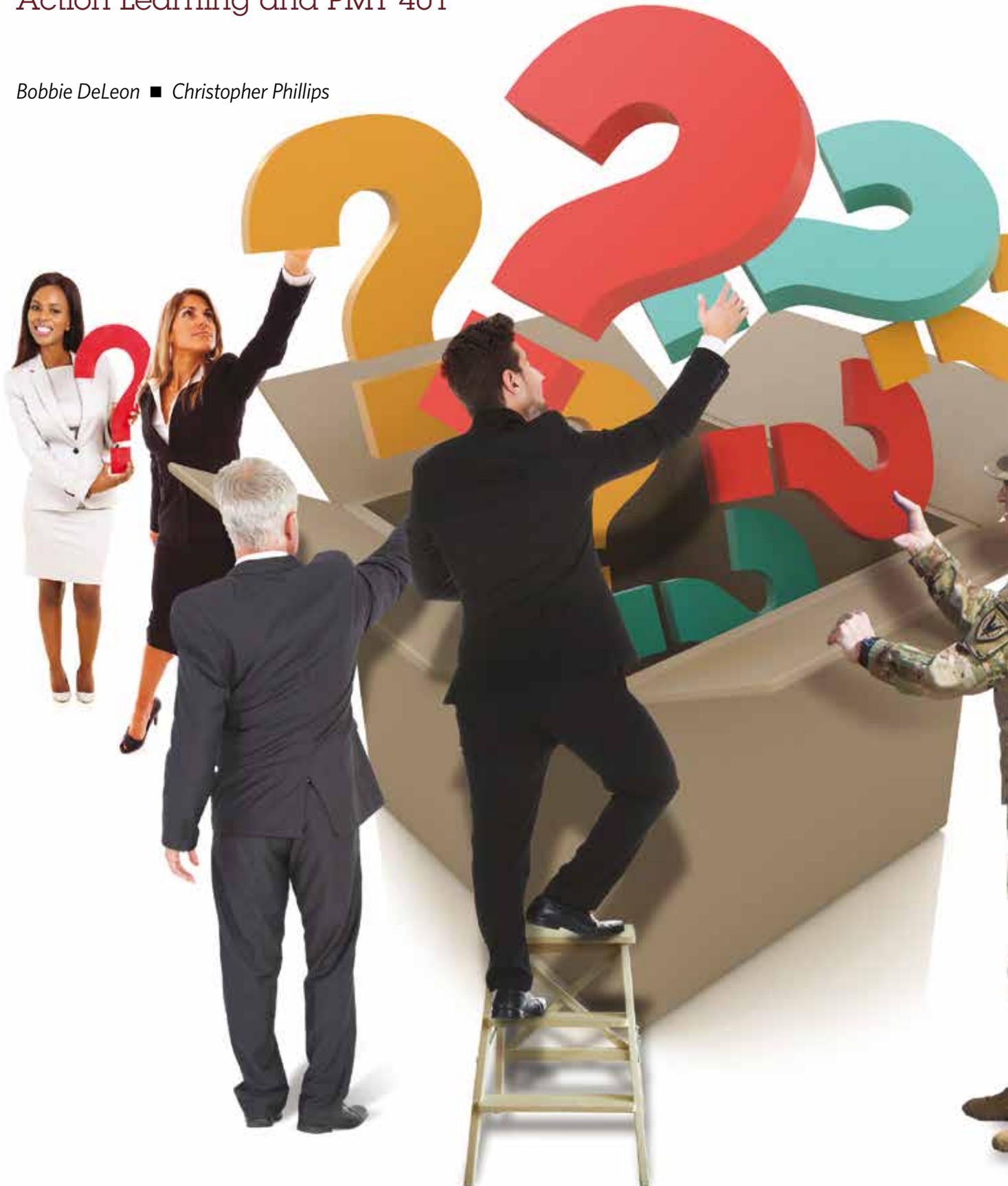


Asking the **Right Questions**

Action Learning and PMT 401

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Six students form a rough circle seated in a seminar room at the Defense Acquisition University's Fort Belvoir, Virginia, campus. They lean forward, engaged in animated give-and-take.

The students are enrolled in the Program Manager's Course (PMT 401), an intensive case-based, 10-week program aimed at improving leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and decision-making skills. Participants in this rigorous, in-residence program hail primarily from the military Services, defense agencies and the defense industry. Although most are program managers (PMs), their experience encompasses a wide variety of acquisition communities including, engineering, logistics and testing. A trained coach is on hand to focus on the learning, and steers clear of direct involvement in the problem-solving discussion. The coach makes sure, among other things, that the questions broached are open-ended and that all students actively take part and are committed to arriving at a consensus. This maximizes opportunities for learning and development.

Students are charged with identifying the problem and the next steps in resolving a dilemma that a PM would face in the life of an acquisition program. It is an issue or situation in which they are not the subject-matter experts and do not have extensive personal experience with the specific program. They must nevertheless identify a path forward, seeking to find the optimal solution.

Here is a typical question-centered problem that PMT 401 students scrutinize and seek to resolve: The PM has just received new data that suggest an in-flight failure may occur. The technical experts do not agree on the nature of the problem and first flight is scheduled for today. The PM has to decide whether to continue or to delay first flight, given the cost, schedule and performance ramifications of each course of action.

By bringing their unique experience, perspectives and insights to the question, the students are able to shine new light on it. Meanwhile, their coach listens intently, observing the group dynamics and enforcing the rule requiring the statements be made only in response to questions (see Figure 1). She deftly inserts herself when appropriate with a timely query: Do we have consensus on the problem? What is the quality of our questioning? What question are you answering? What are we doing well as a team in terms of problem solving? What can we improve on? Each session concludes with a review of the next steps in resolving the problem as well as a discussion of best practices to improve both team and individual performance.

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Figure 1. Two Ground Rules

1. Statements only in response to questions
2. The Action Learning coach has authority to intervene to improve the performance and learning of the group.

Needless to say, this is not your typical instructional approach for simulated real-world problem solving—a group of people with no particular proficiency in the specific problem under examination offering valuable insights that can lead to novel and effective solutions.

Welcome to Action Learning.

A Unique Approach

Action Learning's origins can be traced back to the 1940s, when Reginald Revans, a Cambridge University scientist, was asked to help improve productivity in the United Kingdom's coal mining industry. While industry executives expected Revans to use a traditional problem-solving approach—in which the managers would take the lead—he instead insisted on meeting with those who worked on the frontlines in coal mining. Revans believed that, if the viewpoints of those involved in mining were solicited, if their combined brainstorming power was harnessed, and—most important—if they had real decision-making authority in solving their most intractable problems, this would prove the most productive way to devise and carry out an effective solution (see Figure 2). That was the genesis of the Active Learning approach.

Figure 2. How Action Learning Differs from Other Problem-Solving Groups

- Questions precede answers; dialogue over discussion and debate
- Learning and team development as important as solving the problem
- Membership not reserved to experts or involved people
- Coach works learning opportunities
- Consensus on problem
- Skill Development
- Urgent and complex problems requiring unique systems thinking
- Groups charged with implementing the solution as well as solving the problems

Fast forward to today. The current version of Action Learning was developed by Dr. Michael J. Marquardt, Advisory Board chairman of the World Institute for Action Learning and professor of Human Resource Development and International Affairs at George Washington University. Marquardt has seen to it that Action Learning's core tenets from its very beginning—the use of insightful and reflective



questioning in tandem with careful listening and immersive problem solving by small multidisciplinary teams—have remained distinctive elements.

Action Learning now is used the world over by business and organizations of all sorts, in the public and private sectors, and makes significant contributions to the most pressing organizational issues: problem solving, organizational learning, team building, leadership development, and professional growth and career development. Its five core components:

- A problem or project challenge
- An action learning group or team
- A process of probing questioning and reflective listening
- A specific response, developed by consensus, on the assigned problem or dilemma
- A shared commitment to learning that contributes to the development of more effective and equipped leaders, teams and organizations

In the PMT 401 instructional approach that incorporates the Action Learning method and ethos, one key distinguishing feature is that students do not start out with a preconceived problem. Rather, they begin with a situation or issue that is described in a PMT 401 case study. It can be posed as a problem, but the students themselves decide whether this is in fact the problem they're solving or whether it's a symptom. They must first arrive at consensus on this dilemma before proceeding. This focus on better defining and discovering the problem at the outset sets apart Action Learning from other approaches, and makes it an effective complement to PMT 401.

Action Learning and PMT 401

Action Learning in PMT 401 began as a pilot in 2011, undertaken by Dr. Bobbie DeLeon, professor of Acquisition Management, who was exploring the impact of Action Learning on the

critical thinking development of professionals taking part in the 10-week course. The initial feedback from the students was mixed: Some found the structure too restrictive, while others appreciated the participatory and inclusive approach. They particularly lauded how Action Learning helped improve and hone their listening and questioning skills.

Since then, Action Learning has become a mainstay of PMT 401 at Fort Belvoir. It has been further refined over the years, with students now undertaking case dilemmas in three Action Learning sessions (see Figure 3). The PMT 401 enterprise faculty received training to ensure that the “learning by doing” experience is as meaningful as possible for all involved, and that the Action Learning paradigm meshes with the program’s best practices for learning.

Figure 3. Action Learning Team

- Small group (4-8 participants)
 - Problem Presenter
 - Team Members
- Learning Coach
- Focus on Individual Skill Development
 - Each member uses questions from critical thinking model
 - Other members note demonstrated skill
- Focus on Group Learning
 - Reflect on actions to improve future sessions
 - Reflect on learning to identify insights

Most curricula that aim to enhance leadership capacities for professionals tend to lump together problem-solving and decision-making skills. Not so for PMT 401. Its emphasis is on taking a step back and first zeroing in on key foundational questions: “Am I solving the right problem?” “What do I need to make a decision?” “Have I framed it the right way?” This learning paradigm, which places primacy on framing and exploring the right questions, can generate more fruitful options and more effective outcomes for decision makers.

The emphasis in the initial part of any given Action Learning module offered at PMT 401 is on arriving at consensus on the problem that students seek to solve. This doesn’t mean that there is universal agreement that there is one way to solve the problem, but students have come to a meeting of minds on an approach and how to move forward with this particular approach. This in turn helps them better answer that question of questions: “Am I solving the right problem?”

The Primacy of Questions

Action Learning is comparable in many ways to the Socratic Method, in that questions are considered more important than answers. Or at least, the operating premise with both approaches to inquiry is that the most advantageous answers—ones that (in the case of Action Learning) lead to beneficial

knowledge for impactful problem-solving—cannot be arrived at until and unless significant attention and effort are initially placed on coming up with the most potent question or set of questions. The result is that, rather than spurring PMT 401 students to engage in a debate in which someone wins and someone else loses, the emphasis is on open-ended, methodical and reflective inquiry promoting the discovery of common ground in which all the participants “win.”

Clearly, this puts Action Learning into alignment with PMT 401, with its emphasis on cooperative and experiential learning and with facilitated discourse that stresses student-centered questioning and reflective engagement on real-world problems that a senior manager would face. Students gain considerable practice in exploring questions that lead them to engage in shared problem-solving rather than in advancing a particular agenda. This is at the heart of leadership development, critical thinking-based problem solving and sound decision making.

PMT 401 students also come to a keener understanding of when it’s best to talk and when it’s the best time to listen. Action Learning stresses that what you say, how you say it and encouraging others to share their own insights, make all the difference in cultivating leadership and problem-solving skills. This is where becoming a more astute questioner enters the picture. The best leaders know that the quality of the questions that they and their team come up with are paramount (see Figure 4). All those involved must become more expert at understanding the purpose of their questions, their underlying assumptions, the problem they’re trying to solve, the concepts that everyone needs to understand, and who the stakeholders are. Leaders must model this approach.

Figure 4. Attributes of Great Questions

- Do not have a preconceived answer in mind
- Are fresh questions to evaluate the same data in new ways
- Are supportive, insightful and challenging
- Create clarity—open doors in the mind and get people to think more deeply
- Challenge and test assumptions—explore why and how
- Are open-ended

A hallmark of Action Learning is the promotion of this guiding tenet: Leaders ask questions, actively listen and encourage those working with them to do the same. By employing precepts of the Action Learning method, such as reflective questioning, those taking part in PMT 401 become even more proficient at its collaborative problem-solving approach in a rapidly changing environment. That is the crux of the program. 

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