Triple Value of Action Learning
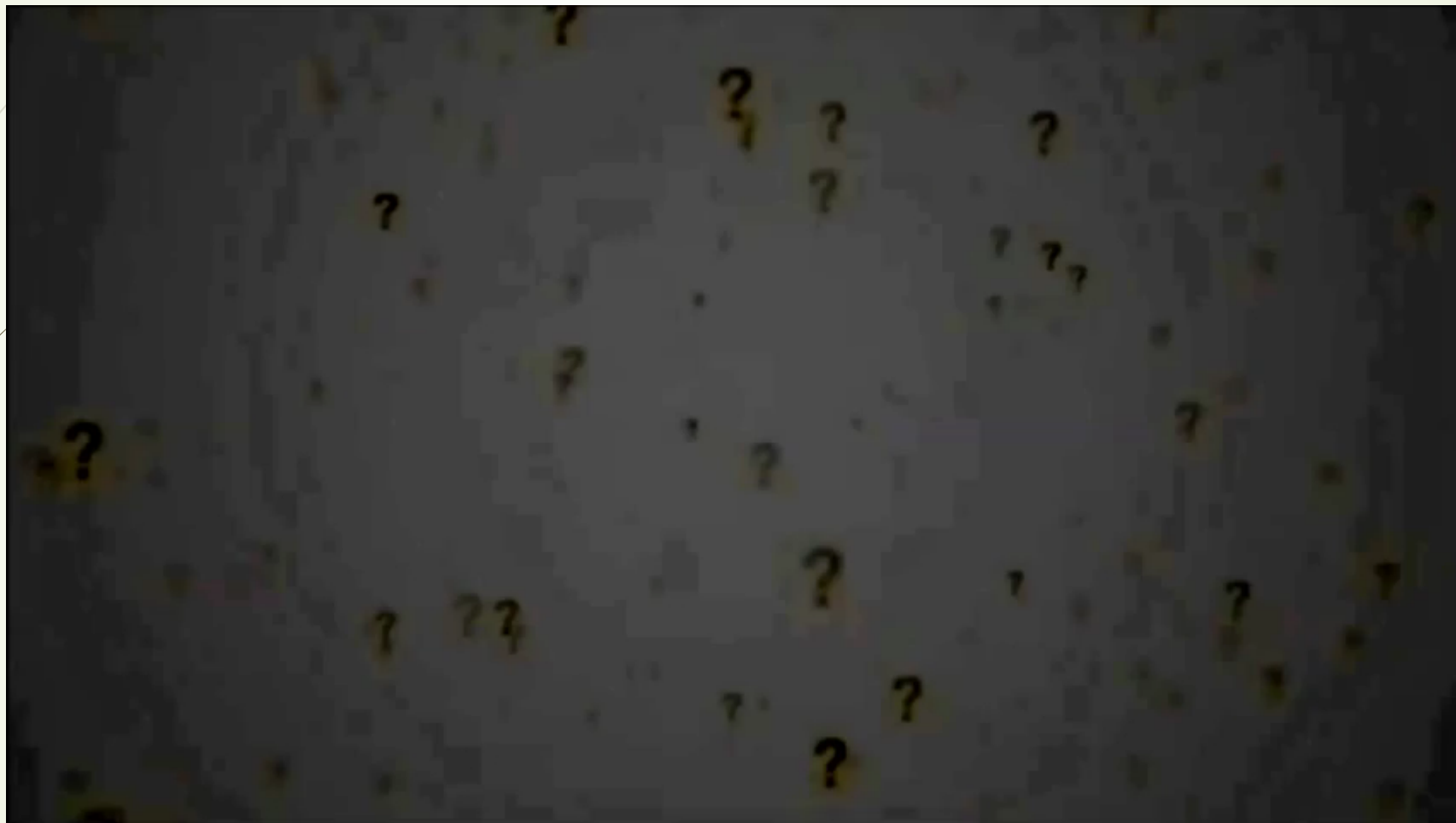
Dr. Bea Carson

President

World Institute for Action Learning

Shift Happens

What is Action Learning?

- A process that involves a small team ("set") working on real problems, taking action, and learning while doing so

- A powerful management tool that creates dynamic opportunities for individuals, teams, leaders and organizations to successfully adapt, learn and innovate

Adapt
Learn
Innovate

Two Ground Rules

➔ 1 Statements only in response to questions;
anyone can ask questions of anyone else

➔ 2 Action Learning team coach has the authority to intervene whenever he/she identifies learning opportunities
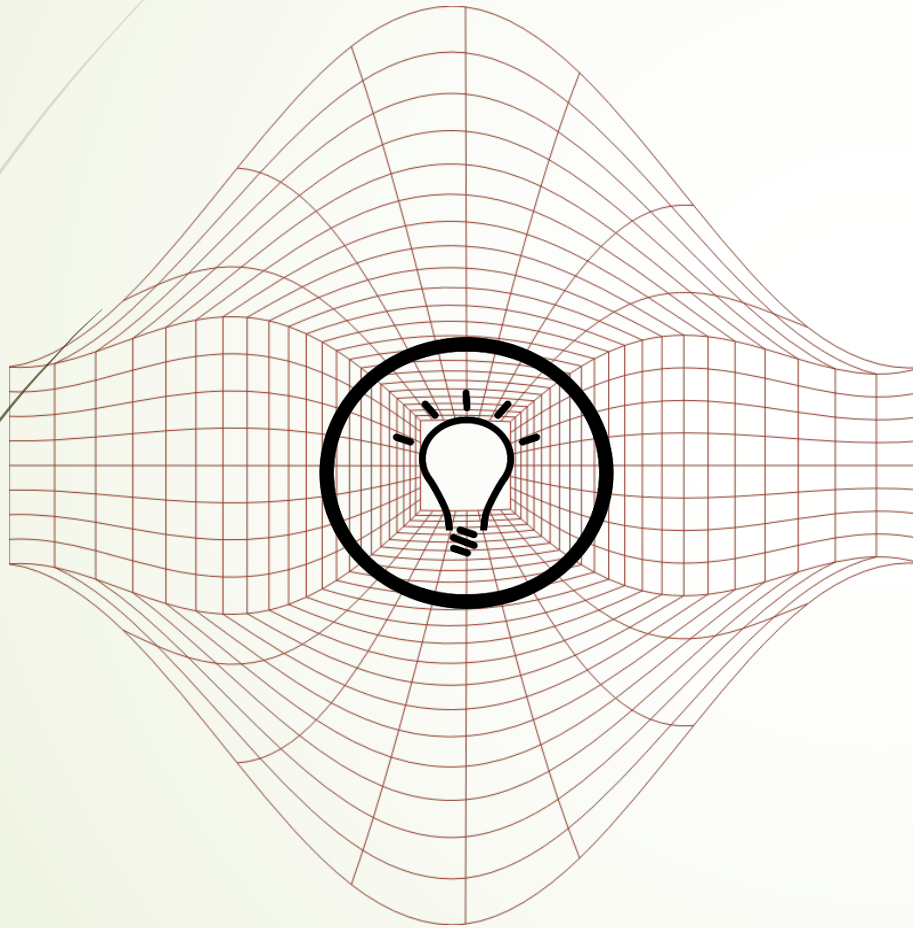
Components
of Action Learning

6 Components

- 1. Problem or Challenge
- 2. Team
- 3. Questioning & Reflective Process
- 4. Strategies & Actions
- 5. Three Levels Learning
- 6. Action Learning Coach

Value Added

During Session
- **Problem Solving**
- **Leadership Development**
- **Team Building**

After
- **Breakthrough Solutions Implemented**

**Ongoing**
- **Organizational Learning**
- **Culture Change**

Problem Solving

- **Seeing issues** differently
- Identifying **root causes** and impacts
- Illuminating **macro and micro perspectives**
- Promoting **systems thinking** and **linking great ideas** and strategies
- Generating "**breakthrough**" **insights, solutions,** and **strategies**

Challenge Types

PROBLEM

OPPORTUNITY

DILEMMA

CIA

Control

Influence

Accept
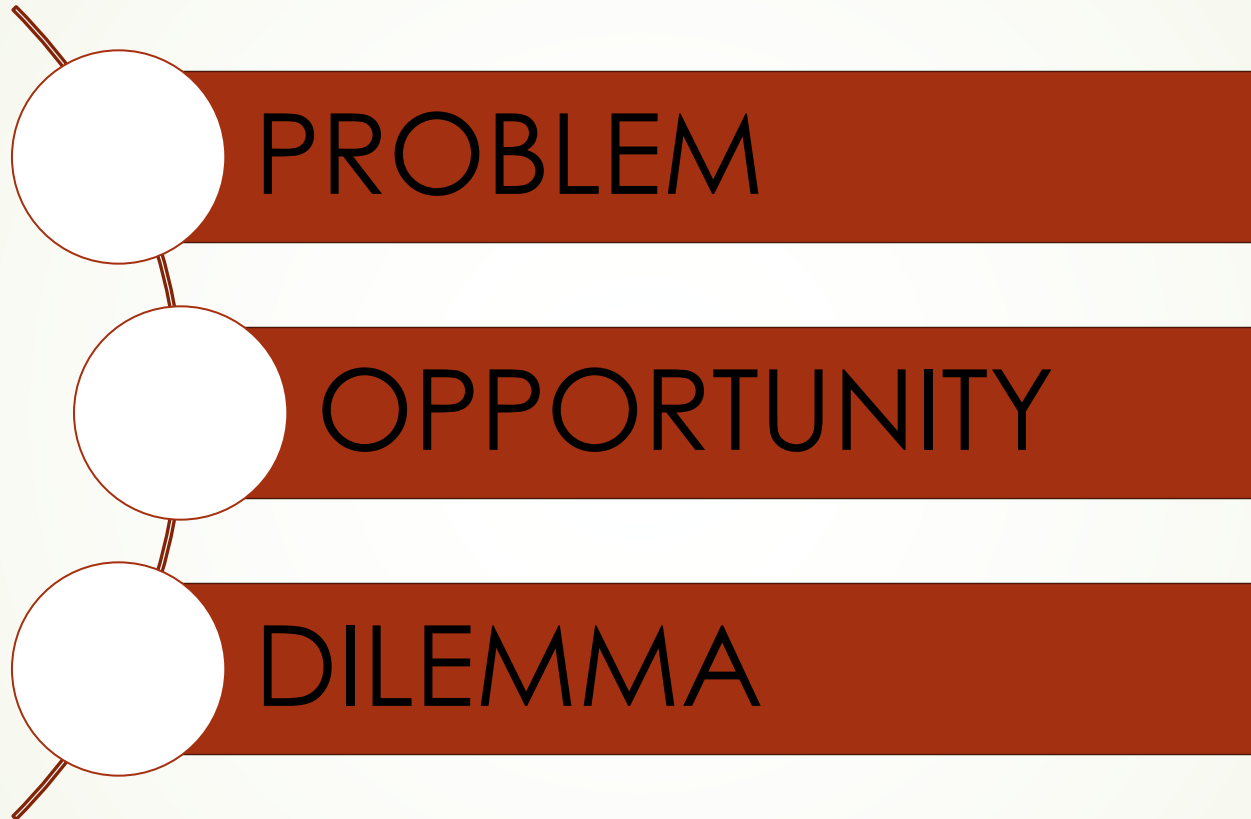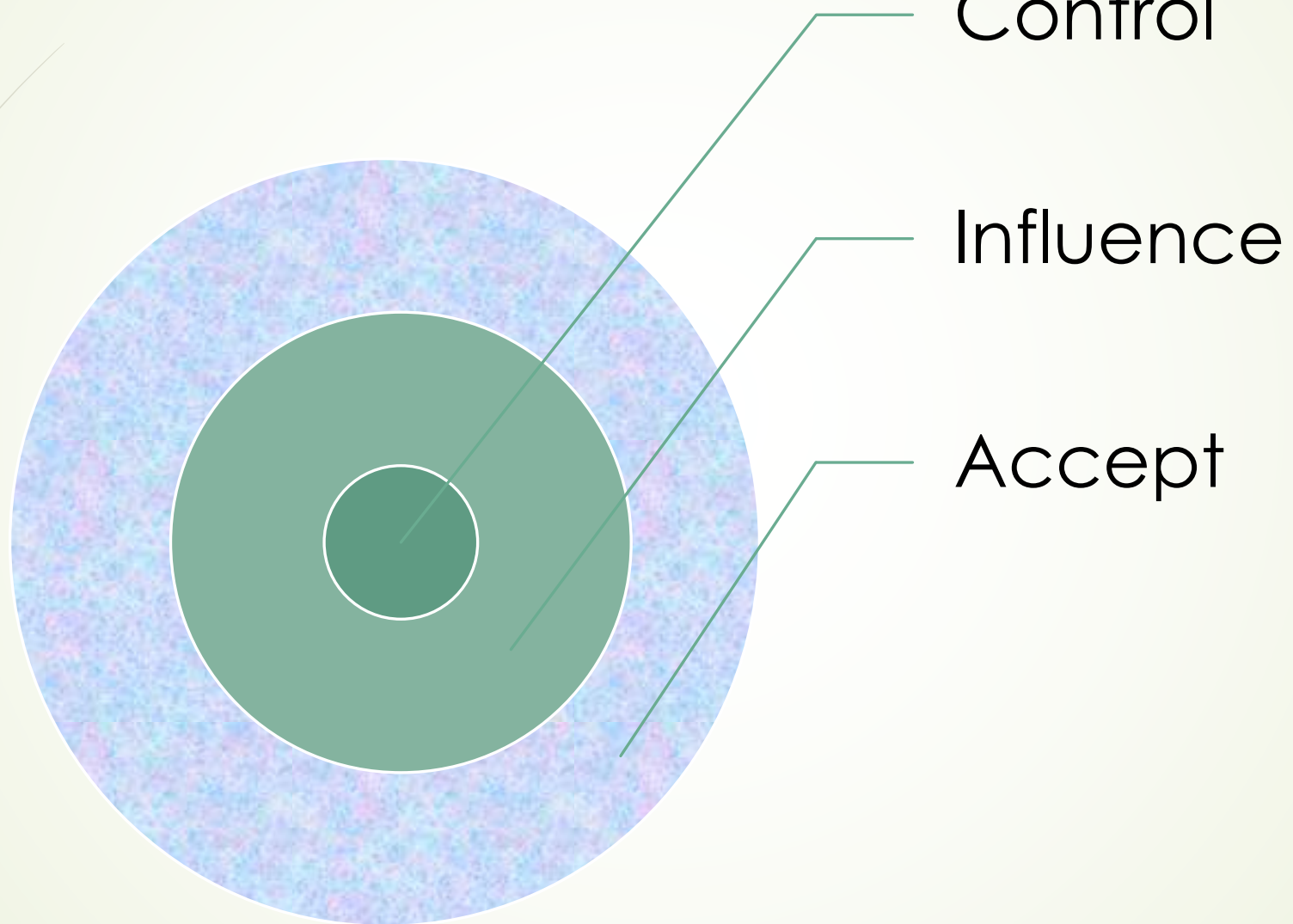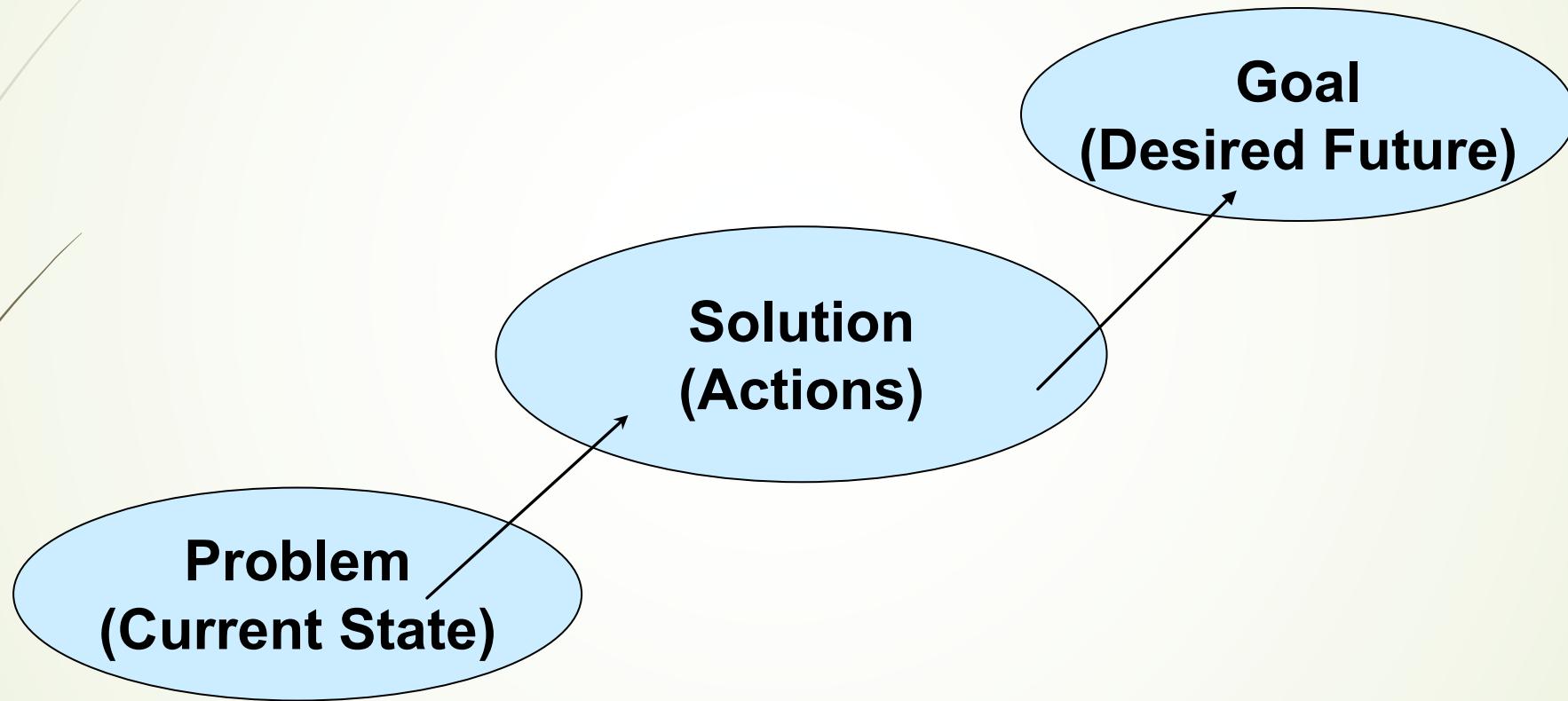
What is a Problem?

- Individually:
  - Write down an organizational problem with which you are concerned
- In teams:
  - Each member read what you've written
  - Team members - What do you notice about how the problem as stated?

Samples of Thinking

When answering the question, "What is the problem," people are most likely to respond in one of three ways:

1 "This part of the organizational system is **broken**. It doesn't work." **(Symptom)**

2 "We want these specific **results**." **(Goal)**

3 "We need to find or create some way **to achieve** some specific result." **(Solution)**

Example 1
Problem Definition

Example → We've have two groups in the organization that are feuding that is causing poor morale at the plant.

Problem Definition Example 1

- We've got a feud between 2 families at the plant that is causing poor morale.

- Is this the real problem, or a symptom, a goal, or a solution?

- What is your initial reaction to this as a problem?

- What would the impact on identifying solutions be?

- What would you predict the would happen if the team went forward with this as the real problem?

Questions to Uncover the Real Problem

- What is the real problem?

- What is the dissatisfaction with the current situation? Who is dissatisfied? Why? For how long have people felt dissatisfied?

- What factors contribute to the dissatisfaction? How can we be sure?

- What actions have been taken thus far to reduce or eliminate the dissatisfaction?
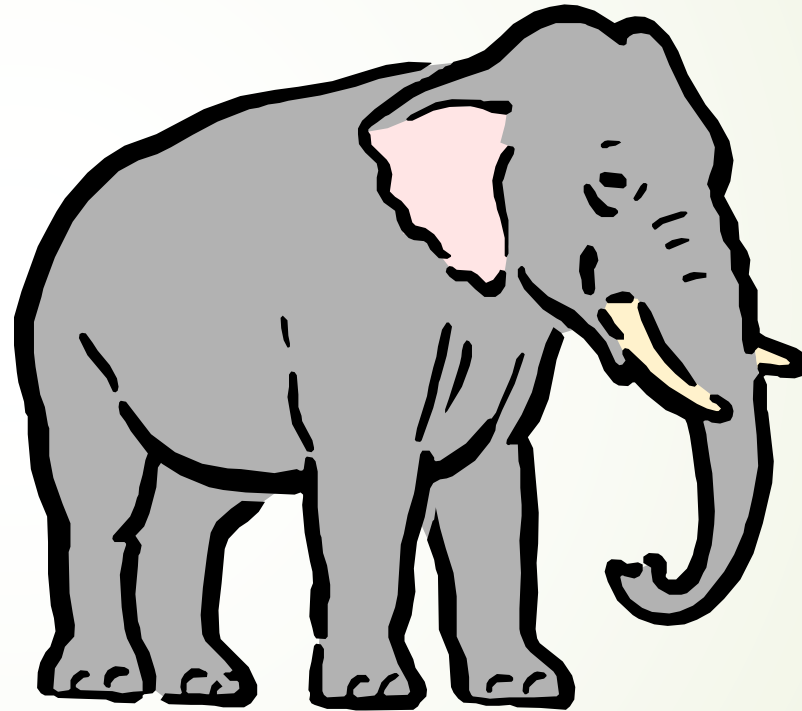
6 Blind Men and the Elephant

Lessons Learned

➡ Focus on questions rather than solutions

➡ Seeds of solution are in questions

➡ How questions enable group to understand the big problem and identify best strategies

➡ Beginning with questions

Example 2
Problem Definition

Example

➔ We need programs in place to create a positive culture.

Problem Definition Example 2

- We need programs in place to create a positive culture.

- Is this the real problem, or a symptom, a goal, or a solution?

- What is your initial reaction to this as a problem?

- What would the impact on identifying solutions be?

- What would you predict the would happen if the team went forward with this as the real problem?

Questions to Move from Solution to Problem

- What problem would that solution fix?

- What situation would be dealt with by implementing this solution?

- What other problems might we encounter if we set this solution in motion?

Moving from Problem to Goal

- Now that we've identified the problem, what is our goal? What would we prefer the situation look like?

- What so we want to accomplish?

- What do we want to change to remedy the problem?

Approaches to Problem Solving

Traditional	Action Learning
One right solution	Multiple great solutions
Thinking is separate from action	Thinking requires/exist in action
Goal is to solve problems	Goal is great strategies and great learning
Clear problem definition – hypothesis and linear causality	Diffuse problem definition – issues and multiple causalities
Analysis of factions, reductionist; elimination of possibilities, specific questions; deterministic and sequential	Collecting insights; holistic; integration of possibilities; open questions; associative; intuitive; synchronistic
Objective find the solution; quality of the answer	Objective; discovery of interrelationships; quality of the understanding

Taking Action

- Action learning requires action after each session and during implementation of strategies

- Testing ideas in the real world determines if strategies are effective and practical

- Merely recommending diminishes creativity and commitment

- Deep and real learning occurs when reflecting on real action

Actions Between Sessions

- Focus Groups
- Surveys
- Data Gathering
- SME Interviews
- Stakeholder Interviews
- Prototypes

Tools

- Mind Mapping
- Force Field Analysis
- Brain Storming / Brain Writing
- Root Cause Analysis
- Focus Groups
- Surveys
- Interviews

- Six Sigma
- Lean
- Prototyping
- Appreciative Inquiry
- 5 Whys
- Cause and Effect Analysis
- Six Hats
- Other???

Tools in Relation to Action Learning -

- What is it?

- How could we use it to understand and reframe the problem?

- How could we use it to frame and formulate the goal?

- How could we use it to develop and test strategies?

- How could we use it to take action and reflect on that action?

Best Action Learning Problems

- Real, Current, Unresolved
- Important and Urgent (keeps leaders up at night)
  - Important problems increase creativity
  - Urgent problems increase commitment and learning
- Complex
  - The more complex -> the more powerful
- Owned
  - Ideally ownership within the team
  - Alternately, ownership with sponsor/champion

Choosing a Problem

- Problem (versus Puzzle)
- Individual or Corporate
- Not redundant
- No predetermined solution
- Open to creative solutions
- Have clear outcomes, desired state, results
- Implementation probable
- Appropriate scope and scale
- Problem is appropriate for Action Learning

Problem 1
Problem 2
Problem 3

Problem

Problem 4
Problem 5
Problem 6

Action Learning Problems:

Examples

- ➔ Designing leadership development programs
- ➔ Improving information technology systems
- ➔ Six Sigma projects
- ➔ Improving customer service
- ➔ Resolving conflict between departments
- ➔ Developing a new performance appraisal system
- ➔ Establishing work schedule
- ➔ Introducing new product to the market place
- ➔ Surviving difficult economic environment
- ➔ Reinvigorating fatigued contributors/donors

Example 3:
A. Good Problem Definition

Example

➜ The problem is that this plant will close in 4 years, we need all 24 employees to stay with us until the last day.

➜ To make matters worse the plant is located in a highly depressed region with few job opportunities.

➜ These employees are highly skilled and well trained, when an opportunity presents itself it would be in their own personal interest to accept it.

Example 3:
B. Good Goal Definition

Example ➔ Our goal is to keep the plant operating until the last day while respecting the long term needs of the employees in an economically feasible manor.

2. Leadership Development

- Leadership skills easily practiced in an Action Learning session

- Promotes self-reflection

- Fosters specific and supportive feedback

- Skills practiced while doing real work makes it easy to transfer skills to every day

Leadership Development by working on a real problem with no known solution while simultaneously deliberately practicing leadership skills

Questions Develop Leaders

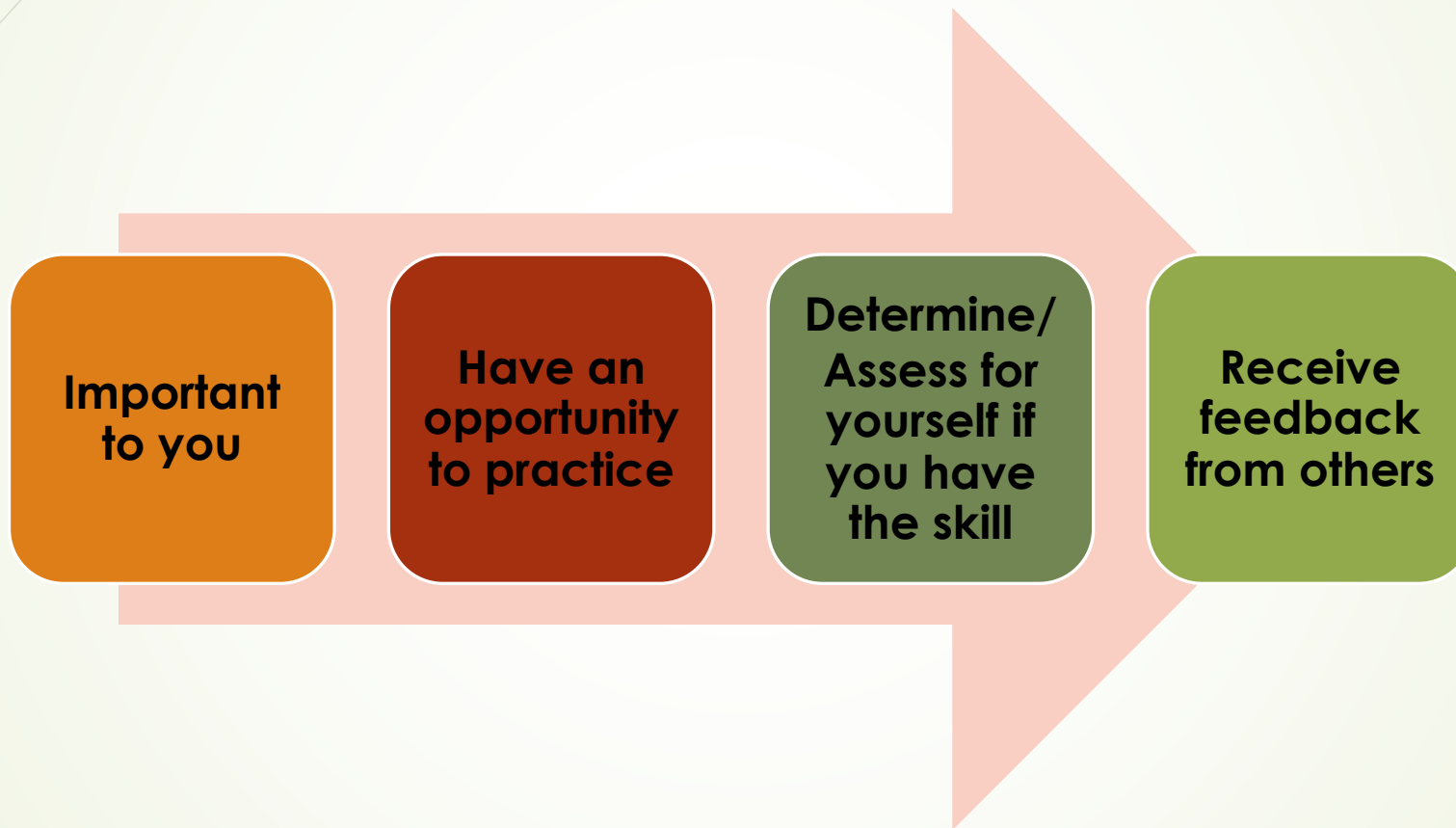|		
Become a better listener and communicator	**Build greater self-awareness and humility**	**Become a better team member and leader**
Courage and authenticity	**Continuous learning and improvement**	**Systems-thinking and creativity**
Patience	**Respect for others**	**Building and sharing visions**

Individual Skill Development?

| Important to you | Have an opportunity to practice | Determine/ Assess for yourself if you have the skill | Receive feedback from others |

Leadership Competencies

Accountability	Respect Diverse Views	Interpersonal Skills	Team Building	Listening
Consensus Building	Learning	Curiosity	Mentoring Skills	Decisiveness
Fully Present	Creativity and Innovation	Systems Thinking	Integrity and Honesty	Negotiation
Service and Stewardship	Visioning	Collaboration	Inclusiveness	Ask Great Questions
Succinct Questions & Responses	Provide Support to Others	Agility and Flexibility	Building Trust	Dealing with Ambiguity

Session Start

1

Select Skill

- Each participant commits to developing a specific skill

2

Post Skills

- All skills posted for all to see

3

Look for Skill

- Coach informs team they will each be asked how they did with their own skill and when they observed others demonstrating

Mid Session

1

Observe

- Note when a participant performs the behavioral skill they selected

2

Learning

- If something particularly poignant happens in relation to the skill – pose the question

End Session

1

Individual

- Asked for examples of using their skill

2

Team

- Asked when they observed the skill being used

3

Coach

- Ask how this could be used outside the session

Easily Transferable

3. Team Building

- Working on agreed problems
  - Develops task clarity, strong communications, and commitment
- Incorporating all elements and norms of great teams
  - Fosters high performance, learning, respect, and caring
- Sharing responsibility and accountability on real problems
  - Builds team unity and success

Coach Questions

- Raises Awareness (What?)
  - How are we doing with … ?
  - I've observed …. Did anyone else notice that?
- Raises Awareness of the Impact (So what?)
  - What's the impact of … on our problem solving?
  - What's the impact of … on us as a team?
- Allows the team to determine the path forward (Now what?)
  - How can we be sure to … ?
  - How can we be even more … ?
  - What should our team norm be in terms of … ?

Testing or Setting Team Norms

- Some members are absent, arrive late, or leave early
- Information is discussed, but not collected or organized
- Team agrees to actions but not owners of actions
- Decisions are made by one or two team members; others sit passively and appear to go along
- No one tracks or records developments and decisions
- There are occasional episodes of noise and disruptions
- Alternative goals are proposed but not prioritized
- Some members seem to pay more attention to their smart phones than they do to team business
- Electronics are used to take notes

Teamwork Competencies and Skills

- Adaptability
- Shared Situational Awareness
- Performance Monitoring and Feedback
- Leadership and Team Management
- Interpersonal Relations
- Coordination
- Communication
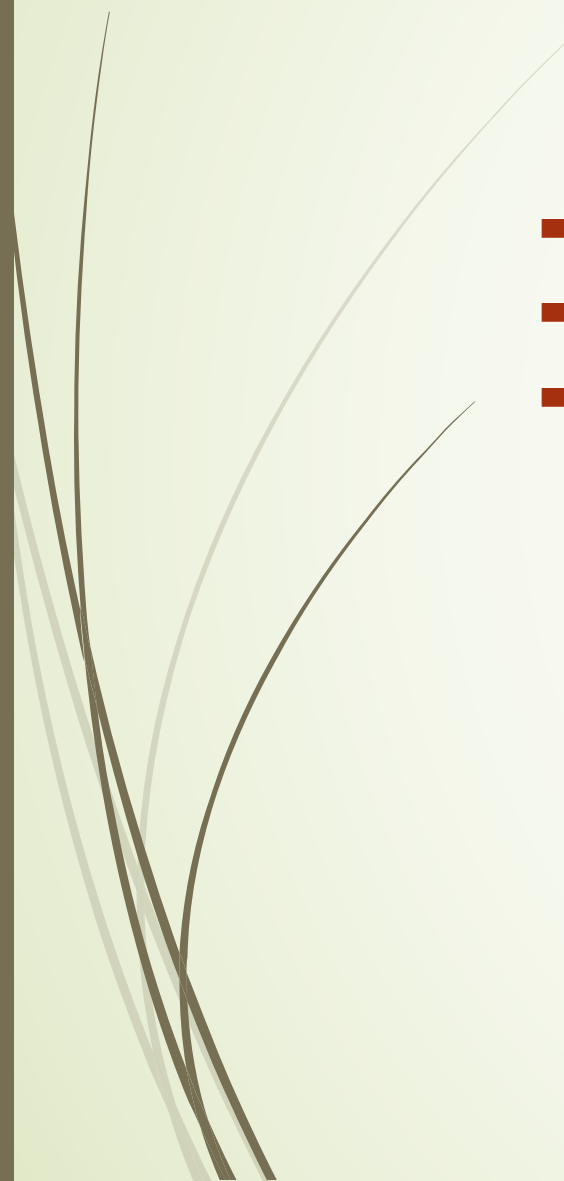- Decision Making

Criteria for Effective Teams

- Clear goals and values.

- People understand their roles and assignments.

- Climate of trust and support.

- Open communication.

- Full participation in decisions.

- Commitment to implement decisions.

- Supportive leaders.

- Constructive handling of differences.

- Structure consistent with goals, tasks and people.

- *SOURCE: From Levi, D. (2007). Group dynamics for teams. (2nd edi.).Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Symptoms of ineffective teams

- Loss of production.

- Increase in grievances and complaints.

- Evidence of hostility or conflicts among members.

- Confusion about assignments and relationships.

- Decisions misunderstood or not enacted.

- Apathy or general lack of interest.

- Lack of initiative, innovation, or effective problem solving.

- Ineffective meetings.

- High dependency on leader.

- *SOURCE: From Levi, D. (2007). Group dynamics for teams. (2nd edi.).Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Ineffective Team

- Abilene Paradox
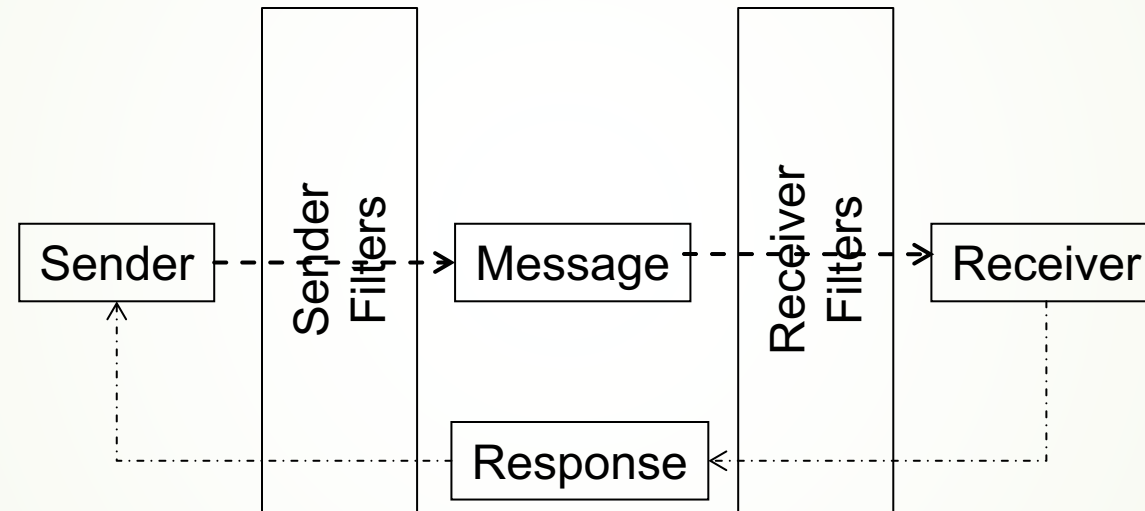- Groupthink
- Organizational Silence

Abilene Paradox

Groupthink

Organizational Silence

Communication

It's not enough to talk candidly. Professionals can still find themselves talking past each other.

Modes of Listening

- Passive
  - Little more than hearing
  - (music, television, story telling, being polite)

- Active
  - Listening with a purpose

  - * Note – people speak at 100 – 175 wpm and think at 600 – 800 wpm. This makes it easy for are minds to drift to other thoughts.

Response Types

- Evaluative
  - Making a judgment about the worth, goodness, or appropriateness of the other person's statement.
- Interpretive
  - Paraphrasing - attempting to explain what the other person's statement means.
- Supportive
  - Attempting to assist or bolster the other communicator.
- Probing
  - Attempting to gain additional information, continue the discussion, or clarify a point.
- Understanding
  - Attempting to discover completely what the other communicator means by her statements.

Nonverbal Communication

- Eye contact
- Facial Expressions
- Gestures
- Posture and body orientation
- Proximity
- Vocal

Factors that Improve Teams

- View from multiple viewpoints
- Research before making a decision
- Consider alternatives
- Manage both task and relational aspects
- Stay focused on the problem
- Listen to all opinions
- Test against established criteria

Factors that Hurt Teams

- Jump to solution to quickly
- No structured approach
  - Rationale – limited time, money, and information
- Trade offs for best solution
  - Cost versus effectiveness
  - Probability of success
  - Available resources
  - Politics of implementing
- Communication Issues
  - Focus on common knowledge
- Desire to reduce uncertainty
- Avoid conflict
- Within group competition

Action Learning Group

- 4-8 members to maximize creativity

- From within and outside the organization

- Diverse so as to obtain fresh viewpoints (Pizza man)

- May be familiar or unfamiliar with roles and situations

- May include external resources when needed

Attributes of Group Members

- Committed to solving problem
- Carefully listening to one another
- Creative and open to new ideas
- Respectful of others
- Constructive and supportive
- Group-focused rather than individually-focused

Why Action Learning

Questions, Learnings, & Ideas