

Study-Action Teams

Opening Minds for Organizational Change

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What's the Key to Organizational Change?

Producing cultural change in organizations has long been the holy grail of their leaders and the management consultants who work with them. Many approaches have been tried ranging from data-driven analyses of competitors and markets to psychological counseling about unfreezing and refreezing the company.

Implementations of newly-developed strategies often falter and fizzle out. Planners routinely fail to take into account the strength of old mind-sets and old habits. We reluctantly realize that there is more to change than just announcing it. What can be done to produce the genuine changes in both attitude and habits that are the necessary elements of transformation?

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What Is a Study-Action Team ?

A Study-Action Team™ (SAT) is an unconventional approach to creating the openness, tolerance for disagreement, and trust needed to confront the real issues that arise on the path to change.

EXAMPLES OF STUDY-ACTION TEAMS

- A contractor specializing in utility-related construction held an SAT with their top 7 executives and re-oriented their corporate strategy to enter the wind power market, achieving a 25% market share.
- A hospital construction project used an SAT on *The Toyota Way* to kick off their lean journey. Their completed structure has won multiple awards and is attracting industry-wide attention.
- A team at a computer manufacturer held the first ever SAT in the late 1980s, using *The Deming Management Method* to solve a production problem which was costing the company millions of dollars per month.

The members of an SAT perform a series of activities to fulfill their commitment to bring about the new ways of thinking and acting that must occur for change to become a reality in an organization. First, they set a goal, select a book, and read and discuss it together in a structured way. Secondly, they participate in a planning session, applying the ideas gleaned from the book to their current work situation. Finally, they implement the plan, holding themselves accountable to a committed leader, monitoring progress and making adjustments as they go along.

What Kind of Change Does a Study-Action Team Produce?

Many SATs have helped organizations make the transition from a conventional, command and control culture to a more participative, lean culture based on respect for people and continuous improvement. Participation in the SAT gives its members an opportunity to explore new ideas and practice new behaviors in a supportive, low-risk environment. Members of the SAT learn to voice opinions, listen to their colleagues, listen to themselves, tolerate uncertainty and disagreement, and have their minds changed by what they read and hear. All of these are skills they will need to carry into their new, lean future.

An SAT can be used for any kind of change. On the most practical level, a group of people might select a book to help them solve an immediate problem they face. Another reason for an SAT might be to help incorporate the attitudes needed as an organization begins a lean journey. At the highest level, corporate leaders might use an SAT to redefine their company strategy.

What Happens in a Study-Action Team?

A New Approach to Reading:

Participants in an SAT learn to read with questions. Before they even sit down to read, they consider what they are about to get into

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE READING

- What are the author's main points?
- How is this relevant or not relevant to me or to what we are trying to do?
- What action do I speculate that I or we might take to support our goal?

LEARNING IS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

Although we are creatures of habit, every interaction with another person changes us in a subtle way. If we speak and receive a negative response, we learn to be quiet. If we speak and receive consideration, we are encouraged to offer another idea. These recurrent interactions shape our organizational culture.

and take a look at the prejudices and preconceptions that they are bringing with them. As they read, they look not just for new distinctions and concepts, but for ways that these new ideas might apply to their own work situation. Reading shifts from a passive to a purposeful activity.

A New Conversation:

The first session of an SAT can often be a little awkward. People may be reluctant to speak because of previous negative experiences in classrooms. This may be the first time that this group of people has actually talked to one another on a peer-to-peer basis. People may be used to an environment in which independent thinking and new ideas have not been encouraged. So, a certain tentativeness is understandable.

However, no one is able to hide in silence. The discussion leader calls on everyone. After a while, people get more comfortable. They realize that they are not in school any more, and they are listened to with respect. The mood shifts from trying to please the teacher to actual consideration and reflection on what is being said. Instead of being derailed by disagreements, participants learn to ask each other, "Why do you say that? What do you see that I don't see?"

Practical Planning:

The planning session is the culmination of the study and discussion process. Participants have been collecting their ideas for action as they go along. At the planning session, they are able to draw on the skills they have been developing to produce the results. Each member gets a chance to present their best ideas and advocate for them to the group. Typically, all the ideas for action will be written on sticky notes and posted on a convenient wall or white board. The team then groups them by similarity of content and prioritizes their collective concerns. At this point, either by voting or discussion, they come to a consensus on what is the most important area for action. They may select a corporate-level

TYPICAL SECTIONS OF AN A3 REPORT

- Problem statement
- Relevant data which confirm the current situation
- Alternatives considered
- Action steps with person responsible and date due
- Definition of success and monitoring process

THE A3 REVIEWER IS THE CUSTOMER OF THE PLAN

- Holds the team accountable
- Exercises authority to remove constraints
- Suggests changes in direction as needed
- Provides encouragement and rewards the team
- Models supportive behavior

strategy to roll out, an immediate practical improvement to operations, or whatever project is most appropriate to meet their goals.

Ambition and Alignment:

Here is where the power of the SAT begins to reveal itself. We see a diverse group of people that started with a vague idea about doing something together converging to a focused, committed group with a new horizon of ambition. Instead of a frustrated group, working at cross purposes with one another, they have become an aligned team with shared goals and the communication skills to reach them together.

The One-Page Plan:

Action plans are documented using an A3 format. This format summarizes all the relevant aspects of a plan on one 11 x 17 inch piece of paper. It makes the plan easy to communicate and easy to monitor. However, the point of the one-page plan is not just its easy-to-read format. Producing such a plan requires extensive discussion among all stakeholders and careful distillation of the key points. The document becomes a focal point for an ongoing process in which performers are held accountable, obstacles are removed, and goals are reshaped on the basis of new knowledge.

Implementation:

Two key roles insure the successful implementation of the A3 plan: The A3 report writer and the A3 reviewer. The team must identify the people who will fulfill these roles either before or during the planning session. The A3 report writer takes responsibility for documenting the plan produced during the planning session. They usually also capture the other ideas presented to be pursued later, after the initial effort is complete. The role of A3 reviewer may be taken by a member of the team or by an outside sponsor of their activities. It may also be assumed by a group such as a lean leadership council if appropriate. The job of this person or group

MORE EXAMPLES OF STUDY-ACTION TEAMS

- One large construction firm used SATs to get improvement projects started in 15 divisions. In a little over 1 year, they conducted more than 40 SATs involving over 400 people. Along the way, many of the division management teams were involved in their own SATs.
- A self-formed design and construction team used 5 concurrent SATs to bring their diverse group together in a competition for a hospital project.
- A discussion leader in the UK conducted an SAT for a team in Australia which used it to launch their company-wide lean initiative. He did not meet the team face-to-face until the planning meeting.

is to hold the team accountable for carrying out the plan they have made, but also to provide the support, encouragement, resources, and organizational clout to insure the team's success.

Continuous Learning:

The plans made by an SAT are not cast in concrete. For them to become reality requires taking new actions and establishing new habits. One of these habits must be the frequent inquiry, "How are we doing"?

The team and the A3 reviewer must come together for regular meetings where the status of action items is reviewed, issues are resolved, and measurement data is examined. The question "Are we doing the right thing?" remains alive. If conditions change, this group is in a position to change course or set new goals.

What Makes a Study-Action Team Work?

Purpose and Sponsorship:

Preparation for an SAT begins well before the team meets for its first discussion. It starts with commitment to a goal for the team. This commitment may come from an executive sponsor, who makes a request to a team to carry it out, or from a self-selected team. An outside sponsor can support the team by making attendance at the sessions a priority for the participants among their other work responsibilities.

The involvement of the team and its sponsor continues during the implementation of the plans. The sponsor usually steps into the role of A3 reviewer to hold the team accountable for fulfilling the commitments it has made. This role includes periodic reviews of the action items in the A3 plan with the team and receiving the team's reports on what is done, what is not done, and why. The sponsor can exercise their authority to remove constraints and offer other forms of concrete assistance to assure the team's success. Another key role is to embody the behaviors that

represent the new style of leadership to which the organization aspires. The team will appreciate such support and encouragement.

Team Commitment:

Team members who are invited to participate must fully understand what they are agreeing to, including the reading assignments, attendance, and participation. They must be briefed on how the SAT will work and know what will be expected of them in both time and effort. Team members must commit freely to participate, in keeping with lean management principles. Offering team members the option to decline often becomes the first evidence of change toward the new culture that is being created.

SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why do you think that is important?
- Does someone else have a different opinion?
- How does the author's point relate to our current work situation?

Discussion Leadership:

A successful SAT requires the skills of an experienced discussion leader. The job of this person is to provoke discussion by asking questions of the group. They need to overcome people's reluctance to speak and encourage them to say what they really think, to voice their disagreements, and to speculate. The goal is to shift the discussion from a school-room question and answer session to an open conversation about the organization and its possibilities in which all the participants interact and listen to one another with respect. In addition, the discussion leader can contribute their expertise to the discussion by providing examples from their experience and answering technical questions.

Participation:

The participants themselves often undergo a transformation. For many, it will be the first time that they have seriously read a book in some time. It may also be the first time that they have had an open conversation with their co-workers about what they are up against. In the best cases, the SAT opens minds and builds relationships. This new level of trust and openness serves the team well later when they are implementing their plans.

CULTIVATE A MOOD OF INQUIRY

When things go wrong,
instead of saying: “Isn’t that
awful, I wonder who’s to
blame?” practice the mantra
“Isn’t that interesting, I
wonder why that
happened?”

The Planning Session:

The choice of an initial project to be accomplished is critical. It is important to choose something which is challenging yet doable. Secondly, it is important to produce an A3 document which clearly and concisely captures the current unsatisfactory condition, the steps needed to address it, and the criteria which will be used to evaluate success. Finally, individual team members must assume responsibility for the actions to be taken – they must make promises to each other and devise an explicit process for following up to insure that the promises are kept. These initial activities will demonstrate to the whole organization that change is possible.

Course Correction:

We are used to a black and white world where things are either wrong or right and every action is judged as either a success or a failure. We associate failure only with negative consequences for ourselves and our reputations. This attitude discourages risk-taking.

We need to move to a new attitude, one where every experience becomes not an occasion for judgement but an occasion for learning. If things do not go the way we expect them to, this is not the time for blame. Instead, use the occasion to reflect. What did we fail to anticipate? What other alternatives can we try? What can we learn from this experience? This attitude must be brought to the follow-up activities of the team so that learning from experience becomes a new habit.

Have regular conversations with the team and the sponsor to assess progress, get help and make mid-course corrections. Use the A3 plan for these conversations making updates to it throughout the action phase. We live in a world of change and we might as well get used to it. We must be willing to change our plans as the world unfolds before us and we continuously learn from our experience.

Is an SAT Right for You and Your Team?

ARE YOU READY TO DO IT YOURSELF?

- Have you experienced an SAT first hand?
- Are you familiar enough with the topic to keep the team from getting stuck in dead ends?
- Are you able to put aside your own views in order to draw out the group?
- Can you relinquish your authority so as not to suppress the free expression of ideas and opinions?
- Do you know how to get other people to talk?

How do you decide if an SAT is the right move for you and your team in your current situation? Here are some guidelines to consider:

1. You need an imperative business reason for the activity. There must be an urgent problem to solve, a strategic threat to avoid, or a huge opportunity to grasp.
2. The team must be in a position to really accomplish something. They must be the ones directly experiencing a problem, or the ones with the vision to determine strategy. They will need both the expertise and the authority to bring about a change.
3. The team must be available to fully participate in the SAT. They cannot succeed if they are overwhelmed with day-to-day demands on their time.

Another question that arises is, why do an SAT rather than just sending everyone to a course or asking them to read a book on their own? The answer is in the interaction. An SAT is not just about absorbing some new information or content, but about building a new type of relationship. It produces the skill of a new kind of listening that is essential for any important change in an organization. It helps the members of the group realize that what is obvious to one person is invisible to another, showing why it is important to pay attention to what someone else says. It also helps them to see what their underlying concerns are and where the opportunities lie to align these concerns for a joint effort. People learn to welcome interpretations other than their own.

What Do You Need to Do?

TIPS FOR SELECTING A BOOK THAT WILL ENGAGE YOUR TEAM

1. Choose an author who uses stories rather than tables of data.
2. Choose an author who offers substantiation for the claims he makes.
3. Choose an author with a good reputation.
4. Choose the shorter book rather than the longer one keeping the page-count between 200 and 300 pages.
5. Choose the unconventional rather than the college textbook.
6. Choose a book that will challenge your team's usual way of thinking.

Selecting a Book:

How do you select just the right book that will help you realize your goals? We have a rich selection of books to choose from on topics ranging from lean in manufacturing, design, and healthcare to different approaches to management, strategy, and leadership. The content of the book is important, but it is also essential to choose a book with an accessible writing style that will engage the readers.

Selecting the Participants:

What is the optimum number of participants in an SAT? We recommend a group of from 7 to 11 people. High-level managers as participants can lend legitimacy and authority to the process, while those who have first-hand experience with current problems have a strong motivation to produce change. An SAT to produce organizational change may be chosen from different functional areas and from different organizational levels. A diverse group will produce the most lively discussions and hold the most potential for the cross-pollination of ideas. Alternatively, an SAT initiated to solve an operational issue will be comprised mostly of people who play a role in the process or adjoining processes. The team may also benefit from including one or two subject matter experts.

It's important that the participants be willing, but a dose of skepticism is also healthy for the group. It will give them practice in not just tolerating, but actually exploring different points of view. If you want to include a larger number of people in the process, we recommend multiple sessions, which may be concurrent or sequential.

Selecting the Discussion Leader:

Participants in an SAT are often so inspired that they want to reproduce the experience for other members of their organization.

We often see new reading groups sprouting up all over the landscape. Although these may succeed in generating enthusiasm, you can achieve even better results by learning the skills that a discussion leader uses to produce successful results. It is one thing to focus on your own reading and learning and another to take responsibility for what happens in the group. We recommend that a prospective SAT leader attend at least one session as an apprentice and take a leadership or facilitation skills course.

How and When to Meet:

Of course the most lively discussions take place face-to-face. We recommend this format if possible. However, we have also had success with teams that meet by audio or video teleconference. To maintain the enthusiasm and intensity of the process, we recommend meeting 2-4 times per week for one hour of discussion at a time. An hour is enough time to discuss 30 to 40 pages or one or two chapters.

Patience and Change

"I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch where through
Gleams that untraveled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move."

-- Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses"

We live in an impatient culture. It takes determination and courage to embark on a transformational journey which will take a long time to complete. What we forget is that one of the consequences of continuous improvement is the constant encouragement of small successes along the way. Another reward is the companionship of fellow travelers. An SAT can be a crucial factor in producing those initial successes and forming those bonds of trust that will speed you along.

About the Authors

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Other Resources

Lean Project Consulting has conducted SATs for dozens of clients and hundreds of participants since its founding in 2000. We can lead an SAT for you and teach your supervisory and professional staff how to lead their own Study-Action Teams. Contact us to explore this possibility for your organization, 303-665-8385.

Visit our website at www.studyactionteam.com (development pending) for additional information and resources. Study-Action Team is a trademark of Lean Project Consulting, Inc.

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