



Action research to improve the effectiveness of an information centre

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1 Purpose of the article

In this article, the process and findings are discussed of a research project that used action research to improve interpersonal and organizational effectiveness. The research was conducted at a large information centre at a tertiary institution. Many of the issues that gave rise to the project, for example distrust and negative attitudes, are not uncommon in information centres of this nature or in any other organization that has a large staff component. It is therefore hoped that the findings reported in this article can be of use to other information centres and organizations as well, especially since the action research process is a relatively new way for South African information centres to bring about change. The purpose of this article is also to stimulate the use of action research in information centres and to contribute to the current knowledgebase on action research.

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2 Background and initial investigations

In 2001, the director of an information centre at a tertiary institution with approximately 50 staff members identified that the staff were in general dissatisfied, and deduced that this had a negative impact on productivity. The reasons for this situation were unclear at that stage. The director consequently decided to make use of the services of the Staff Development Unit

of the institution to identify the extent and reasons for the dissatisfaction.

A questionnaire comprising 90 statements that covered 10 dimensions of interpersonal-related aspects was compiled. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the extent to which the staff agreed with the statements. All the staff members were invited to partake in the survey, but participation was not compulsory. Respondents remained anonymous. The response rate was 83%.

The results of this survey indicated five key areas as the cause of unhappiness and low productivity among staff members. After the results were interpreted, it became evident that it was important to establish why these areas proved to be a problem. It was decided that interviews would be conducted with a sample of the staff component to give them the opportunity to explain the reasons behind the results. A random sample of 40% of the population was selected to be interviewed. Participation in these interviews was voluntary but all members of the sample cooperated.

Upon interpreting the results of the interviews it became apparent that the main problems were staff members' unwillingness to take responsibility for their work environment and a general sense of dissatisfaction. Staff members argued that management should take all the responsibility for rectifying the situation and ensuring their happiness. It was apparent that the staff did not trust each other because of a habit of gossiping. It was concluded that the main problems centred on issues of trust, communication, attitude and leadership. It became apparent that the behaviour patterns of both staff and management had to be adjusted where necessary.

A suitable way of addressing the identified problems had to be found. An intervention was needed where people could improve their interpersonal and organizational effectiveness by changing their behavioural patterns and by becoming willing to take responsibility for their own work satisfaction. It was decided that action research would be a viable option. This decision was based on research conducted by various individuals on action research projects and the behaviour of people. Passfield (2002:150) states that, after an action research intervention, there is improvement in motivation and commitment among a group of staff members. Howell (1994:15,20) claims that organizational, professional and personal development can successfully be executed with action research projects and that these research methodologies provide a framework for approaching complex business problems collaboratively. Whiteley, McCabe and Savery (1998:439) find action research a viable method for improving trust and communication among people.

Because action learning as a research method is relatively new to researchers and practitioners at information centres in South Africa, the following section in this article will describe the method and its underlying assumptions in general terms before describing how the authors planned and implemented the action learning process.

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3 Action technologies

3.1 Action research

Action research has been as a research method since the 1940s. It combines theory with practice through change and reflection (Lau 1999:149). Action research involves spirals or cycles of actions and research, and includes four phases, namely planning, acting, observing and reflecting:

- The planning phase focuses on problem analysis and compiling a strategic plan to

address the problem. Exact steps and members taking responsibility for them are decided on

- The acting phase refers to implementing the plans formulated and decided upon in the planning phase.
- The observation phase focuses on evaluating the action.
- The reflection phase entails participants reflecting on the results of the planned actions as to achieve understanding and learning. The participants get the opportunity to reflect on their problems and question their own insights and actions. This is done to increase their understanding of their problems and to change the system in which they are embedded.

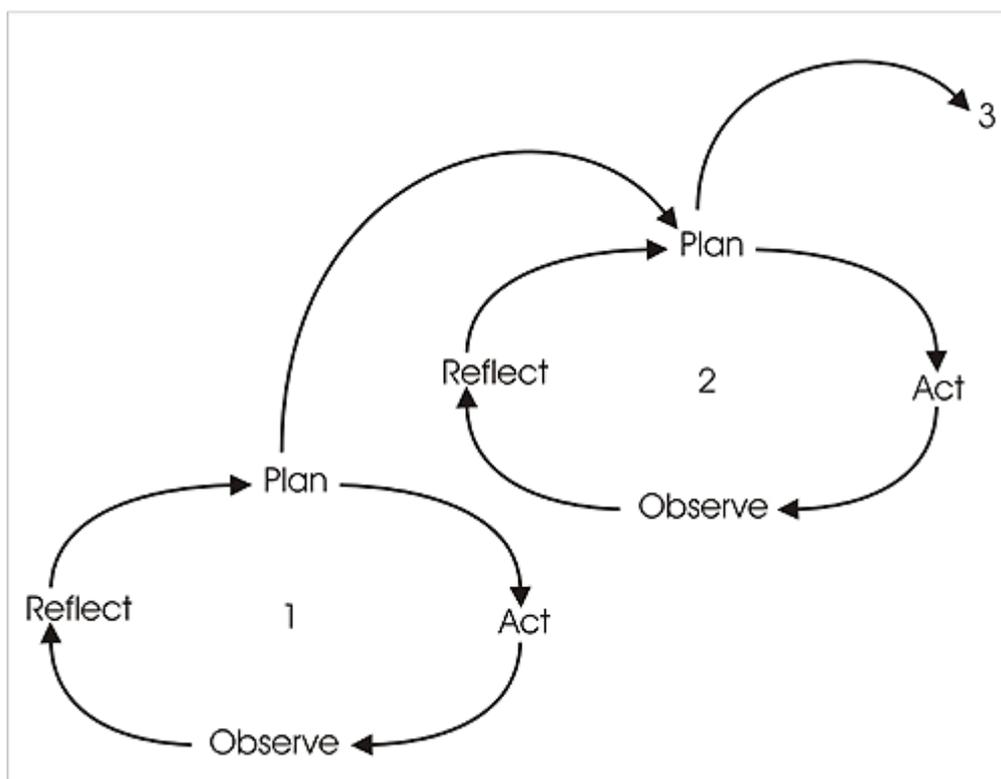
When the learners observe and reflect on their experience, they consequently form abstract conceptualizations and generalizations. They can test the implications of these concepts in new situations and thus produce new concrete experience that may lead to the identification of a new problem and a new cycle of planning, acting, observation and reflection (Mashile 2001:132).

According to Cardno and Piggot-Irvine (1996:19), there are three minimal requirements for action research, namely:

- a problem-focused orientation
- an iterative process of planned action, observation of it and reflection on it
- the collaborative characteristic.

Figure 1 illustrates this action learning cycle or action research as described above.

Figure 1 Action learning cycle as adapted from Engelbrecht *et al.* (2001).



Various researchers attempted to define the term action research. Lau (1999:149) quotes Hult and Lennung by stating that action research

- assists in practical problem solving
- expands scientific knowledge
- enhances actor competencies
- is performed collaboratively in an increased understanding of a given social situation
- is applicable for the understanding of change processes in social systems
- is undertaken within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.

According to Elliot, as quoted by Cardno and Piggot-Irvine (1996:19), action research is 'the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it'.

3. 2 Action learning

According to Cardno and Piggot-Irvine (1996:20) action research and action learning are based on the same philosophical assumptions, but action research is more systematic and rigorous in its methods of reporting on the results and making it public.

Zuber-Skerritt (1993:46) defines action learning as:

'Learning from concrete experience, as well as taking action as a result of this learning and reflecting on that experience – through group discussion, trial and error, discovery and learning from and with each other. It is a process by which groups of people address actual workplace issues or problems, in complex situations and conditions.'

She also emphasizes that action learners are more motivated to implement their solutions and bring about change that will have a lasting effect. In action learning, the learner becomes the expert on the best solutions for the problems encountered.

According to Mashile (2001:134), there should be two intentions with action learning, namely

- learning to take action
- personal development.

This implies that learning is not only about acquiring knowledge or skill through reading a book or listening to a lecture, but also by doing something differently or behaving differently, and applying the new skill or knowledge. Learning also entails thinking differently and can imply new values and beliefs. The successful application of learning is also dependent on the attitude of the learner, the learning skill and the learning environment. Zuber-Skerritt (2002:145) suggests that through action learning, knowledge is not only gained but also created. The learners develop insight and their own theory for a solution to a problem based on their own concrete experience.

Dick, as quoted by Bryar and Walsh (2002:2), states that action research is a methodology with two aims. The first is to bring about change and the second is to increase knowledge and understanding. The present authors will follow his lead and use the term 'action research' in this article, referring to the learning that takes place during an action research project.

To address the problem identified in the information centre, the authors used a generic model for designing an action learning programme. This model is illustrated in Figure 2. The model indicates two cycles. The first cycle focuses on exploring the context within which the project will be executed. The second cycle describes the project plan. At the core of these two cycles is the vision of the project.

Figure 2. The figure eight of strategic project planning adapted from Zuber-Skerritt



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4 Planning the project and putting the plan into action

4.1 Envisioning the outcome

The vision of the project was discussed in a brain-storming exercise and it was decided upon by all information centre staff. A member of the staff development unit facilitated it. Based on Figure 2, three elements were considered for formulating the vision, namely the

- impact of the project
- difference the project will make
- results of the project.

The result of the brain-storming exercise was the following vision statement:

To be a coherent community of highly motivated, enthusiastic staff/colleagues, contributing to the development of future leaders through service excellence.

The following explanatory notes to this vision statement are pertinent:

- *Coherent community* implies teamwork, cooperation and open communication;
- *highly motivated, enthusiastic* imply commitment, a positive attitude, job satisfaction, a culture of tolerance and understanding for each other, as well as high self-esteem; and
- *excellence* implies motivation, honesty, loyalty, productivity, coherence, dedication,

thoroughness, professionalism and knowledge.

4.2 Exploring the context

After reaching consensus on the vision, the context of the whole project was explored.

The first step was to analyse the stakeholders (e.g. the staff of the information centre as well as its clients) in terms of two important aspects, namely, their

- influence on the success of the project
- their probable attitude towards the project – the extent to which they would be supportive of it or against it.

It was established that all stakeholders were, to different degrees, supportive of the project and that no person was against it.

Thereafter, all factors that were of strategic importance to the project were considered. A SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) was done by all information centre staff members and facilitated by a member of the staff development unit. The detailed results of this analysis were interpreted and the most significant factors were noted:

- The strengths that could be depended on were work satisfaction, a stable work environment, skills and experience.
- The weaknesses were a lack of open communication, loyalty, trust, encouragement, support and commitment, as well as excessive competition among colleagues.
- The opportunities mentioned were the availability of excellent human resources, the tendency of staff to rely more on each other during times of economical constraints and the demand for the services that the information centre renders.
- Threats centred on economic factors and staff capacity in numbers.

Interestingly enough, these factors resulting from the SWOT analysis related well to the problems identified during the initial analysis of the problem.

The constraints identified also confirmed certain aspects emphasized during the background research. A lack of commitment and sense of responsibility of staff members to find solutions for their problems were the most important constraints.

The only resources needed to achieve the vision were people and time. However, this implied that the people needed skills, knowledge and commitment to achieve the vision. As a service-rendering institution, the information centre was open to clients all day. The director decided to close the centre for one hour per week so that staff could have time for meetings to plan, reflect and plan again.

Within the context as described above, the following steps were taken to achieve the vision:

- Step 1: The project facilitator reported the results of the background study to all staff members of the information centre so that everyone understood the full extent and consequences of the problem.
- Step 2: A researcher with ample experience in the field of action learning explained the whole process. All staff members who were involved were introduced to the concepts of action learning and action research.
- Step 3: All information centre staff members discussed the identified problems in detail and thematic concerns were identified. Members chose four focus areas to address, namely, leadership, communication, trust and attitude. These thematic

concerns were to be the focus areas of the different action learning sets (groups of people). Staff were asked to decide in which set they would like to participate. Approximately 90% of the staff committed themselves to either one or two of the sets. The set participants selected set facilitators.

- Step 4: The different sets started the action learning cycle by designing strategies for addressing problems. Strategies were implemented, reflected on and adjusted. The cycle was repeated until the set was satisfied with the improved practice.
- Step 5: Success was celebrated.

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5 Implementation of the action learning process by the attitude set

Although four different action learning sets were selected to participate in the action learning cycle, only the activities of the attitude set are described in this article as an example. The attitude set was the first set to reach its objectives.

5.1 Cycle one of the action learning process

5.1.1 First planning phase

At the first meeting, the set soon identified the need to learn more about the phenomenon of attitude and how to change attitudes before any specific planning could start. Although set members had a general idea of the kind of workplace behaviour that can be recognized as either acceptable or unacceptable attitudes, there was a need for a more substantial knowledge and a common point of departure.

5.1.2 First action phase

The set facilitator undertook to identify a few relevant journal articles on attitudes in the workplace. Copies of the articles were distributed to all set members and studied.

5.1.3 First observation phase

At its second meeting, the set analysed what they had learned from the literature they had read and used some of the information in a brainstorming session. During the brainstorming session, set members presented their views, thoughts, experiences and knowledge to get a better understanding of attitude as a phenomenon and factors that lead to positive or negative attitudes in a workplace.

During the brainstorming, ideas evolved on what the set wanted to achieve with their project and what actions could be taken to achieve their goals. At this stage, the set did not evaluate the ideas, but only listed them.

5.1.4 First reflection phase

During the brainstorming session, the set learned about attitudes and decided to use them as a reference for future planning and actions. The set learned that:

- attitude is 'personal'; it is how you feel or think about people or things;
- many things can shape or influence a person's attitude: his or her personality, upbringing, health, other people, etc;
- all people have attitudes toward something or someone – sometimes attitudes are negative and sometimes they are positive;
- attitudes are difficult to change (because they sometimes become fixed over years); and
- a person's attitude cannot be changed – it can only be influenced to change – either negatively or positively.

5.2 Cycle two of the action learning process

5.2.1 Second planning phase

The insights gained during the first reflection phase led to the second planning session. At that planning session the set decided on two strategies. Firstly it was decided not to identify so-called unacceptable attitudes among colleagues, but rather to follow a strategy that would give staff members tools or skills to (a) recognize unacceptable attitudes in the workplace; and (b) understand and handle people whose attitudes at work are unacceptable or different than their own. A second strategy was to stimulate positive attitudes on a regular basis.

To implement the first strategy, the set decided to compile a printed 'how-to' guide for every staff member. The purpose of the guide was to help staff members understand human behaviour better and to learn how to deal with less acceptable personality types and attitudes.

To implement the second strategy, the set decided on a number of actions. The first was to create interesting and different opportunities where staff members could gain insight into their own and other people's behaviour. One such an opportunity was taking part in an activity called 'brain gym'. Although brain gym is not primarily focused on attitudes, the set decided that it could help staff members to learn more about their own behaviour and that of others.

It was decided that the process of addressing the attitude problems in the information centre should not be dull or uninteresting, or presented too seriously, but should rather be experienced as fun, where applicable.

Another action plan to promote positive attitudes was to send an attitude thought for the week via e-mail to all information centre staff members on a regular basis. The plan had the additional benefit of all staff members participating in the campaign and not only the attitude set. At the launch of the campaign, the attitude set facilitator invited all staff members to submit positive slogans, proverbs or sayings to the attitude set facilitator, who would distributed them via the e-mail system.

5.2.3 Second action phase

The set decided not to implement all the plans simultaneously, but started with the attitude thought for the week, while doing research on what to include in the printed guide.

5.2.4 Second observation phase

From the start, the set received positive feedback from a number of staff members with regard to the attitude thought for the week. Apart from positive feedback, the set also received contributions from staff of all the sections of the information centre that were considered for the attitude thought for the week.

5.2.5 Second reflection phase

Owing to the positive reaction to the attitude thought for the week, the set decided to continue with this effort. However, the set realized that although the action plan was received well by the information centre's staff, it did not necessarily mean that attitudes had changed for the better. In fact, during a joint reflection meeting with the other three sets, a number of staff members indicated that they still perceived negative and unproductive attitudes among some staff members. The set realized that a tool for measuring changes in the attitudes of the staff had to be developed to know whether their action plans were effective.

5.3 Cycle three of the action learning process

5.3.1 Third planning phase

At their third planning session, the attitude set finalized the 'how-to' guide that was decided on at the previous planning session. It was decided to issue the guide to every information centre member at the next joint reflection meeting.

Reacting on insights gained at the second reflection phase, the attitude set also decided to draft a questionnaire to determine whether there were changes in the attitudes of the staff since the start of the action learning project.

Owing to the fact that it was near the end of the academic year, the set decided to postpone the planning of the brain gym (see first planning phase) to the beginning of the next term. However, the attitude thought for the week still continued.

5.3.2 Third action phase

During the last joint set meeting of the year, the attitude set launched their 'how-to' guide entitled *My guide to handle workplace personalities*. The guide was mainly based on the work of Gary S. Topchik's *Fourteen workplace personalities and how to handle them* (Topchik 2000). Although the guide deals mainly with personality types and behaviour that are less acceptable in the workplace, it also deals with attitudes because, whether intentionally or not, experience in the library showed that people associate unacceptable personality traits with negative attitudes.

5.3.3 Third observation phase

As was the case of the attitude thought for the week, the attitude set found it difficult to objectively observe the impact of *My guide to handle workplace personalities*. Although some staff members indicated that they had used the handout on one or two occasions, there was no objective way to measure changes.

5.3.4 Third reflection phase

The observations made during the previous session confirmed the need for an objective tool that measures the results of the set's action plans.

5.4 Cycle four of the action learning process

5.4.1 Fourth planning and action phase

As indicated previously (see second planning phase), one of the underlying strategies of the attitude set was to include an element of fun in some of its actions. One way of addressing this was to show the final scene from the film *Shrek* at the first joint set meeting of the new academic year.

5.4.2 Fourth observation phase

Not only did the final song *I'm a believer* from the movie *Shrek* send out a clear and positive message to all staff members, but the actions of the animated characters in the final scene also lifted the spirit of the staff as seldom before.

5.4.3 Fourth reflection phase

Apart from the showing of *Shrek*, the set confirmed that no new actions would take place and decided to finalize the questionnaire during the days to come.

5.5 Cycle five of the action learning process

5.5.1 Fifth planning phase

The aim of the questionnaire was to determine whether there had been changes in the attitudes of the information centre staff since the library services started with the action learning project. The questionnaire consisted of two sections.

The first part asked individuals to indicate on a scale of one to four (one meaning 'I fully agree' and four meaning 'I do not agree') whether a listed number of attitude changes had occurred among the library staff in general since the beginning of the action learning project. An example of a statement included in the questionnaire is: 'Since the beginning of the action learning project, staff members have been less sensitive to feedback that they do not like.'

The second part of the survey repeated the same 15 statements from part one except that the statements were not related to the respondent's colleagues but to the respondents themselves. An example of such a statement is: 'Since the beginning of the action learning project, I have been less sensitive to feedback I do not like.'

5.5.2 Fifth action phase

The questionnaire was distributed to all library staff that were not on leave during the time of the survey. Although staff members could complete the questionnaire anonymously, participation was not compulsory. Nevertheless 44 of 52 staff members completed the questionnaire in time, which resulted in a response of 84.6%.

5.5.3 Fifth observation phase

It falls outside the scope of this article to discuss the results of the attitude survey in detail, but it suffices to report that the results from the questionnaire indicated without doubt that the majority of respondents believed that not only their own attitudes changed for the better, but also the attitudes of staff members in general. However, it was interesting to note that staff members were more in agreement about the fact that their own attitudes improved than about whether the attitudes of the library staff in general improved.

5.5.4 Fifth reflection phase

Owing to the positive outcome of the survey, the attitude set was of the opinion that it had reached all its goals and recommended to the set coordinator to end all further actions of the set. This recommendation was accepted at a joint set meeting, but due to the popularity of the attitude thought for the week, the attitude set was asked to continue this practice as long as the need exists.

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6 Conclusion

The action research process as described above showed that it is a viable research option to address and solve interpersonal problems in an organization with a large and diverse staff component, for example an information centre. Not only did the set concerned with attitude issues successfully use the action research process to reach all their objectives, but they also proved to the participants that they were able to take responsibility for their own work satisfaction.

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