Action Learning Coaching

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Abstract
The Problem.
Action learning (AL) continues to be an important learning and development approach within organizations. Many successful AL programs use AL coaches to help facilitate the program and the learning that can occur within such programs. How might AL coaching be similar to, or different from, other types of coaching, and how might AL coaching be most effectively practiced?

The Solution.
A review of the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical research on AL coaching will address these questions and will enable a comparison of AL coaching and other types of coaching. We draw upon the research to demonstrate effective practice and the learning that can result from AL interventions.

The Stakeholders.
AL is used globally for learning, development, and change, and therefore, many organizational leaders are interested in the effective practice of AL and AL coaching. These leaders, human resource development (HRD) professionals, executives, internal and external coaches will benefit from this article.

Keywords
action learning, action learning coaching, action learning conversations

As the practice of coaching has developed in recent years (Hamlin, Ellinger, & Beattie, 2008; Maltbia & Marsick, 2009), some of the greatest growth in the practice has been to address the development of leaders in organizations (Global Coaching Survey 2008/2009, 2009). Executive coaches often work with individual leaders and managers to develop skills and competencies (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Grant, 2006; Joo,

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Shushko, & McLean, 2012). Leaders and managers themselves are being called to serve as coaches to subordinates, both one-on-one (Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999; Joo et al., 2012; Kim, Egan, Kim, & Kim, 2013) and in team settings (Hackman & Wageman, 2005), to help their subordinates to perform better and to develop the needed skills and knowledge to rise in the organization. Another type of leadership coaching, action learning coaching (AL coaching), takes place in many organizations that choose to use action learning (AL) as a vehicle for leadership development. In this article, we will describe AL and AL programs, discuss the role of the AL coach, and demonstrate how the AL coach’s work is similar to and different from other forms of coaching within organizations. This understanding of the role and work of the AL coach will help enable organizations and practitioners to make decisions regarding the kind of coaching that best fits their organizational needs.

**AL**

There can be a number of reasons why an organization may choose to use AL for leadership and management development: a recognition that AL can help an organization keep pace with the rapidly changing global work environment (Boshyk, 2002; Watkins & Marsick, 1993), a desire on the part of the organization to combine development with the production of tangible outcomes (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007; Rimanoczy & Turner, 2008), and a recognition that people are motivated to learn when they can see a relevance between the experience of learning and their lives (Conger & Benjamin, 1999).

When we talk about AL, we define it as follows:

An approach to working with and developing people that uses work on an actual project or problem as the way to learn. Participants work in small groups to take action to solve their problem and learn how to learn from that action. Often a learning coach works with the group in order to help the members learn how to balance their work with the learning from that work. (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007)

We differentiate AL from other forms of “learning by doing” that require application and skills in addition to knowledge of facts (Rimanoczy & Turner, 2008). This includes case study or experiential programs, as well as simulation exercises and outdoor adventure exercises. While these activities can involve “action,” they do not focus on a real work problem in real time (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007; Yorks, O’Neil, & Marsick, 1999).

AL is not an organizational fad but a process with a long and rich history (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007). AL was first developed and practiced in the 1940s by Reg Revans in the coal mines in England (Revans, 1982). The process was further developed and spread to other countries during the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1970s, a similar concept was being developed in Sweden (Rohlin, 2002). The idea and practice of AL eventually reached the United States in the 1990s. General Electric was one of the best-known early adopters (Dotlich & Noel, 1998) with many national, international, and
global organizations following suit (Boshyk, 2002; Marquardt, 1999; O’Neil & Marsick, 2007).

As the use of AL spread, both practice and the literature began to show a wide variety of forms of AL (Cho & Egan, 2009; O’Neil, 1999; O’Neil & Marsick, 2007). “The house of action learning has many doors” (Boshyk, 2000, p. vii). In order to bring some order to the variety of practice of AL, we use the concept of the “schools” of AL (O’Neil, 1999). The schools were inductively derived from the literature and research and are categorized by the way in which AL practitioners view that learning takes place in AL (Table 1; O’Neil & Marsick, 2007).

In the Tacit school, the focus is primarily on action and results through the project. The Tacit school assumes that learning will take place so long as carefully selected participants work together, some team building is done, and information is provided by experts from within and external to the company (Yorks, O’Neil, & Marsick, 1999). Explicit attention is not necessarily placed on the process of learning, which makes the learning primarily tacit and incidental (Marsick & Watkins, 1992). The Scientific school is rooted in the work of Revans who described his “method for achieving managerial objectives” as consisting of Systems Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. Given his early background as a physicist, these systems have a basis in the scientific method (Revans, 1982). Neither school places emphasis on the use of a coach to help enable learning.

We believe learning in AL takes place through learning from experience and learning through critical reflection and that this kind of learning is enabled by an AL coach. Our focus on the role of an AL coach is in the Experiential and Critical Reflection schools. In the Experiential school, AL practitioners see Kolb’s learning cycle as its theoretical learning base. Kolb’s cycle emphasizes learning by first experiencing something, reflecting on that experience and sharing perceptions of the experience, checking these perceptions against theory that helps to explain what happened, and applying what is thus understood to practice (Kolb, 1984). Practitioners in the Critical Reflection school believe that AL needs to go beyond the simple reflection found in the Experiential school to focus on “critical reflection,” on the basic premises that underlie thinking. That is, people recognize that their perceptions may be flawed because they are filtered through uncritically accepted views, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings inherited from one’s family, school, and society. Such flawed perceptions often distort one’s understanding of problems and situations (Mezirow, 1991).

We believe the role of an AL coach is critical in these schools for the success of an AL program for a number of reasons. Boud and Walker (1996) identified numerous barriers to learning from experience including not recognizing one’s own assumptions,

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**Table 1. Schools of Action Learning (SoAL).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SoAL</th>
<th>Tacit</th>
<th>Scientific</th>
<th>Experiential</th>
<th>Critical reflection</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning Theory</strong></td>
<td>Incidental Learning</td>
<td>Alpha, Beta, Gamma; ( P + Q = L ) Revans (1982); Boshyk (2000)</td>
<td>Learning from Experience</td>
<td>Learning through Critical Reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
lack of opportunity to step aside from the experience, lack of skills in noticing and intervening, and established patterns of thought and behavior. Marsick and Maltbia (2009) discuss participants’ impatience and discomfort with practices that may lead to critical reflection, and Cho and Bong (2010) point out that participants in Korean AL programs they have studied are not accustomed to questioning, so there is much demand for AL coaches. As will be seen later in the article, the AL coach creates situations to assist AL participants to overcome these barriers and ensures an explicit focus on learning.

Although there has been a great deal written about AL over the years, much of what has been written has been based on the personal experience of practitioners (O’Neil, 1999). There have been published research studies that have looked at transfer of learning from the AL program to the workplace (Ward, 2009), the personal development of participants (Lamm, 2000; Ward, 2009), transformative learning in an AL program (Lamm, 2000), and the role of coaches in AL programs (Gibson, 2012; O’Neil, 1999). A recent review of AL literature (Cho & Egan, 2009), however, found that only one third of published articles reviewed met the key methodological traits of quality research. Earlier AL literature reviews had similar findings (Smith & O’Neil, 2003a; Smith & O’Neil, 2003b), so there is still the need for additional research on both AL programs and coaches.

AL Programs

Once an organization determines that AL is an appropriate intervention for leadership and management development, a co-design process takes place during which members of the organization and an AL consultant (either internal or external) follow steps to make a number of program design decisions. These decisions can include determining the strategic focus of the program, choosing the projects for the AL teams and executive sponsors for the projects, and determining how to address the personal development needs/learning goals of the participants. Based on the strategic focus, decisions are also made about what might need to be taught to the participants in either a more traditional classroom structure or in the project teams in a “just-in-time” format. For example, if part of the strategic focus of an AL program is to develop new managers for future leader/executive roles, one of the subjects taught in a classroom structure might be understanding organizational strategy. As much of the work of leaders involves working with teams, a design decision may be to provide a tool for decision making in teams at the just-in-time point that an AL team needs to make a decision. Once these types of decisions are made, the actual length and design of the program can be determined (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007). The work of an AL coach can include several roles in the program: help with the co-design, work with the project sponsors, teacher of classroom and just-in-time learning subjects, and work with the teams during the project and personal development team meeting sessions. It is in the work with the team that the real work of coaching takes place (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007).
AL Coaching

Coaching any team involves helping at a variety of levels, that is, on the task or project level of the team’s work, and at the process, or team dynamics level, of the team’s interaction (Reddy, 1994). In AL coaching, another level is added—the learning-how-to-learn level. In O’Neil’s (1999) research on AL coaches, coaches spoke about working with a team at the task and process level, but then said, “I find I go below the process level, to the learning level” (p. 128).

Coaches often need to focus on performance improvement but do not always explicitly develop leaders’ ability to learn-how-to-learn. By honing these learning capabilities, leaders can build capability, in themselves and groups they lead, when facing new challenges at work. A common misstep is failure to recognize and accurately diagnose recurring patterns, especially in complex, ambiguous circumstances. AL coaching can support leaders’ abilities to diagnose patterns (even though context varies), recognize how the new situation differs, and adjust or create new responses. Skills developed for learning to learn include thinking outside of the box, crossing boundaries (mental, imaginal, functional, political, etc.), integrating perspectives, and experimenting with feedback.

In the Experiential school, the AL coach helps support the team’s learning throughout their learning cycles. The primary focus of the coach role is not to teach or provide expert perspective but to create conditions under which participants might learn from their project work and from one another. The AL coach tries to primarily use questions, rather than give answers, as the way of working with the team (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007). Reflection is also key to help ensure that what is learned through the experience of working on the project is explicit and planned, rather than erratic and halfhearted (Mumford, 1996).

In Critical Reflection school programs, the AL coach plays an important part in the creation of opportunities for learning from critical reflection (O’Neil, 1999). For example, as an AL coach is not a team member, and often comes from outside the culture, he or she can be freer to ask questions from an outsider’s perspective as he or she is not immersed in the organization’s mores and norms and is not constrained by political issues.

When Yorks, O’Neil, Marsick, Nilson, and Kolodny (1996) studied the Grace Cocoa program—a program in the Critical Reflection school—they found that the role of the participant observer researcher in many ways “mirrored” a role of the learning coach. They described the role of as that of a “‘sophisticated barbarian,’ who by his/her very outsider nature, is intended to see the situation through fresh eyes and then use those insights to raise critical questions to help reframe the participants’ understanding . . .” (p. 318).

AL Coaching in Project Team Meetings

Specific work with each AL team differs based on the design of the program, the makeup of the team, and the project being addressed. Research has shown, however,
that there are interventions many coaches use to try and create situations for learning. Table 2 summarizes the situations and interventions used by many AL coaches (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007, p. 109).

Creating an Environment for Learning

Before learning can happen, sufficient trust is needed for participants to feel they can take risks such as exposing personal information, questioning themselves and others in the team, engaging in reflection, and challenging the organization (Casey, 2011; O’Neil & Marsick, 2007). Lamm (2000) found that participants needed an open, trusting, and supportive environment for transformative learning to happen and that one of the key roles of the AL coach was to develop this environment. The coach needs to create an encouraging environment that is safe, confidential, and empowering of individuals to engage in reflective inquiry and powerful actions (Sofo, Yeo, & Villafane, 2010).

Recently, Gibson (2012) looked more closely at how AL coaches create the necessary climate, or environment for learning. Fundamentally, the coach can shift participants out of habitual business-as-usual behavior. In doing this, the coach can reduce the defensiveness usually found in team interaction and discourage the normal drive to solution in a team working on a project.

Specific Interventions for Learning

Once work has begun on establishing the needed environment, an AL coach looks for opportunities to continue to create situations in which learning may take place. Some coaches might base their interventions on intuition, in other cases on verbal and nonverbal feedback or their own internal feelings, and in still other cases more on focusing on the team and their process and task (O’Neil, 1999).

**Table 2. Creating Situations for Learning.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situations</th>
<th>Action learning intervention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creating an environment for learning</td>
<td>Emphasize confidentiality&lt;br&gt;Create a supportive environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific interventions for learning</td>
<td>Use questioning&lt;br&gt;Use reflection&lt;br&gt;Use critical reflection&lt;br&gt;Use just-in-time learning&lt;br&gt;Make work visible&lt;br&gt;Create ways to help think differently&lt;br&gt;Challenge the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer skills needed for learning</td>
<td>Help participants to give and receive help and feedback to each other&lt;br&gt;Help to learn how to transfer learning&lt;br&gt;Say nothing and be invisible</td>
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</table>
Hoe (2011) sees these interventions as a way to ensure meta-learning or “learning how to learn” among team members. By intervening at appropriate times, the AL coach helps team members to become aware of inquiry and development practices so they can be internalized. A key role of the coach is to develop a reflective practice over several sessions by following up on themes to make certain continuous team and individual learning has occurred resulting in meta-learning.

Questions are one of the most used interventions. Questions asked by the coach need to be both supportive and challenging (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007). The coach can foster an attitude of inquiry through questioning (Cho & Bong, 2010; Gibson, 2012; Sofo et al., 2010). The coach helps participants to learn how to ask the “right” questions, and through these questions, learn how to think in new ways (Hoe, 2011; Pedler, 1991).

Reflection is an integral part of how learning happens in AL. Reflection is intrinsically bound to questioning as it is often guided by good questions (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007). “Reflection consists of those processes in which learners engage to recapture, notice and re-evaluate their experience, to work with their experience to turn it into learning” (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1996, p. 9). Reflection is not an end in itself. Some benefits of reflection may be lost if it is not linked to experience and action.

In critical reflection, people recognize that their perceptions may be flawed because they are filtered through uncritically accepted views, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings inherited from one’s family, school, and society. Such flawed perceptions often distort one’s understanding of problems and situations (Mezirow, 1991). In a supportive environment, participants can feel comfortable in examining their beliefs, practices, and norms and can put a “spotlight” on taken-for-granted norms of behavior and thinking (Marsick, 1990; Sofo et al., 2010).

Just-in-time learning can be a mini-presentation, an exercise or a job-aid, but the AL coach offers it to the team at a point in their work when it would be most helpful. Many just-in-time learning options are anticipated based on the program co-design, but given the ambiguity of AL, the coach needs to be prepared for almost any eventual-ity. Many times, the coach will ask if the team is interested in a tool that might help them with the current dilemma or issue. This allows the team to proceed without the coach’s help if they so decide.

An example of a just-in-time learning opportunity that frequently comes up is when the team first arrives at a time that they need to make a decision. Sometimes the participants do not recognize that they are at this point, so the AL coach may need to ask a question to help make the situation “visible.” For example, “You’ve been discussing this issue for quite a while. Why do you keep going over the same ground?” Once the team realizes a decision is needed—as many teams will not have identified a decision-making process in advance—the coach can offer to teach them a process that works well in AL programs.

Making the work of a team “visible” can catalyze learning because participants become aware of what they do not see, or see in only one way. It is easy for a team to get so caught up in a focus on the task that they are unaware of the dynamics of the team process. AL coaches have different ways in which they try to make the work of
the team “visible” in those situations. Some may use questions as in the example above. Others, based on their backgrounds or philosophies, might use other kinds of interventions like role plays or diagrams to illustrate the dynamics. One of the coaches from O’Neil’s study describes her intervention:

I say, I see a lot now. Do you want me to tell you what I saw? And if they agree, I say, I’m going to say some of the things that you will not recognize. Then you have to say no, no, no that’s not what happened. If you want to, you may see something in what I’m saying. Then I’m telling them. And that’s sort of a guiding, because I take out things that they know that they do that they think no one else saw. (O’Neil, 1999, p. 164)

There are many ways to help a team think differently. Casey (2011), in his seminal piece on set advising (AL coaching), speaks to the need for a coach to challenge a team in order to help think differently. He views the AL coach’s role through the lens of the religious orders of the Benedictine and the Jesuit. In the Benedictine view, learning takes place in an atmosphere of love. In the Jesuit world, it is a relentless fight, as Casey describes,

I identified these four tasks for the set adviser:
1. to facilitate giving;
2. to facilitate receiving;
3. to clarify the various processes of action learning;
4. to help others take over tasks 1, 2, and 3.

The broad “Benedictine” assumptions behind these four tasks is that set members can look after themselves and can facilitate each other’s learning, with a little catalytic help from the set adviser. The set adviser’s role is assumed to be transferable to them . . . But in addition, I now believe . . . There is a fifth task, which only the trained and experienced set advisor can do and it conforms more to the confronting Jesuit model than to the benign Benedictine model . . . There is a level of learning, particularly about oneself, which can be reached only through some level of pain. And set members (AL participants) are not willing, nor are they able, to push each other through very much pain. (Casey, 2011, p. 66)

One of the ways to operationalize interventions that help a team/participants think differently is through the use of tools adapted from Action Science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). Some of the tools include right-hand/left-hand column discussions, the ladder of inference, and the TALK (Tell, Ask, Listen, Keep open) model (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007) adapted from the concept of advocacy with inquiry.

Transfer Skills Needed for Learning

Most AL coaches try to transfer their skills to participants thereby working themselves out of a job (Gibson, 2012; O’Neil & Marsick, 2007). Some co-design elements of a program can help with this, for example, a feedback session in which both the team
and the coach participate. Another important skill that coaches want to turn over to participants is how to go about transferring what is learned in the program back to the job or life. A degree of transfer is built into many co-designs; the coach helps to reinforce those elements. For example (Yorks, Lamm, & O’Neil, 1999),

- Through modeling via just-in-time learning, the coach takes advantage of the teachable moment to demonstrate how an explicit link can be made between a principle and the team’s experience.
- During periods of reflection, the coach can draw attention to how current issues in the team are similar in principle to those experienced earlier and those that may be encountered back in the organization.
- By spacing AL meetings over time, participants are able to try out new behaviors back on the job. These behaviors can then be discussed and questioned by the coach and team to reinforce the transfer.

The principle of “saying nothing and being invisible” (Casey, 1991, p. 273) manifests itself in a number of ways. It involves holding back and helping the team to grow by letting them learn from their own mistakes and letting them produce their own good answers (Marsick, 1990). The coach wants the team to learn how to recognize the process issues or stop for reflection to sort things out. This is not as easy as it sounds, even when this role has been clarified and contracted early on. The group can put pressure on the coach to “earn his keep” by taking on an expert role—despite the fact that the coach’s expertise is to help people to learn through and from their own experience. So, in some cases, the coach decides to actually do nothing in order to let the team figure things out for themselves. For example, this principle is practiced when a learning coach makes an explicit decision not to intervene in order to see if the team is able to respond to a participant acting aggressively (Weinstein, 1995).

**AL Coaching in Personal Development Team Meetings**

In the process of co-design of an AL program, many organizations want to include the opportunity for participants to have time for personal development. An AL coach usually plays a significant role in helping with this personal development. In order to determine the particular area upon which a participant might focus his or her development, the co-design of the program can include input from a variety of sources, for example, 360° surveys; interviews with participants and their peers, subordinates, and superordinates; and personality inventories such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®); O’Neil & Marsick, 2007; Ward, 2009). With the help of the AL coach, these various inputs provide a focus on one to two areas for personal development. There are many ways in which personal development can be approached in an AL program (Boshyk, 2002; Marquardt, 1999). We have developed a structured protocol that focuses several important elements of AL into a peer coaching process. We call this process action learning conversation (ALC; Marsick & Maltbia, 2009; O’Neil & Marsick, 2009).
ALCs

ALCs are a critically reflective practice that we believe can support transformative learning (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009). ALCs combine insightful questions with reflection and critical reflection to produce a process for personal development that can be used within an AL program or as a separate learning activity. Critical reflection, that is, reflection that helps identify underlying values, beliefs, and assumptions, is especially powerful in the context of ALCs because it enables people to see how they can change a situation by changing the way they frame it and act on it (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009).

Figure 1 shows how Maltbia structured an approach to ALCs for coaching in three phases: (a) framing/engaging, (b) advancing, and (c) disengaging (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009). O’Neil experimented with the basic steps of these ALCs in her practice, based on the kind of questioning that drives AL programs.

We warn participants that it will feel “unnatural” to work through the protocol because it artificially channels conversation. Participants are guided by the AL coach to ask questions or offer observations without giving advice about how to address the area of development. The person receiving the help does not respond to questions or observations in the moment but does write down what he or she hears. Each phase includes an opportunity for short, selective responses by the person receiving the help, but remarks are held until that point in the protocol (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009).

**Phase 1: Framing and engaging.** The first step involves a participant sharing his or her area of development, often called a personal learning goal, with the rest of the team. The AL coach and other participants help by asking what we call “objective” questions to clarify the context and surface essential background information (i.e., the “facts”...
about the situation, external reality, relatively direct observable data). Phase 1 concludes with the participant stating the support that would help in thinking about how to tackle the personal learning goal (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009).

**Phase 2: Advancing.** Phase 2 is the heart of the process. It is divided into four key steps. During each step, the person receiving help listens and writes but does not respond. At the end of each step, one can then respond selectively to what they heard before moving to the next step. Phase 2 begins with more questions. Questions have always been at the heart of AL in that they free people to think in new ways, whereas advice giving can reinforce prior mental models that inhibit fresh solutions (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009).

We encourage the use of four kinds of questions: objective, reflective, interpretative, and decisional. Objective questions center on “What is happening?” Reflective questions probe “How am I feeling/reacting?” Interpretative questions seek to answer “What does it mean?” “What are we learning?” Decisional questions focus on “What do I do?” and “How do I respond?” (Spencer, 1989). Objective questions begin to be asked in Phase 1 when people share their personal learning goal. In Phase 2, although some objective questions can still be asked, we focus learners on reflective and interpretative questions. We recommend refraining from decisional questions early in the process. Decisional questions become more important as people engage in iterative cycles of ALCs because, at that point, they are reviewing action taken on decisions made in earlier ALC cycles. A common pitfall when first engaging in this questioning process is to provide advice disguised as a question (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009).

People first silently think and write down questions related to the personal learning goal, which are then shared in a round of “Q-storming,” that is, getting clear about the kinds of questions that need to be asked; eliciting, discovering, and developing new questions; and converting these new questions into actionable items (Adams, 2004). Often we use a sequential, round-robin process whereby each person raises one question at a time until all questions are asked. The participant remains silent throughout, but at the end, he or she can choose to selectively comment, provide more information, or remain silent.

The second step in Phase 2 involves exploring assumptions. Assumptions are any belief, idea, hunch, or thought held about a subject. People use their assumptions to guide their behavior. People are frequently not aware of underlying assumptions that drive actions. In this next step, members silently write down relevant assumptions they think the person being helped might hold, or that they themselves might hold were they in a similar situation.

The third step in Phase 2 involves reframing the original personal learning goal. New information typically leads to fresh thinking. Often the person begins to see how he or she contributes to the gap that can exist between “intentions” and “impact” and/or identifies other views of people in the situation. In this step, members write down ways they might now reframe the personal learning goal and then, in round-robin fashion, share these re-frames. At the end of this step, the person receiving help can share his or her re-frames based on new thinking. The final step in Phase 2 is a commitment to action, based on new insights (e.g., to gather more information, check out
assumptions, or behave in new ways). This prepares the way for Phase 3—that of disengaging (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009).

**Phase 3: Disengaging.** During the final phase, the AL coach, a member of the group, or the person who has been helped summarizes key discoveries, reviews commitments, and checks for alignment. As Figure 1 shows, doing so enables a feedback loop in which feelings and attitudes experienced can be informed by new insight and knowledge, which, in turn, gets fed back into the way the person frames and engages the situation through action (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009).

**AL Coaching and Managerial Coaching**

Although the main role of AL coaches takes place within the context of an AL program and is focused on creating situations for learning, rather than helping an individual or team improve performance (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007), there are similarities in some of the processes used in AL coaching to other types of coaching. For example, the work that AL coaches do at the process level is similar to the work done by leaders and managers in a managerial coaching role with their teams. There are also similarities between the work an AL coach does with participants for personal development and the work a manager might do one-on-one with individuals. We will discuss these similarities separately.

Hackman and Wageman (2005) define team, or managerial coaching, as “direct interaction with a team intended to help members make coordinated and task-appropriate use of their collective resources in accomplishing the team’s work” (p. 269). They go on to say that one of the various approaches leaders and managers can take to engage in managerial coaching is that of process consultation (Schein, 1988). In process consultation, a coach observes the team as it works on an organizational problem, and once the team is ready, the coach introduces interventions intended to help with problems and exploit unrecognized opportunities (Hackman & Wageman, 2005). Similarly, Reddy (1994) defines the role as “reasoned and intentional interventions, into the ongoing events and dynamics of a group, with the purpose of helping that group effectively attain its agreed-upon objectives” (p. 8). AL coaches engage teams at the process level and then go beyond that level to a learning level:

It’s different. As a process consultant you are floating with the process. You are helping people to stay in it and be aware of what is happening. As a learning coach . . . you are on many more levels. (O’Neil, 1999, p. 128)

One way to understand how the work of managers who use process consultation is similar to the work of AL coaches is found in Table 3.

**ALCs and Managerial Coaching**

The practice of managerial coaching can include one-to-one conversations, active listening, questioning, non-verbal behavior, motivational/developmental feedback, and
silence (Gilley, Gilley, & Kouider, 2010; Hamlin et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2013). Whereas the process and intended outcome are different, certain elements of the ALC protocol are similar to these practices of managerial coaching. These elements are the questioning process, reflection, and critical reflection.

As a managerial coach, asking good questions can be difficult because it is hard for a manager not to give advice or solve a problem for the coachee. The relationship may also be influenced by power dynamics and status differences. The intent of this part of the protocol as a coaching tool is to ask questions to help the subordinate look at his or her work differently, understand what is happening, and learn from what is happening so the learning can be used the next time a similar situation arises (O’Neil, 2000).

Reflection can use questions as well but can also provide a time, often a silent time, for learning to happen. A manager might use a reflection time when the subordinate appears to be heading for difficulty or is “stuck” in some way. The reflection, or silent time, can allow learning to occur for the subordinate. Critical reflection and questions can be used if a subordinate is open to being more introspective. Through critical reflection, a manager can help a subordinate question taken-for-granted norms of behavior and thinking and eventually create alternative perspectives and actions (O’Neil, 2000). However, managers themselves are not always open to hearing critical questions from subordinates or to entertaining views other than those of the organization or the path to which the manager has already committed.

### ALCs and Executive Coaching

As with managerial coaching, executive coaching, while the intent and process is different, uses some processes that are similar to processes used in AL coaching:

Executive coaching is defined as a process of a one-on-one relationship between a professional coach and an executive (the person coached) for the purpose of enhancing
Table 4. Comparison of Action Learning Conversations and Executive Coaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action learning conversations</th>
<th>Executive coaching</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Similarities</strong></td>
<td><strong>Differences</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inputs</td>
<td>Systematic inputs: 360° feedback, personality inventories, interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process</strong></td>
<td>Peer coaching with team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting goals, reflection, taking action</td>
<td>Set protocol including Q-storming, Exploring assumptions Problem framing and reframing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>Change in perspective, attitude, and/or behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change in perspective, attitude, and/or behavior</td>
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behavioral change through self-awareness and learning, and thus ultimately for the success of the individual and the organization. (Joo et al., 2012, p. 8)

The process is usually begun between the coach and the executive through the use of systematic inputs such as a personality inventory, interviews, 360° feedback, and action planning (Joo et al., 2012). Executive coaching is designed to unlock developmental potential by setting clear goals, creating action plans, seeing the future with strength and optimism, and reflecting on the outcomes of one’s actions to learn and take informed future action. The primary activity of the coaching relationship is a dialogue between the coach and executive about the executive’s values and beliefs, performance issues related to effective leadership, and plans and action to be taken (Maltbia & Marsick, 2009). While the literature makes a clear distinction between executive coaching and therapy (Joo et al., 2012; Maltbia & Marsick, 2009), the work between coach and executive requires a certain degree of psychological skills and competence so as not to remain at a superficial level or open up issues without sufficient knowledge as to how to deal with them (Bluckert, 2005).

Executive coaching can be used to raise the performance of an existing executive, develop high potentials within an organization, or help executives within an organization adapt to changes in the external environment (Maltbia & Marsick, 2009). A key outcome is change in the executive being coached; growth and change whether it is in perspective, attitude, or behavior (Bluckert, 2005; Joo et al., 2012; Maltbia & Marsick, 2009). Reflecting back on the ALC protocol, Table 4 shows a comparison of ALCs and executive coaching.

**Key Differentiator in AL Coaching**

The literature on AL coaching has often discussed the coach role in terms of metaphors (Botham, 1991; Casey, 1991; Sewerin, 1997). In her study of learning coaches, O’Neil...
(1999, 2001) found in interviews with 23 practicing AL coaches that one of the important differentiators of these coaches was that they created different meanings around their roles in AL that served to frame much of their interaction with their teams. A coach’s background, values, and attitudes helped to influence these meanings. Table 5 shows some of the metaphors that reflect a belief system a coach holds that helps to shape his or her work.

For example, the Consecrated/Religious Advisor is described as submerging or subordinating his or her needs to that of the group (O’Neil, 1999). In the Experiential school, this might look like understanding that the role is not to teach or to provide expert advice and opinion but to provide conditions under which managers might learn themselves from their project work and from each other (Lawrence, 1991; Mumford, 1996). The Radicals saw themselves as enabling participants to become empowered and challenge authority. Marsick (1990) and Weinstein (1995) use the following kinds of phrases as they describe the Critical Reflection school: challenging norms; leading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quote (O’Neil [1999])</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Radical</td>
<td>The coach enables participants to become empowered and use that empowerment to question and challenge authority.</td>
<td>“It’s worked when the group has shown some courage to oppose authority. It’s working well when I see people with the courage to do something unconventional.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consecrated Self</td>
<td>The coach submerges or subordinates his or her needs to those of the group and may have an underlying current of spirituality to his or her work.</td>
<td>“He talks about working in the context of grace . . . We are servants seeking service.”</td>
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<td>Deep Diver</td>
<td>The coach describes his or her work as going below the process level of the group to a “deeper” learning level.</td>
<td>“the first level is the task itself, then below is the task process, . . . then the group process, . . . then the fourth level . . . the learning process.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Legitimizer</td>
<td>The coach conceives that one of his or her main roles is to just “be there” and be instrumental in creating an environment in which people are free to learn.</td>
<td>“You represent the whole idea of the program and just being there and seeing and listening to the group is sometimes enough.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Sage</td>
<td>The coach easily draws upon his or her own experiences, is in contact with his or her own psychology, and has entered into the Socratarian world of humility by discovering what he or she does not know.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Wizard</td>
<td>The coach, like Merlin of legend, points out unconscious contradictions; helps support people as they try to find the courage to face the contradictions; is present when things go awry; and creates a field of tension in which learning can happen.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Benedictine and the Jesuit</td>
<td>In keeping with the religious orders, the coach needs to create an accepting, supportive environment for learning (Benedictine), but then needs to confront participants to help them break through the “shell” of their understanding (Jesuit).</td>
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to the examination of organizational norms; thinking the process may be deeply disturbing for those who do not want a change in the existing structures, status and beliefs. These similarities in outlooks would indicate that someone with a radical mind-set would probably be practicing critical reflection, more often than simple reflection, in their work (O’Neil, 1999).

Conclusions and Implications

This article has reviewed the roles, mind-set, and practices taken by AL coaches to probe that deeper level of learning that is not as easily or frequently engaged when managers coach their subordinates or teams toward business goals or that executive coaches engage when focused on specific objectives in the coach–client relationship. AL coaches seek to open minds to a deeper level of questioning that may follow, or work in conjunction with, executive coaching or managerial coaching depending on the circumstances of the interaction. AL coaches, as well, are freer from the power and organizational dynamics that contextualize the coaching relationship because their role is less tied to explicit results or predefined objectives.

The stakeholders interested in AL and AL coaching include organizational leaders, human resource (HR) professionals, coaches within organizations, and professional external coaches. While there are several practical examples of application found within this article, there are also important considerations for the various stakeholder groups.

For example, as executives try to determine the appropriate use of AL and AL coaching, they need to keep in mind that the kind of critical thinking that AL coaches encourage can be challenging to the organization. The output from an AL program can create “noise,” that is, challenging comments made by participants as they are asked to reflect on deeply held assumptions, mental models, and issues that the organization would not have previously treated as items for discussion. The more potential “noise” produced by a program, the more important readiness for AL and change in the organization becomes (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007). Despite these potential issues, AL coaching, as we describe and practice it, can produce learning for innovation in complex, ambiguous situations.

HR professionals who advocate for AL within their organizations also need to be cognizant of the organizational impact. It is important for a stakeholder in this role to prepare both executives and organizational members for participation in and support of an AL program. Orientation sessions and special executive AL sessions can be used for these purposes (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007).

Coaches internal to organizations need to consider how they can use AL coaching skills both in programs and in their roles as executive coaches. They may struggle with how to operate outside the culture and in challenging executives within their own organization. Coaches external to an organization who have AL coaching skills may be brought in to work in an AL program and can provide the advantage of being an outsider to the culture (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007).
Coaching can certainly be considered to be the new face of leadership for the 21st century (Maltbia & Marsick, 2009). With the many different kinds of coaching available to organizations and individuals, it is important to understand the processes and outcomes that each coaching practice entails. AL and AL coaching offer a variety of processes and potential outcomes. AL coaches use processes that can help individuals deal with rapidly changing environments and enable them to use critical thinking toward transformative learning. The outcomes of such work can help organizations solve complex issues and executives in these organizations reach the upper limits of their potential. As organizations and individuals make decisions about the kind of coaching that would best suit their needs, or practice, AL coaching is one for strong consideration.

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