Action learning is a concept that brings a new approach to solving problems in the workplace. While implementing action learning with my team, I discovered valuable insights into my current behaviors and the steps I need to take to become an authentic leader.

The team-defined wicked problem is the extreme lack of communication due to the massive internal reorganization within the Director’s Office at the Federal Agency. Throughout the action learning process, the team uncovered huge gaps in how the Director’s Office communicates and also the need for the office to change its toxic culture.

**Background**

The Federal Agency is the principal investigative arm of the other Government Agency. Created through a merger of the investigative and interior enforcement elements of one Federal Agency and another Federal Agency, the Federal Agency now has more than twenty thousand employees and offices in all fifty states and forty-seven foreign countries.

The Agency’s primary mission is to promote security and public safety through the criminal and civil enforcement of Federal laws governing customs, trade, and other areas. The Agency has an annual budget of more than $5.7 billion dollars, primarily devoted to its two principal operating components; Section One and Section Two.

The Director’s Office was also established and falls under the Management and Administration Section of the Agency. The Office provides information technology services and products that enable Agency to meet its respective mission. To meet these goals, the Director’s Office has developed a number of critical IT initiatives to help the Agency modernize its IT systems, adapt and conform to modern IT management disciplines, and provide IT solutions throughout the Agency. The Director’s Office is comprised of almost four hundred federal employees and over five hundred contractor support resources.
The Problem

The Director’s Office Fiscal Year (FY14) Top Priorities list was released in November 2013. A key priority listed under the Relationship Management section is the priority to improve communication channels within the Office. This priority is based on the results of multiple negative internal employee surveys, high turnover of federal employees in recent months, and an all-time low morale among the majority of Office employees.

A new Director started in December 2012 and departed the Agency less than two years later to take another position within the federal government. His predecessor had been in place for five and half years, was well respected, and had a talent to move the organization forward while balancing the needs of human resources within an organization of this size. The new Director operated much differently than his predecessor. The atmosphere of the Director’s Office was quite anxious as the new Director did not engage the staff on any level at the start of his tenure. Instead, he immediately began planning a total reorganization of the Office. Anxiety was exhibited in the following ways; people were terse with each other when communicating, meetings were contentious, people were openly looking for other positions and customer relationships were damaged.

In February and March of 2013, the Director conducted an internal assessment of the existing organizational structure of the Office. Based on that assessment, he determined that the organizational structure was not adequate to support the future of the Agency. Customer meetings and discussions with senior leaders within the Agency provided the Director with what he thought was a sound understanding of what the future requirements and priorities should be for the agency. As a result, a new organizational structure was proposed to the Office of Human Capital (OHC) and a formal approval to implement the Director’s new organizational structure
was received in December 2013. The Director believed that the proposed streamlined organizational structure would allow the Office to be in a position strategically aligned with requirements from internal and external customers.

The proposed changes have had a significant impact on every aspect of the Office. The organizational structure that had been in place for several years was comprised of seven divisions (see Appendix A) with multiple branches under each. The Director’s new organizational structure is comprised of five divisions (see Appendix B) performing significantly different work. Additionally, several positions need to be geographically moved from the DC metro area to one of three locations (Florida, California, or Mississippi). Employees are confused and anxious and have not been fully informed of how or why they are being affected in the new structure. The confusion and anxiety has led to a massive exit of approximately fifty federal employees within the Office. The Director provided several high level drafts of the proposed structure to employees prior to receiving approval; however, the draft was high-level, contained new job titles, and new names for the divisions. Employees were not able to tell where they were going to end up after the reorganization.

Overall, the lack of two-way communication is the biggest issue that the Office employees have right now. There was a strong sense of distrust that the employees had for the Director due to the new structure being developed without any input from the employees. Unfortunately, with the recent departure of the Director and the lack of a permanent Deputy Director (The Office has not had a permanent Deputy in over two years) the communications are even more strained and employee morale continues to decline. The rollout of the reorganization still continues today without a permanent Director or Deputy Director. The five directorate
directors have been continuing to follow the reorganization plan also referred to as Director’s Office 2015 that was approved in December of 2013.

Non-Resolution of the Problem

If the lack of communication is not addressed, the following repercussions will continue to plague the Office: a negative workforce; bad or low morale; high employee turnover rate; depreciation of the quality of work products; and employees expressing discontent to customers and other external entities.

People deserve to have a functional work environment where they are valued and offered opportunities to excel in their careers. The law enforcement officials facing every day dangers in the field depend upon a stable information technology infrastructure to accomplish their work. We must have a cohesive workforce not distracted by lack of information, but empowered and informed.

The Process

In considering a team for this action learning project, I looked for individuals who would actively participate in the process and who would each bring a unique perspective. I thought it would be prudent to include people who encompass varying roles inside and outside the organization. My Action Learning team consisted of resources within the Office: Ms. X, Director, Operations Directorate, Mr. Y, Branch Director, Network Engineering, Ms. Z, Director, Business Resource Management (BRM) Directorate and Transformation Program, Dr. M, Program Management Analyst Contractor, and one resource outside of the Federal Agency, Mr. W, Management Analyst with a different Agency, Office of the Procurement Officer (OPO).

I relied on the criteria outlined in Optimizing the Power Action Learning when assembling this team. Those criteria include the following: commitment - team members are
engaged and ready to solve the problem; *knowledge* - team members have an understanding of the problem and the organization; *power to implement* - at least one of the team members has the power to implement actions; *familiarity* - one or more of the team members is familiar with the context in which the problem resides; *diversity* - team members are from varying hierarchical levels of the organization, and finally, *attendance* - team members are expected to be in attendance at all meetings that take place.¹ (Marquardt, 2011)

As the leader of the project, my perspective was a constant awareness of time restrictions and the need to accomplish tasks. My ability to give myself over to the process completely was often challenged by fitting these meetings into a typical workday. At times it proved difficult to move from work to Action Learning and back to work. Ms. Z brought a perspective of experience to the project. She is a graduate of the *American University Key Executive Program* and served as the coach for our sessions. Her longevity in government, and her maturity, aided in keeping the team on track and focused. Mr. Y brought the perspective of someone who is in the middle of an organization in trouble. He was with the organization in better days and regularly drew on historical analysis to assess current problems. Mr. W is a senior and longtime federal government employee. Being the only person outside of the Agency, he had an alternate perspective from most of the team. He was able to assess discussions and offer unbiased opinions. He was a valuable resource in that he did not have any preconceived ideas about individuals in the organization. Dr. M was the only non-government employee on the team. As a contractor, she was able to offer ideas about how contracting staff perceived issues in the organization. She brought a fresh perspective; she has not served as a federal civil servant.

Keeping in mind that all team members have very busy work days, I provided them with a meeting schedule that fit into each of their calendars. Along the way we had to accommodate changes in the schedule and there were occasions when one team member was not able to attend. For the most part, we rescheduled and were able to still accomplish what we set out to do. Prior to our first meeting I prepared special file folders with background information on action learning, my action learning contract, and artifacts that related to the wicked problem we were trying to solve. The folders allowed the team to have a frame of reference during our first meeting and something to carry with them throughout future meetings.

We have met seven times and have one more meeting scheduled for early April. We met once in December and January, three times in February and three times in March. Meeting times were roughly one hour and typically action items were accomplished between meetings.

Our meetings followed a specific structure. I typically welcomed everyone and thanked them for their participation. I provided a brief recapitulation of what happened at the previous meeting and reviewed assigned action items. Members of the group reported on their action items. The next part of the meeting involved a tremendous amount of discussion, asking questions, and learning. Members of the group freely offered their opinions and thoughts; it was never necessary to encourage the group to speak. At some points, we revisited previous discussions; however, the repetition helped us hone in on the specific problem we ended up addressing. The group was very respectful of each other and discussions were mostly evenly distributed.

The team covered a lot of information during our meetings and made an impressive progression from no problem defined to comprehensively defining the problem. We followed the phases of action learning to include the following seven stages: 1. Formation of the group, 2.

During the first meeting we conducted introductions and reviewed the relevant documents distributed in the folders I had prepared for each team member. I gave an overview of what action learning is and provided them with the wicked problem that we were going to tackle over the next several months. We also selected a coach, Ms. Z, for future sessions.

The first two meetings mainly focused on venting Agency issues and challenges. We spent a fair amount of time expressing our dissatisfaction with the lack of communication and the recent massive reorganization that took place in late December 2013. Each one of us had a different perspective and we were also careful to try not to solve the problem right away. We took time to dissect what “no communication” means. Dr. M also created a simple but impactful diagram that visually displayed where we believe the breakdown starts when we discuss the lack of communication around the reorganization. The diagram was a circle with other circles orbiting it; in the center was the CIO and the orbiting bubbles were senior leadership, Director’s Office employees, customers, and contractors. The diagram demonstrated that the bubbles are in no way connected or linked. See below:

Meetings three through six took us into different areas. We focused on where exactly the breakdown of the reorganization was occurring; the stage in action learning referred to as “reframing the problem.” One issue that came up while reframing the problem was the realization that many of our upper leadership were in “acting” positions. The lack of permanence was causing doubt and confusion for employees. For example, the organization has not had a permanent Deputy Director in over two years. The realization caused the team to conclude that the senior leadership must not be very concerned with finding a permanent Deputy and seem content with assigning various senior managers within the Agency to temporarily fill the position. A temporary leader is weakened at the onset as an acting Deputy does not have the power to make any real changes within the organization and is simply keeping the “lights on” until a permanent Deputy is selected.

As a team we uncovered another significant issue to add to our wicked problem: the Federal Agency needs to change its culture. This realization was a watershed moment for the
team. We realized that the Agency was at a disadvantage due to the lack of permanence in the senior leadership. The transitory nature contributed to a culture of negativity and distrust.

During all the meetings, our coach was very attentive and followed the action learning coach’s guidelines outlined in *Optimizing the Power of Action Learning.* (Marquardt, 2011) The guidelines helped keep the team on track and also provided them with valuable points to use in their future action learning projects.

During the latter meetings we came up with multiple activities to put our discussions and ideas into action. Certain members of the group spent time investigating and analyzing the current Agency intranet website to see if information was easily accessible to all Agency employees and if it was useful. The BRM directorate has a weekly meeting and discussed sending out a short survey to Agency employees to see what communication vehicles they would find useful and what current forms of communications are not useful. We reviewed the outdated *Federal Agency Strategic Communication Plan* for any relevance in the current organization. We also looked at the internal Agency SharePoint site, where a significant amount of documentation resides and allows employees to review meeting notes, presentations, and reports, to see if the data was relevant. Lastly, the team created a one-page email communications quick reference guide. It provides guidelines on how to write effective, concise, and professionally polished emails. This guide is currently being piloted by a small group of employees to see if they find it is an effective tool. This pilot is scheduled to conclude on April 14, 2014 at which time the feedback from the pilot group will be analyzed and next steps will be identified.

We will spend our last meeting in April discussing next steps and it is highly likely that we will continue on with these meetings until we can see some actual improvement in how the

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3 Michael J. Marquardt, *Optimizing the Power of Action Learning,* (Nicholas Brealey Publishing: Massachusetts, 2011), 148-155
Agency communicates internally and how we can shift the culture to a more positive and productive working environment for all Agency employees.

**Organizational Challenges: Issues and Barriers**

The team had multiple discussions about the issues and barriers that are present within the Agency. The major barrier is the lack of interaction and information sharing. Disgruntled employees are unhappy when no information is provided. This discontent greatly contributes to additional problems which create more barriers. We also acknowledged that there are significant barriers that we are faced with when trying to improve communication. One barrier is that people are generally fearful of change. They are uncomfortable with the unknown and they can be angry or upset with change. Another barrier identified is the lack of consistent data flowing from the senior leadership team.

**Results**

The most tangible result of the process is the team becoming familiar with action learning. The team members all grasped the concept and fully embraced it. Two team members shared situations where they were able use action learning to assist with solving a problem, and though not a wicked problem, they were still able to use portions of action learning. One team member was in a meeting as a participant, and the leader of the meeting was disorganized and not able to clearly articulate tasks and intentions. The team member quickly implemented her action learning knowledge by asking some reflective questions to gain clarification on what the leader specifically wanted to achieve.

Another team member was experiencing difficulty with one of his direct reports. The situation involved a long term project in which the employee was not completing the established deadlines. The team member took the interpretive approach asking the question “why is meeting
the deadlines a problem for you?” The team member also used the decisional approach by asking “what will you do next in order to meet this deadline?” His questions resulted in a successful and expeditious conclusion.

**Team Learning In Process**

Throughout this process I gained increased awareness of my current leader-logic. In *Transforming Your Leadership Culture*, McGuire and Rhodes break out leadership logics into three distinct categories: Interdependent-Collaborator; Independent-Achiever, and Dependent-Conformer. The Interdependent-Collaborator is defined as a transformer and a collaborator. The Independent-Achiever is categorized as the freethinker and performer, and the Dependent-Conformer is considered a specialist, moderator, and dominator. (McGuire & Rhodes, 2009) In an assignment submitted in September 2013 to Professor A, I listed my leader-logic as broken out into 80% falling under the Interdependent-Collaborator and the remaining 20% fitting into the Dependent-Conformer. During this process, I learned that perhaps my original breakdown was not totally correct. I became aware that I leaned more toward the Dependent-Conformer as well as an Independent-Achiever. In the early meetings, I tried hard to please the group while also trying to avoid conflict. I even moved into the freethinker (Independent-Achiever) category by initiating various activities that could aid in improving communications. The change in my leader-logic made me realize that these models can be based on situational realities. There will likely be more shifts in my leader-logic as I continue to tackle issues at work. I will exploit the leader-logic that feels the most appropriate while always keeping in mind that other people might be operating from a different leader-logic.

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My team members identified their leader-logics as follows: Mr. W, Dependent-Conformer, Ms. Z, Interdependent-Collaborator, Mr. Y, Dependent-Conformer and Dr. M, Independent-Achiever. This made for a nice combination of logics and although they each listed their own leader-logic at the outset of this project I noticed some interesting changes as we progressed through our meetings. For instance, Mr. W listed himself as a Dependent-Conformer and supported that with information such as seeing himself as a specialist a moderator; however, as we got to our third and fourth meetings I noticed that he was becoming a bit more comfortable and would initiate ideas and activities which fall under the Independent-Achiever model. I didn’t necessarily see Mr. W move into the Interdependent-Collaborator. 

Ms. Z listed her leader-logic as Interdependent-Collaborator and I noticed that she stayed with that logic throughout the process; however, she did have a touch of the Dependent-Conformer logic as it related to her role within the Agency which brought her into the specialist portion of this logic.

I recently interviewed the team members to ask each of them if they believed they had met their personal developmental goals over the course of the action learning project. One person said; “I have found myself stopping to think about why I am doing something, instead of just doing it.” Another said; “I have become much more deliberate in what I say to my colleagues. I think about the intention behind my words.” One said; “I have been energized in the workplace because I am asking myself questions I had not previously thought of before.”

Each of the close-out interviews revealed something interesting about the team member. The team had already been very honest about what their goals were and what the project meant to them personally. The interviews revealed four very personal and individual perspectives on the success of the project. Overall, each team member met some of their goals. No one reached all
of their goals and one person said they did not meet any of their goals. Everyone said that their workplace experience was improved by the lessons learned on the action learning project.

It was generally expressed that the action learning project was a worthwhile way to spend time and had illuminated workplace and personal issues. One person said; “I honestly thought the project would not reveal anything new to me and I did not have much hope for enjoying the experience; however, it turns out that I had some concentrated time to examine issues that were very important to me. It turns out I still have some real feelings and opinions about what goes on in the workplace. Thank you, Ms. X.”

Self-Learning In Process

I have discovered that I will never stop growing and changing as a leader or as a person. This will be a constant truth throughout the rest of my life. I did recognize in the action learning process that I am typically used to taking the lead when it comes to meetings, but this was not a surprise. In this process a coach was designated and I was very aware that I was a participant and needed to be an active listener as much as an active participant. Active listening is a process where we make a conscious effort to understand someone else. Weaver and Farrell define the active listening process as having three categories; 1. Sensing – use all your senses to take information in, 2. Interpreting – evaluating the meaning of the information, and 3. Checking – reflecting on what you have heard in an effort to gain a mutual understanding of the speakers intended message.\(^5\) (Weaver, 1999) I struggled a bit in the beginning. I found myself wanting to interject comments when some team members were talking and not getting to the point of what they were trying to say. We had limited time during out meetings and I felt they were wasting time with their extensive comments. I immediately recognized that I was not being an active

listener in the sense that I was not evaluating the information being provided or reflecting on the data being shared instead I was focusing more on how to move on to another topic.

Hartman states that “the very nature of a beginners mind is not knowing in a certain way, not being an expert.”6 (Hartman, 2001) I have to admit this was not easy for me to do but the first step was becoming aware of the fact that I didn’t have a beginners mind. I then quickly changed my normal pattern and shifted into being more inquisitive – asking questions from a curious point, not anticipating what I thought someone was going to say, but rather accepting what they said. The result was extremely refreshing and exciting and I am trying to incorporate this into other aspects of my work and personal life.

After each of the team meetings, I typically jotted down notes and observations in my journal about how I felt during the meeting and what progress I thought the team was making. In reviewing my notes, it became clear that I got to know each team member on a deep level. Reflecting on my notes helped me to become more aware of the extreme emotional element in other people’s points of view. I also noticed that I was becoming more thoughtful in my journal, more reflective, and not as structured as my earlier entries. A specific entry said “realized how important active listening is. Letting people finish their thoughts and pausing for reflection is powerful”.

At first, the value of not-knowing was extremely uncomfortable. Fronsdal states that “…the phrase “I don’t know” questions the authority of everything we think.”7 (Fronsdal, 2004) I agree with Fronsdal and would add that it is expected that a leader should always have the answers and never should admit any uncertainty. That belief needs to change. I found that in the first few meetings I didn’t feel completely comfortable not having answers; I wanted to appear as

a capable and intelligent team member. I observed that our group quickly and quietly built a strong level of trust. It was at that point that I no longer felt the need to try to have the answers and could accept that there were many open ended questions being asked, which indicates that we don’t know everything. It was refreshing to experience being comfortable with the unknown as a group.

My journal entries really showed me that I was able to be less guarded. Zinsser states that “vulnerability has a strength of its own.”8 (Zinsser, 2006) Being vulnerable made me realize I’m not alone with my thoughts and feelings. Marshak states that “…covert processes are more often relationship-related, emotionally based, often out-of-awareness or unconscious, and defined by the group norms as illegitimate or inappropriate.”9 (Marshak, 2006) I have support from my action learning team that I know will carry on long after we break apart. I truly value each of their insights, their experiences, and their perspectives. I am impressed that the level of trust within the group increased during the meeting process.

It wasn’t until the middle meetings that we got into the more emotional side of what was really going on in the organization. That was a clear turning point and the undiscussables were put out there for discussion. The new candor proved to be a critical step in the building of trust with the team. In Deep Change, Quinn writes about the undiscussable in detail and states that “Individuals fear that they would be unable to function effectively as a group if they processed an issue associated with such a high level of potential conflict.”10 (Quinn, 1996) I was not the first to raise the undiscussable (perhaps it was out of fear like Quinn suggests) but I did listen actively and my input was thoughtful but still somewhat guarded. It was fascinating to watch the emotions of the team members; there was anger, humor, frustration, fear, and uncertainty. There

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was also a sense of loss. Loss for the former leadership and the communication channels they had created and worked well. The functional communication channels were non-existent in the new organizational structure. An area that I had concern with from the outset of this project was the fact that the Director for BRM was part of our action learning team. She was also an integral part of the small team that the former Director worked with to develop the new organizational structure. My concern was that the other team members might be more reserved in their dissatisfaction with the structure and lack of involvement from other parts of the Agency. I was pleasantly surprised that they put everything out for discussion and what was even more exciting was seeing the BRM Director actively engaging and listening instead of being defensive.

Being a teaching leader takes self-awareness, a beginner’s mind, and the ability to be unafraid of risks. In Peter M. Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline*, Roger Saillant is quoted; “It all starts with my willingness to see the shortcomings that are all too evident to those around me. I can never expect the people around me in an organization to be more open and willing to learn and improve than I am.”

(Senge, 2006) I believe I strengthened my ability to be a teaching leader. My participation in our action learning meetings demonstrated that growth. For example, in meetings I find myself paying closer attention to other team members to see if they are engaged and interested in what is being discussed. I speak up a bit more, try to draw people out by asking their opinion, and make certain I don’t embarrass them or put them on the spot. I realized the importance of keeping eye contact and that smiling makes people feel more relaxed and provides encouragement for them to express themselves. I genuinely enjoy hearing other opinions.

Being a learning leader also takes self-awareness and a beginner’s mind. I must be open to not knowing and continue to find a deeper connection to my environment. I must also have a willingness to accept that I will be learning for the rest of my life.

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Action learning helps with developing emotional intelligence. Marquardt states that “Emotional intelligence consists of five primary abilities: 1. Self-awareness, 2. Managing emotions, 3. Motivating oneself, 4. Empathy and, 5. Handling relationships.”¹² (Marquardt, 2011) I have seen my own emotional intelligence grow as our action learning meetings progressed and trust was increased. The team showed emotional intelligence by their willingness to examine the seven stages of action learning more closely than they had previously.

When reviewing each team member’s individual developmental goals, I found that all of them relate to one or more of the five abilities needed for emotional intelligence. At the conclusion of our fourth meeting I asked each of the team members to provide me with a written status on how they thought that the action learning process helped them with their developmental goals. The responses were insightful and well thought through. The general theme was that they were more self-aware and some were more critical about their progress than others. However, it was evident that they are engaged and open to the concepts of action learning. It made me feel excited that they were so open, honest, and willing to be a part of this process. Each one, even the one more reserved member of the team, had grown.

It was clear that the teams’ Values, Assumptions, Beliefs and Expectations (VABEs) were a big part of what makes them who they are as individuals. It felt like at times the beliefs and assumptions they had were incorrect. I have high expectations for the team members and their ability to incorporate action learning into their day-to-day operations. Action learning is not reserved for just solving wicked problems. I am able to use it in every aspect of my work and personal life. Action learning involves continuing to explore and improve something that is not working; this can also be referred to as headroom. McGuire and Rhodes state that “Headroom

¹² Michael J. Marquardt, Optimizing the Power of Action Learning, (Nicholas Brealey Publishing: Massachusetts, 2011), 121.
means supporting, growing, bigger minds in yourself and others in order to face and unravel big organizational puzzles. In Headroom, individuals, groups, and the leadership culture systematically and intentionally develop toward and interdependent collective leadership logic.”13 (McGuire & Rhodes, 2009) I fully expect and believe that the action learning team members will become teaching leaders within their work units.

I had listed three leadership goals that I wanted to achieve at the start of the project. They were; 1. Leading change, 2. Results driven, and 3. Business acumen. These goals were derived from the five Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs). I have not yet met any of these goals in their entirety and I did not intend to. Quinn states that “The transformational paradigm transcends the rational planning process. It is concerned with deep change – with exploring new areas, trying new methodologies, and reaching new goals. The means to the desired end cannot be specified; they can only be learned as part of a risky, action-learning process.”14 (Quinn, 1996) Quinn’s statement confirms that I will be forever be growing and sculpting my skills to fit all leadership environments.

To fulfill my goal of leading change, I have taken on the wicked problem to improve communications within the Agency. I assembled a team of people to work on this problem and we have achieved some tangible results. As mentioned earlier, the development of the quick reference guide for writing effective email communications and the pilot program is a tangible result.

Achieving the second goal of results driven is continuous. Being results driven involves the ability to make decisions that produce high-quality results. The time I was spending in the action learning meetings and the work I was doing to support the project needed to be focused

and specific (being mindful that there is always room for modifications) in order for me to make a decision and to produce a quality product. We had a few assignments during this project and when the work products were presented to the group by the team member we had collaborative discussions and I was usually the one urging a decision to be made. However, sometimes we would get caught up in some very fine details that in the end did not lead to a decision.

The third and final goal of business acumen includes elements that involve the ability to manage human, financial, and information resources strategically. My action learning project greatly benefitted from my bringing a varied group of professionals together. This allowed me to align resources with our strategy for solving the wicked problem.

I was blind to a few things that I already knew about myself but became even more aware of during the action learning process. Journaling after each of our meetings highlighted a couple of blind spots. An area I noticed needed improvement was my lack of patience with the team at the beginning of the project. The first few meetings we were spending a lot of time venting and expressing the discontent we had with the lack of communication from the Director. I was getting agitated and didn’t see the benefit of re-hashing the same stories that some team members were telling. I know that being impatient is not a quality that is admired. I need to change this behavior and, in retrospect, the team needed to spend the time venting in order to move to the next phase of solving the problem. Boleman and Deal state that “Stories are sometimes dismissed as the last resort of people lacking substance. Yet stories convey information, morals, and myths vividly and convincingly.”15 (Boleman, 2008) Not everyone behaves and interprets things the way I do, being aware and listening and paying close attention to the details of stories will be extremely useful for me going forward.

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Another blind spot for me was feeling like I had to be the first person to respond. I felt like this was my project so I need to speak up and guide the team. I realized quickly that I absolutely did not need to speak up first and I became more comfortable with silence that followed some questions that were asked. I am so accustomed to being busy and needing to get a lot of things done that I don’t take the time to be silent; I don’t take the time to reflect in the moment. During this process I was forced to take some quiet time after each of the meetings to journal about what I was feeling. It didn’t take long after each meeting and it proved to be a way for me to review and reflect upon what had transpired; it provided me with a sense of accomplishment.

My VABEs needed to shift and change to allow me to expand my mind. McGuire and Rhodes state that “by increasingly opening up your awareness of beliefs, you can be more conscious of, and about the decisions you are making and the impacts of those decision on your behaviors and practices.”16 (McGuire & Rhodes, 2009) Where I always struggle with this type of learning and changing is finding the time to do it and keeping it in the forefront of my mind. It is incredibly hard (but not impossible!), to really unlearn certain things that I have used and relied on over my twenty-five years in the work force. During this process I was very aware that I would likely discover behaviors and traits that would have to be unlearned. I approached this as a very small scale wicked problem.

What I am still trying to do each day is unlearn my assumptions about people’s intentions within the workplace. I can be quick to dismiss someone’s input if I assume they are only looking at it for their personal benefit. It happens so frequently within the Agency that it is a habit for me to truly believe that the assumptions I have made are absolutely accurate. I tested

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this out during a staff meeting recently. I was asking various people about a certain technology that we wanted to put in place to track data collection requests from our customers. I was going to skip over a certain group because I assumed they would have nothing positive to say and that they were short on resources and couldn’t assist. Instead, I asked them the question as well and although my assumption was partially correct (they did say they were short on team members who could assist) they also added that another group outside of the Agency was working on something similar and they volunteered to find out if that group had a set of requirements they used to develop the technology. Had I not asked them I would never have known the valuable information they shared.

Now that I am armed with almost two years of intense learning from the American University I feel stronger and much more confident about my abilities as a leader. I will continue to consider my growth as a leader an organic process. I now have a toolbox of knowledge that is overflowing with information to help me continue to grow and learn. I plan to continue to utilize the action learning methodology in my career as it is an effective way to solve problems. It is useful to have input from a variety of people and build trust and loyalty when you solve wicked problems as a team. The safe environment encourages honesty and to discuss the undiscussables. If people feel like they are being heard and listened to, they will almost always support decisions that they had a part in making. Last but not least, the most valuable asset a person can provide is their discretionary energy. You cannot put a price tag on this and when you have a workforce full of people that provide their discretionary energy you can accomplish an incredible amount.
The action learning process is thoughtful and sensible. Since I have firsthand knowledge of it I plan to share my positive experience with my leadership. When I think about what conditions would make it likely for other leaders and managers in my workplace to adopt the action learning concept and utilize it within their groups, I would have to say that I would need the Director’s and Deputy Director’s buy-in. If we could get that buy-in, and if they pushed it out as a methodology to be utilized when problem solving was needed I think we would be able to fully adopt it as common practice. However, I am one of five senior leaders within the Agency and I have a team of over two hundred federal staff that I have already started to share why action learning should be utilized within their teams and organizations. I will continue to implement and teach action learning to others within and outside my organization. I believe that action learning works.

Conclusion

Implementing action learning in an attempt to solve our team’s wicked problem has proven to be an invaluable learning experience on several levels. I was able to pass along a problem solving methodology that is sensible and will now be used by three other Agency employees of the Federal Agency and one employee of another Federal Agency. Although we did not fully resolve the issue of communications and culture change for the Agency, we got a conversation started and developed tangible work products to enable us to continue the conversation and determine a well thought out path forward for the Agency. My teachable point of view for leadership is serving as a role model and mentor to people. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee state that “people change when they are emotionally
engaged and committed.”¹⁷ (Goleman, 2004) To be an effective teaching leader, a person needs to be in touch with her own leadership style and self-aware to the point that she is able to be open and honest with others about what she is doing that works, and areas that she could use guidance and direction in an effort to improve. It is also critically important to be an active listener and to really hear what people are saying. It is necessary to pay attention to what is important to people.

Over the past twenty months, I have had the opportunity to learn from a cadre of brilliant professors. I have taken over fifteen courses which have all been focused on becoming an extraordinary leader in the public sector. As I was preparing my action learning capstone project, I drew upon learnings from virtually every course I took but I did find a handful of courses that were very closely related to the wicked problem I was trying to solve.

The very first course I took was Professor B’s “Leadership for Key Executives.” Professor B laid the foundation for what would be an exhilarating program. Specifically, we started with reading Robert E. Quinn’s *Deep Change*. Quinn states that “deep change effort distorts existing patterns of action and involves taking risks. Deep change means surrendering control.”18 (Quinn, 1996) Not only is that an impactful statement it also transcends across other books and materials that we have covered throughout this program. That book provided incredible insights on how to be an authentic leader. I remember developing a leadership philosophy that I brought back to my office immediately and I continue to use it to this day.

The second course that I drew upon for this paper was Professor C’s “Executive Clarity.” That course not only covered how to write in a coherent and efficient manner it also taught techniques to use when formulating what you want to address in a report, email, or letter. One tool that I used was the mind-mapping technique. I was able to organize and parse out what wasn’t needed for this paper. Mind-mapping was also used when I was attempting to define our wicked problem.

The third course I relied heavily on for this paper was Professor D’s “Organizational Diagnosis & Change.” Professor D focused on how changes in the workplace can have either a

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positive impact or a negative impact. It was noted that in times of change people want guidance and a level of stability. People look to their leaders for these things. I had an assignment to write a change management plan and that was incredibly useful when I was preparing this paper. I was able to reach back to the point of how critical effective communication is when an organization is in a crisis. The reading materials, specifically *Covert Processes At Work* was also referred to throughout the action learning process.

Finally, I utilized materials and readings from Professor E’s “Executive Problem Solving” course. Professor E’s course provided not only what the action learning concept is (critical for this capstone project) but also explained the benefits of putting action learning in place within your organization. The course also focused on the concepts that I discuss in this paper about having a beginner’s mind and how to unlearn what you have learned. Additionally, I learned the importance of identifying and understanding VABEs and the impact they have on the decisions I make and the way in which I learn from and lead others.
Fronsdal, G. (2004, February 10). *Not-Knowing*