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Dear Reader,

In this issue we are sharing with you an excerpt of a case published in "Action Learning and Action Research" (*). The chapter describes an ARL™ experience with the Thailand-based executive team of a multinational company. The CEO, the only Western executive, who had spent three years in that function, had been appointed CEO in another country. He was interested in:

- a) ensuring a smooth transition for the team and their new leader,
- b) getting feedback from his executive team on his own performance, and
- c) giving feedback to team members to help improve their future performance.

The CEO seriously doubted that a 'democratic' and open approach could be implemented in a traditionally hierarchical society, where straight feedback, critical observations and 'left column' thoughts are socially unacceptable between peers and superiors. But reality showed it was not like that.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

(*)Shankar Sankaran et al, *Action Learning and Action Research*, Southern Cross University Press, Lismore Australia, 2001



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Action Reflection Learning in Thailand Defying Cultural Differences

By Isabel Rimanoczy

In 1998 one of my partners and I were invited by the CEO of a multinational corporation in Thailand, to help him prepare a smooth transition from this current assignment to a new position in another Asian country. He had been the only Western executive in the Thai subsidiary, and he had experienced many cultural challenges with his executive team. It was his sense that he had failed in the past to extract learnings from those experiences and feedback on his performance as a leader of the team and organization.

He felt it was now important for him to reflect on those experiences, to draw meaning from them, and to use the learnings to prepare him for his new assignment. He felt that if he could persuade his executive team that he needed their honest and actionable feedback, he would benefit enormously from their response. In preparing to leave, he wanted, too, to prepare his team for a good start with his successor, the incoming CEO, by giving them feedback based on his own experience with them, so that they could be helped to work effectively with their new leader.

He had, however, many doubts that the Action Reflection Learning approach, based as it was on transparent feedback, democratic thinking and candid questioning would be possible in a very traditional culture, where hierarchies were very much respected, and where saving face is often viewed as more important than voicing one's true feelings about another team member.

PREPARATION

We began by meeting with M. to define what outcomes he wanted from this intervention. We listened to his assumptions about what might happen during the intervention, and got his agreement to have us challenge the feelings and data on which he based them. With his active participation—a basic tenet of our process—we designed a meeting that would help him to both receive and to give feedback.

He felt comfortable with the design and we clarified what his role would be during the one-day meeting. He was the team leader and as such was to lead the meeting. My partner and I were to act as Learning Coaches, helping the group to work on the task and to learn from it, and supporting the entire team as it navigated the potentially difficult rapids of an unfamiliar cross-cultural experience.

MEETING

The meeting began with M. (the CEO) introducing us to the executive team, and stating the objectives of the meeting. We then showed an outline of the agenda, and asked everyone to take a moment of silent reflection to write down his/her expectations from the meeting. (Stop /Reflect /Write/ Report). We asked the members to read their reflections out loud, thereby taking the first step in accepting some ownership of the process, and in influencing the outcomes of the session.

Then we introduced the process of setting norms, stated the rationale for the procedure, and invited everyone in the room to write down one norm that we should respect during the session, based upon their former experiences of what helped in other meetings.

After that M. talked to his team about his need to learn from his performance as a leader. He positioned his request by stating that he wanted them to give him a "good bye" gift, one that was to help him in his next career step, and one that would identify the behaviors that he should continue to do because they were very helpful, and those behaviors that he should consider changing in his next assignment. He, in turn, offered a similar 'gift', to help them in their integration with the next Western CEO they would have.

We provided instructions on how to proceed. We asked M. to go to a separate room for the next part of the session, and gave both him and the team the same assignment. First, the team took time for individual reflection on what they would say to M. on his return to the room, and then they exchanged their thoughts and recorded a summary on a flip chart. The team decided what to present and chose a spokesperson, the oldest member of the team, as a sign of respect for seniority.

The CEO did the same exercise in another room. When he came back into the room, the team was very excited to share their feedback with him – they liked both the idea of the "gift", and also the notion that

past experience could be seen as a lesson for the future.

We decided that M. would give his feedback first. The respect for hierarchies is high in this culture, and the feedback exchange was already a challenge to their habits. So we decided to begin with the CEO, as a way to lower the anxiety and begin in a way they were more "used to". Then both he and the team members would use the concept of a 'fishbowl' as the device for providing the data. M began with his feedback to his team in a conversation with the two of us while his team listened in the 'fishbowl' setting. Afterwards they asked questions for clarification only.

Then the team had a fishbowl conversation with the two of us while M. listened carefully, taking notes on the issues where he wanted to get more information later. He practiced active listening, for which we had coached him before the meeting.

We ended with a session of Reflection and Dialogue, sitting in a circle, with the question "What have we learned from this experience and how do we feel"? This introduced a new way of communication among the executive team, as they had never had the experience of taking a silent time for reflection in the work setting, nor were they used to extract lessons from a regular meeting.

The spirits were high. They all felt much honored to be able to give such a gift to their leader, and they discovered a way to give feedback by phrasing it in a positive, constructive way: highlighting what the person did well, and instead of stating 'this is what you do badly' suggesting instead "this is what you could consider doing differently".

CONCLUSIONS

The experience showed that an ARL based intervention was possible in this culture, that the values supporting the model transcended cultural differences and that success is very much conditioned by the intervention's design. It also showed that when people are given a safe environment and the opportunity to do things in a new way, provided their fears and perceived risks are carefully addressed, surprising things happen.. We believe that, given the awareness of national sensibilities, and given the intentional explanation of purpose, this is a 'Western' process that can cross national and ethnic borders. This was our first experience with its successful use in the Thai culture.



If you want to read more about this experience, how it was designed and the key elements of the design that made it successful, go to www.LIMglobal.net – [Articles](#)- to find the full article.

ARL is a modified version of Action Learning developed in the mid 80s by LIM partners and their colleagues from MiL in Sweden. From their experience, learning does not automatically result from action. For the learning to occur an intermediate step is essential -- the awareness of what has happened in the "action phase". Awareness is rarely a spontaneous event (Aha-Erlebnis); it requires an intellectual process - thinking "about" an action. For awareness to take place it is necessary to do a pause in the action and introduce a challenging question to promote reflection on what has happened. Thus, reflection was found to have a major role in this "Action Learning" process.

As a consequence of this, a learning-cycle was defined:



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Each phase is supported by different interventions and tools to reach depth and efficiency of the cycle. A Learning Coach who is trained to see the "just-in-time" learning opportunities guides the learner/s along the cycle and introduces tools and concepts to optimize the process of working on a task.



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