

UNIVERSITY
ACADEMIC THESIS

ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

ASSIGNMENT TYPE: ESSAY

Questions:

- 1) *Explain how the action research approach may be applied in an organisation. Give a real or hypothetical example*
- 2) *An ideal OD consultant-client relationship is based on mutual trust. Why then do consultants and clients need to bother with developing a contract?*

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Date: 18 April 2002

Question 1

Explain how the action research approach may be applied in an organisation. Give a real or hypothetical example.

“Action research is known by many other names, including participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, action learning and contextural action research” (O’Brien 1998, p.2), but all these terms are just variations of a theme. In essence, action research involves the identification of a problem by a group of people who does something to resolve it, review its results, and if not successful, runs through the whole cycle again, until a satisfactory result is derived. This is generally how the approach is formed, but a more succinct definition of action research is,

“Action research refers to a change process based on systematic collection of data and then selection of a change action based on what the analysed data indicates.”

- Robbins, Water, Cacioppe, and Millett (1994), p.802

The difference between the defined *action research* from professional practices, and our daily general problem-solving practices, is in the emphasis of a scientific methodology for managing planned change. This means that the researcher is required to study the problem systematically to ensure the intervention is informed by theoretical considerations, namely, the theories on action research.

Kurt Lewin (1946) has been generally considered as the ‘father’ of ‘action research’ (O’Brien 1998, p.6; Dickens and Watkins 1999, p.128), having

first coined the term in his 1946 paper, *Action Research and Minority Problems*. In his paper, Lewin characterised action research as “a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action”. His hypothesis on action research is in using a process of “a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action” (Lewin 1946, p.34-46).

In applying the principles using the ‘spiral of steps’ for the purpose of this paper, we will based our study on the cyclical phases of planned changed found in the action research process, generally agreed by most action researchers, to consist of five main steps: analysis, fact-finding (data gathering), planning, executing (acting), evaluating (Dickens and Watkins 1999, pp.128-135; Robbins *et al.*, 1994, pp.802-803; Waddell, Cummings and Worley 2000, pp.28-29). We will look into a case study from the article ‘Using Action Research in a High-tech Rapid Change Environment’, written by Robbins and Deasy, for the December 1995 issue of the *Public Administration Quarterly*.

The case in question took place at a software development company in Silicon Valley, where a department director initiated the call for a planned change study to address a staffing and skills crisis within the organisation. A meeting was called to meet with direct participants, which include the directors from the various departments and sixteen other members of the software development group. Through the collaborative discussion, three

main objectives for the needed action research were derived. The first objective is to effect a “rapid, radical change in the technical skill level of the software development personnel”, and the second is to “provide a vehicle for the staff to remain at the leading edge technologically on an on-going basis”. The final objective is to “stem the turnover of experienced personnel. The desired outcome is to have well trained personnel prepared to create state-of-the-art software products while simultaneously providing for continued maintenance of the company’s existing software” (pp.3-4)

Having identified the main issues requiring problem formulation, the top management decided to hire a change agent, an outside consultant in action research, to conduct a preliminary analysis of the organisation. The first step in the action research cycle involves the *analysis* and identification of the questions to be studied. Based on the three objectives mentioned above in the problem identification phase, a practical, general and open-ended analysis was made to determine how to achieve tangible results. For the purpose of this paper, we will only focus on the first of the three objectives, which is aimed at achieving rapid, radical change in the technical skill level of the software development personnel. In this case, through the analysis, it was suggested that the focus for the first objective should to study on the technical education need and decide on who gets what classes, when, and how to deliver them (pp.8-9).

Upon completion of the initial preliminary analysis, the consultant presents his feedback to the client, before he proceeds to step two of the action

research cycle in the *fact-finding* phase, or *data gathering*. During this phase, the team of researchers, consisting of members from the organisation and the OD practitioners, conducts one-on-one interviews with ten of the sixteen people involved in the project. This is done so as to determine how members feel about participating in a collaborative planning project, and about learning new technologies (pp.9-11). The interviews also help to build interrelationship between the members of the organisation and the practitioners, and in getting commitment through.

After the data gathering phase has completed, the next step involves the *planning* and conceptualisation of the design for the proposed activities. This is the third step of the action research cycle. The activities at this stage continue to be collaborative in nature *for joint action planning*. A concrete implementation plan is drawn out at this stage, detailing tasks specification, estimated start dates, schedules for various training programs, identification for performance criteria, and bi-monthly meetings to review the status of events and its validity in the fluid nature of the company (p.11-12).

Once the concrete plan is drawn out, the fourth step in the action research cycle is in *executing (acting)* the specified tasks. During this phase, the identified tasks in the plan begin to be implemented. The person responsible for setting up the technical resource library first identifies a space, then puts a PC, several periodicals, books, tapes and CDs to add to the library. The person responsible for teaching the PC system components held her class on the scheduled date, and the various other tasks in the list

continue to be executed and acted on by the various parties. These resulted in generating a lot of interest and the heightening of staff enthusiasm (p.12).

The final step in the action research cycle is the *evaluation* step. Upon executing the planned tasks, the next step “is to identify what measures and criteria can be used to determine the effectiveness of the implementation plan” (p.12). The evaluation step will include an on-going measurement and review of the results after its execution or action. Through the evaluation, the actions performed through research continues to be refined and collaboratively improved, with areas of fluidity adjusted according to the changing technology and industry standards through experimentation. Bi-monthly meetings serve to be the checkpoint and mechanism used for on-going evaluation (p.12).

Based on the study in this paper, we can see that the use of Lewin’s ‘spiral of steps’ in action research result in a successful implementation of actions through data gathering and research. The action research cycle through evaluating and refining actions for further improvements continues after execution and maintains a successful on-going implementation.

Question 2

An ideal OD consultant-client relationship is based on mutual trust. Why then do consultants and clients need to bother with developing a contract?

One of the processes in OD often involves the hiring of an external practitioner to study into the organisational issues, be it problems or areas requiring development. There are, of course, exceptions occasionally, where an internal consultant possessing OD skills and who is familiar with OD practices, may be tasked to look into the organisational development or change. In the latter case, the 'contract' can be relatively informal in nature through a verbal agreement between the organisation and the consultant, or through an email, or other informal modes of communication (Waddell, Cummings and Worley, 2000, pp.72-73).

At the point when the management calls in an OD practitioner to look into the organisation's issues, both the practitioner and the organisation members would have entered into an initial exploration stage of their potential working relationship. The practitioner, through the initial data gathering and fact-finding, will attempt to understand the varying complexity of the requirements and assess whether he or she is able to satisfy the organisation's OD needs. A discussion will ensue between both parties to determine the nature of the problem, the resources required to tackle the problem, and the depth of intervention that will be needed in order to resolve the problem or change requirement. Upon the completion of the analysis, the practitioner will then submit a proposal of what actions

can be done towards meeting the OD requirements. If the client and practitioner decide that they can, and will work together, then a contract must be drawn up to specify the expectations of the two parties, the time and resources to be allocated for the OD activities, and the ground rules for working together (Waddell *et al.*, 2000, pp.68-69).

In entering into a contract between the two parties, it should not be seen that there is a lack of mutual trust between the OD consultant and the client. On the contrary, “unless there is a mutual understanding and agreement about the OD processes, there is considerable risk that someone’s expectations will be unfulfilled” (Waddell *et al.*, 2000, pp.72-73) and this is especially true because of the collaborative nature of OD, which requires involvement by participating members from different areas in the organisation. The goal of contracting is primarily to make a good decision about how to carry out the OD process. In stating the OD specifications, expectations, resource requirements and other areas in a contract from the start, it not only does not hinder the mutual trust between the client and practitioner, but also strengthens and bonds the relationship between the two parties.

In spelling out the details of the OD contract, earlier in this paper, it has been explained that a contract can take the form of a formal or an informal agreement (Waddell *et al.*, 2000, p.72). An example of an informal contract can be in the case of a team leader with OD skills, voicing out his or her concerns to members about how the team is functioning. Through some

discussion, the team members *agree* to spend a specific duration of time in future meetings to diagnose team functions, with the help of the leader. In the case of a formal contract, a formal document may be drawn and signed-off between the client and practitioner. This typically occurs when organisations employ outside OD practitioners. Contracting in the case of government agencies, for example, a different approach may be necessary in order to follow the procurement regulations.

Regardless of whether the contract is formalised or informal, all OD processes require some form of explicit contracting that results in either a verbal or written agreement. Unless there is a contract clarifying the client's and the practitioner's expectations about how the OD process will take place, there is a risk that certain expectations may not be met, and this is especially true when the stakeholders consist of different members in the organisation. Without the contract, reduced commitment and support may become visible, and result in misplaced action or premature termination of the process (Waddell *et al.*, 2000, p.72).

In spelling out the details in the contract, the purpose is to eliminate possible disputes of the deliverables at the succeeding stages or during the different milestones of achievement. Entering into a contract plays an important role in specifying the overall process of OD, including clarifying details of what is to be considered a delivered action completion of the deliverables. In order to have a good content and a well-written contract to address specific areas of possible conflict, which may arise at different

stages, the contract should include key details of the execution procedures, a review and evaluation of the implemented change. According to Harvey and Brown (1992, p.142), the contract should include information such as the point of contact, the role of the consultant, the schedule, the anticipated results, the fees, and the operating ground rules. In short, the main items in the contract should include three areas: mutual expectations, the time and resources, and the ground rules.

To set mutual expectations between the client and the practitioner in the contract would mean that the client must state the services and desired outcomes of the OD process to the consultant. The OD practitioner, on the hand, would need to state to the client what he or she expects to gain from the OD process, and this may include the opportunity to try new OD interventions, reporting the results to other potential clients and receiving appropriate compensation or recognition (Waddell *et al.*, 2000, pp.72-73).

The next item that needs to be spelled out in the contract would be the time and resources to accomplish the change. Both parties, the client and the practitioner, must be clear about how much energy and resources will be dedicated to the change process. Typically, the client will want to know how much time will be necessary to complete the assignment, who needs to be involved, and how much it will cost (Waddell *et al.*, 2000, p.73).

“The final part of the contracting process involves specifying how the client and the OD practitioner will work together” (Waddell *et al.*, 2000, p.73).

The operating ground rules to be specified in the contract should include information such as the point of contact, the requirements of organisation members, the confidentiality of consulting information, the involvement of the practitioner in personal or interpersonal issues, the role of the practitioner in assisting managers make decisions and making expert recommendations, and how the OD relationship will be terminated (Harvey and Brown 1992, p.142).

Having clarified the content requirements of the contract, it should be noted that while a client and practitioner should maintain mutual trust even before they enter into a contract, the purpose of the contract is not to eliminate this trust, but rather to enforce a joint agreement to work closely to meet the organisation's OD objectives and expectation. In the event that a clarification is called to dispute over any deliverables, the contract can then serve as a guideline to address any conflicts.

References

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