The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research

Learning Pathways Grid

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The Learning Pathways Grid (LPG) is a visual template (see Figure 1) for a particular kind of conversation analysis. LPG analysis helps professionals discover links from cognition to action, to the effects of action and makes those links explicit; it then supports a pragmatic redesign of action. LPG analysis is a powerful action research tool. It allows professionals to develop reflective practice skills in a rigorous, structured and collaborative way. While ‘reflective practice’ may appear mysterious and unattainable, the LPG allows practitioners at any level to identify ways in which their espoused beliefs and actual actions conflict or are in sync, a key reflective practice skill.

Figure 1 The Learning Pathways Grid

An LPG analysis is a stepwise process of reflection which guides inquiry into past conversational behaviour that has yielded undesirable results. It is done in a group. At each step in the LPG mapping and redesign, respectful inquiry and suggestions from group members can help an individual see past her or his inevitable biases and blind spots and empower the individual to adopt a new, more effective approach to a challenging situation. At the root of LPG analysis is the frame, a term applied loosely to encompass related concepts such as assumptions, cognitive schemas and mental models. The simple LPG conceptual model is that frames lead to behaviours, which in turn have consequences, as depicted by the left-to-right sequences in Figure 1. Frames both inform and limit actions; however, the individual has the power to imagine and adopt different frames that will lead him or her to more effective behaviours. LPG analysis supports this reframing. The LPG emerged from the interrelated traditions of Action Science, organizational learning, action inquiry and family systems therapy. It was developed initially by Diana McLain Smith and colleagues in the early 1990s for use in organizational development consulting. This entry explains the LPG and describes its application.

LPG Analysis Overview

LPG analysis begins with a case written by an individual whose actions failed to yield the
desired outcomes. The focal behaviour is excerpted from an interpersonal interaction, which might be a meeting, a teaching or training session or a professional team effort, such as surgery or the work of a flight crew. LPG analysis is conducted ‘offline’ with trusted peers. The remainder of this entry refers to those conducting the analysis as ‘the group’ and to the focal individual who experienced the dilemma as the ‘case writer’.

LPG analysis follows the flow of the arrow in Figure 1. The case writer prepares a case about a conversation with problematic results. The case is presented to the group. The group and the case writer then use the LPG to map specific thoughts and actions that appear to have led to the undesired results. Group and case writer then use the LPG to craft alternative ways of thinking and acting, which hold the potential to bring about the desired results in the future. The steps are described below.

**Case History**

The history is typically brief. It includes specific examples of what was said and done, how others responded and what the focal individual was thinking and feeling. The case also includes a brief introduction with some background and ends with lingering concerns or questions.

**Mapping Problematic Thoughts and Actions**

A blank LPG (Figure 1) provides a sequence for and visual record of the analysis. A highly simplified case is used in the following example to illustrate the six steps of the LPG analysis. In this case, the case writer had grown frustrated and quit a project team when the team appeared to be mired in old habits and when the team members appeared unwilling to listen to the case writer’s suggestions.

1. In dialogue with the group, the case writer first enters one or more items in the Desired Results LPG cell to document his aims for the interaction described in the case. Two desired results in the sample case might be ‘Team learns of problems with current methods’ and ‘I help team envision new methods.’
2. Next, the group documents Actual Results—in other words, the problematic outcomes. For the sample case, this would be ‘Team maintains current methods’ and ‘I quit the team’. Comparison of actual with desired results yields an outcome gap—that is, important ways in which the results differed from the aims.
3. The group identifies Actual Actions, for example, what was said or left unsaid, which led to the Actual Results and, in particular, to the outcome gap. For the sample case, this would be ‘I explained why their approach is wrong’, ‘I said they seemed unwilling to listen to my ideas’ and ‘I quit’.
4. In the next step, the group helps the case writer uncover the subjective experience leading to the actions and to the outcome gap. Typically, this centres on the case writer’s thoughts and feelings leading to the actual actions and, more specifically, on the case writer’s often tacit assumptions or patterns of beliefs, called ‘frames’ in this context. For the sample case, this would be ‘The team is stuck in habitual practices’ and ‘The team will never listen to a new employee like me’. While a wealth of accurate frames often can be generated at this stage, the analysis should be parsimonious: What are the most essential and powerful frames that can explain the Actual Actions?

**Crafting Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting**
With the problematic thoughts, actions and results mapped, attention turns to reframing and the situation.

1. The overarching inquiry here is what plausible new perspectives and/or assumptions might the case writer adopt which could lead to more effective actions and desired results? The aim is pragmatic: What are the simplest, subtlest cognitive shifts that can trigger more effective actions? These are entered in the Desired Frames LPG cell. Continuing our sample case, this would be ‘The team’s current methods may actually be logical; the better I understand the team’s current methods, the better I can suggest improvements that members will accept’.

2. Finally, the group helps the case writer generate some potential Desired Actions consistent with these frames, which may help the case writer achieve the desired results in the future. To conclude our example, ‘Inquire about the logic of the team’s approach’, ‘Avoid attacking their approach’, and ‘Suggest improvements that build on what they are already doing’.

LPG analysis is most useful when the type of situation analyzed is likely to recur and where the case writer’s actions are likely to affect the outcomes in meaningful ways. It can be used anywhere when individuals wish to learn from interpersonal experience in order to improve their professional or personal practice and where they have a trusted group of colleagues or peers to work with.

See also: community of inquiry; cycles of action and reflection; reflective practice; two-column technique

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