

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 434

CE 081 858

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TITLE Layers of Learning: Promoting Performance Improvement and Action Learning in Higher Education. Innovative Session 5. [AHRD Conference, 2001].

PUB DATE 2001-00-00

NOTE 10p.; In: Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) Conference Proceedings (Tulsa, Oklahoma, February 28-March 4, 2001). Volumes 1 and 2; see CE 081 829.

PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Administrative Organization; Adult Learning; Case Studies; Change Agents; *Change Strategies; Classroom Environment; Competence; Delivery Systems; *Educational Change; Educational Needs; Educational Objectives; *Experiential Learning; Higher Education; Human Resources; Instructional Development; Labor Force Development; Learning Processes; Learning Theories; Literature Reviews; Organizational Change; Organizational Development; Outcomes of Education; *Performance Factors; Program Development; Systems Approach; Theory Practice Relationship; *Universities

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ABSTRACT

This document presents a case study for an innovative session exploring the nature of learning and the relationship between action learning within academic programs in adult education/human resource development (HRD) and the higher education institutions that house them. The first two sections discuss the dilemmas confronting higher education and challenges for effecting change in higher education. The next section details how James Madison University (JMU) attempted to meet these challenges by reconceptualizing its academic services and student services as integrated, collaborative, and seamless by creating its Student Success Initiative. Presented next are 10 ingredients that were identified as essential to achieving integration of academic and action learning within the university. The following are among the ingredients listed: (1) a strong, open leader within university administration who is willing to take risks and champion the effort; (2) an open, flexible academic program leader willing to explore new ways of teaching and learning; (3) students grounded in performance improvement and instructional systems design approaches; (4) a real need to which practices can effectively be applied; and (5) creative ways to recognize and value student commitment and learning. Concluding the document are a brief conclusion and the agenda of the innovative session. (Contains 32 references.) (MN)

Layers of Learning:
Promoting Performance Improvement
and Action Learning in Higher Education.
Innovative Session 5

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Layers of Learning: Promoting Performance Improvement and Action Learning in Higher Education

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This paper provides a case study for an innovative session exploring the relationship between academic programs in Adult Education /Human Resource Development and the higher education institutions that house them. The dilemmas of higher education today, the difficulties inherent for organizational change within this entrenched institution and the possibilities that action learning coupled with performance improvement and competency modeling strategies hold for effecting change will be discussed. The session will be highly participative.

Keywords: Action Learning, Performance Improvement, Higher Education

This paper provides an introduction to an innovative session designed to advance creative thinking about the nature of learning within the university and to explore possibilities about action learning within academic programs and the universities that house them. As this project continues to evolve, the learning has extended beyond the boundaries of this original paper. Therefore, ideas will be presented during the session that were not included in the paper. To stimulate discussion around both the positive and negative implications of the ideas originally proposed, the presenters will give a brief background description of the James Madison University (JMU) performance improvement project and their roles as administrators, faculty and students. Dramatic soliloquies will give voice to various competencies necessary to catalyze a relationship between academic programs and higher education institutions. Participants will work in small groups to identify personal and institutional competencies and then sort the competencies using a Q-sort technique, which is a highly participative validation method used by the JMU project team. As groups report back, the presenters will facilitate discussion of the ideas generated by the results. A connection between the processes used in the case study and the Probability of the Adoption of Change (PAC) model for higher education (Creamer, D.G. and Creamer, E.G., 1990) and characteristics of creative persons (Davis, 1986) will be introduced. Finally, the participants will be asked to reach a conclusion about the applicability of the concept of action learning as described by this case study. The session agenda follows the conclusion of the paper.

Dilemma's Confronting Higher Education

The health of American universities has been called into question over the past decade (Beede, M. and Burnett, D., 1999; Beede, M., 1999; Montano, C.B. and Utter, G.H., 1999; Wallace, J.B., 1999; Karapetrovic, S. Rajamani, D. and Willborn, W. W., 1999). Stagnant enrollment, poor retention rates, reduction in state funding, rising tuition costs, unsatisfactory services, and questionable educational results are among the symptoms of ailing higher education institutions. As in industry, globalization and technology have presented colleges and universities with fierce competition for declining numbers of "traditional" students. Employers expect graduates to be more knowledgeable and confident than ever before, equipped with skills to tackle the challenges of emerging innovations and markets (Bailey, D. and Bennett, J.V., 1996).

Ikujiro Nonaka, professor of management at the Institute for Business Research of Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo, Japan states: "In an economy where the only certainty is uncertainty, the one sure source of lasting competitive advantage is knowledge" (1991, p. 41). Innovative and successful Japanese companies approach knowledge creation within the organization as central to human resources strategy. The "spiral of knowledge" moving from tacit to explicit knowledge, to standardized knowledge and finally to knowledge internalized by others as tacit understanding represents the continual process of new knowledge creation. Beginning with the individual,

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“personal knowledge is transformed into organizational knowledge valuable to the company as a whole. Making personal knowledge available to others is the central activity of the knowledge-creating company” (p. 43).

Intentionality is explicit in Nanaka’s description of the spiral of knowledge. The same is true in the *Student Learning Imperative*, a driving force behind uniting student affairs and academics as partners in the education of the whole student (Bloland, P.A., 1996). The key question posed by the *Student Learning Imperative* is “how student affairs professionals can intentionally create the conditions that enhance student learning and personal development” (ACPA, 1994). It assumes that “‘learning’, ‘personal development’, and ‘student development’ are inextricably intertwined and inseparable”; both in-class and out-of-class experiences contribute to personal development; learning occurs within a context through interactions with the environment; understanding and knowledge are critical for institutional performance; and responsibility must be shared between all employed members of the university community and students “for creating the conditions under which students are likely to expend time and energy in educationally-purposeful activities” (p. 118-119).

Further evidence of the importance of intentionality can be found in Purkey’s (1992) invitational theory of education. Based upon perceptual tradition and self-concept theory, invitational theory combines peoples’ perceptions of the events in their lives and their own beliefs about who they are and their place within the greater scheme of the world. It assumes the interdependence of people and the inherent need for trust and respect. It assumes optimism in the human potential, which “can best be realized by places, policies, processes, and programs specifically designed to invite development and by people who are personally and professionally inviting with themselves and others” (p. 3). Conditions created by organizations and individuals will be perceived as either inviting or uninviting.

Nanaka’s spiral of knowledge, the *Student Learning Imperative*, and invitational theory, present several challenges to the university. How will the university remain competitive in changing and emerging market conditions; meet the challenge of intentionally creating an organizational climate that values and encourages individual knowledge creation and sharing; place student learning and development both in and out of class as its highest priority; and create an inviting environment for students, parents, faculty and staff to live and work?

Challenges for Effecting Change in Higher Education

The difficulty in creating strategies for change in higher education can be linked to confusion around the definition of the customer. Some analysts conclude that students have different roles in higher education. They are the product-in-process, i.e., the raw material when admitted and the finished product upon graduation (Sirvanci, M. 1996; Bailey, D. & Bennett, J.V. 1996). They are internal customers for nonacademic campus facilities, such as food service and dormitories (Sirvanci, 1996). They are the laborers for the learning process, who are actively involved in their education and the learning process and the internal customers for course delivery (Sirvanci, M. 1996; Bailey, D. & Bennett, J.V. 1996). Sirvanci contends that students lack the attributes often assigned to the customer: freedom to choose the product (students are required to meet entrance requirements), requirement to pay in full for the service (costs are shared by the state, parents, college) and the freedom for continued use of the product (students must continually prove worthiness to buy education through ongoing testing). Groccia (1997) identifies the student as both a customer and a learner. “They are customers because they have engaged in an economic agreement, a contract for goods and services and an opportunity to learn in an organization that is in the business of selling opportunities to learn.” However, “A real learner is a producer, not a consumer, of the knowledge he or she gains...learning is a direct result of the student’s efforts rather than a service that the student purchases.” Wallace (1992) weighs in contending that the student is the primary customer of the University, arguing that consumers have responsibilities too. The customer, service or product provider relationship is neither passive nor one way. Thus, the University has a number of customers, not least of which is the student (Wallace, 1999, Sirvanci, M. 1996; Bailey, D. & Bennett, J.V. 1996). While employers will pay handsomely for students graduating from Harvard, and much less for the community college graduate (Bailey, D. and Bennett, J.V., 1996), without student satisfaction and accomplishment at either institution, there will be no “product”.

Another challenge to change in Higher Education is the role of the faculty and the classroom to the larger institution, particularly student affairs. From its inception, Higher Education has been driven by the notion of knowledge for its own sake in the most academic of senses. As our world becomes smaller, more technological and work requires a more educated populace, the relationship of the classroom to the institution and to the larger society is changed. The classroom is no longer an isolated domain for the pursuit of knowledge lead exclusively and at the command of the faculty member. Technology diffuses access to information, when access occurs and what is done with the information. The classroom can provide the opportunity for transforming information into knowledge (Davis and Botkin, 1995). The University presents the environment to test and assess the value of new knowledge

gained through integration of the academic with the environment. This is a changed stance, requiring new views about the role of student, faculty, administration and staff.

All types of institutions are shaped by external challenges and higher education is no exception. Among the challenges facing colleges and universities are new demographic mixes of students and staff; changing labor markets requiring new sets of skills and competencies; global competition through the internet and other information technologies; training and postsecondary education provided outside of the traditional higher education institutions; higher expectations for service from "customers"; and accountability and productivity demands from the public. (Mingle, 1998; Fenske, Rund & Contento, 2000; Jackson, 2000).

These challenges require student services personnel to continually learn new skills, acquire new knowledge, and become competent in providing service in a changing environment. The changing demographic mix requires greater attention to meeting the needs of diverse students and staff. The changing labor markets on and off the campus require that staff acquire new skills, particularly in information technology, and become more familiar with the skills students will need. Alternative forms of training and education require that institutions reexamine whether credentials are more important than competency. To meet higher expectations for service from its many "customers" higher education institutions will need to raise the bar on service performance and evaluation. Finally, accountability and productivity must become priorities for staff through best practices, benchmarking, process improvement, and performance improvement.

Change Strategies at JMU

In 1993 publication, *An American Imperative: High Expectations for Higher Education*, a study by government, business, and educational leaders re-examined what society expects from higher education. The report recommended that higher education take values seriously, put learning first and create a nation of learners. In response to this report and the *Student Learning Imperative* (1993) James Madison University reconceptualized its academic services and student services as integrated, collaborative, and seamless by creating the Student Success Initiative with the following mission:

"to design, implement, coordinate and assess learning opportunities (programs and services) that help students complete seamless transitions into, through, and out of the institution; that develop the student's motivation to learn, engage in educationally purposeful activities, and assume self-responsibility; that are cohesive, supportive, and organized around common educational goals."

This process of change is supported and accomplished through the collaborative efforts of administration, faculty and staff across university functions. With the completion of the physical relocation of services in 1998, aligning all functions with the mission of Student Success is a high priority. As an example, departments such as Registration Services and Financial Aid that previously operated as functional silos are now charged with integrating their services. This integration represents a significant culture change within the departments, reorganization of job responsibilities and tasks, and potential systemic changes regarding areas of supervision.

In 1998, during this ongoing change process, the Student Success Curriculum Development Committee (SSCDC) was formed and charged with assisting staff in understanding their new role in the Student Success Program. After a year of team-building exercises, some committee members recognized that a more comprehensive development approach was needed. An administrator who was also a student in the HRD program made the Associate Vice President (AVP) for Student Success aware of his learning about performance improvement and instructional design. With employee development part of the AVP's work plan, he welcomed the suggestion that Student Success approach the Adult Education/Human Resource Development program. The Coordinator of the AHRD program had recently approached her Dean and the Director of Human Resources about forming collaborations where students could learn in a more active and authentic way, working as HRD consultants within the University. The time and circumstances were right for this partnership, a partnership that would create much more than a training program.

This collaboration introduced the concept of action learning, integrated student learning, performance improvement strategies, instructional systems design and continuous learning from an HRD perspective into the business of organizational change at JMU. It changed the way administrators and staff view the needs assessment process and produced comprehensive research-based recommendations and results. It provided students with an opportunity to work as "consultants" and implement the strategies learned in the classroom. These intentional efforts have created a spiral of knowledge for all involved including undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, administrators and student success employees. On every level participants experience moving from tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge and transforming personal knowledge into organizational knowledge valuable to

the university as a whole (Nonaka, 1991). The process for achieving these results can be described as experiential action learning (Yorks, L., Marsick, V.J. and O'Neil, J. 1999).

This project has become a research based action-learning imperative seeking to articulate boundary spanning employee competencies within the Student Service Center. The competency model and the participatory process of developing the model are the foundation for an ongoing system of development opportunities to equip employees to work successfully within Student Success.

Introducing Action Learning

In 1999, the Student Success Curriculum Development Committee (SSCDC) which originally include administrators, the Director of Human Resources and staff members directly related to the services provided, expanded to include a consultant team comprised of an Adult Education/Human Resource Development professor, three undergraduate students, one graduate student in the AHRD program, and a graduate assistant from the Student Success office. The committee members were asked to read several articles on informal learning (Marsick, V.J. and Volpe, M., 1999; Marsick, V.J., Volpe, M., Watkins, K.E., 1999), action learning (Yorks, L., Marsick, V.J. and O'Neil, J. 1999; O'Neil, J. and Dilworth, R.L., 1999; Nilson, G.E., 1999; and Yorks, L., O'Neil, J. and Marsick, V.J. 1999) performance improvement (Torraco, R. J., 1999a) and integrating learning with work (Torraco, R.J., 1999b) prior to the first meeting in January 2000. These articles provided a basis for discussing the multiple approaches available for learning and development, not only for the target employees, but also for the committee. Emphasis on learning and critical thinking through the ensuing months was blended with the ongoing tasks of performing the research. The core research team, which met weekly, but communicated daily, included the consultants, one administrator and one staff member.

A critical concern for the team was the breadth and depth of the project and the limited human and financial resources available for completing the numerous tasks. It was decided that in order to make the process manageable, the performance analysis and needs assessment would focus only on a few of the departments located in the Warren Student Services Center and the following year, extend the process to the Wilson Academic Center and eventually the Sonner Welcome Center.

After negotiating the scope of the assessment, the SSCDC decided to concentrate its efforts on seven functional areas with the assumption that most of the results would generalize to the remaining functional areas within Warren. Furthermore, the process for assessing the needs and developing the performance improvement proposal would be established and applicable to the Wilson Academic Center and other areas of the University. Through these activities, SSCDC provides the potential impetus for expanding the university from an organization for learning to a learning organization.

Integration of the intentions of Student Success with the learning objectives of the AHRD program proved nearly seamless because of a shared vision and trust established among the partners. The initial meeting of the SSCDC with the student consultants, framed by articles expanding assumptions about options for employee development, opened the door to a more comprehensive approach. Negotiation of roles and managing the focus on learning while accomplishing the defined task for Student Success proved challenging and continues to be negotiated, largely by the professor serving as the learning coach. (Yorks, L., Dilworth, R.L., Marquardt, M.J., Marsick, V., 2000). The University is a highly conducive environment for pursuing action learning because learning, in theory, is the business of the institution and HRD educators are housed there. The opportunity for authentic, dynamic learning abounds. However, the use of time, the role of the faculty member, and the relationship of the learning to the classroom, to other faculty members, to administrators, to students and to the University change dramatically.

Conducting Performance Analysis and Needs Assessment

Using Swanson's Performance Improvement Strategy (1994), a needs assessment of the Student Service Center was conducted in Spring 2000, which included the following departments located on the third and fifth floors of Warren Hall: Student Financial Services, Financial Aid, Card Services, Box Office, University Information, and Registration Services. The SSCDC entered the performance analysis and needs assessment assuming that staff would have difficulty describing Student Success relative to their job performance and requirements; customer service would be the major competency discovered; resistance would be high among staff for fear of further change or personal repercussions; and communication throughout the process would be critical. Since little change had resulted from the surveys taken by staff over the past year, the committee believed employees might feel the assessment was an exercise in futility.

Efforts to Overcome Fears. Beginning during the physical relocation of offices in 1997, the *Warren Neighborhood (Neighborhood)*, a group of supervisor level staff from the various departments in Warren, met monthly to discuss the continuing changes and offer input to the process. After the physical construction was completed, the *Neighborhood* has focused its efforts toward welcoming the students to the “new” center and measuring the performance of front line staff through a newly developed *Success Shopper* program. In Spring 2000, upon learning of the existence of the *Neighborhood* and its activities, the consultants suggested it be brought into the performance improvement process. A representative from the *Neighborhood* was asked to serve on the SSCDC. The AVP of Student Success gave a presentation to introduce the student consultant team and the forthcoming performance analysis and needs assessment to the to the *Neighborhood*. The group was asked to choose a contact person within each individual department to act as a liaison with the consultant team and a vehicle for dissemination of information.

Data Collection. Data collection conducted over several months from January- April 2000, included observations, document analysis, Success Shopper surveys, exemplary employee surveys, supervisor interviews, employee and student focus groups, and personal experience as students, faculty, and staff of the JMU community. Data was analyzed and organized according to Swanson’s suggested performance variables: Mission/Goal; Systems Design; Capacity; Motivation; and Expertise (1996). The performance variables that are least affected by training often find their roots in the processes that define the mission or goal of the organization, the design of the operating and/or physical system, the capacity of human resources available and the factors that affect employee motivation. The SSCDC wanted to isolate the performance variables attributed to expertise or skill prior to further training development.

Over the course of several weeks, the core research team worked in pairs to analyze the data. When complete, the team met to consolidate the findings. Several revelations occurred. The data indicated that staff identity is connected to the workgroup and the role of student services staff as educator was negligible. Furthermore, while students readily provided concrete examples of good customer service and teamwork, the staff was less able to define the concepts in behavioral terms.

Results. Based upon the results of the performance analysis and needs assessment, four management interventions were suggested: 1) develop information and communication strategies, 2) eliminate physical barriers to success, 3) align jobs and position descriptions with the Student Success Mission, and 4) develop a reward and recognition program. The following essential knowledge/skills are indicated for employees in the Service Center: Interpersonal skills, Customer Service, Teamwork, Technical Expertise, General JMU Campus Knowledge, Core Knowledge of Other Student Success Departments, Lifelong Learning, and Instructional Skills. In order to develop the above competencies, recommended development interventions include: 1) design a Diamond Performance competency model articulating elements of Service, Specific Knowledge, Support Knowledge, and Student Learning, 2) design learning options, including “help books”, self-assessment tool, computer software training, customer service and empathy training, supervisor “climate setting” skill training, and 3) establish process improvement action learning teams.

In the fall of 2000, the spiral of the learning partnership now extends further. Lead by the student consulting team, the validation of the Diamond Performance competency model is underway using a participatory Q-sort with nearly all of the employees of the Warren Service Center participating. The *Neighborhood* meets regularly and presents an ideal environment for initiating action-learning teams among the Warren Service Center employees. An HRD undergraduate class of 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students will join the effort, serving as instructional designers for a “Day in the Life of A JMU Student” simulation determined by the needs assessment as necessary to enhance employee empathy and understanding of the students. The AHRD graduate course in Instructional Design will also join the consulting group over the next year to create a transition between consulting groups and complete implementation of the Diamond Performance competency model. The same AHRD graduate class, serving now as the core of the “new consulting team”, will also initiate the needs assessment process in the Wilson Learning Center.

The SSCDC is exploring appropriate ways to evaluate the efforts to date and intends to expand the associated evaluation responsibilities beyond the committee. The Results-Based Approach to performance assessment and analysis (Phillips, J.J., 1997) and customer satisfactions surveys, such as SERVQUAL (White, L.S., 1998), offer possibilities for assessing the impact on the University financially and qualitatively. This also presents the very real opportunity for the AHRD 620 Performance Measurement and Evaluation graduate course to learn about and apply their learning about evaluation to a very authentic situation.

Management Response. The four management interventions identified through the Spring 2000 study have been delegated to the directors of the student service offices located in the Warren Services Center. Together with the *Neighborhood*, the directors will begin to address these elements. To develop information and communication

strategies, the management group is exploring coordinated referral resources such as alphabetical quick-referral and frequently-asked-question handbooks for employees; consistent and visible signage and pamphlets of the Student Success mission and services; a web board to facilitate employee discussions; and electronic or printed newsletter of employee information and updates. To eliminate physical barriers to success, the management group is pursuing creation of a lobby management system; establishment of automated incoming phone lines; increased monitor locations and employee counter access to computers; and increased staffing and student assistance during peak periods. To align jobs and position descriptions with the Student Success Mission the management group hopes to work with the institution's Human Resources department to establish three categories of service: *ambassadors* (front-line people with high public contact and visibility), *facilitators* (engaged in gathering and processing information and solving problems), and *counselors* (providing in-depth advising for specific student needs). Finally, the management group will explore development of a reward and recognition program that reinforces the Student Success mission and expectations.

Integrating Academic and Action Learning in the University Setting

Through active outreach by the AHRD academic program and the openness of the university administration, JMU has established an intentional, integrated, experiential action-learning framework that is yielding positive results for all involved. This partnership provides valuable, authentic learning opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate AHRD students in the academic program. Administrators participating in the work report significant learning and application of that learning to other areas of their work.

Evidence is not yet conclusive regarding the impact of changes made through the process on the University. As is often the case with HRD interventions, some years are needed to know the full impact of the efforts (Phillips, J.J., 1997). In the short term, this initiative has enhanced the learning of AHRD students, administrators at JMU are much more aware of the AHRD program, high quality needs assessment and resulting interventions have been conducted at a fraction of the cost of a commensurate effort by external sources, and a process model has been developed and will be implemented in additional areas of the University in the coming year.

In order to achieve integration of academic and action learning within the university we found the following ingredients essential:

- 1) A strong, open leader within University administration willing to take risks and champion the effort,
- 2) An open, flexible academic program leader willing to explore new ways of teaching and learning,
- 3) Students grounded in performance improvement and instructional systems design approaches,
- 4) A real need to which HRD practices can effectively be applied,
- 5) Student learners willing to commit significantly beyond the three credit course,
- 6) Creative ways to recognize and value student commitment and learning,
- 7) Financial commitment from the University to cover costs for the interventions enacted as a result of the work,
- 8) Respect for and by all team members,
- 9) Time enough to meet, reflect, and adjust,
- 10) Celebrations of achievements at intervals consistent with the ebb and flow of the work and the evolving team membership.

Where these criteria are met, the likelihood for effective action-oriented learning is possible. Can these criteria be met? Are they worth the time, effort and adjustment needed by student, faculty, administration and staff? Do they yield a significantly better prepared student? Is the spiral of knowledge from tacit to explicit, from standardized to internalized, from personal to organizational achieved in any more meaningful way through this approach than another? Is what we describe action learning? These are the questions we hope to address during the innovative session this paper supports.

Conclusion

The practices of instructional systems design, performance improvement, action learning and competency modeling hold great promise for effecting real change in higher education. Moreover, Universities, as home to academic programs in human resource development and adult education, present natural opportunities for authentic learning and real change to go hand in hand. At JMU we have introduced a performance analysis and improvement process that can now be implemented in other areas of JMU Student Success over the coming years, thus providing an ongoing consultative relationship between the AHRD program and the University. In addition, the University gains valuable support in its ongoing improvement efforts. The real nature of the work, the convenience of the client

location and the shared learning focus of the program and the institution make this dynamic learning partnership valuable to all involved.

With open communication, a shared valuing of and focus on learning and a real desire to implement change, HRD programs across the country could enter into real partnerships with their institutions to become centers for research and implementation of HRD practices engaging in work to both achieve results and learn from the process. By working together and embracing effectively implemented HRD practices, change in higher education can be achieved in ways consistent with those advocated for in the *Student Learning Imperative* (1993), advancing learning in higher education beyond words to new action-oriented heights of achievement.

Session Agenda – (Diane Foucar-Szocki, Moderator)

Overall Format: Inquiry-oriented participation to include prompting question, data provided through “scenarios” drawn from our case study, participant small group q-sort of factors influencing organizational readiness for action learning, performance improvement strategies and total group discussion of the theoretical frameworks and implications. (Timeframe: 90 minutes)

<i>Introduction/Setting of Purpose</i> “What issues in your organization most impact performance?”	10 Minutes
<i>Client/Stakeholder Scenarios</i> (Soliloquies with brief Q&A)	15 Minutes
<i>Q-sort and discussion</i> (Small group and facilitated large group discussion)	30 Minutes
<i>Theoretical Frameworks for the “Features”</i> (Facilitated large group discussion)	15 Minutes
<i>Action Learning Definition and Discussion</i> (Small group and facilitated large group discussion)	20 Minutes

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