**Action research**

*Web version of the chapter included in the 5th edition*

Action research is a human process intervention. It involves the application of scientific methods (fact finding and experimentation) to organizational problems and underpins the generic process model of change presented in Chapter 2.

Lewin developed the action research model in the 1940s when he identified the need for social scientists to base their theory building on research into practical problems. Early projects involved Coch and French (1948) working with employees at the Harwood Manufacturing Company to overcome resistance to change and Lewin working in the community to reduce violence between Catholic and Jewish teenage gangs (see Marrow, 1969). These early projects involved social scientists collaborating with members of social systems to understand and take action to resolve problems. The action research methodology helped members to apply scientific methods to guide their actions and helped social scientists to develop knowledge about social processes that they could generalize to other situations.

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Dickens and Watkins (1999) observe that Lewin originally conceived of action research as a process that involved cycling back and forth between an ever deepening surveillance of the problem situation and a series of research-informed action experiments. These experiments formed an important part of the process. Action research is based on the traditional scientific paradigm that involves experimental manipulation and observation of the effects of the manipulation. However, as Dickens and Watkins note, there are important differences between action research and traditional science. Action research, unlike traditional science, does not attempt to set tight limits and controls on the experimental situation. Also, action research uses information to guide behaviour in order to solve immediate problems, whereas traditional science involves studying information for the purpose of learning and typically ends at the point of discovery. Over time, this dual focus on problem solving and theory building has changed, as those concerned with facilitating change have focused more of their attention on improving organizational functioning within a particular context rather than helping social scientists contribute to the development of theoretical understanding. However, over the past few years, a growing body of social scientists have been using action research as the basis for developing theory. Brydon-Miller et al. (2001) refer to Lewin’s (1951, p. 169) assertion that ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’ as a major influence on their work. Brydon-Miller et al. (2001, p. 15) argue that:

action research goes beyond the notion that theory can inform practice, to a recognition that theory can and should be generated through practice, and … that theory is really only useful insofar as it is put in the service of a practice focused on achieving positive social change.

**Action research and organizational learning**

Hendry (1996) reviews the role of learning in the management of change and refers to Lewin’s three-stage process of change as a learning process. The motive force for learning and change is cognitive dissonance and the experience of disconfirmation. As discussed in Chapter 2, the initial questioning and unlearning associated with this ‘unfreezing’ experience provide the motivation for individuals and groups to engage in the information gathering, diagnosis and experimentation that leads to new learning.

Individuals, groups and whole systems are constantly faced with the need to learn and change in order to adapt to changing circumstances. Those who are best able to adapt are those who are able to learn from their experiences. Kolb (1984) elaborated Lewin’s model and articulated a theory of experiential learning that conceptualizes learning as a four-stage cycle, which translates experience into concepts that are used to guide the choice of new experiences (Figure 20.1).

<Insert Figure 20.1>

*Figure* **20.1***The experiential learning model*

Stage 1 involves engaging in immediate concrete experience in order to provide the basis, at stage 2, for observation and reflection. At stage 3, these observations are interpreted and assimilated into a ‘theory’ from which new implications for action can be deduced. These implications or hypotheses then serve as guides when planning, at stage 4, how to act to create new experiences. If individuals and groups are to be effective learners and action researchers, they must be able to:

*  involve themselves fully, openly and without bias in their experiences
*  reflect on and observe these experiences from many perspectives
*  create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories
*  use these theories to make decisions and solve problems.

**Role of the facilitator**

This process can be facilitated by a change agent. Shepard (1960) advocated a collaborative relationship between consultant and client. His view was that the role of the consultant is to ‘help’ the client or client group to design their fact-finding procedures and plan their actions in such a way that they can learn from them in order to discover better ways of organizing.

The role of the change agent as facilitator rather than prescriber of solutions has received considerable attention. Action learning (Revans, 1980), for example, advocates an approach to learning that involves solving real problems. Mumford (1985) made the point that those who wish to assist learners should do so by helping them to learn from exposure to problems and each other. The role of the facilitator/trainer is to help learners to formulate their own plans for action and test them through implementation.

Over the past 70 years, action research has spawned many related action strategies that have been applied to individual learners, groups, organizations and even wider networks of institutions (see the special edition of *Management Learning*,edited by Raelin, 1999, and the special issue of *Human Relations*, edited by Eldon and Chisholm, 1993). In addition to the classical model of action research, Raelin (1999) refers to five other models: participatory research, action learning, action science, developmental action inquiry, and cooperative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry is also regarded by many as a contemporary development of the classical action research model. This will receive separate and detailed attention in Chapter 20.

**The participative nature of action research**

All these action strategies are inherently participative. According to Raelin (1999, p. 117), facilitators and members of the target system

mutually open themselves up to an inquiry process that seeks to ‘unfreeze’ the assumptions underlying their actions. Their methodologies are experimental and predominantly conducted in group settings.

Reason and Bradbury (2001, p. 1) define action research as

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes … It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

Most of those who advocate a collaborative approach to problem solving in organizations do so because they believe that much of the information relevant to resolving problems is widely disseminated throughout the organization. Participation increases the likelihood that those who hold important information will share it with others. Collaborative approaches to problem solving also build commitment and facilitate the implementation of actions designed to resolve the problem.

Blake and Mouton (1983) report one of the early examples of action research to illustrate the importance of participation. This is described in Example 20.1.

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| ***Example* 20.1*Action research at the Harwood Manufacturing Company***  The Harwood Manufacturing Company was planning to recruit older workers to ease the labour shortage, created by the Second World War, at its pyjama factory in rural Virginia. The proposal was fiercely resisted by supervisors who feared that older workers would be inefficient and difficult to manage. The director of personnel responded by providing supervisors with scientific ‘proof’ that older workers did possess the skills and aptitude necessary to perform effectively. But the supervisors rejected the evidence and were not persuaded. However, rather than moving ahead and imposing the new hiring policy, the director of personnel decided to try to change attitudes by involving the supervisors in a research project designed to investigate the efficiency of older workers.  The study focused on older workers already employed in the plant. Some had been with the company for many years and others had been employed more recently for social reasons, for example because they had been widowed. Members of staff were given full responsibility for designing the project and deciding how to collect the data. The findings of the study were a surprise to the supervisors. They found that it was not age but a range of other factors that were the main determinants of performance. Blake and Mouton report that while the supervisors had rejected ‘expert’ evidence, they were convinced by their own findings. Their involvement in the project helped them to unlearn some of the beliefs they had held to be true and changed their attitudes towards the employment of older workers. |

**The process of action research**

The classical model of action research involves collecting and analysing data about the nature of a problem, taking action to bring about a change, and observing the effects of the action in order to inform further actions to improve the situation. Sometimes, the process starts following the identification of a problem by a senior member of the organization who has the power and influence to make things happen. However, this top-down approach is not the only way of introducing action research methodologies into organizations. Sometimes, group members are aware that a problem exists but, for a variety of reasons, find it difficult to manage the problem more effectively. This may motivate them to take the initiative and seek help from an external facilitator. Whatever the starting point, Lewin (1946) argued that an essential prerequisite for action research is a ‘felt need’, an inner realization that change is necessary. Unless the group are willing to work on their problem, this kind of collaborative intervention is unlikely to succeed.

Following the identification of an issue that requires attention, action research involves successive cycles of action and evaluation. Each cycle comprises five steps. Succeeding cycles begin with the collection and analysis of data to evaluate the consequences of the action taken at the end of the preceding cycle (Figure 20.2). The five steps are:

**1** *Data gathering for diagnosis:* Involves collecting data about the problem. Several methods of collecting data have been discussed in Chapter 9, such as interviews, questionnaires, observations and reference to performance data and other records that are collected as a normal part of day-to-day operations. The choice of method needs to be influenced by the nature of the problem and the people involved. For example, the ‘organization mirror’ (see Change tool 20.2) is a technique that might be appropriate when the problem involves the quality of relationships between a group and other organizational units or external parties such as suppliers and customers. These other units reflect back to the focal group their perceptions and information about its performance. They act as a mirror and provide the group with their view of the situation. Data can be collected by the whole focal group in a meeting with representatives of other units, or by a designated person interviewing others on behalf of the group.

**2** *Data feedback to client group:* Often, members of the focal (problem-solving) group are delegated to investigate particular aspects of the problem or an external facilitator collects data on behalf of the group. Consequently, in order for the process to be truly collaborative, data need to be fed back to all group members.

**3** *Discussion of the data and diagnosis of the problem:* One of the defining features of action research is that system members collaborate with each other and with an external facilitator to review the data, clarify issues and formulate hypotheses about cause and effect.

**4** *Action planning:* Involves identifying possible interventions to improve the situation and selecting a preferred way forward.

**5** *Implementation of action plan:* Involves taking action to improve the situation.

<Insert Figure 20.2>

*Figure* **20.2***The action research process*

Following the first cycle of the process, the original hypothesis about cause and effect and the action taken to improve the situation are evaluated through a further cycle of data gathering, feedback and analysis. This evaluation might suggest ways of refining the original hypothesis, or the implementation of alternative actions, or it might prompt the formulation of a completely different hypothesis regarding the nature of the problem. And so the process continues. Example 20.2 provides an example of how the process can unfold in practice.

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| ***Example* 20.2*Action research at Freedman House***  Freedman House is a 10-bed voluntary hostel for ex-offenders who have recently been released from prison. The initial energy for the Freedman House project had come from probation officers who worked in the community to rehabilitate offenders. They were aware that of the 250 people from their city who were committed to prison each year, over 20 per cent had no fixed abode. Many had been to prison before and homelessness was identified as a factor contributing to their recidivism.  One of the probation officers noticed that there were two uninhabited houses near the city centre that had been boarded up for some considerable time. He thought they might provide the possible basis for a hostel and brought the idea to a volunteer group attached to the local probation office. The group agreed to establish a working party, which eventually obtained planning permission to convert the houses into a hostel. Their next step was to call a public meeting, elect a management committee and launch a fundraising campaign. The committee worked with enthusiasm, but because cash was short, it was impossible to employ contractors to undertake all the necessary work, so members and volunteers did much of the work to convert the houses. Eventually, a warden was appointed, the first residents selected and the hostel opened.  Unfortunately, this was a short honeymoon, soon to end with the premature departure of the first warden. The hostel had to close until a replacement could be found. Two candidates were interviewed and one was appointed. Soon after accepting the post, the successful candidate announced that he would not be able to take up the appointment. Time was short. The hostel was empty and it was decided, that rather than embark on a new round of advertising and interviewing, the unsuccessful candidate would be offered the job, which he accepted.  A few months after the hostel was reopened, the office holders of the management committee decided it was time to take stock and identify priorities to carry the project forward. A national charity concerned with the welfare of offenders agreed to sponsor a consultant to facilitate this work. The office holders had an initial meeting with the consultant, where they provided him with a brief history of the project and outlined, in broad terms, the kinds of issues they felt needed to be addressed. While a number of the group were familiar with action research, some were not and had expected the consultant to introduce them to ‘best practice’ and offer advice. This minority was a little uncomfortable with the consultant’s proposal that he would act as a catalyst to help them move forward, but as the meeting progressed, they warmed to the idea and it was agreed that the group would take the proposal to the next meeting of the full management committee. The full committee agreed to embark on the project and mandated the lead group of office holders to work with the consultant to begin data gathering.  The lead group and consultant discussed the kind of information they would need to help themselves and the full committee understand how the ‘system’ currently operates, identify problems, and explore what could be done to improve matters. They also thought about what they needed to do to gather this information and who should be involved. Because all the group had ‘day jobs’ elsewhere, they invited the consultant to take the lead collecting data and agreed that he would interview all office holders, the warden, two members of the committee who were not office holders, an external stakeholder (a member of the voluntary group attached to the probation service) and two groups of residents (those under 20 and older residents). Interviews with the warden and management committee focused on the goals of the hostel, the hostel organization, strengths and weaknesses, decision making, communications and ‘important issues’. Interviews with residents focused on the goals of the hostel, their expectations before arrival, what it was like now, and what they would change.  The way the process unfolded is shown below in Figure 20.3. A number of issues emerged from the initial feedback meeting. These were:   *  *Finance:* It was felt that raising funds to keep the hostel going would be more difficult than it had been to establish the ‘exciting new project’ in the first place. *  *The relationship between the management committee and the warden:* A majority of the management committee felt that their role was to closely supervise the warden and the general running of the hostel. They also felt that the warden frequently stepped out of role and assumed too much responsibility, thus preventing the management committee from managing. The warden, on the other hand, felt that the management committee was bureaucratic, unwieldy and too reluctant to delegate. It was decided that this issue needed to be one of the first they would work on. *  *The management committee’s contact with residents:* Some committee members felt that it was their right to ‘drop in’ to see how things were going at the hostel. The warden felt that this was inappropriate and insensitive. Other members of the committee supported the warden on this point, and data from residents indicated that they perceived committee members to be authority figures – most were magistrates, probation officers and so on – and felt uncomfortable when they were around. *  *The liaison officer’s role:* One member of the committee had been designated as liaison officer responsible for communications between the committee and the warden and residents. It transpired that there were almost as many views about the role of the liaison officer as there were members of the committee. A clear brief had never been agreed and a complicating factor was that many probation officers on the committee had clients who were residents in the hostel. *  *Original vision versus current reality:* Some members of the committee were becoming disappointed with the project because they had had to compromise on some of their aims. Others were more pragmatic and reasonably satisfied that, at last, the hostel was ‘up and running’ and appeared to be ‘ticking over’ with few problems. *  *The future role of the management committee:* Early on, everybody had been involved in lots of talking, planning and fundraising. As the project progressed, attention shifted to making things happen. Following the launch (and relaunch), attention shifted again to ensuring things worked as required, but the committee was much bigger than needed to manage this task.   There was insufficient time to work on all these issues at the first meeting, so attention was focused on the management committee’s relationship with the warden, their contact with residents and the role of the liaison officer. As a first step, it was agreed that only the liaison officer would visit the hostel on a regular basis. However, it was agreed that he could visit unannounced, at least on some occasions, in order to reassure the committee that all was well. With regard to the warden’s role, it was anticipated that reducing visits from committee members would allow the warden more freedom to get on with managing day-to-day matters. The committee also asked the liaison officer to work with the warden to review their relationship and how this might be changed to improve the way the hostel was managed. Figure 20.3 shows the action research process in diagrammatic form.  Taking action to improve relations between the warden, liaison officer and management committee was not an easy or comfortable process, but some progress was made. The warden wrote and circulated a frank report for the committee, in which he aired a number of delicate issues that, up until then, had been avoided by all parties. The committee responded by arranging a special meeting with the warden and sharing some of their concerns about the way he ran the hostel and related to members of the committee.  Working on these issue raised a number of concerns, chief of which was that the warden might ‘take umbrage’ and leave, but almost everybody felt that the free discussion at the special meeting and the respectful way in which it was managed produced some positive outcomes. It helped to improve relationships, reassure the committee that the warden was both competent and committed to the committee’s strategy, and reassured the warden that he had the committee’s support for what he was trying to do.  <Insert Figure 20.3>  *Figure* **20.3***The action research process at Freedman House*  While this was happening, the management committee also met to work on some of the other issues identified at the first meeting of the full committee. Attention was focused on the future role of the management committee. It was agreed that the project had entered a new phase and the existing, large management committee was no longer appropriate. Instead, there was a need for a smaller core group supported by a wider network of ‘friends’, and a separate subcommittee focused on fundraising to finance day-to-day operating expenses.  It was at this point that the consultant began to withdraw, leaving the original lead team to take matters forward. |

The action research process sometimes focuses on natural work groups and sometimes brings together people who do not have close working relationships. In both settings, but especially the latter, it is not always easy to get members of the group to work together to identify and solve problems.

**Results from action research**

Action research is widely acknowledged as an effective means of bringing about change. Reference has already been made in Example 20.1 to the Harwood Manufacturing Company project, illustrating how it can be used to overcome resistance to changes proposed by senior management. Greenwood et al. (1993) reported a successful action research project in the Xerox Corporation, which involved employees persuading senior management to radically change their proposal to outsource the manufacturing of selected components (Example 20.3).

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| ***Example* 20.3*Action research at Xerox***  The Xerox Corporation introduced a series of major changes in response to a decline in market share and profits. One outcome of this process was the development of an employee involvement programme at the Webster plants, the company’s major US manufacturing facility. Sometime later, this was integrated with a quality improvement programme and was jointly administered at plant level by local managers and members of the union. They received training in group problem solving so that they could be involved in the programme as internal consultants and facilitators. This high level of collaboration provided the context for a successful action research project.  As part of a competitive benchmarking programme, Xerox decided to outsource the production of parts that could be manufactured externally at lower cost. The first outsourcing decision targeted the production of wire harnesses. Benchmarking and cost comparison studies indicated that the company could save $3.2 million a year by outsourcing production and shutting down the wire harness department. It was anticipated that an immediate outcome of this outsourcing decision would be the loss of 180 jobs, but the union feared that this might be just the beginning of a major programme of redundancies as the competitive benchmarking exercise was rolled out to include a wider range of components, and local managers also recognized that their jobs were at risk.  Greenwood et al. (1993) reported that after several weeks of discussions with top union and management officials, it was decided to institute a cost study team, comprising six workers and two members of management. The team was established to determine whether Xerox could cut its manufacturing costs sufficiently to meet the outside bid and thus save the jobs. Inputs were sought from many sources including industrial engineers, cost accountants and a social psychologist. Greenwood et al. describe the outcome of this action research intervention as spectacular. The team was able to demonstrate cost savings sufficient to persuade senior management to retain wire harness production within the company. The exercise was successfully extended to include four other cases and led to 900 jobs being saved.  <Insert UNFig2>  © Getty |

Greenwood et al. (1993) also reported other benefits following the action research project at Xerox. Management developed greater trust in workers’ abilities and this led to them promoting a variety of other initiatives involving workers in new plant design and the restructuring of the research and development programme for discovering new products and new manufacturing methods. Union leaders and workers experienced a raised level of confidence in their own ability to make an intellectual contribution to the solving of manufacturing problems. In terms of contributing to theory, the cost study teams learned how conventional forms of allocating indirect costs to industrial products could lead management to make decisions against the economic interests of the company and workers. Greenwood et al. also assert that their analysis led to a theoretical reformulation of the relations between worker participation and productivity.

**Summary**

Lewin created action research as a vehicle for using communities and work organizations as laboratories for field experiments designed to help scientists develop theories about social processes and members of the focal community to understand and manage their circumstances more effectively. During the 1960s, organization development practitioners began to use action research as a basis for intervening to promote change in organizations.

Action research is based on the premise that people learn best and are more willing to apply what they have learned when they manage the problem-solving process for themselves. The learning process involves:

*  observing what is going on
*  developing hypotheses that specify cause-and-effect relationships and point to actions that could help manage the problem more effectively
*  taking action
*  collecting data to evaluate the effect of the action and test the hypothesis.

The client group is often helped by a facilitator who works with members to help them design their own fact-finding procedure, work on the data they have collected, plan what to do, take action, and then evaluate their actions in such a way that they can test their cause-and-effect hypotheses and learn from what they did.

It is a collaborative process because:

*  many people may have information relevant to the problem
*  their ‘rich knowledge’ about issues might be different to an outside consultant’s understanding of reality
*  involvement promotes psychological ownership of the problem
*  involvement facilitates the implementation of the action that has been planned.

According to the typology presented in Figure 18.3, action research is a human process intervention that addresses processes such as learning, problem solving, communication and decision making.

A wide range of change management interventions are rooted in action research methodologies, insofar as they involve some form of fact finding and action taking designed to improve the way problems are managed. Many also reflect the principles of interactive or participatory action research, insofar as they involve organizational members in the problem-solving process in order to promote the kind of learning that will support the ongoing development of their group or organization.

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