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Dear Reader,

This is a special issue, since I am happy to share with you a special announcement, the publication of the book Action Reflection Learning: Solving real business problems by connecting learning with earning, which I co-authored with Ernie Turner. Basing the book on the research that conceptualized the framework of the ARL practice, we see this as a milestone in sharing the what's and how's of this powerful learning methodology with a larger audience. The applications of ARL are broad and cover all aspects of the professional development process, but we have contented ourselves in this month's article, by way of demonstration, to adopt a single approach and show how ARL can be used to make meetings more effective.
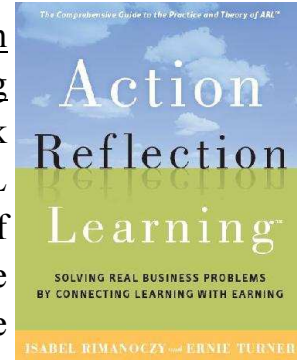
Enjoy the reading and try out the suggestions!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

"Playing dead not only comes in handy when face to face with a bear, but also at important business meetings."

(Jack Handey, American humorist (1949 —)

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MORE THAN JUST A MEETING
by Isabel Rimanoczy

What do you do when you attend a meeting? As headcount shrinks and fewer people have to do more, as corporations organize around processes rather than around silo functions, teamwork becomes a daily necessity—and with it come meetings. A huge amount of corporate time is spent in meetings—virtual meetings, face to face, teleconferences, or a combination of all. And meetings take place on site or off-site, in task forces, project teams, with departmental or cross-functional attendees, in local or international settings. They all require preparation, attendance and follow up time.

All too often the productivity of meetings seems to be in direct relation to the number of participants. One-on-one meetings have a better chance to meet the participants' needs or expectations, if they both agree they want to meet to work on a specific topic. But things happen differently when the number of participants increases, and some organizations are beginning to address the efficacy of such gatherings. Intel has started to pay attention to the cost of ineffective meetings by estimating what they cost by pro-rating each salary according to the time spent at the meeting. Further, every factory or office has posters that remind the employees of a few critical questions: Do you know the purpose of your meeting? Do you have an agenda? Do you know your role? Do you follow the rules for taking good minutes? These questions can certainly lead to better organized, more purposeful and structured meetings.

However these questions are in themselves not enough to make a meeting productive. Unspoken expectations and tacitly held assumptions by each one of the participants can complicate communications and the commitment to achieve the stated meeting goals. It is not uncommon for participants to have varying degrees of agreement on what the purposes and the goals of the meeting ought to be, as well as how the agenda items support the stated goals. Each meeting brings together people of differing levels of interest—and self-interest—and this fact, plus the competing demands coming from outside the meeting, challenge the focus of the people in the room. In addition there is a fabric of underlying relationships among the participants, which frames all interactions, fostering and impeding understanding, promoting or blocking agreement.

Unless the convener of the meeting is clear about the goals and who should attend,

participants could be confused. Who is part of the meeting, and why? Who should be there but is not? Who shouldn't be there but there? What is the role of the different participants, who are the decision makers and who are empowered to decide? Who takes the leadership, and is it assigned to that person? When meetings combine face-to-face attendees with virtual participants, the challenges to create an inclusive meeting increase dramatically. When participants have different mother tongues, communication is frequently hindered by their reluctance to speak up lest they be judged for poor language skills.

The complexity we describe can be approached from another perspective. Consider this: You have called a meeting. What do you want to get out of it? Let's assume you have a team and want to share some information, hear reports, exchange ideas, analyze and discuss some topics, make some decisions and end up with concrete next steps. You think it's pure business. Yet I suggest we think of it as pure learning.

How so?

- As we receive information, we learn about it, and are expected to do something with it: it is supposed to help us think differently, expand our point of view, enrich analysis, so that we make better decisions.

> **Expanding our thinking is called Learning,**
> **and Learning is aimed at solving problems better**

- Analyzing and discussing are two ways of making meaning, hearing different perspectives, integrating and organizing information, trying to understand.

> **Making new meanings is called Learning**

- When we are in a meeting, we are tacitly learning about communication, diversity, feedback, planning, decision-making, leadership, empowerment, appreciation, negotiation, and the list goes on.

Learning happens just in time

Addressing Meetings As You Would A Learning Intervention

If meetings are learning situations, everyone can benefit from designing and running them with the principles of adult learning[1] in mind. Some of these principles are:

♦ *Make it relevant*
Create ownership. Ask participants to co-design the meeting, to run different sections, to include their own pressing topics when the goals of the meeting are being set. Limit one-direction presentations to the bare minimum, and insist that participants are given time to raise questions triggered by what they have heard. This way the conversation will be highly relevant to the audience, and will include attendees who might not otherwise wish to participate in a topic that is not "theirs".

♦ *Connect the knowledge sources in the room*
Ask questions and give attendees time to reflect and come up with their own answers. If you are presenting, don't automatically answer the questions of the audience: give the question back to the group and seek their input whenever possible. That not only engages the audience and provokes thinking, but it also allows us to see where the thinking of the group is.

♦ *Make space for making meaning*
Don't assume people can automatically convert data into applied knowledge. Provide time and space in the agenda for participants to reflect how what they are hearing can impact their work and their department.

♦ *Generate opportunities for exchange*
We are social learners. We learn when talking with others as it allows us to process our own thoughts. We learn from others who see different angles. Meetings are not places for individual learning and processing. View the meeting as providing a unique opportunity to gather differing opinions and expertise in the same space and time. So why not make the most of this opportunity to interact, and jointly develop ideas?

♦ *Challenge assumptions and current points of view*
What is learning, if not changing the way we see things, and therefore changing the way we address problems and situations? How is the new information presented in the meeting

going to change behaviors and thinking? By helping the participants to uncover and challenge their current assumptions, each presenter can make the meeting one step more effective. Ask yourself the question: If nothing is going to change, why have a meeting anyway?

♦ *Set the right context*
We tend to restrain our contributions when we feel unsafe, when we are unsure how our words will be judged. A clear set of jointly agreed norms helps build a frame of safety. Maintain an appreciative approach in the interactions.

♦ *Meet with human doings and human beings*
We all call ourselves human beings, yet meetings are frequently only for human doers. Allow the whole person to come to the meeting, by connecting with the personal side, with the individual concerns or feelings. A quick check -in is helpful, as is the importance of conducting a brief review of the meeting so all can learn from the exchange of ideas. Ask "What worked well at this meeting? What can we do to make future meetings more meaningful?" It is all about learning.

These are a few examples of how ARL principles and elements can be applied to shape and change the tone and productivity of meetings. Because meetings are about learning.

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[1] Find the full list of principles of adult learning applied to different contexts, in Rimanoczy I., & Turner, E. *Action Reflection Learning: Solving real business problems by connecting learning with earning.* Davies-Black Publishing, 2008.

If you want more triggers for reflection, visit
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