



The Wordwise Coaching Podcast

TRANSCRIPT – BONUS EPISODE

Unleashing the Power of Questions with Shannon Banks

Rachel (00:00:05) - Hello and welcome to the Wordwise Coaching podcast. I'm Rachel Goodwin, an executive coach, and for this series, I've chosen some of the common areas I focus on with clients and have invited fellow coaches and experts to explore them with me. In my work with clients, I aim to help them improve their performance in the workplace. It's really rewarding to see the difference coaching can make, and I'm now excited about reaching a wider audience, sharing experience and advice, and hearing your thoughts. So please do visit <https://rachelgoodwin.uk/>, where you'll find suggested reading around today's podcast, the top tip summary and all the other episodes. Today I'm joined by Shannon Banks. Shannon had a highly successful career at Microsoft and then launched her own organisation, BE leadership. She and her team help organisations bring their social purpose to life through their people. Shannon is also a certified Action Learning Coach and trainer. Her new book, BECAUSE will be published in October 2023. I found it a compelling and insightful read. It's focused on social leadership and helping readers to develop skills to live and work in line with their purpose.

Rachel (00:01:25) - Today we're going to talk about the power of questions versus the habit of making assumptions and action.

Shannon (00:01:32) – Action Learning, at its core, is a small group problem solving method that attempts to get a balance between making real progress on real challenges and learning.

Rachel (00:01:47) - Listening isn't you planning what you're going to say next.

Shannon (00:01:54) - Children are wonderful at questioning, but as we become adults and even go through school, we're really taught to stop questioning.

Rachel (00:02:06) - Thanks so much for joining me today, Shannon.

Shannon (00:02:09) - I'm happy to be here. Rachel.



Rachel (00:02:11) – One of the many learnings I took from the training you ran was about the power of questions. Can you tell us about that and explain the science behind it?

Shannon (00:02:18) - Sure, I'd be happy to. I love the topic of questions. In BE leadership. We work with a framework of 12 social leadership skills, and one of them is actually curiosity. So, questions are really at the core of a lot of the work that we do with our clients. There are four things that we always talk about that are really valuable about questioning.

Shannon (00:02:41) - I mean, one is that they help us to be way more creative, so we get to far better breakthrough ideas and solutions, because instead of relying on our own assumptions and our own knowledge, we can draw in the insights and perspectives of other people. The second thing is that it helps us build engagement and develop relationships with other people because, let's face it, we like to talk. And so when we ask people questions, they get an opportunity to talk and it engages them in whatever it is that's being discussed. The third is that it gives us a chance to step away from our own thoughts and our own focus and expand our thinking and get new perspectives. So it's almost like space to think for us. And then finally, it helps us diverge. So because we're all so inclined to jump to solutions as humans, we all do that every day. And before we do that, if we stop and ask questions, it diverges our thinking and lets us expand our perspective and incorporate new ideas. I think one of the reasons that curiosity and questioning are so important today is because of the amount of change that's happening in the world.

Shannon (00:04:09) - There's a lot of transition going on in the world today, and it's far more volatile and complex than it was in the past. Some of these changes are positive and involve technological advance and digital transformation. But then there also are the difficult ones around the pandemic and crisis around conflict and even financial issues. So I think in that kind of environment, we all need really good ability to question and be curious. Sadly, though, we lose a lot of this ability when we're kids. Children are wonderful at questioning, but as we become adults and even go through school, we're really taught to stop questioning. And we're really taught to make assumptions. So I think this is a really important topic. You asked about the neuroscience. I did a degree. I did a coaching certificate with the Neuro Leadership Institute, and I'm fascinated around the science of the brain and how it impacts us as leaders. And the neuroscience around questioning is really, really fascinating. Basically, one of the things it says is that when someone asks a question and you have an insight as a result of that question, you develop new neural networks in your brains, new connections in your brain, and you're far more likely then to take an action.

Shannon (00:05:43) - So if someone just gives you advice, nothing changes in your brain and you're not as likely to take action. But if you're asked a question and you have an insight, it actually changes the mapping in the brain.

Rachel (00:05:56) - That's so fascinating. It's so interesting. And also, just to go back to the point you made about questioning in children, because we joke about it, don't we? We joke about, oh, you know, it's just endless questions. But I'd never really, I suppose I assumed that was the stage we



went through. But then to think that there's, there is kind of conditioning going on that closes that down is, is really quite sad, isn't it?

Shannon (00:06:21) - It's incredibly sad. And I once had a trainer named Mike Marquardt, who's actually one of the founders of the World Institute for Action Learning, and he talked about the fact that when children are young, he gave the example of a young toddler who digs through a handbag and looks at everything in a handbag, and at some point they stop doing that because we tell them societally that that's wrong, right? It's not appropriate to necessarily go up to a stranger's handbag and start pulling everything out.

Shannon (00:06:55) - And so society teaches us to stop exploring. And as soon as that happens, the learning curve that we have stops. It plateaus.

Rachel (00:07:04) - It is. It's really, really. Remarkable. Yeah. And something to really be aware of around children.

Shannon (00:07:10) - Yeah, indeed. We tend to tell kids to stop questioning because it gets tiring. And what we should really be doing is encouraging them to continue that questioning. Unfortunately, the education system in most places in the world also really discourages open questions.

Rachel (00:07:27) - Yeah, well it is. You can see it is time consuming, but it's about really encouraging that continuous learning, isn't it? So what would you say are the ingredients of a good question then.

Shannon (00:07:40) - Well I would probably talk about that around two dimensions. There are many ways probably to define this. So this isn't necessarily the only answer to this question. But I think one thing to think about is whether the question is open or closed. Most people know that language and recognize the difference, but we even if we know that we often ask questions that we intend to be open in a closed way.

Shannon (00:08:05) - So even experienced coaches that I work with and I would say for myself, I have to continually practise opening my questions up and making sure I'm not closing them inadvertently. Closed questions are fine if they're intended to be closed, but oftentimes we really want to be asking an open question and that can be more powerful. The other dimension that I look at are empowering and disempowering, and that's more about the tone and the style with which the questions asked. There are some language considerations there too.

Why as a starting point can often be an empowering, but I think a lot of that is about the tone with which it's asked. You know, if you say, why did you do that? Of course, that's very empowering. And



if you ask it in a very curious way, it can be empowering. So that's what I think about as the foundation for the ingredients of a good question.

Rachel (00:09:05) - And so when we're talking about open questions, we're talking about how, what why so really getting people to think rather than just the closed yes and no type answers.

Shannon (00:09:17) - Correct. And what's interesting really, is that when people really want to be asking an open question and they instead ask it in a closed way, which often is starting with an open question and then closing it down themselves by giving lots of their own answers because they're trying to help, they get one of two things from their respondent. Either they get a long, meandering answer because effectively the person is trying to figure out what they want, or they get a limited answer that's constrained by the assumptions that the person has put into the question. So if you open it up, leave it open. Don't answer your own question. You'll get far better responses.

Rachel (00:10:11) - One of the things that really stuck with me from the training that we did was the quote from Einstein, and that always seems to resonate with clients as well. Can you just tell us a bit about that?

Shannon (00:10:23) - Sure. Einstein came to mind for me when you said something about lifetime learning, because he was the ultimate lifetime learner, and he spent his whole life asking great questions.

Shannon (00:10:36) - And at least I don't know if it's true or not. But there is at least a rumour that he really loved spending time with his grandchildren because he thought that they asked the highest quality questions. He has loads of great quotes relating to questioning and lifelong learning, and one of them that I love actually, which isn't the one I think you're thinking of, but I'll get to that one in a minute, is that education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think. And I just think that's a beautiful quote from him, but one that really, really resonates for me, that I think that you mention is this one that says, if I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask. For once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes, which just speaks to the power of questioning and its ability to help us with our problem solving.

Rachel (00:11:33) - Yeah, yeah. And also, this idea of and we'll talk more about this in a moment about spending time exploring to get the right answer rather than rushing to an answer, because it's actually not time effective. It's not efficient. But just also I mean, there's obviously the asking of the questions, but then the whole point of that is that you have to listen to the response. So what would you say about the importance of listening, proper listening? Hmm.



Shannon (00:12:03) - Well, you're absolutely right that questioning is one side of it and listening is the other. And we aren't very good listeners, really, even those of us who are coaches and trained to listen. When we think about it, we're not always doing a good job of that. And I kind of think about listening in two different ways. One is, are we active listening or not active listening? So I'll talk about that one. And then there's another piece of listening that I think is really helpful. So in terms of active listening or not, you know, of course we want to be active listening, but there are all sorts of ways that we shut our listening down.

Shannon (00:12:41) - So either we are making assumptions about what's going to be said, and we only listen to the first few words, and then we just assume we know or we're selective in our listening. Some of us think our parents can be selective in their listening, or our children can be selective in their listening it's probably both. Sometimes we're false listening, so we're pretending to listen and we're not actually listening. And a lot of times we're listening to get our own word in. So we're sort of listening and we're really thinking about the next brilliant thing that we want to say. So all of those impede our ability to really actively listening, listen. But then the other thing that I really love that I've learned around listening came from Jennifer Garvey Berger, and she has a fantastic book, which probably many people know, which is *Unlocking Leadership Mind Traps*. But she talks about listening to learn, and she talks about that in contrast to listen, to fix and listen to win. And so this relates to assumptions as well.

Shannon (00:13:51) - Because when we listen to learn, we are actually really open in our listening. And we are not assuming that we know everything. But unfortunately, a lot of times we listen to fix or listen to win. And there's an assumption there that we're right in both of those forms of listening.

Rachel (00:14:08) - That's so interesting that listen to fix and listen to win. Yeah. And also, I think whenever I talk about this with clients, especially in a group, when you say listening, isn't you planning what you're going to say next? There's often a lot of kind of smiles and nods around that, because I think it's a genuine desire to be engaged, isn't it? It's not. Oh, I want to shut this person down. It's like, oh, I've got something to add or I know something about that. So the intent is positive and being engaged, but it does mean that you're not then fully engaged with what they're saying after that point 100%.

Shannon (00:14:46) - I actually think it's always well intended. Yeah. Because it is about oh, I know about that.

Shannon (00:14:52) - And like you start out interested. Yeah. And I think actually I have an extroverted preference. And I think unfortunately people with an extroverted preference have even a worse time with that because we're always seeing things through a communal lens or something like, I think we feel like we've got our own experience to bring in, and it's just a way of engaging around it by talking about, oh, I know about that. It's difficult for sure for a lot of people.



Rachel (00:15:20) - Yeah, yeah. No, it is. It's one to watch, isn't it? So coming back to the action learning, which was sort of how we met, when I talk to people about action learning, that can often be a variety of models or understanding around that term. Now you're part of the World Institute of Action Learning, so can you tell us about that? They have a, you know, a very specific model and process, don't they? Could you just tell us a bit about that?

Shannon (00:15:49) - Sure. Yes. There are a number of forms of action learning that exist around the world.

Shannon (00:15:55) - They all really start from the same common foundation. So there was a gentleman in the UK named Reg Revans who really is seen as the grandfather of action learning. And so at the heart of all of the different action learning approaches, there are some commonalities. The approach that my team and I use and that you trained in and we work together in, is with the World Institute for Action Learning and the difference is, I guess what I'll do is talk about the WIAL method, the World Institute for Action Learning method, just to explain that. So we really focus on six components that we think are really needed in order to be the most effective. When we work in action learning and action learning at its core, is a small group problem solving method that attempts to get a balance between making real progress on real challenges and learning at the same time, and developing ourselves at the same time. And as I say, I think that's common across all but in the WIAL method we have these six components. So we have a small group of 4 to 8 people who are coming together to work on a challenge, which is the second thing.

Shannon (00:17:21) - It's a problem. It has to be real. It's not about working on some kind of theoretical case study. It needs to be a real challenge. The third component is around questioning to our point here. So it involves questioning at its core with reflection and with active listening. The fourth and fifth are a focus on action and learning. So both a commitment to learning and pausing to reflect on learning and really properly developing ourselves while we're working and at the same time taking action, developing strategies. And then finally, the sixth component is a coach who is there to support the group, doesn't get involved in the problem, but helps enhance the performance of the group and make sure that they're working at their very best.

Rachel (00:18:17) - I mean, I think one of the things that I found difficult at the beginning, but also very helpful, actually, was there is this very clear framework, isn't there? And you absolutely adhere to it. And at first, I sort of felt a bit uncomfortable with that. But I think as a coach then I found that very containing and I think the groups find it very containing.

Rachel (00:18:39) - I'm constantly surprised by actually how easily they slip into that way of working.

Shannon (00:18:46) - Yes, indeed. So with the WIAL method, we have a framework of questions that we always ask and that we always go through when we're working with a group. There obviously are opportunities to bring in additional questions and interventions to support the group with what they



need. But there's a corset that we always ask, and it is amazing how if you work with a group over time, they rely on those. They love those questions, and they'll even get to a point where they ask them themselves. So it's not like they're relying on you as a coach as much as just relying on the structure. I think people like having those guardrails, and it gives boundaries to the work that is that is really powerful, actually. We also have a core ground rule in the action learning method, which is statements can only be made in response to a question. And that sounds very straightforward in theory and is incredibly difficult. And it's amazing the power of that when people work through the challenges of it and figure out, wow, that's hard.

Shannon (00:19:57) - And wow, when I do that, it really brings value.

Rachel (00:20:00) - I can still see myself sitting there around your table. When we did the program, and I honestly, I was thinking about this this morning, it was almost like I could feel my brain creaking, thinking, how can I do this? How can I get what I want? By coming up with the question and resisting the whole statement thing. So it does. It forces you to think in a way that is far deeper and more purposeful than just the normal kind of to and fro of a conversation around something. So people do find it really difficult, but when they make the effort to do it and they see the results, they do start to really engage with it and stick with it.

Shannon (00:20:44) - Yeah, they do. And I think there are two really powerful benefits from it. One is that it's far more inclusive. So in groups that often aren't inclusive in the way they work and are hierarchical, or one voice is always the loudest or they don't hear from some people, it eliminates all of that, and it really ensures that everyone has an equal voice.

Shannon (00:21:11) - And people really, really notice the power of that in their problem solving as well as in their behaviour. So as a result of that, you get the second benefit, which is way better solutions and far more effective problem solving because you actually can benefit from those diverse perspectives. And people are really blown away by that benefit. And how useful it is. An important it is to get diversity into the decision making and the problem solving. Yeah, yeah.

Rachel (00:21:45) - And also, I think, you know, if you're working with a group or a team that work together quite regularly, they've developed habits and they're really ingrained and they're probably not aware of them. And one of the first groups I worked with using this model, there was somebody who just didn't offer up their opinions. They rarely spoke, to be honest. And because of this method, she was far more engaged in the process and felt, I think, empowered to say a lot more, more confident. And at the end of it, when she was talking about the experience, she started crying because she she'd been in this group for quite a while, but this was the first time she felt that she'd really made her point and been heard.



Rachel (00:22:33) - So it was it was an incredibly powerful experience for her, and then for the rest of the team to realise what it evolved over time and the impact it had had on her and on the quality of their discourse, I suppose, and the solutions. So it can really break down those habits, can't it?

Shannon (00:22:54) - That's wonderful to hear. And yes, I remember the very first team that I used action learning with as an early coach was my own team that I worked with my peers. And like the description you just gave, we had our own normal ways of working and we were very close as a team. But a couple people often kind of bickered with each other. And one of the things that happens in action learning is you surface something that's going on in the group to help with the performance. And I remember surfacing that and the two people involved denied it. And yet when we went back into the problem solving again, they stopped doing it completely. And the behaviours all were completely different. And when we reached the end of the session, everyone talked about how powerful it was and how that much better the behaviours and the problem solving was as a result.

Shannon (00:23:51) - So yeah, there's so much power in just asking questions and surfacing. Yeah. What's going on?

Rachel (00:23:58) - Yeah. And also, at the beginning when you identify what particular element, what sort of leadership skill that you want to be working on within. So you set an intention there, don't you? And you share it so that you're setting your own intention, but you're also sort of enabling the group to support you with that and to notice that. And as I was going through the notes from the course that we did and just refreshing it all, that just seems like such a simple idea. But so powerful, the idea that this whole tandem process of trying to come up with a solution, but also observing your own behaviour, the behaviour of a group, and stopping and reflecting on that as you go along, you know, it is very simple, but so, so powerful.

Shannon (00:24:45) - Yes. Thank you for raising that. That's one of the things we hadn't really talked about. And that's one of the differences between the WIAL action learning method and some of the other methods that exist.

Shannon (00:24:59) - In the WIAL method we always, at the start of the session, each identify a leadership skill that we want to work on within the group and that we can demonstrate within our work. And then at the end of the session, we always do a reflection learning review where we share how we think we did on that skill, and then we get feedback from others in the group and the Coach on how it went. And it's very, very powerful. And there's actually some neuroscience around that because what you're basically doing is raising to your subconscious a skill that you think would bring value. And even if you're not actively thinking about it, you do improve that skill just by kind of having declared it at the start of the session. Yeah. So it really allows everyone to bring their best selves to the action learning. Yeah.



Rachel (00:25:57) - It is it's really, really fantastic. Also, the idea that you've got that intention for yourself, but then the pauses to kind of check in. Can you tell us a bit about that? Because that's incredibly powerful as well.

Shannon (00:26:11) - Yeah. One of the requirements of the coach or the responsibilities of the coach and is within the coach's authority is an ability to check in at any point and intervene at any point to check on and ask questions around how the group is, is doing. And you work on a couple of things. One is the learning of the group and helping them reflect on that, and the other is sort of the performance around the problem solving. And one of the core check ins is, how are we doing on a scale of 1 to 10 and what's going well and what could be even better? And that's so foundational and sounds so obvious. And yet how often do we do that in a normal meeting? We don't do that. We don't stop and say, actually, how are we doing? And another really wonderful thing in action, learning that we do is try to find out whether there's agreement on the problem, like how often when we're working in a meeting, does anyone stop and say, hang on, are we actually what are we working on? Do we have agreement on the problem that we're trying to solve? Nobody does that.

Shannon (00:27:19) - Yeah. And then just the surfacing of the various forms of the problem, the way in which the problem is being defined by different people is massively eye opening.

Rachel (00:27:29) - It really is. Because, again, when we first did that, I remember the pause and saying, right, you know, do people want to write down what they think the problem is? Let's see if we all have the same understanding. And I can remember sitting there thinking, well, of course we do, because the person at the beginning explained it. So that's what the problem is. And then being astonished by the variety of views and opinions about what the problem was. And yeah, it was so eye opening. And of course, as I've done it with groups, it's often the case that there is this massive difference in understanding. And so, you're all sitting there investing time and working on completely different focuses. It's really bizarre.

Shannon (00:28:15) - I'm really smiling here because I've actually had people say to me, why do we have to write it down? She just said what it is.

Shannon (00:28:21) - I'm like, no, no, just write it down. And then they're like, oh, because you go around and ask, do we have agreement on the problem? They're like, no. Yeah, it is very funny.

Rachel (00:28:32) - Yeah, it is very interesting.

Shannon (00:28:34) - And you know, by the way, that is a neuroscience thing because we all bring things from our past, right? We have patterns and connections in our brain that help us to interpret what we hear. So we all hear things through the quote unquote lens. It's not a lens. But we through that filter that in our brains from our past. And so those connections cause us to interpret the same



sentence in different ways. And that's what leads to all those different perspectives, which is really fascinating. Yeah.

Rachel (00:29:07) - Yeah. And also, I think it's so important to keep reminding myself of that because so much of the frustration around communication can be, well, why would they think that? And that's just this is just confusing everything. And why didn't they read that properly? Or there's been there's been something I've been trying to organize this week with just three people involved and some of the emails I found myself reading them thinking, well, that's not what they said, you know, why did you do that? Because that wasn't what we agreed.

Rachel (00:29:38) - And you can feel the frustration and, you know, the temptation to write back and say, I think it was perfectly clear. Whereas, you know, you take a breath, you step back and you realize that's just there was a bit of information missing, or they assumed something. And then before you launch in with everybody getting very frustrated with one another, it's that acceptance that sometimes you just have to make things clearer or open things up, or revisit what's been agreed rather than making assumptions around it.

Shannon (00:30:11) - Yeah, and maybe even the person who's made the assumption is us. Yes. And not the person like we're sitting there thinking, what? They didn't hear that. Right. Well, maybe we didn't hear that right. It's so hard to get your head around that. But this comes up with spouses and partners and kids as well, where we think, how could you not have understood that? Or how could you not have heard me? And you assume it's them? Yes, maybe it's not.

Speaker 3 (00:30:38) - Yeah.

Rachel (00:30:38) - Now, the other thing is that in this whole thing about have we got agreement on what the problem is, that can often take quite a long time, can't it? Because the work continues to try and clarify that process. I mean, I found that quite difficult because I was kind of thinking, we haven't got much time, we haven't got much time. We're still doing this. We need to start that push to think, well, we've got to come up with some answers now. How does that play out?

Shannon (00:31:04) - It plays out like you just described it in most cases where people are really stressed by it. And I mean, there are a few things to say with that. It goes back to the Einstein quote with 55 minutes in five minutes, if we actually have agreement on the problem, and we've thoroughly explored the problem together, collectively the solutions come really quickly. And so once people go through the whole process and they see that and they see how quickly the solutions can come at the end, then it's far less stressful.

Shannon (00:31:41) - But the first time through, people are really taken aback by it because it's not how we work in the quote unquote normal world. We jump to solutions in the normal world, and



we're paid to jump to solutions in the normal world. And I actually worked with one leader many years ago at Microsoft, who came out of his first action learning session, and he was like, he wasn't even done with it. It was they were at a break and he was looking just overjoyed. And I asked how it was going and he said, I cannot believe it. It's so amazing. And I asked what was going on. And he said, I figured out for the last six months we've been working on the wrong problem. We've been meeting on this problem for six months, and we've been working on the wrong problem. And so spending that time ends up saving you so much time because it ensures that you are actually working on the problem. Yeah. There's also something about engaging everyone collectively in that problem definition that speeds up the problem solving.

Shannon (00:32:48) - Yeah, yeah, there's quite a good book called The Open Organization that relates to this. It's a book by the CEO, former CEO, I believe, of Red Hat, which is an open-source software company, and he really talks about the process by which that organization solves their problems. And they're not using action learning, but they are using a process that's very open and engaging and inclusive early in the problem solving. And he talks about this exact thing where basically there's quite a lot of back and forth and debate. Right? But then as soon as they all are engaged around it, it can take a long time upfront. But then the actual actioning is super fast. Yeah. And so the other thing I would say is that sometimes people think about this process and think it takes forever. Yeah. But actually does it what takes a long time is the problem part. And then the solution is way faster. Like, would you rather spend six months on the wrong problem, or would you rather spend five hours defining the problem and then know that you're working on the right one, which then allows the solutions to come much faster?

Rachel (00:34:05) - Absolutely.

Rachel (00:34:05) - Because I think often the process can be that you start working on a solution and you put quite a lot of effort into it and then realize it's not the right solution. So you have to go all the way back. And that can be a cycle that you go through several times before you do find the right solution. And then inevitably there's the people saying, well, I knew that was going to be an issue, but for whatever reason, they weren't empowered or able to maybe bring that point at the time. So that diversity does make for a far better solution, doesn't it?

Shannon (00:34:38) - Yeah, indeed. You reminded me of one of the stories about Reg Revans, who was this grandfather of action learning. He was really influenced by his dad, who was a marine surveyor, and was called in to look at the sinking of the Titanic. And when his dad went and looked at the sinking of the Titanic, he found that there were a lot of people who worked on its construction, who had worries about its stability and its safety.

Shannon (00:35:12) - But no one had asked them the questions. And I think story goes, that that was very eye opening for Reg Revans, because he realized exactly what you just said, which is, there are people who know a lot if you will ask them questions and bring them in earlier in the process.



Rachel (00:35:30) - Yeah, yeah. And also people from different levels in the organization, because there's the also the example of the pizza delivery. Can you just tell us about that? Because that really I thought that was so interesting.

Speaker 4 (00:35:41) - Yeah.

Shannon (00:35:42) - This is a real story. And I might not tell it perfectly well because it didn't happen to me. But it's a story in the history of the World Institute for Action Learning. It happened in Washington, DC early on in the days of WIAL, and there was a group using action, learning to try to solve a problem. And they had been working quite a long time together, and they decided they were needing to have some dinner, and they ordered pizza, and a pizza person came.

Shannon (00:36:14) - A pizza delivery person came to deliver the pizza and they asked the person to stay. I don't know why. I don't know what the ingenious person was, who that was, who thought that was a good thing to do. And the pizza delivery person sat down and for a while just listened to them. And they had a whole bunch of notes up on the whiteboard with a bunch of steps like ABCd steps. And at some point he stopped them and said, you know, this might be a stupid question, but I understand A, B, and D, but I don't even understand why you need step C, and they all looked at it and realized that they didn't need it. And by not having that step, it would save them thousands and thousands of dollars. And so what they learned from that, that now has become part of our thinking in action learning, is that there's huge power in having a really, really diverse perspective. So even if you're working with an intact team who work together all the time, and you're trying to get those voices, bringing someone in who's really different with a totally different point of view can be massively valuable.

Rachel (00:37:23) - And also the idea that there's somebody in the room who everybody knows doesn't have depth of knowledge necessarily, so it opens up the possibility of just any questions, no question is a stupid question is so important.

Shannon (00:37:40) - Indeed here this person said they thought this would be a you know, maybe this is a stupid question, but and it was the best question that this person could have asked. So yeah, I think that's one of the things that this extended problem exploration allows, which is the idea that no question is off the table and actually diverging and asking as many questions as you can completely out of the box really does bring value before you get to convergence and trying to actually solve the problem. Yeah.

Rachel (00:38:20) - Can you just tell us a little bit more about the role of the coach in the action learning? Because it's quite unusual in some regard, isn't it?

Speaker 4 (00:38:28) - Hmm.



Shannon (00:38:29) - Yeah. So in the while action learning method, the coach is there in service of the team. And to help make sure that the team performs as well as it can and learns, but they are not there to get involved in the problem, which is really quite different to a lot of coaching roles and facilitator roles.

Shannon (00:38:53) - So it's a coach in that they role model questions and they ask questions about the team's performance and their learning and how it's going for them. But they don't ask questions around the actual problem and they don't facilitate in a normal facilitator sense. So it is quite a unique role, but very powerful for the group. And by playing that role as a coach, my experience is that it allows me to really listen to the work in a different way, because I am not listening to the problem to figure the problem out. I'm listening to the quality of the questions. I'm really staying on the balcony and really thinking about the dynamic of the group. And are they building on each other? Are they asking questions that are open? Is everyone getting an opportunity to speak? You just really listen in a different way and that makes you add more value.

Rachel (00:39:57) - I completely agree with that. I think it's a fantastic experience to really underline how important it is to listen because you I mean, it's very intense actually, isn't it? Because if somebody came in, they would see that there's this person who doesn't seem kind of engaged, isn't, you know, kind of driving the discussion or making major input.

Rachel (00:40:19) - But you're right at the heart of it. You're fully, fully engaged. And it's quite exhausting, actually, isn't it, because you're looking at the dynamic so closely in trying to capture all of the points. So it's very, very intense but removed at the same time?

Shannon (00:40:36) - Yeah. There's a model called the Kantor Four Player Model, which maybe you've heard of, which is around different roles that you can play in a conversation. And one of the four players in that model is bystander. And I think in a way it aligns with that. You almost are on the balcony by standing because you're not asking questions about the problem. So it's at a different level. And as you say, it's not less tiring as a result of that or less intense or less focused. It's focused on an entirely different set of things. It's like a different plane and having someone on that plane is where the value comes.

Rachel (00:41:18) - Yeah, yeah. And also, I think it creates a real sense of psychological safety, doesn't it? Because the group feels it feels very different for them, but they know that there's somebody there that is guiding it and giving everybody permission to fully engage with the process.

Rachel (00:41:35) - So I think there's that level of input that they make as well.



Shannon (00:41:40) - I think that's true. And I also think that part of that safety comes from the guidelines and the ground rules that we talked about earlier. Yeah, I think the framework allows people to settle into it and feel secure. Yeah. Which sounds crazy because in a way you'd think it would feel constraining. But actually people like those constraints and it helps with the safety it does.

Rachel (00:42:04) - And also as a coach, you're very clear on what you're doing. So you're not sitting there thinking, you, should I pick up on that or should I? It's absolutely clear. Everybody's role is very, very clear. And that's so helpful. Yeah.

Shannon (00:42:15) - It sort of reminds me of contracting. Well at the beginning of any engagement. I think when you do action learning as a coach, you do contract well around what's going to happen and what your role is as the coach and the ground rule of statements only being made in response to a question.

Shannon (00:42:35) - And like all contracting, that makes things easier.

Rachel (00:42:45) - So how would you describe the impact of this way of working?

Shannon (00:42:49) – Well I think there are lots of positives from it. I think being more inclusive in your leadership style and helping people develop skills that are more inclusive is really at the heart. I think when you go back to questioning and being a good questioner and listener. That's what that allows, is that you're far, you listen to far more diverse perspectives, and you're a lot more inclusive. I think you get better earlier engagement around a problem, and we've all been in meetings where someone brings something to work on, and they just go on for half an hour with some PowerPoint about what their challenges, and you can't follow it because your brain just shuts down. And the asking of questions allows people to engage and stay engaged with the problem. And so that's incredibly powerful. I think that it allows for skills that make people better collaborators. And whether or not the team stays together or they're all going off to work with different teams after the action learning, they're taking skills back to their team that make them better at working with other people and increases the performance of what they do collectively and individually.

Shannon (00:44:12) - And I think ultimately it leads to better problem solving. So because of the quality of the questions, I think you get better solutions and you get better problem solving.

Rachel (00:44:23) - Also, just hearing you talk about it, I suppose, you know, when you talk about someone arriving with a massive PowerPoint, and often that framework is that they're coming with a solution and then they're asking people to comment on it. So you're almost doing the reverse and just opening up the idea, because one of the groups I remember there was somebody who was quite new to the team, had been given something to work on that was historically really difficult and



complicated. It had quite a history to it. And they felt, you know, they had to prove themselves. They felt under massive pressure and, you know, they were attempting to do it. But being offered the possibility of bringing it as a problem and not having to pretend that they had a solution was really helpful to just that idea of everybody wanting to support in driving something forward.

Rachel (00:45:21) - And I'm thinking it isn't that common? I don't think. Really?

Shannon (00:45:25) - No, actually that's true. One of the forms of action learning that we do is something we call multi problem action learning. Sometimes it's called a learning circle. It's like a peer coaching group really. And one of the things we often hear from people who participate in those is that they feel far less isolated and alone because there's when they hear what the problems are of other leaders in the group, whether they're in their same organisation or other organisations, whoever they are, they suddenly realize, oh, I'm not alone in having challenges, and I can actually relate to these people's challenges. There are commonalities across the challenges, and so it's helpful just from a wellbeing perspective, that people feel less lonely, less isolated, more heard. Yeah. So there are all those benefits too.

Rachel (00:46:18) - Yeah. And do you think it sticks? Do you think people do continue kind of using some of the practices or is it one off?

Shannon (00:46:29) - We know it sticks because we hear from leaders months and years later who say that it's really transformed their leadership.

Shannon (00:46:35) - So, you know, there are two levels of this. One is the role of the coach and one is the person who's involved in the action learning. I think if you do action learning, coaching, it influences all the other coaching that you do and probably the questioning you do elsewhere, because it's really powerful to observe this process. Yeah. If you work in an action learning team or in any other way, work on your questioning skills, I think leaders come back to us and say how transformative that is around their leadership, their way of engaging with other people, the effectiveness of what they do. So I think both the overall questioning skills and some of the specific interventions that we do in action learning can be used outside of the core action learning context and can be very helpful.

Rachel (00:47:36) - Because as you say, you can there are so many different elements to it that even if you don't use absolutely every single element. Even if you use 1 or 2 and stick with it, it will have a really significant impact.

Rachel (00:47:50) - And I think the experience of a team being able to observe themselves and given permission to talk about that is very powerful in itself.



Shannon (00:48:03) - Yeah. So this reflection that we do well as we go along and at the end around what has gone well and what could be even better, what do we do best as a group? All of those types of reflections that we do along the way. That's powerful.

Rachel (00:48:25) - Could you just give us a sense of the work that you've done using action learning and some of the impact that it's had, some of the outcomes?

Speaker 4 (00:48:33) - Sure.

Shannon (00:48:34) - We use action learning a whole lot. I'm not really a person who relies on one tool. I actually really like bespoke work and I believe in many methodologies, but it's quite amazing to me how often we work with action learning and how consistently impactful it is, despite being used in lots of different organisations and different forms. Next week we have a hackathon running. It's the 11th hackathon we were running with one of our clients, which is BNP Paribas.

Shannon (00:49:08) - It's a bank and in that hackathon we use Action Learning, where we bring together employees who are talent at BNP Paribas, with social partners who are coming to the group completely different organizations with challenges that they're facing in their charities or in their social enterprises. And so we're working on challenges that have really huge social impact with partners that work across a range of different areas, from learning disabilities to gender to the environment, you know, just a broad, broad range of social organisations. And we basically allow the talent from the bank to, in a small group, partner with one of those social partners and really immerse themselves in that organisation and their challenges. So we start out with an immersion session, which kind of draws from some of the ideas of design thinking and allows people to without having any context of what the problem is, go on a little emotional journey with the partner to really understand why they exist, what their purpose is, and really emotionally engage with that partner. And then when we start the action learning, they kind of already have that context and they go into the action learning with really no subject matter expertise whatsoever, bringing their diverse perspectives to work along with that social partner on the challenge that they've brought.

Shannon (00:50:48) - So unlike a lot of these types of programs where the partner presents the challenges and walks away and then comes back to hear the outcome, it's not that, we're working alongside each other through the week, and it's incredibly powerful for everyone involved. So at an individual level, the leaders get really great leadership skill development, both from the bank side and from the partner side, because they're all identifying leadership skills they want to work on. They learn great team skills, how to work and collaborate better together and be more inclusive in their leadership. The organization benefits because they start to develop skills that they can take back and apply in their jobs, and the social partners also benefit with new insights as well as the leadership development from the action learning.



Rachel (00:51:43) - That sounds fantastic. And so BNP Paribas have done all 11 of these with you, that you've been doing that consistently with them?

Shannon (00:51:51) - Yes, we started it in 2016 and the first five were in person in various parts of the world, and we did our immersion going out into, you know, the communities in India and different partners in New York and things going on the ground into offices and things.

Shannon (00:52:10) - And when the pandemic started, we moved these online and we actually found, while different and there are different pros and cons, there are some really wonderful diversity benefits of doing these virtually. So we've done the subsequent ones all online, and it's amazing how you can get transported through zoom or through teams or any other platform like that to somewhere that you're not. So I worked with a partner who was in South Africa, and they took us on a tour via their mobile phone of the community within which they worked, and I swear it was like we were there. It was so incredibly powerful and so immersive. And so I've really learned a lot, actually, about what's possible virtually through these programs.

Rachel (00:53:00) - It is amazing, isn't it? If I'd have been told a few years ago that I was going to be running things virtually, I would have said no, absolutely no way. But there are some losses, but there are some real gains and it's really fantastic. Yeah. What amazing work. I'm just going to run through the top tips now to just kind of try and encapsulate all that we've talked about today, which is a bit of a challenge, but here we go.

Rachel (00:53:30) - So accept that it's worth investing time to fully engage with the problem and explore it thoroughly, rather than rushing to a solution.

Take time and check in to ensure everyone has agreed on what the problem is.

Experiment with embracing the power of thoughtful, open questions bringing real curiosity.

Experiment with really listening, active listening, not waiting to speak and not making assumptions.

Observe and resist your potential inclination to rush to a solution.

Always try and engage with a wide audience with a diversity of views when looking for solutions.

When working in a group or team, take time out to reflect on performance. What are you doing well, what could you be doing better?

Make sure that you're creating an atmosphere where everyone can contribute, where everyone's talents are respected and drawn on.

Remember, you can find a transcript of this episode and all the support materials at Rachel Goodwin UK. If you've enjoyed this episode, please do spread the word. You could leave a review where you're listening, post on LinkedIn, or just recommend to a colleague or friend.



Rachel (00:54:49) - I really appreciate your support. Shannon, it's been so fantastic to talk to you today. It's such a powerful tool and so important to constantly remind ourselves of how important questions are. So I'm really, really grateful for you giving up your time and sharing this knowledge with us and your great experience.

Shannon (00:55:13) - I've loved it, Rachel. It's my pleasure. Thank you for the opportunity.

Rachel (00:55:17) - Great. Thanks very much.