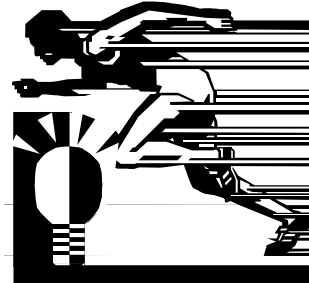


Action Learning, Kaizen and Corporate Culture

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Introduction

Action learning is a concept that promotes individual and organizational learning through small teams that address real problems and learn from their attempts to change things. The most important aspect of Action Learning is its ability to promote cultural change. The surface simplicity of Action Learning can mask its real power. It not only provides learning for individuals and the organization. It also solves intractable problems and generates significant changes in corporate culture.

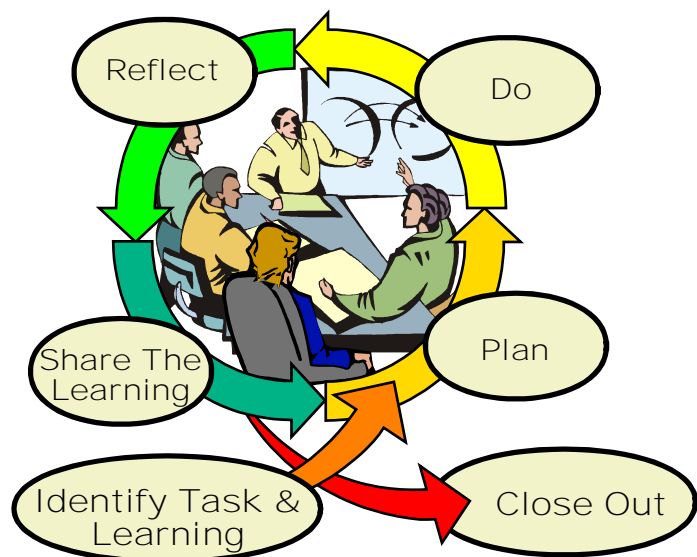


Action Learning shares many characteristics with Kaizen events and process improvement teams. Indeed, some process improvement teams or Kaizen teams are, in fact, Action Learning teams. Figure 1 shows the general process, to be discussed later in this article.

The benefits of Action Learning come at two levels. At an individual level, people learn through doing. They learn about technical issues such as workcell design. They learn about team processes and how to function in teams. They also learn leadership and cooperation skills. Action Learning gives team members confidence in their abilities to learn while promoting an appropriate humility about their actual knowledge.

Figure 1 the Action Learning Process

At the organizational level, companies need to learn coping skills for new problems. The rate of change in the external environment is accelerating and has been for several decades. It is only likely to accelerate more. For survival, organizations must learn at least as fast as the pace of change and, preferably faster. Existing knowledge about how things work, or are supposed to work, often misdirects inquiry rather than facilitates a solution. Action Learning promotes the kind of changes in Corporate Culture that allow companies to survive in rapidly changing environments.



Origins of Action Learning

The term “Action Learning” was first coined by Professor Reg Revans. Originally an astrophysicist, Revans later worked on productivity improvements in British coal mines in the 1950’s. He experimented, developed, researched and wrote about Action Learning for almost 50 years. The concept is better known in Europe than in the U.S.



Action Learning drew upon many older tools from Work Simplification and the work of Gilbreth, Taylor and the other Industrial Engineering pioneers. At the same time, it anticipated many of the techniques of Team Development that came later such as self-norming and conflict resolution.

Fundamentals

Revans was careful not to define Action Learning in a rigid way, leaving the concept open for growth, experimentation and development. Others have attempted more definitive models. Action Learning teams operate with a wide variety of formats on a wide range of problems. However, most practitioners would agree on this summary of basic elements.

Learning Teams (Sets)

Action Learning is always a team effort. Revans referred to these teams as “sets.” Team concepts had not been developed when Revans did his original work. The problem often lies outside the expertise and knowledge of some or all of the team members. This is an important part of the learning experience. A team consisting only of experts in the area of the problem would be unlikely to question basic assumptions and mental models.

Real Problems

The team is given a real problem and they are expected to solve it. Contrived classroom exercises are not compatible with Action Learning. The problem should also be a challenging problem, e.g. one of those recurring, intractable problems that seem to haunt organizations, a problem where everyone thinks they know the answer but all the answers are different.

Revans’ Learning Formula

Reg Revans described Action Learning with the formula $L = P + Q$, where Learning (L) occurs through Programmed knowledge (P) and insightful Questioning (Q).

Traditional instruction, or “programmed knowledge” is appropriate when we are faced with puzzles, i.e., challenges that have a right answer. However, when we are faced with “problems”, challenges that have no right answer, we need critical reflection or questioning insight. Action learning encourages such reflection by providing the support to enable people to learn from challenges as well as from themselves and the group itself.

There are substantial benefits of learning on all these levels.

- The knowledge is more likely to be transferable to other situations.
- Participants engage in double loop learning. They not only receive feedback on their actions, but also investigate their own underlying assumptions and mental models.

Learning Must Dominate

The problems and situations undertaken by an Action Learning team are genuine, important and difficult. However, the learning experienced must always be the primary goal. Solving the problem should be a happy but collateral result. This is primarily what distinguishes Action Learning from the typical Kaizen Event or task force.

Always Start With Questioning

The “questioning Attitude” was formalized by Ralph Barnes in the 1930’s and popularized by Allan Mogensen in the 1940’s and 1950’s. It encouraged the repeated asking of questions about every aspect of a process or problem situation. The more detailed and more useful questions are in figure 2.

Figure 2 The Questioning Attitude

	5 W	Key Questions
Purpose	What?	What is done?
	Why?	What is the purpose? Is the purpose accomplished? Why is it necessary? What if it were eliminated? What would make it unnecessary?
Place	Where?	Where is it performed? What alternate locations are viable? Can the departments be reorganized?
Sequence	When?	What other sequences would work? Can it be combined with another event? What are the implications of other sequences?
Person	Who?	Who performs the task? Who else could perform it?
Means	How?	What other methods are available? What other process technologies exist? Can smaller-scale processes be used?

At the beginning of an Action Learning project, the most important questions concern the purpose. People embroiled in the process every day rarely ask the first three questions in the “why” category. Yet they are often the most important. It is surprising how many times we find that a whole series of work activities are unnecessary or how often activities simply do not accomplish their purported purpose.

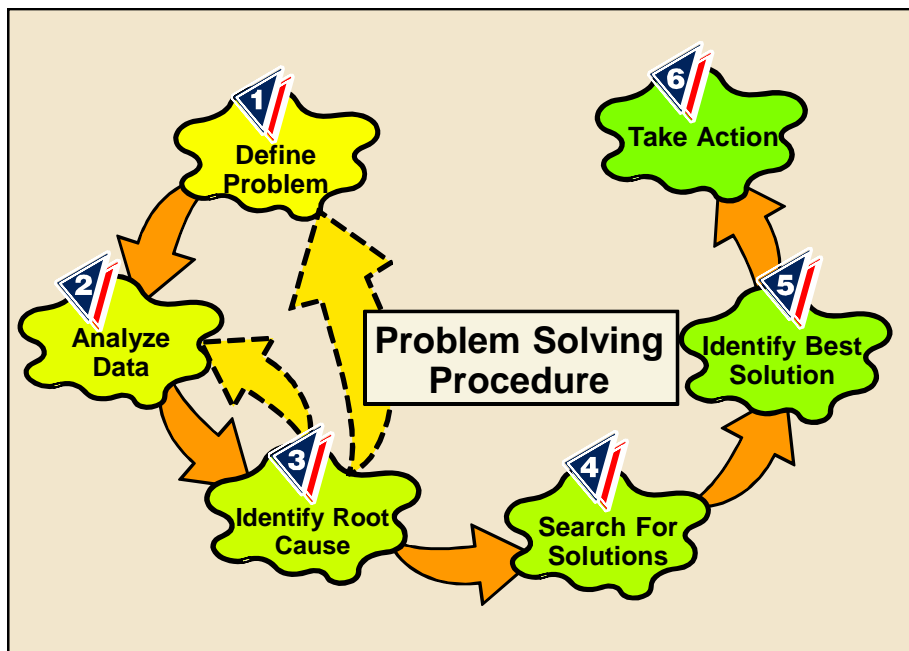
When the purpose is necessary, the final question, “*What would make it unnecessary,*” is often the most intriguing. This is a question that leads backwards to root causes that often lie outside the apparent scope of the project. It is also one of the “Lateral Thinking” techniques promoted by Edward DeBono and can lead to breakthrough solutions.

The question categories of Place, Sequence, Person and Means apply later in the problem-solving process.



I keep six honest serving men.
They taught me all I knew.
Their names are What and
Why and When and Where
and How and Who.
-Rudyard Kipling
The Elephant's Child

Figure 3 A Problem Solving Procedure



Problem solving Procedure

The team needs a formal problem solving procedure, another adaptation from the early Work Simplification movement, figure 3. The formal procedures prevent a rush to judgment or knee-jerk responses. They structure the process and focus attention towards the immediate task. A number of such procedures are popular as part of TQM and Six Sigma. In essence, they are similar and most provide an adequate framework.

Reflection Is As Important As Action

In figure 1 “Reflection” is one of the four essential elements of the Action Learning cycle. This is where the team and its individual members review their activities and internalize their approaches to solving the problem. Reflection consists of both individual and group exercises. Some of the questions that are considered might be:

- When was I most engaged?
- When was I most distanced?
- When was I most affirmed?
- When was I most puzzled?
- What was the most important thing I learned today? How will I capitalize on it in the future?

The questions above focus on individual learning. Other questions would be asked of the group and answered by the group. Such group questions have long been used in Team Development to promote learning of group processes.

Share The Knowledge

For many reasons Action Learning teams share their knowledge with the remainder of the organization. They usually do this through group presentations. The presentations and reports are not necessarily at the end of the project. The group may make interim presentations so that others in the organization can follow the logic, advance their own thinking and contribute valuable information.

Those outside the group cannot gain the full learning without the actual experience. However, they can gain some insight. The most important result of sharing is to build enthusiasm and support for the process within the organization and to encourage others to participate in future sessions. This is also part of the recognition and reward structure for the group itself. Sharing the knowledge promotes the change in corporate culture that is, probably, the most significant benefit of Action Learning.

Conducting The Project

The Beginning

Since the Action Learning team is new, it is important for the group to spend time getting to know each other and develop group norms. This process need not be as lengthy or elaborate as it would be with a self-directed work team. The team may also need formal training in certain areas such as workcell design or process improvement.

Fixing The Problem Versus Learning

Several thousand years ago it was pointed out that teaching a hungry person to fish was better than giving them a fish to eat. Not much has changed in that respect.

The primary goal of Action Learning is the learning experience. Solving the problem is important but secondary to learning. It is easy for the group and easy for management to get caught up in the problem and shortcut the learning component.

Facilitation

Facilitation practices in Active Learning vary widely and there is a range of opinion about their best role. Some facilitators are active in the beginning and then fade away as the group progresses. Others stay with the group throughout the project. However, some things are generally agreed.

- Facilitation is most important in the beginning. This is where the facilitator guides the group in establishing norms, explaining the goals and ensures that planning is consistent with Active Learning principles.
- The facilitator must not dominate the group or solve the problem for them. A facilitator may allow the group to flounder and, apparently, waste time. This time, however, is not really wasted—it is part of the learning process. The most important learning usually comes from struggling, floundering and making mistakes.
- The facilitator should always be available, if the team requests help, to smooth group processes or provide specific training or expert advice.

Timeframe

The Active Learning team establishes a timeframe for the project in the early planning stage. This timeframe should allow for learning processes that may include formal reflection and informal internalization of knowledge between official sessions.

Strategy Versus Tactics

Strategic issues relate to the long-term, difficult-to-change elements of a business that create competitive advantage. They are elements that competitors cannot quickly duplicate. Action Learning is a strategic tool because it changes corporate culture.

Corporate Culture

Corporate culture is usually the most strategic of these elements. It is notoriously resistant to change, particularly in larger organizations. Attitudes, policies, practices and behaviors are unconsciously interwoven into the daily patterns of employees. Many companies find success with approaches to business that suits a particular time and technology. Then, when external conditions change they cannot cope because the culture perpetuates the original formula. When changes are made in some areas of the operation, the mental models in surrounding functions and area find reasons to resist. Often the changes are only temporary as the pervasive influence of corporate culture gradually brings things back in line with the original mental models. Action Learning teaches people how to question those mental models.

Ford Motor Company during the 1930s and 1940s is the most well-know example of this. The problems at Ford during this period were generally blamed on the founder and his peculiar personality. However, I worked at Ford almost two decades after Henry Ford's death. There were many counter-productive attitudes and policies still in place. The same phenomena affects the other Detroit automotive companies and is largely responsible for their present troubles.

When it comes to cultural change, the only certain things are uncertainty, inertia and difficulty. This is the most misunderstood and troublesome aspect of a Lean implementation.

Action Learning is a strategic tool because it changes corporate culture. It encourages people to examine the mental models of the current culture as well as their own assumptions, prejudices, beliefs and mental models. As this re-examination begins to migrate through the organization, it allows for the possibility of creating new models and beliefs that are more consistent with the current environment, more productive and more conducive to company survival.

Action Learning, Kaizen & Lean

With the wide range of practices with Action Learning it can appear that the concept is little different from most Kaizen Events or even an ordinary task force. The differences can be subtle but those differences are important. All three approaches can (usually) solve the assigned problem. However, the longer range, strategic effects are radically different. Table 1 summarizes the commonalities and differences.

A task force may find a solution to the problem but the implementation is slow, painful and uncertain. When complete, the organization reverts to its normal modes of operation.

A typical Kaizen Event solves the problem and implementation is swift and sure. However, outside the immediate area that the problem has addressed, the organization also reverts to its normal operating modes. Because the culture has not changed, the benefits of the Kaizen Event may be slowly undone over time.

In Action Learning the facilitator's role is less dominant than in a typical Kaizen Event. In the Kaizen Event (or Blitz) the pressure of time forces facilitators to make many decisions about scope and scheduling. The facilitator also exerts heavier influence on specific decisions rather than discuss the issues for hours or days.

In Kaizen, the pressure of time gets fast results. Time pressure forces people to give up dysfunctional mental models. However, it affects only the people directly involved and only with respect to the specific problem. Participants do not learn how to learn. They do not recognize that other mental models might also be dysfunctional. They rarely carry their new learning into dissimilar areas or use it to deal with dissimilar problems.

Table 1 Thumbnail Comparison

Element	Action Learning	Kaizen Event	Task Force
Goals	1. Learning 2. Cultural Change 3. Fix The Problem	1. Fix the Problem 2. Implement Quickly 3. Learn To Fix Similar Problems	1. Fix The Problem
Time Frame	Weeks-Months	2-5 Days	Weeks-Months
Reflection	Reflection occurs after every session and is integral. There is considerable "Second Loop Learning.	Reflection is limited and occurs at the end.	Reflection, if it occurs, is individual, sporadic and not part of the project.
Facilitator Role	Varies but primary role is to maintain focus.	Facilitator dominates, plans & often makes decisions.	No Facilitator
Strategic Level	Highest Strategy—Cultural Change To Learning Organization	Tactical To Mid-Strategic. Example- Implement Workcells.	Tactical—Fix The Problem
Scope	Varies but often company-wide	Product or Department	Varies

Case Studies

Telecom Installation

This example comes from Strategos' consulting experience. The client's identity is disguised for competitive reasons but the essential facts and events are real.

The Background

"ConCom" was a telecommunications company that operated in a number of cities and regions scattered throughout the United States. Although a mid-level firm in the telecom industry, ConCom would be considered a large organization by most standards. They employed well over 10,000 people. Some parts of the firm dated to the early 1900's and the general culture was bureaucratic, functionally organized and centralized.

Top management recognized that radical change was necessary for long term survival. They decided to experiment with a Kaizen Event aimed at improving a major process. However, they had larger goals than those for the usual Kaizen Event. They wanted to deal with large-scale, company-wide processes and they also wanted to begin a major cultural change that would make the firm more responsive to the changing environment and changing technologies.

A rather long list of problem areas that were critical to competitiveness had been developed. From this list, a small Steering Committee selected one particular problem for the initial event.

The Problem

ConCom had developed a networking product that used very expensive existing infrastructure to network customer organizations having scattered locations. For many business and technical reasons, this product offered significant advantages for both ConCom and their customers.

The problem was that ConCom required an average of three months to install the system. Competitors were installing functionally equivalent systems in weeks.

A small headquarters group had investigated this problem. This group had not clearly identified the root causes or developed viable solutions due to the complexity and internal politics of the situation. Nevertheless, their work was valuable in developing the project scope and in planning for what became a sort of Super-Kaizen Event. One thing that was clear from the headquarters investigation was that the problem was highly complex and involved many functional groups. These groups often did not communicate well.

The Action Learning Team

Because of the scope and complexity of the problem, a rather large team of about 35 people was assembled for a three-day event. The team had representation from every region, from every functional group and from all levels of the organization. It included line installers, clerical workers, supervisors, managers and senior managers. It represented sales, engineering, Operations, Scheduling and other functions. Some of these people knew each other from telephone conversations but most had never met.

The Steering Committee recognized that a broad, company-wide consensus was a necessary part of any solution. They publicized the event widely within the firm and requested nominations for team members. It was important to ensure that not only was the solution a good one, but that it would be acceptable to the various constituencies.

Top management gave absolute support to the team. It was made clear to all concerned that the team's recommendations **WOULD** be implemented. They ensured that the best people were sent. They provided travel and accommodation for the team and rented a first-class meeting facility with luncheon accommodations and breakout rooms.

Ultimately, the team resembled (at least in some respects) the constitutional convention of 1788. From the intensity of debate, the rhetoric, the negotiation of provincial interests and the seriousness of attitudes one would think they were founding a nation.

The Results

Within the three-days of sessions the team identified root causes and three viable solutions. The root cause was a cumbersome and little-understood process for planning and implementing an installation. This process was centrally controlled at corporate headquarters but the control was illusory. Moreover, the process did not allow for wide variation in the nature of individual installations. Thus, every installation was planned and executed as though it were the most complex and difficult installation.

Solution #1

This solution made minor changes to the existing process. It was least disruptive to the organization and power structure, acceptable by most constituencies but offered only minor improvements in installation time.

Solution #2

This solution made major revisions to the process but retained corporate control. It would reduce installation time by 50%.

Solution #3

This solution radically changed the nature of the process. It delegated management of each installation to local project managers and provided for installation teams that would absorb the activities of several functional groups. It offered much greater reductions of installation time but required a major disturbance of the organization and power structure.

What They Did

Because of the members' inexperience with team activities and the time constraints, facilitators played an important but not dominant role. Strategos provided two facilitators. The client assigned several facilitators from one of their groups with prior team experience. The facilitators developed an outline schedule, conducted initial training in teamwork and introduced several analysis techniques.

Strong facilitation proved necessary in the beginning as some team members had considerable trouble staying on topic, presenting views concisely and refraining from interrupting others. However, by the third day most participants had adapted to group norms and the team had coalesced and matured considerably.

Aside from the scope and complexity, the team approached the project in a typical process improvement way. They used the problem solving procedure of figure 3, examined the present state by analyzing existing data, identified root causes with fishbone diagrams and developed solutions through brainstorming.

The most important sessions involved the construction of a Present State Process Chart. The chart was extremely complex and covered a large wall. It was evident from early on that no one person understood the process. Individuals knew that they received information or documents, acted on that information and sent information out. Other than that, almost nobody knew what had happened before, where information originated and what others used it for.

There developed some curious circumstances surrounding installation milestone dates. These dates were important to installation personnel. Missed milestones were dealt with harshly. they showed up in performance reviews, salary reviews and, occasionally, letters of reprimand. However, it came to light that when milestones were accomplished early, this early accomplishment was totally ignored.

The question was asked, "who sets milestone dates?" Nobody seemed to know the answer. It finally developed that milestone dates were set by a clerical employee at corporate headquarters. Moreover, the time allowed was arbitrary and set without any knowledge of the complexity of the installation. Every installation, whether simple or

complex, had the same allocated time and this time was sufficient for the most complex installation. There were many other such revelations as the sessions continued.

After the present state analysis, the group broke into sub-teams to work on various aspects of the problems. These sub-teams would convene, report back and then reconvene with different members for the next stage of the problem solving.

One important aspect of the session was the use of daily newsletters. A scribe was appointed who summarized each day's activities. Each delegate emailed this newsletter to their constituencies and asked for comments and inputs. In this way, news of the team's progress spread through the organization and feedback was received. This generated a great deal of interest and conversation throughout the organization as many others followed the team's activities and deliberations.

At the end of each day, time was allowed for reflection and discussion of the team process and learning experience. Surveys were done to help evaluate the effects and encourage participants to think about their experience.

While the team recommended solution #2, the more radical Solution #1 was very seriously considered and almost tied for the top recommendation. The team suggested using Solution #2 as a pilot project in one region. They also setup an online survey to solicit comments and opinions from others in the organization and allow them to vote on the solutions. This promoted even broader participation and support.

The team made a presentation to top management and then individual delegates made similar presentations in their various regions. The organization was enthusiastic about the results and the process. As a result, additional such events were scheduled.

Strategic Issues

Another strategic issue was revealed during the project, although few appreciated it at the time. This was the integration of Marketing and Operations strategy.

The ability of ConCom's infrastructure to support this new product varied greatly between their various service areas and it also varied within the service area. Some locations could install the product quickly and easily; others could not. Much depended on the history of the infrastructure and what point in time it had been installed.

It appears that when marketing rolled out the product, they ignored these differences. the product was promoted equally in all regions. This had several effects. First, it required a major marketing effort in all regions rather than concentrating resources. In some regions, the product could be offered quickly and inexpensively. In other regions the product required major efforts and cost that was passed on to the customer.

This also affected cash flow. ConCom might have done better to concentrate marketing in areas where the infrastructure supported the product best. They might have quickly achieved a dominant market share in those areas. The improved cash flow might then have been used to upgrade infrastructure in other areas.

From the operations side, it appeared that there was little in the way of master planning that would allow an orderly upgrade of the infrastructure to support this and similar products. The result was a hodge-podge of infrastructure technologies and considerable unnecessary cost.

This Action Learning project was, hopefully, the beginning of a transformation of ConCom to a true learning organization. However, it will be several years before it is known whether the transformation is successful or not.

Computer Technology

This example is related by Robert L. Dilworth. It is abbreviated from his article, "Active Learning In A nutshell", referenced below.

The Background

I headed a major organization with hundreds of computers organized in an Intranet. The organization was highly dependent on this system and its efficiency and responsiveness directly influenced our performance.

The computers were slow in moving between screen images. These time delays were a major drag on performance. My internal experts had promised prompt resolution but failed to deliver. The national headquarters of the major computer firm that provided the system was activated and after further troubleshooting, they believed the problem was unfixable. Their solution was a new multi-million dollar system.

The Action Learning Team

Convinced there was a solution, I called together 22 management trainees from our fourteen directorates. All had basic computer literacy, but only two were computer specialists. Some trainees had never met before. Most had never worked together.

I informed the trainees of the problem, its significance to the organization, our unsuccessful efforts to solve it, my belief that it could be solved, the importance of avoiding the cost of a new system, and my belief that working to solve the problem would be a wonderful learning experience.

Asked to take on this problem as a group, they huddled briefly and accepted the challenge.

Outsiders thought the group was naïve to think they could fix this and some commented on the unfairness of asking trainees to take it on. The trainees never seemed to think the problem was beyond their depth, although they did view it as extremely challenging.

The problem was real, and once they accepted responsibility for the project, the team was expected to solve it. They were absolutely certain of top management support.

The Results

One month later, the problem was fixed.

What The Team Did

- The computer experts offered to join, but the trainees declined, preferring to follow their own instincts and call up specific expertise as appropriate.
- The trainees did not know enough to start with customary troubleshooting techniques. They invented their own process and asked fresh questions. They explored avenues not explored by others.

- They drew fully on the intellectual resources of their trainee group. There was no leader. They operated as equals in a trusting environment.
- They broke into sub-teams into smaller groups of roughly six to examine various aspects of the problem.
- They found an array of causal factors rather than any single problem driver.
- They gave considerable thought to what they had learned and classed it as one of the best learning experiences of their lives.
- A camaraderie grew out of the experience. They had bonded as a group and asked to be allowed to take on other complex troubleshooting projects.
- The trainees briefed their problem solving approach to me, the in-house computer experts, representatives from the national computer firm, and other computer organizations.

Summary

By constantly interweaving learning and reflection, Action Learning increases discernment and brings deeper understanding among the participants. People go beyond their pre-programmed assumptions and mental models.

These increased abilities do not just affect the Action Learning group. Participants carry these new abilities to other parts of the organization and begin to influence the thinking and thinking abilities of many others. The quality of thinking, problem solving and decision-making rises throughout the organization, at many levels and in many diverse situations. The result is cultural change.

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