

Challenge Quest, LLC



Indicators of Learning

Greg Robinson and Mark Rose



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“What is important is to keep learning, to enjoy challenge, and to tolerate ambiguity. In the end there are no certain answers.”

Martina Horner, *President of Radcliffe College*

Healthy teams continue to grow, mature and change over time. To us, the word *learning* captures this process. Although we could substitute the word change for learning, we like learning for a couple of reasons.

First, learning says that this activity is purposeful and intentional. We all change over time, but we do not all pay attention to how we change or what changes are occurring. Learning, on the other hand, speaks to a process that a person participates in for a reason and is seeking some result. Likewise, teams that continue to grow in their effectiveness will purposefully continue to learn from and with all team members. In line with the first reason, learning results in individuals and teams making meaning of their experiences. Not only is learning an intentional activity but, when mastered, allows teams and individuals within those teams to repeat their success when needed. Many teams have success, but not many teams know why they were successful, or are able to replicate the success in different settings.

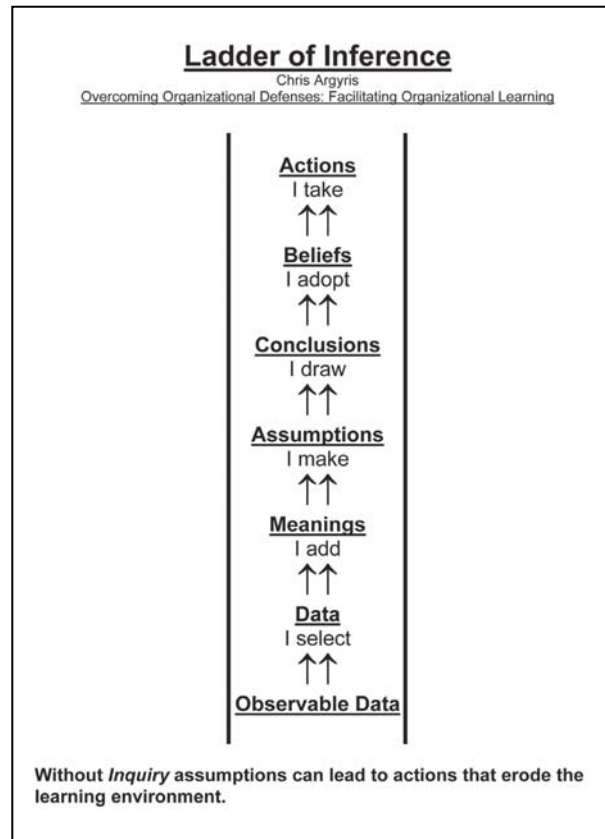
A facilitator knows teams are learning when . . .

1. There is an increased *awareness of assumptions* and mental models.
2. There is an increase in individuals and the group’s ability to *manage differences*.
3. There is an *expanded perspective*.

Awareness of Assumptions

When we begin to think about the desired outcomes of change, the focus is generally on some behavior or action. Generally, when people pursue change, they want to do something different in the end. We agree that real change will affect

the way we act, work and interact with others. In other words, our behavior will change. However, when change agents try to alter behavior first and exclusively, the sustainability of that change is limited. The reason is that behind our behavior is a logic that guides and generates our actions. Unless we can change our inner logic, our outward changes will be limited and short-lived.



A model that has proved very helpful to us in understanding this concept is Chris Argyris’ Ladder of Inference. In this model, we begin by recognizing that all around us every day is a plethora of **data**. While a facilitator works with groups, there is an enormous number of things a facilitator could pay attention to, i.e., people talking, shifting in their chairs, their body language, the hum of the air conditioning, the lights, noise from outside the room. Since we cannot focus on everything at once, we **select** certain things to pay attention to. Once we have selected something to focus our attention on, we quickly begin to give **meaning** to those

things. The meaning we give is based on our experience, culture and training. With some meaning attached, we begin to make **assumptions** about the things we are focusing on. Again, our mental models about who we are and how the world works are automatically engaged. We may or may not be aware of the assumptions we are making. Yet the assumptions we make lead us to draw certain **conclusions** about the thing or person we are focusing on. This leads us to form certain **beliefs**, which generate our **actions** or **behavior**. All of this happens in a split second, yet the logic behind the behavior will continue to create the same kinds of behavior over time.

Here is an example. If we are working with a group and see someone leaning back in his chair with his arms folded, this posture can mean a couple of things. It could indicate someone who is skeptical and withdrawn from the group process. Or it could also indicate someone who is very comfortable and attentive. Based on our experience with this person or other people in groups who lean back and fold their arms, we will formulate some assumptions about this person. Depending on the assumptions that we form and the conclusions we draw, we will either treat this person as a skeptic to win over or an engaged participant who wants to learn something. What the Ladder of Inference allows us to do is to be fully aware of how we are choosing to see the person, that we are making those choices, whether we realize it or not.

The point of this discussion is that if we want to facilitate sustainable change or learning with a group or an individual, we need to help him or her surface his or her assumptions. If a person can become aware of his or her assumptions and challenge them, he or she will behave differently because it makes sense to act differently. Not only that, but since people tend to see those things that confirm what they already believe and dismiss those things that contradict what they believe, if we can help a person change his or her assumptions, he or she will change what they see and pay attention to in his or her environment. As facilitators, we will know that a group or individual is learning in a way that will lead

to long-term effectiveness if they are becoming aware of their assumptions and in turn adopting more accurate assumptions.

As a sidebar, our assumptions are automated, taken-for-granted ways of understanding ourselves and our world. Consequently, they are not always accessible to us directly. What we think or say we believe is not always consistent with what we really believe. What we really believe comes from our assumptions. So, to become aware of our assumptions, we need some pathways that will bring our assumptions into our consciousness. We suggest at least two that we have at our constant disposal. The first is our actions, and the second is our emotions.

This first pathway seems the most obvious. What we do can be witnessed by others, and the consequences of our actions and decisions are usually observable. Consequently, by reflecting on our experiences and asking questions that seek to understand the 'why behind the what' of our actions, we are able to uncover the assumptions driving the actions. This explains the emphasis on reflection in some of the most innovative organizational and human learning writing of the last two decades.¹

What may not be as obvious is the usefulness of our emotions as a pathway to understand our thinking. The relationship between emotions and thinking has been around for years.² Many of us have been taught not to trust emotion. It is irrational and uncontrollable. But no matter how irrational an emotion may be, it will always tell you what you believe to be true in that moment.

Actions and emotions provide the reflective facilitator the pathways to understand the assumptions or inner logic of individuals and groups. By asking questions such as, 'What does this action get for the performer of the action?' or 'Of all the possible emotional responses why does this response come now?,' the underlying logic can be surfaced.

Managing Differences

We often ask the question in seminars that we teach 'why people form teams?'. Most often, the response is because a group of people can be smarter and more effective than individuals. Yet teams most often never really maximize the perceived benefits that led them to be formed in the first place. Why? "Often when we listen to

others we may discover that we are *listening from disturbance*; in other words, we are listening from an emotional memory rather than from the present moment.”³ Much of the lack of collective intelligence and collaboration is due to residual anxiety from previous personal conflicts. It may be a bad encounter with the person with whom one is trying to work. Or it can be a memory of another leader or team member from a previous team. The end result is that too often teams become dysfunctional because team members are too reactive to one another. Effective team members recognize and resist this temptation to listen from memory.

A second sign that individuals and teams are managing differences well is that the amount of tension and reactivity (automatic responses) diminishes and is replaced with purposeful listening and dialogue. When teams are practicing good Collective Learning, differences, rather than polarizing the team, are seen as opportunities to consider different perspectives. Consequently, the quality of decisions increases because the team is taking advantage of its collective intelligence.

In addition to diminished reactivity, learning teams are more aware of the choices they make. Rather than blame each other, circumstances, the facilitator or their leader for failure, learning teams seek to understand how each member contributed to ineffective action so that they can do better in the future.

Broadening Perspective

A third way to assess a team’s learning status is how well team members let the

perceptions of others broaden the team members’ perspective. All of us, no matter how old we are, how intelligent we are or how educated we are, can see only a limited amount of the world around us. That is the limitation of being human. However, if a person considers the perspectives of those around the individual and does not get lost in defending or debating those perspectives, then that person can expand his or her understanding of himself or herself and the world. Learning teams do not waste their energy debating who has the right perceptions of an event. Rather, they take each person’s perceptions as valuable and allow the different perspectives to provide a more complete picture of how things are. In this way, the breadth of experience on the team makes the team exponentially smarter.

Conclusion

Learning is the key to sustainable teams. Yet it is important to realize that learning goes beyond just assimilating new information or data. The learning necessary of new generation teams requires a deeper learning. This type of learning requires an ever-growing awareness of one’s assumptions as well as the shared assumptions of the team. In addition, individuals and teams must become more intentional, especially when it comes to differences. The differences among the team members are the team’s greatest potential strength and the source of its greatest struggles. When teams become aware of their assumptions and focus on being less reactive to ideas and practices that are different from what they are used to, teams will develop the ability to learn collectively, which will result in broader, more accurate perspectives of the world and work they must engage.

Excerpt from:

Robinson, G., & Rose, M. (2007). *Teams for a New Generation: A Facilitator’s Field Guide*. Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse.

For more information about ways to improve how teams learn, go to www.AuthorHouse.com/Bookstore and find Greg and Mark’s book *Teams for a New Generation: A Facilitator’s Field Guide*.

References

1. See, for example, P. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990); C. Argyris, *Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1990); J. Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991); D. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
2. See, for example, F. Pearls, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1969); D. Bohm, *On Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1996); M. Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, Inc, 1978); C. Argyris, *Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1990).
3. W. N. Isaacs, *Taking Flight: Dialogue, Collective Thinking and Organizational Learning*. *Organizational Dynamics*, (Vol. 22, 24-40, 1993, p. 98).

About the Authors

Greg Robinson is currently President of Challenge Quest, LLC in Pryor, Oklahoma. Previous to coming to Challenge Quest, Greg spent 5 years with Williams in Tulsa, Oklahoma as a Managing Organization Development Consultant.

Greg has a Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior and Leadership from The Union Institute and University in Cincinnati, Ohio. He also has a M.S. in Counseling from John Brown University.

Greg's professional career has concentrated in the areas of team development, leadership development, facilitation and consulting with organizational change efforts. His first book was *Teams for a New Generation: An Introduction to Collective Learning*. This book is a "how to" to develop the four distinct abilities needed to build the infrastructure for teams to learn collectively.

Greg currently resides with his wife Jeannie, his daughter Keely and son Kobe in Pryor, Oklahoma.

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Mark Rose is the Business Development Leader for Challenge Quest, LLC. His main focus is equipping teams with skills and tools to become more effective. He received his Master's of Human Relations degree from The University of Oklahoma.

Mark is a national ASTD member and 2004 VP of Programming for the Central Oklahoma ASTD Chapter. He has worked as co-facilitator in a series of training videos, *Trainer Games in Action: Volume One and Two* which show how trainers can use activities to help the retention of information for their learners. Both videos received ASTD's Central Oklahoma Chapter Award of Excellence.

Mark is a certified challenge course instructor who has worked in the experiential learning field with clients in non-profit companies, government agencies and corporations. He is a skilled facilitator, and excels in his ability to enable clients to relate challenge course behaviors to actual work and home behaviors.

He completed his Certificate of Achievement from the University of Oklahoma's Training and Development Certificate Program and currently teaches in the program. He enjoys golfing and spending time outdoors with his wife and two daughters.

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