Learn to ask the right questions

John Peters and Peter Smith

The authors

John Peters and **Peter Smith** are directors of XEC Development International Ltd. E-mail: jpeters@cadvision.com and pasmith@tlainc.com

Abstract

Argues that in business, as in medicine, prescription must follow diagnosis if it is to be effective. Reviews the psychological need for certainties in uncertain situations, and the guru industry, based around bestselling books, which suggests generic solutions. Points to action learning as a developmental methodology geared around asking questions, rather than the provision of answers.

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Introduction – diagnosis before prescription

Management education relies, if it is to be effective, on three clear and distinct premisses:
(1) That we know what problem or problems we are trying to address.
(2) That we are able to design some kind of remedy for the problem(s).
(3) That we are able to implement the remedy effectively.

These three are sequential, that is to say, design follows diagnosis, and implementation follows design. If they are not conducted sequentially, they lose their logic and their meaning.

To draw a simplified analogy, a physician diagnoses a patient's illness, then designs a course of treatment, then monitors the effectiveness of the prescribed treatment. Or, a mechanic figures out why the engine will not start, then determines what parts, techniques and tools are appropriate to repair the engine, then fits the parts and applies the techniques appropriately, checking that the engine is working again.

Operational training can be expressed in such simple tripartite terms. A new and more efficient order-processing technique has been formulated; the problem is that our order-processing personnel are unfamiliar with the technique; the solution is to school them in the new technique until they can execute it effectively. We can design that schooling, to be delivered off or on-site; to have support materials on paper or a PC screen, or interactive CD-ROM; to have a self-study or a watch-me-and-copy approach. Results can be monitored and measured. The same would go for learning word-processing software, operating a drilling machine, laying bricks or wiring a circuit board.

In management and leadership development, the process of diagnosis, solution design and solution implementation should be similarly addressed. We will be arguing in this article that it is frequently, and detrimentally, not done in this way; and in particular pointing to the weakness of the solution-driven approach arising from populist management literature. Finally, we will be discussing action learning as a diagnosis-centered approach to training and development. Our premiss is that if you do not learn to ask the right questions, you are not likely to get the right answers.

The need for diagnosis

The triumvirate of diagnosis, design and course of treatment is clear enough for simple medical intervention and simple operational

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training, as discussed above. But it is more difficult to achieve such clarity in addressing the more ambiguous challenges of encouraging managerial and leadership effectiveness.

The problems of managing and leading are rarely simple matters of skill-building or knowledge-inculcation. Rather, managing involves judgement, best guesses and situational responses to interpersonal dynamics. If operational training is a puzzle, to be solved in one of a strictly finite number of ways, managerial effectiveness development is a problem, involving infinite possibilities, no one of which can be judged – even after the event – as optimum. We simply do not and cannot know; yet we have to decide any way.

In wrestling with such uncertainties and ambiguities, it is a basic human need to seek clarity and simplicity. Business educators and theorists have, as humans, sought such clarity. But in so doing they have turned to (often well-intentioned) quackery, just as in former times we turned to (often well-intentioned) quackery for cures for diseases we did not understand. At the risk of labouring the point, the adoption of prescription-without-diagnosis interventions such as centralized planning, de-centralized planning, flat organizations, re-engineering, 14 steps to TQM, seven steps to personal mastery, five steps to organizational learning and so on, is uncomfortably reminiscent of blood-letting to cure mental disorders, or virgin sacrifices to ensure a successful corn harvest.

This is not to say that prescriptive techniques propounded by populist theorists like Senge *et al*. are "wrong", *per se*; but that their application, without understanding the nature of the problem(s) at hand, can give disappointing and even detrimental results.

There are no universal laws in business, nor in any of the social sciences. There is no panacea. Prescription without diagnosis is quackery. Re-engineering, de-centralizing, etc., without a clear understanding of your organization's particular problem is conceptually in there with blood-letting, leeches and virgin sacrifices. Only diagnosis and design will indicate which of the many available treatments might be best used to effect a cure.

The rush for answers

Why do rational people in modern organizations indulge in medieval practises? We would argue that there are two forces at play – a pragmatic human need to avoid existential angst, and the paucity of a coherent body of knowledge in management.

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a psychologist might argue, is the archetypal embodiment of the human condition where decision and action are concerned. Although we never seem to have enough data to act with complete assurance, we still need to act. Hamlet is caught in a web of existential anxiety, unable to act without proof; unable to get proof; unable to rest without acting.

As human beings forced to carry on with our daily lives, none of us wants to be Hamlet. Although we know, if we think about it hard enough, that there is no single right answer to the problem of the right strategy, or the right management style, or the magical success formula, the last thing we want to do is pace around on the metaphorical battlements agonising about whether we should be or not be. We want to, and we need to, get on with our lives.

Unfortunately, in the business world, decisiveness is a virtue praised above practically all others. This leaves us prone to miss out on what Deming calls profound knowledge – an understanding of root causes – and rush for an easy answer. Things not going well? Okay, there is this great book I read which says if we only …

So although we cannot think about it for ever, we have to think about it a bit. What is not going well? What are the symptoms? Who is being affected? Who can help? Why is it happening? When did things change? Put another way, we should not take the medicine until we know what the matter is. Then we can choose the right medicine.

This is straight investigative, scientific, method, of course, hardly new or groundbreaking. Which brings us on to the next difficulty that makes us rush for an answer – any likely-looking answer – to dig us out of a problem. Management has no coherent body of knowledge to show for its many years as a scholarly discipline. There is no abiding bedrock laid down on which future researchers can build. There are – still – no certainties. There are only theories, most of them derived from empirical observation.

Empirically-observed theory building often goes something like this: Here is a good idea I just had. Let me look at some successful firms and see if they do what I suggest. Now let me look at some unsuccessful ones and see if they do not do it. Bingo! Most of the successful ones do, and most of the unsuccessful ones do not. I will not dwell on the ones that do not fit, but being a good scholar, I will present some probability data that shows positive correlations between my idea and success. That will be an appendix in my bestselling book. Now all I need is a snappy title – maybe with a number in it, like "The nine things successful businesses do", and I can take it to the publisher, sit back, light up a cigar and watch the mazooma roll in.

Anyone with any kind of scientific training would be unhappy, to say the least, with this approach. Where are the controlled variables, and the elimination of uncontrolled variables? Where is the bedrock on which this edifice can be constructed? Where is the mathematical proof, the theoretical proof? Where is the structure?

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The answer is, of course, there is not any. There is no proof, no control of variables, no depth to the structure, no mathematics, no laws. There are only observed behaviours that can at best translate into some kind of model, which might work in some circumstances. We can not say with any certainty what kind of circumstances, because we can not isolate and replicate all the variables. We do not know, for example, whether the state of the managing director's marriage or the behaviour of his or her children, or his or her sexual preferences, or propensity to go to the theatre, or hair colour, or star sign, affect an organization's performance positively, negatively or not at all; and if any of these do correlate, how they fit in with the millions of other variables about the managing director, and in what combination with the millions of variables about every staff member, and the millions of variables about the organization – when it was formed, whether it got a lucky break three years ago, etc. We presume, as management theorists, to propose that carrying a certain debt to equity ratio, or having a flat structure, or having five disciplines, seven habits, eight success behaviours, or whatever, carries any more proof than having a red-head as a sales manager or having your financial year end falling within an astrological fire sign?

Medievalism! Given the lack of depth of management theory in finding answers, we might as well just adopt the next fad that comes along.

In view of the temptations on offer, and the weaknesses in the body of knowledge, we would argue very strongly the necessity of remembering to focus on the question, not rushing to the answer.

The truth is out there

Given the lack of a grand unified theory, or anything approaching one, what have we to fall back on save empirical investigation – try it out, keep the good stuff, discard what does not fit. So long as we regard management theories and models as ideas to be tried out and possibly discarded, not as new religions, we would have little argument with that approach.

We would argue very strongly that the uncertainties of management (as opposed to the technicalities of business such as double entry book-keeping or machining a piece of metal) cannot be taught, *per se*. They must be learned. Following that thesis, they cannot be learned in isolation from their context, simply because management is almost entirely contextual. They cannot be learned from a book, or a lecture, or from climbing a tree in the wilds. They can not be learned through simulation. They can not be learned through case analysis of some historical event. All these methods, in their place, may be able to help. But management can only be learned by experience.

Now, you might argue, having an experience and learning from it are two different things, and you would be right. So we would further elaborate by saying that experience can only be reliably learned from if a proper learning design and framework is in place to help people capture the learning from experience.

Those readers from the serious end of the education and development industry will be saying at this point – hold on a minute! What about action learning as an education and development approach, where we accept the existential nature of the world of business variability, political manoeuvre and human interaction, and focus on learning about the question, not the answer?

The truth is indeed out there. Action learning is based on the principle that we need to know not only how we should act, but how we really do act. As a development approach, that means that we need to design learning around real problems – with real risks of failure, in real time, in a real environment (our own), which will allow us the opportunity of investigating how we really act and make decisions.

Because we can at times misinterpret our actions and motivations, and those of others, action learning initiatives are designed around a learning group, together with a process advisor. Their role, as well as taking their own actions and reflecting on them, is to help us as individuals to get near to the truth about what is going on. Reciprocally, we each do the same for each other, helping to see where actions do not match words. A well-designed and managed group will start to examine what motivates the decisions we make and affects our actions.

An action learning developmental initiative presumes little or nothing. Models and theories can be legitimately presented and discussed, but properly, as models and theories, rather than as cure-alls or ritual magic. The focus is on the question, and sometimes on questions about the question. An able adviser, preferably one familiar with *Hamlet*, will guard against over-indulgence about the questioning process, for the outcome of action learning should be – indeed, must be – meaningful action.

The crucial difference between action learning and other types of learning is, reasonably enough, action (see Table I). The model of knowledge acquisition simply says – here is our curriculum which dictates what knowledge is appropriate to acquire, ingest it, and we can test to see if you have retained it. Applied learning says – here is some knowledge, ingest it, now see if you can apply the knowledge to fit a set of real or simulated circumstances; analyse a case study, say, or discuss in your own work context.

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Table I Three approaches to learning

Knowledge acquisition	Applied learning	Action learning
Teacher or institution's syllabus	Teacher or institution's curriculum	Problem Question
Ingestion of knowledge to fit curriculum	Ingestion of knowledge to fit curriculum	Elicitation of knowledge to address the question
Testing of retained knowledge through examination	Testing of knowledge through analysis of real or simulated circumstances	Analysis of problem Action Reflection (and more action) Testing through outcomes (and documentation of process)

The problem with these two types of learning is transfer – the difficulty of true application from a discussion on paper, where circumstances are in the control of the student and teacher, to application in fact, where unforeseen circumstances arise in unforeseen ways.

Action learning, as we have already discussed, starts with a question of what we would like to know, rather than a body of knowledge *per se*, and then draws down or elicits from the body of knowledge what might be seen as useful to bear on the question. The foundation of the question is normally a real problem which really needs to be addressed, rather than a hypothetical one, and normally one which the learner him/herself cares about. That is often because the successful solution of the problem will produce some self-interestedly beneficial result, and/or the non-solution of the problem will produce some self-interestedly negative outcome.

From that point on, action learning asks for analysis of the problem, in the same manner as does applied learning, and then for actual action. It is really at this point, action learners would argue, that real learning begins. Following action comes reflection and further analysis, ideally concurrently with further and continuing action. Formal testing of knowledge acquired is largely unnecessary as it is self-referential; a successful intervention can be seen as a successful intervention in terms of a business outcome, and therefore a conclusion formed that effective learning in some manner has taken place.

In a formal educational setting, such as a university or (increasingly), on a company training and development programme, formal testing can be achieved by asking for documentation of the process of problem, question, elicitation of knowledge (including sources and methodological design used), problem analysis, action taken, reflection on action, reflection on learning, actual outcome.

Learning to ask the right questions

We have argued that in the shifting sands of management theory, there are no absolute answers. Plenty of persuasive arguments, maybe, but no real answers. As human beings, we need to find certainties when faced with uncertainty, just as we mythologised the seasons before we understood them scientifically. As human beings, in the social structures called organizations, we are still seeking certainties, even though there are none, and we still seek a justification to take risky decisions, even when we never can have proof.

As a social structure, organizations are wide open to ideas that purport to give answers. The publishing, education and advice industries which feed from the business world, seek and promote not just specific answers which worked once in one set of circumstances, but generalisable answers, which work in many or all circumstances.

Ever since *In Search of Excellence* propelled Tom Peters and Robert Waterman into the kind of sales (and income) previously reserved for blockbuster novelists like Jackie Collins and Frederick Forsyth, every teacher and consultant dreams now of being a bestselling author. In business, best-seller status and its attendant lifestyle comes only through universal prescription.

We have a need to create gurus, panaceas and certainty, and a need to be them. The connection is a clear and obvious one. What a shame they do not – cannot – work.

We have argued that before taking medicine, it is very sensible indeed to understand what is wrong with you; that the question must come before the answer. Action learning is an educational methodology that encourages questioning insight, especially in groups, to work towards a deeper understanding. Then when action is taken, it is meaningful, based on a principle of understood causes and likely effect, rather than mythology or symbolism.