

Action Research – presentation notes Cycle One CDI

Task:

1. Make a few notes about a change you have been part of making, in the parish or other organization (might see the change as successful or not)
2. What did you learn about the parish or other organization? – about its dynamics and values, about how it deals with change, etc.

An **underlying assumption of action research** – you learn about an organization when you try to change it

Related – action learning, experiential education, laboratory education, learning organizations, Future Search, Open Space, collaborative inquiry, etc.

Action research is ...

A cycle between intentional action to change an organization and disciplined reflection & learning rising out of that change action

Some Characteristics

A Cycle – Action -> Reflection/Learning -> Action -> Reflection/Learning

As you move through the cycles of an Intervention/OD project you continue to reflect & learn. Use what you learn to challenge and refine the learnings of the earlier cycles. Steps 1) Identify an opportunity or problem; 2) Action plan to address it; 3) Take action; 4) Learn from the results and the process; 5) If needed, try again based on what you have learned

Collaborative & Participatory – Members of the organization are co-researchers and actors

You plan the next step and carry it out. You meet to explore and critique the experience. You state what you have learned, assumptions you have changed or are new. Based on your learning you decide what to do next (more information needed, something to build on, a new approach to be taken)

Theory & Practice – Each informs the other. There is an interest in both improving the organization and it better understanding the organization

Process by which change and understanding can be pursued at the same time. For situations where the leader/consultant wants to facilitate action for system improvement and at the same time develop a deeper understanding of system dynamics/issues that will inform the change. Need ability to move between stances of an organizational anthropologist, open to learning, testing your hunches, *and* a change agent, working to improve the organization, having some passion for the organization becoming its best self.

Risk – Those involved experience anxiety about the open discussion of our interpretation of the situation

The change process threatens established ways of doing things and generates fears among those involved. There is also the fear that we experience as our ideas and perceptions are brought into the open, challenged, and revised.

Consultant Role (from OD Network web site)

Because of the emphasis on participation, the consultant takes on more of a facilitator role than an "expert" role, although the role can also be a blend between these two. In most cases, the client group is involved in every aspect of the project, including:

What part can an expert play in the action research process? Like many answers in organizational change, the simple and best answer is "It depends." Following a pure facilitative role implies that the system being consulted to has sufficient self-insight and reflective abilities to be led through the process. However, if the system is new to this type of process, a pure facilitative approach to action research may be more painful, time-consuming, and expensive than the system can handle. It is up to the consultant to co-determine with the client which is the most appropriate approach to take. It should be noted, however, that this is not an either/or choice, and the choice does not need to be applied to the entire process. The consultant can act as expert in making sense of the data and facilitator in helping the participants create an action plan. Regardless of the balance found between the expert and facilitator roles, the process will remain largely the same.

MORE

STORY --Early T-Groups – important step in development of AR.

Kurt Lewin -- the 'father' of action research. A German social and experimental psychologist, and one of the founders of the Gestalt school, he was concerned with social problems, and focused on participative group processes for addressing conflict, crises, and change, generally within organizations. Initially, he was associated with the Center for Group Dynamics at MIT in Boston, but soon went on to establish his own National Training Laboratories.

Lewin first coined the term 'action research' in his 1946 paper "Action Research and Minority Problems", characterizing Action Research as "a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action", 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".

Eric Trist, another major contributor to the field from that immediate post-war era, was a social psychiatrist whose group at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London engaged in applied social research, initially for the civil repatriation of German prisoners of war. He and his colleagues tended to focus more on large-scale, multi-organizational problems.

Both Lewin and Trist applied their research to systemic change in and between organizations. They emphasized direct professional - client collaboration and affirmed the role of group relations as basis for problem-solving. Both were avid proponents of the principle that decisions are best implemented by those who help make them.

Is part of OD's "Principles of Practice" (foundations of the field)

- May be part of the work of practitioners based in a university who are primarily concerned with the research/learning aspect

- May just be basic OD (with limited “research” element)

Dimensions of participation

There are a variety of dimensions of participation. For present purposes I wish to distinguish seven. Four of them relate to the content of the situation:

- providing data; the participants are informants;
- interpreting data; the participants are interpreters;
- planning change; the participants are planners and decision-makers;
- implementation; the participants are implementers.

Another two are part of the research process:

- managing the process of data collection and interpretation; the participants are facilitators;
- designing the overall study; the participants are researchers or co-researchers.

The seventh may be about process, or content, or both:

- being kept informed about the study and its implications; the participants are recipients only.

On **each** of these dimensions, there is a choice:

- who is to participate?
- to what extent are they to participate?

Action learning

Action learning can be defined as a process in which a group of people come together more or less regularly to help each other to learn from their experience.

Experiential learning

Both action research and action learning may be compared to experiential learning.

As usually described, it is a process for drawing learning from experience. The experience can be something which is taking place, or more often is set up for the occasion by a trainer or facilitator.

The experiential learning cycle

Consider the following simple learning cycle. It appears to capture the main features of experiential learning, action research, and action learning.

At its simplest, it consists of two stages: action and reflection:

action --> reflection

in an ongoing series of cycles.

However, the reflection gains its point by leading to learning, which in turn leads to changed behavior in the future:

action --> reflection --> action

EIAG a method for reflection

R.A. Gallagher