contracting
- Meeting
- Deciding
- Bonding
- Communicating
- Planning
- Delegating

- Performing
- Making Meaning

- Measuring
- Celebrating

Our systemic approach understands development as a staged process:
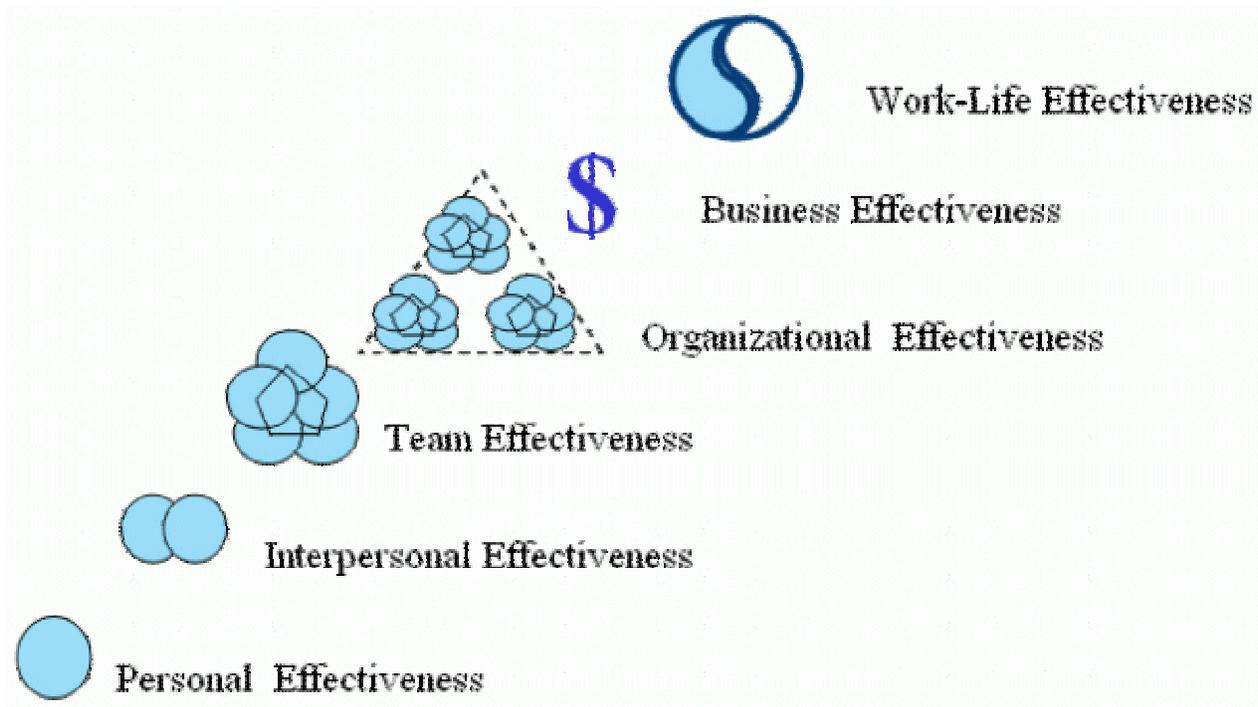


Although not all team interventions may spend equal time in each of these stages, they are recommended for higher performance.

The principles on which an Action Reflection Learning approach is based are:

**-->** Learning takes place naturally when people work on a challenge that needs to be solved

**-->** People have more resources and knowledge than they believe to address the challenges they face

In a team development process, a Learning Coach intervenes when appropriate by offering ARL elements designed to help the team to achieve high performance. Some examples of interventions are:

- Exchange of learnings
- Improvement of team processes
- Support and challenge
- Provide feedback
- Concepts

- Reflection
- Focus on five levels
- Extract lessons
- Just in time tools, concepts and techniques
- Individual coaching

# Q&A Session

- **How do you teach the teams to do what you do in terms of team facilitation?**

Our process is based on transfer of knowledge and on empowerment. We help team members, to surface knowledge they already have; to understand when to use tools they already have; to practice implementing them; and then, as we introduce "Just in Time" concepts or tools we encourage the participants to try them out.

- **If the team has a significant problem with trust and respect, won't all of the reflection, and feedback merely serve to harden ill will? Can I proceed without building trust?**

Trust and respect are the foundation for any relationship, and teams are not an exception. There are several ways to build trust: one is providing the space for team members to express their needs, fears or frustrations around the teamwork. We have a process , where we interview team members in a way that is safe to express their thoughts and feelings. Collectively defining and agreeing on operating norms, contracting mutual expectations are other key ways to build respect and increase trust. Further, the coach can use the reflection process, and the feedback to surface the lack of trust, so that the team begins to take ownership of its own functioning. This can only work to diminish ill will.

- **How can we quantify the value of reflection time, so that it can be sold to teams in organizations?**

The power of reflection is difficult to quantify, but easy to demonstrate. To give an example, we become more effective when we are clear on where we want to be. This just doesn't just happen-- we have to take a moment and think before we act.. The rapid pace in our daily life makes us believe that if we move faster we do more or arrive sooner, but unless we take a moment to pause and think where we need to go, we won't get there.

Whenever you are in a meeting and think the group is moving fast without a clear direction, take that opportunity to introduce a question that invites everyone to reflect for a moment. Very often the team recognizes that in the rush to get somewhere, they have boarded the wrong train. The pause clarifies their thinking and their objectives. You won't need to sell reflection to anyone; the impact of this simple action will speak for itself, so all you need to do is offer the show the team how they can be more focused, more aligned. Perhaps that is how you can position it at first, because some teams might view the very word as too 'touch-feely', but will relish the results of its use!

- **How do you integrate the coaching concept into teams? Are you invited? Are you directed to coach by top management?**

Sometimes we are invited by a team member, by the team leader or are recommended to the team leader by his superior. In any case, the first key step is to have a conversation with the team leader, to explore what his/her needs are regarding the team, how he/she perceives the team's performance, what he/she would like to change, improve. If there is no such need to understand or to do things differently, no team coaching can take place.

- **What is Action Reflection Learning?**

Action Reflection Learning (ARL) is a methodology that uses real action and reflection on the action to generate learning. It is based on two well known principles:

**-->** Learning takes place naturally when people work on a challenge that needs to be solved

**-->** People have more resources and knowledge than they believe to address the challenges they face

ARL is used to coach individuals and teams, introducing "Just in Time" tools, concepts and processes, while they work on their real current business challenges. ***To read more about ARL, go to our*** *Articles* ***page.***

- **How do you suggest we "manage up" when a boss or team sponsor discounts one or more of the High Performing Team development processes?**

Resistance is often seen as an obstacle to reaching a goal. We believe this attitude ignores the great value in examining the resistance, and using it as a powerful guide and orientation to what we should be paying attention to. Try to understand what are the reasons behind the boss' resistance. It may simply be that s/he fears losing face because it was not his/her idea. It may be that s/he just doesn't understand the purpose of the process, and feels s/he will lose face by asking the team members. And if you have specific examples of the benefits that have accrued to the team through use of the processes, then having a member of the team cite the example can be powerful.

- **Do we get the definition of High Performing Team from the top?**

Every person has had enough experiences to know what a high performing team looks and feels like. We invite team members to think back on their own experiences, the good and the bad ones, and to come up with the key elements of what makes a high performing team. Those reality-based definitions are the best, as they will be remembered and be integrated more easily than text book definitions or those prepared by the HR department. You can indicate to the team what senior management has suggested as criteria, work with the team to develop its own set of high performing criteria as the basis of a high performing team instrument, and to use the document frequently as a feedback mechanism. You could show senior management the results.

- **What is new under the sun? How does the form-norm-storm-perform sequence relate to the team processes presented today?**

The form-norm-storm-perform sequence is a classical and now universally accepted framework to describe the dynamics of a group. What we presented today was a number of tools and processes that can support the team members as they go through those necessary stages. To contract expectations, to set norms, to have a meeting management process, a common planning process or a decision making procedure are little things that accelerate the integration, which will lead to more efficiency and lower frustration of the members. Are these tools new? Some are, others are not. The concepts are certainly not new. Are they used? No, most of the teams know them but don't remember to use them when they could come in handy. This is where the "just in time" intervention of a Learning Coach can add value.

- **How can current leaders, those of the "old school", be enticed to open their minds to incorporating "new" concepts of coach development?**

This is a challenge. To become a "leader coach" is less an intellectual task than an attitude shift. If you believe you have certain rights and power due to your position, seniority or experience,

you may be more inclined to tell others what they have to do, rather than to ask them questions, listen to their ideas or concerns and help them sort through what the best solutions are. **"What would make you change?"** Probably only to experience a real need to change. The need can come from different places: you are not being successful in reaching your outcomes; you don't feel happy with your interactions and your results; or you are getting strong feedback and cannot afford to remain unchanged. If any of these is absent, why change?

- **What high performing teams work best from your experience : one that has a team leader or one where decision making and team leadership are shared?**

Both models can be high performing, and both present challenges to the team. When a team has a leader, the challenges are of good contracting of mutual expectations, and of living up to the agreements. The challenge is for the leader to ensure that the team is aligned around the task and its objectives, that all members participate, feel valued, and hold each other responsible for the results This is easier said than done, and it is a constant task for each team member.

Shared leadership systems are stronger, as the absence of a single member (like in the other case the leader) . doesn't unbalance the group. Teams that are based on shared decision making and leadership are more empowered, and function like a net, where each knot supports, and is supported by, the others. They still have the challenge of clear role contracting, of living up to their own norms and using influence and advocacy.

Shared leadership can take longer to become effective because most organizations do not use the concept. There is an interesting book by Joseph Raelin "Creating Leaderful Organizations" that addresses this type of shared leadership.

- **An executive is coaching two next level managers. One is very needy, high maintenance, asks for a lot of time. The other manager sees that needy one taking up too much time, so asks for none. Both are high performers. What to do?**

Both superior and the direct report have to assume responsibility for the development of the direct report. However, sometimes the executive has to take the lead in ensuring that the report's needs are being met. Even when an executive encourages all reports to come to him/her when they need coaching there are occasions—and this is a case in point—where the offer is not taken up. In this instance it is the executive's obligation to initiate a conversation with the reluctant manager, especially because s/he is a high performer. It is the role of the executive to ensure the high performance continues.

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