

Opening Remarks
Andrew Rahaman, Ed.D
WAIL-USA and Global Conference
“Leading and Sustaining Change through Action Learning”

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen

I’m Andrew Rahaman, the Chair of WIAL-USA and your host and it is indeed a pleasure to welcome you all here to the WIAL-USA and Global Action Learning Conference. We have a few days of great speakers and I’m confident it will be one of prodigious conversation.



A lot of work went into creating this conference and workshop and I’d like to extend my thanks to fellow colleagues at WIAL-USA, Adam Smith, Jacqueline Villafane, Joe Scalafiani and especially Cheryl Thompson. Please help me in acknowledging their efforts

As you can see from the size of this room and table set ups, this is will be an interactive conference in the style of the late great John Dewey who opined that learning is a social event.

As we start this conference aptly named **“Leading and Sustaining Change through Action Learning”**. Let me begin by asking you **“What are the challenges you or your clients are currently facing in your organizations?”**

From my own experience, as an actively practicing coach, (graduate of Georgetown, cohort 27!), Faculty member at American University and a Leadership facilitator /d executive coach for the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), and having spent 25 years in government service living in in 6 countries, I can safely say that the challenges leaders in both private and public institutions are faced with at the individual, team and organizational level are multifaceted across a complex and interdependent operating environment to include:

- Working across stake-holder boundaries
- Developing an enterprise wide perspective,



- Creating the conditions for adaptive change to develop themselves and their team comes down is no small task.

For me, I've needed to think of this as an ecosystem of interrelated strategies, tactics and activities that I can encapsulate into two ideas:

1. First, being able to reduce the time between learning and development and
2. Second being able to align learning strategies with business strategies,

This is a conference and workshops that involves action learning; however it is not only about action learning. We were very diligent about choosing our title, recognizing that action learning is an effective methodology for change; and to change is to encompass learning at different levels, for the leader, the team, and for the organization. Hence, we've reflected the potential to learn and to change at the individual, team and organizational level with the diversity of speakers we have over the next two days.

To that point, I'd especially like to thank our speakers who have come here sponsored by their own companies or by their own resources in support of leadership development, team facilitation and organizational performance. Our speakers have come from both public and private institutions in the US, Canada, England, Thailand, Poland and Taiwan. In addition, we have visitors from the Barbados, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan Indonesia, Trinidad, and of the US. Please help me to welcome them and the ideas they will bring and share.

Let me then address action learning from **the leader's point of view**,

The faster pace of work, increasing diversity, competition and the need to have flatter organizations make it harder to maintain direction, alignment and commitment – a hallmark of leadership output. Consequently, leaders have to change from the all-knowing, unique individual to one that embodies leadership as a social process that involves a wide network that they can mobilize to create and innovate.

They are doing this in environment where employees are no longer wed to one company and want training and development and yet personal development funds are limited.

This requires leaders to facilitate organizational purpose at levels to embody the experiences of others to create



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emergent knowledge within the context of the organization, and in doing so also create commitment.

So, part of the challenge is to create leaders that see one of their roles as increasing the social capital in an organization in order to foster the emergent knowledge that can be self-sustaining. Secondly, it's creating the conditions for knowledge to be co-produced in the existing context of the values, assumptions and existing strategy to make tacit knowledge available to all.

I believe we would you agree this is a different approach or skill sets needed to solve linear problems of the past where rooted in the cultural paradigms of the organizations that were not typically open for negotiation.

So this brings me to the second question: How do you leaders align learning strategies with business strategies? 5 Minutes

In action learning, leaders become the architect of social constructivism of shared knowledge. Learning is then a social activity as leaders, make sense of and re-organize existing mental models by asking questions that simultaneously challenge *"the way of we do things around here"* and build upon ideas for future actions.

Now, I want to add that its simply not about solving the technical problem that social constructivism lends itself to. No, it's making the explicit subjectivities and the negotiated relationship of teams throughout the organization visible that creates the environment to learn and solve problems together.

I say this because typical problem solving is rooted in the politics, hierarchy and personal perspectives of individuals



The reframing process starts with the organizational context that individuals and teams share

So the leader's role at any level in the organization is the shift from *finding out* to *creating from within* the context and conversation of others to promote learning.

So, today and tomorrow we have speakers, such as Mary Stacey and Dr. Silvia Martinez, Dr. Steve Terrell on Critical Thinking, Shannon Banks on Questions and the brain and Cliff Kayser on Polarity Leadership

What about Teams and Action Learning as part of the alignment of Development and Strategy?

Action learning is experiential and participatory its design of asking questions to learn and to reflect and reflect on the mental models that guide them as a team. As this is done collectively and within a constructivist model, teams collaboratively diagnose problems, create the networks and agreements to develop action plans within the context of their operating environment and importantly are free to change it.

To me, the result is that teams view each other and themselves through a more humanistic philosophy as resources to each other, as equals amongst equals and in doing so create the space for feedback and support to develop themselves.

In my experience as one that has led, been on teams, and been a manager of a group, this social constructivist approach, moves one away from receiving information or persuading others that sounds like “What do I want them to do” to one of creating an environment to communicate “how are we seeing this together” and “how are we doing this together” shortens the period of team development

For teams, we know that as complexity increases they tend to revert and rely on habitual ways of doing things. Action learning develops teams as they inquire together – each bringing their own knowledge and perspective, adding fresh questions from their peers who have their own perspectives, linking currently shared experiences, self-reflection on one’s own mental models of how things have been done before to explore and create a common mental model of the organization’ context, building cohesion and trust, and taking different actions than before action in a supportive environment. In this context of a commonly shared problem the group or team is linked to the larger organizational system.

So, it’s a pleasure to have speakers like Tony Pearson, Chuck Appleby, and Dr. Peter Cauweiler here today who will address several of these issues



Finally, let’s consider Organizational Development

We've looked at action learning from the leader, the team what we've heard, is that of legitimizes individuals through open communication, building trust in the team by openly identifying assumptions, creating pathways by the sharing of perspectives and developing one's agency with the use of individual power to take action.

We see that the value and orientation to innovation and reaching strategic goals is not about simply "filling the gap" with discreet pieces of knowledge learned by an individual. Rather, it's an approach that learning in context and with others to creates a map of possibilities through a social constructivists perspective.



From an organizational development perspective, this inside-out process positions learning as a journey that replaces exiting paradigms of decision making at hierarchical level.

The journey is one of making the implicit explicit by illuminating experiences, challenging existing frameworks of strategic decision making and I will be bold by saying that it disrupts the exiting organizations culture around what is valued and how it is actualized in its behaviors.

It does so by identifying the alignment and/or *mis-alignment* that that all companies have in common, which is understanding of the mission, consolidation and integration, core values, the role of teams and capability, how organizations create and sustain change through learning.

So organization learning emerges when our individual and team perspectives identify that the organization is a process of permeable networks, relationships, sustained by communication of ideas and action that links development to strategy.

This is different from the consumption of information; it's using existing information to create emergent knowledge.

To that, we are grateful to have speakers who identify how organizations can use the important existing organizational resources, the people, to create organizational learning and change. It's a pleasure to welcome



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Dr Dan Denison - Organizational Culture,

Leadership and Action Learning; Alexandra Walker and Stephanie Cosgrove Wells Fargo – Integrating Action Learning; Rich Walsh from the Center for Creative Leadership on Transformation, Strategic Leadership and Action Learning; Dr. Patrick Malone from American University along with a panel of speakers, and Dr. Michael Marquardt on leading action learning

It's also a pleasure to welcome our other guest speakers, such as Dr. Deborah Wadhill on Action Learning online; Tomasz Janiak from Poland; Dr. Showjiun Cheng Ass't Prof at Rikko University in Japan; Dr. Bea Carson, Popsy Kanagaratnam and Dr. Jacqueline Villafane

As I welcome you to the conference. I close my comments with the two observations I made early, which were First, the importance of being able to reduce the time between learning and development and Second being able to align learning strategies with business strategies.

Action learning is a both a methodology and a form of organizational learning as information becomes knowledge through questions, reflection and action that is embedded in the actual work of the team and organizations strategy for the future. The result can be action learning becomes a lever for organizational change to include cultural change as existing paradigms of "how we do things around here" are explored through questions that open up the habitual norms and expectations that script individuals, teams and organizations.

Have a great conference and welcome!