ACTION SCIENCE IS NOT SCALABLE TO AN ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING INTERVENTION

INTRODUCTION

"Why didn't you do what I asked you to do?" is quite an explicit way of questioning someone who did not perform the action that was agreed upon. The response will certainly be defensive and the conversation may not have the constructive character that you would like it to have. When such a conversation is of recurring nature between the same people, or characterises the communication style in an organisation, it begs the question whether this is an effective approach to learn from a negative experience and create a learning organisation. To change someone's mindset and reduce the policing element of the conversation, such action is not very helpful.

This type of action is designed to maintain four underlying values: achieving purposes as defined by the actor, winning, suppressing negative feelings, and being rational. The primary strategies are those of unilateral advocacy, controlling inquiry, and protection of self and other. Consequences include defensive interpersonal and group relationships, limited learning, and decreased effectiveness (Putman, 1991). To create learning systems, Robert Putman suggests to rather use a method of inquiry, with underlying values such as valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment. The primary strategies are to combine advocacy and inquiry, to make reasoning explicit and confrontable, and to encourage others to do the same. Consequences include an increasing capacity for learning not only to improve strategies for achieving existing goals (single-loop learning), but also to choose among competing norms, goals, and values (double-loop learning). Instead of asking "Why didn't you do what I asked you to do?", one could ask "What is it in what I say or do, that prevents you from doing so?".

Action Science, as to what these designs refer to, identifies whether the actions are corrected in order to obtain a different outcome (Model I) or the underlying mindset can be changed to prevent certain unwanted actions from happening at all (Model II). It is relatively simple to apply Action Science to change the mindset of an individual; in childhood through parenting, in later life through coaching and therapy, provided that there is a trusted relationship between the individuals that partake in the process of changing the mindset.

The question is, whether it is possible to scale the principles of Action Science to a larger group, such as an organisation, to change its mindset and thereby improving the actions for the intended outcomes. To understand the possibility, I will reflect on the impact of group dynamics and circumstantial influences on the application of Action Science to a larger group. These dynamics and influences – such as trust, motivation, cultural differences, distances between entities, and constant

change – impact group behaviour and therefore the success rate of a collective learning intervention to achieve a mindset change, on individual level and various size levels of an organisation.

CHANGE THE MASTER PROGRAM TO CHANGE THE MINDSET

According to Chris Argyris (Arygris, 1995), learning occurs whenever errors are detected and corrected, or when a match between intentions and consequences is produced for the first time. There are at least two ways to correct errors. One is to change the behaviour (for example, reduce backbiting and bad-mouthing among individuals). The second way to correct errors, is to change the underlying, or master program, that leads individuals to backbite others even when they say they do not intend to do so. If actions are changed without changing the master programs, which individuals use to produce the actions, then the correction will either fail or will not persevere.

These so-called master programs can also be viewed as theories of action that inform individuals of the strategies, they should use to achieve their intended consequences. Theories of action are governed by a set of values that provide the framework for the action strategies chosen. Thus, human beings are designing beings. They create, store, and retrieve designs that advise them how to act if they are to achieve their intentions and act consistently with their governing values. These designs, or Theories of Action, are the key to understanding human action.

THE FOUNDATION FOR CHANGING THE MINDSET: INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

For change in general but in particular for changing the mindset, a prerequisite is that people are motivated to change, with the aim to make the change or the changed mindset part of the individual's nature: internalisation (Harakas, 2013). Internalisation is more likely to happen when there is support for the three essential human needs: relatedness, competence and autonomy. As an example, employee internalisation would most likely be strengthened in a work environment in which employees feel attached to and valued by their co-workers (relatedness). Internalisation is also supported by perceived competence so that social events such as feedback and rewards that strengthen individuals' feelings of competence during action can enhance motivation for that action. Finally, feeling autonomy, that is having a sense of volition, choice, and willingness, makes it more likely for individuals to internalize the responsibility for the change process and to integrate new behaviours.

Motivation can be intrinsic and extrinsic. With respect to intrinsic motivation, human motives vary along a continuum of relative autonomy, the self-determination continuum, which orders motives according to the degree to which the motivations are, in fact, fully intrinsic. Excluding the two polar extremes of amotivation and intrinsic motivation, the self-determination continuum consists of four forms of intrinsic motivation: external, introjected, identified, and integrated regulation of behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The different motivations reflect differing degrees to which values and regulation of behaviours have been internalized and integrated. When individuals internalise a behaviour regulation, they accept the behaviour as having some personal importance and value. When individuals integrate a value or regulation, they transform and assimilate it to their self-concept (Harakas, 2013).

Apart from intrinsic motivation, people can be motivated by extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation refers to behaviour that is driven by external rewards such as money, fame, grades, and praise. This type of motivation arises from outside the individual. From experience as a director leading a variety of teams, extrinsic motivation works very well when certain precise actions need to

be carried out, or when certain personal or company targets need to be achieved. Rewards and promotions are good instruments to motivate employees to achieve goals that have a non-behavioural character, such as driving sales, increasing profits, reducing costs, or to increase or recover market shares.

I would argue that intrinsic motivation plays a prominent role in changing the mindset, as the mindset belongs to the employee and not to the employer or organisation. Extrinsic motivation is based on a contractual obligation between employer and employee, which can be altered outside of the employee's sphere of influence. There is a higher chance to reach internalisation by strengthening intrinsic motivation, than by rewarding or promoting people; rewards and promotions have a strong temporary character. For applying Action Science successfully, another prerequisite is that people have a high degree of intrinsic motivation—in particular, when the needs of relatedness, competence and autonomy are satisfied.

GROUP DYNAMICS AS A FACILITATOR FOR A COLLECTIVE MINDSET CHANGE IN AN ORGANISATION

When a group of individuals work together, we talk about a team. When teams work together, we could consider this type of cooperation to be an organisation. Teams and organisations are exposed to group dynamics. Group dynamics can be very intense when there is a high level of heterogeneity, such as hierarchy, various levels and types of competencies, professional and educational backgrounds, norms and values, as well as the level of motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic.

Even when there is a high level of intrinsic motivation – the prerequisite for mindset change, as described in the previous paragraph – among all members of a team or an organisation, group dynamics may be of negative nature. Well-functioning groups are characterised by authentic humanness of the relationships between members, ideally pursuing the same objectives and sharing the same norms and values (Clarkson, 2003). Authentic humanness unfolds through tenderness, compassion, and sympathy for people, especially for the suffering or distressed.

When the this is not the case, a group relationship can be a working relationship, enabling people to work together, even when either or both do not want to. It can also be a transference/counter-transference experience of the working relationship, when wishes and fears and experiences from the past transferred onto or into the team partnerships; for example, a negative experience out of the past, may hinder a group member not to trust anyone in the team (Clarkson 2003).

Lack of trust, or lack of authentic humanness, could negatively impact the motivation of the team members with a lower level of intrinsic motivation will not step forward to drive change and demonstrate their willingness to change their mindset, in the case of a working relationship or a transference/countertransference experience in the working relationship. These individuals are not facilitated with the trust and compassion they need in order to cross their boundaries (Haan, 2011).

I consider trust and a humane approach to be a key facilitator to embed a mindset change in a team or organisation. In a working relationship it is still possible to motivate people to carry out their tasks, as specified by the organisation and rewarded through extrinsic motivational rewards. However, this relates more to a Model I situation and approach, and not to a Model II approach, which requires intrinsic motivation, trust and compassion.

Therefore, I argue that when the foundation for mindset change (Model II) is laid, meaning that a team or organisation shows a high level of intrinsic motivation, the team needs to make sure that

group dynamics are as positive and constructive as possible. In order to avoid being caught up in the dynamics of the situation of a team or between teams in an organisation, a coach can provide objective and neutral guidance and support the required corrections in group relationships – provided that the coach is not causing any (additional) damage to the group dynamics.

During my career in multi-national organisations, I have come across all sorts of teams and companies with various group dynamics. Whenever the group dynamics were of a negative nature, the issues were predominantly related to trust. In a business context, just like in real-life, one could easily get a feel for which individuals or teams would trust each other and who is in the in-group or (enemy) out-group—sometimes manifested in relatively high levels of nepotism, which led to even more damage to the trust and sympathy levels. The sentiment among people who were not part of the in-group was typically expressed by why would I change, I will never get a chance anyway, or why would we help the other team, they would not help us if we need it.

Most of these types of challenges relate to so-called group shadows and social-masks to sustain an illusion of harmony, homogeneity, cohesiveness, by which they cannot avert the group shadow. The group shadow of a particular in-group consists of the denied attributes, emotions, thoughts, and issues within the in-group that are experienced by members of the in-group as belonging only to the out-group. The shadow projected by the in-group onto an out-group is a defense against directly experiencing repressed interpersonal and emotional issues occurring between members of the in-group. With repression, these issues remain dormant because they are both unexpressed and undiscussable. The in-group's exaggerated view of itself in only positive terms constitutes a social mask that blocks out the group's shadow. It is a façade that covers up the projection of the group's shadow onto the out-group. The tendency for an in-group to perceive itself in only exaggerated positive terms constitutes a harmony illusion (Gemmill, 1993).

With group dynamics like these, I would argue that changing the collective mindset of a team or organisation, is very challenging. Model I, correcting the actions, would be the highest possible achievement, when certain relationship issues are not addressed; in particular issues related to group shadows and social-masks. Intrinsic motivation, trust and compassion is a requirement for Model II to be applied. Intergroup mirroring and making projections conscious, are necessary interventions for improving not only intergroup relations but also intragroup relations.

The impact of organizational characteristics and cultures

Where a coach, a manager or a group of team members is able to change the mindset of a team or a country organisation, it may be a lot harder to change the mindset of a large organisation, which operates in different countries. First, there is the aspect of geographical distances and the level of interaction between country organisations. Secondly, operating in different countries, may expose an organisation to a high variety of country cultures.

My first job was at a large European player in building management. In my role as an assistant to one of the European Directors at our Swiss Headquarters, I was responsible for business development. In my first few months, I asked my boss if I could work for a week with the heating installation teams. When I put on my blue coverall and spent my first day with a service representative visiting houses of our customers, he was very much surprised that I was not Swiss and even more surprised that the company was active outside of his home town, let alone across Europe. The local nature of the business did not require service teams to interact with other service teams in the country, or abroad, for their day-to-day business. But I was astonished that there was no awareness of the size and internationality of the entire organisation among the service teams.

In a later role, I was responsible for a large European people development program for a global construction materials player. The aim was to identify the skills and competencies' gap of all commercial people and close these gaps, but also to change the mindset of the commercial teams from a transactional mindset (sell and forget) to a customer value mindset. One of the assessments and development topics for senior sales representatives, was the command of the English language. Also, in this case, the business was local and predominantly in the native language. The reason why we wanted to assess and develop English language skills, was solely for the purpose of creating the foundation to interact with colleagues across Europe and to learn from each other. We had to put quite some effort in demonstrating the importance to the local sales teams and faced quite some resistance, such as I do not see the need to learn English, because my customers do not speak English anyway. Also, we felt that the western European commercial teams looked down on the eastern European teams, even ignoring the many innovative selling methods of their eastern European colleagues, as compared to their more traditional selling methods.

These two examples show that even the basics of relationships are not to be taken for granted in large organisations, being the awareness of the size of an organisation and its people, and the ability to interact with each other. On top of this, cultural differences are present and need to be bridged through trust and awareness, in order to be able to implement a company-wide mindset change and benefit from best practices across the organisation.

But what works in one country culture, may not work in another country culture. Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, 2011) speaks of six dimensions which can be used to describe organisational cultures: 1) process-oriented versus results-oriented, 2) job-oriented versus employee-oriented, 3) professional versus parochial, 4) open systems versus closed systems, 5) tight versus loose control, and 6) pragmatic versus normative. Large international organisations that are designing their Action Science programs, need to take these different dimensions into account in order to make people relate to the implementation approach and build the required trust.

THE IMPACT OF CONSTANT CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES

Under ideal circumstances, each member of an organisation is aware of the size of the organisation, its other members and relates to these members. Across borders, the members are able to interact and learn from each other, share best practices and have overcome cultural differences. The fundament is in place to implement Action Science across the organisation. But what happens when the organisation as the members know it, is exposed to constant and significant changes?

For example, when another previous employer of mine, a global player in the construction materials industry, acquired new assets worth several billions, various organisational cultures collided. The existing organisation was characterised by a large collection of acquired businesses, pluralistic branding, and autonomous decision making at company level. The acquired businesses were divested by two merging large global construction materials players, as part of a remedy ordered by governmental competition law offices. In 2015, the Group CEO initiated a company-wide program with the aim to unite all businesses across the Group and named the project OneCompanyXYZ (CompanyXYZ masks the name of the company). The initiative was very much top-down imposed, informing all management teams what ONECompanyXYZ will stand for in the future. Since then, many reorganisations took place, group companies and even entire business units were sold, new businesses were acquired, and many management changes happened.

This example is not uncommon for large international organisations, in particular for conglomerates, owning, selling and buying various types of business. What may be a clear company direction for

decision makers at a company's headquarters, may be completely secondary to the country organisations' interest; survival or motivating the local company employees may be their first priority, which could even lead to a stronger manifestation of in-groups and out-groups between country organisations. Relatedness, one of the essential human needs, is not present, and this will damage the intrinsic motivation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have discussed a logical sequence of applying Action Science aiming for mindset change (Model II) as part of a learning intervention, from an individual, to a team, to a country organisation, to a multinational organisation. On all levels, trust is essential for change. For individuals to change, the three human needs (relatedness, competence and autonomy) should be satisfied in order to achieve internalisation. Intrinsic motivation should be present and stronger than extrinsic motivation, which I consider not essential for applying Action Science.

On team level, authentic humanness of relationships between the team members plays an important role to build on trust and the individual values. In order to change the mindset of various teams within a country organisation, in-groups and out-groups need to bridge their differences to facilitate the change across teams and break resistance. In particular, when group shadows and social-masks obstruct harmony and require repair work.

I consider this achievable and the intervention should be supported by an external coach to make sure that objectivity is applied in situations, in which trust needs to be restored, intrinsic motivation needs to be increased and group differences need to be repaired.

However, applying Action Science as a learning intervention in multinational organisations faces serious challenges, such as the high degree of cultural differences and the inter- and intraorganisational characteristics. Even when these challenges can be dealt with, multi-national organisations are exposed to a high degree of constant internal change, in terms of their constellation through merger, acquisition and divestment activities, as well as leadership changes. Constant external change, such as market conditions and stakeholder interests have a compounding effect.

Therefore, I conclude that the complexity of large international organisations does not seem to facilitate Action Science as a learning intervention very well, when the same approach is applied throughout the entire organisation. The large set of requirements on individual, team and country organisation level may be fulfilled up to country level, but the large complexity that is coherent with international diversity and characteristics of multi-national companies, heavily impacts the success of such a collective learning intervention.

Applying Action Science as learning intervention for a collective mindset change (Model II) demands a careful approach, as it faces a significant number of barriers and resistance, which needs extensive repair work. I would recommend multi-national organisations to apply an individual intervention on country level supported by central guidance and coaching, and to set very low expectations for a collective global intervention to be successful.

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