

Editorial: insider action research

The theory and the practice of insider action research (IAR) have been afforded increasing attention over the past seven years or so. The publication in 2001 of Coghlan and Brannick's *Doing action research in your own organization* appeared to give voice to a practice that was struggling for legitimacy and which hitherto had not been framed in a manner that facilitated its place in the action research literature (Brannick & Coghlan, forthcoming). In the intervening years since 2001, both further articulations of theory and accounts of practice have burgeoned to the extent that a second edition of Coghlan and Brannick was requested by Sage (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005).

Doing research in and on one's own organization means that a member of an organization undertakes an explicit research role in addition to the normal functional role that they hold in the organization. The researcher then has to balance their organizational role, which they usually hope will continue, with the additional demands of a role of inquiry and research. Insider action researchers need to be aware of how their roles influence how they view their world as well as how they are perceived by others, and to be able to make choices as to when to step into and out of each of the multiple roles they hold. The contributions included here all discuss roles: role negotiation (Ravitch and Wirth), holding multiples roles which are often in conflict explicitly (Humphrey; Moore), insider/outsider role (Roth, Shani and Leary), being an employee and a researcher (Roth, Shani and Leary; Moore), and relational roles in the community (Braithwaite, Cockwill, O'Neill and Rebane).

Doing action research means being engaged in a more rigorous series of diagnosing situations, planning and taking action and evaluating than is perhaps the norm. There are many issues to be considered for those embarking on research within their own organization. For those seeking to do the research in order to achieve academic certification there are often issues pertaining to both their academic directors and their organizational superiors. These include issues of gaining access and receiving permission, and building and maintaining support from peers and relevant sub-systems within the organization. There are also issues related to selecting a research question and area for study. Those who are student-researchers in effect take on an additional role to their conventional organizational one, that of also being active agents of inquiry. They are also likely to

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have access to 'external' academic supervisors who advise and support them throughout their research project. However, not all insider action researchers are students, they may be internal consultants or managers, in which case there may not be a planned end point for carrying dual roles, or access to advice and support from key external 'critical friends' to help them sustain doing the work and maintaining a career.

Multiple role identities both complicate and focus internal action research projects. There are issues around how to attain some sense of professional distance or 'objectivity' and move beyond a personal perspective by testing assumptions and interpretations. There are the uses of appropriate frameworks for viewing, understanding, summarizing and conveying meaningful descriptions about the data that has been gathered. There are questions about how to write up this type of a research project, how to give feedback to one's superiors and peers, and how to disseminate the research to the wider academic or practitioner community. Anticipating and handling interpretations or outcomes which would be perceived negatively by the organization is a particularly sensitive and important issue.

Doing action research within one's own system can be seen to involve managing three interlocking challenges (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). Insider action researchers need to build on the closeness they have with the setting, while, at the same time create distance from it in order to see things critically and enable change to happen. This is referred to as *preunderstanding*. Holding *dual roles*, as an organizational member and an action researcher, can create ambiguities which may involve role confusion, role conflict, and role overload. They also have to manage *organizational politics* and balance the requirements of their future career plans with requirements for the success and quality of their action research. Each of these three challenges makes demands on first, second and third person voice/practice. We also note that these three challenges are not static. Action research is a dynamic and iterative process where the situation changes as a consequence of deliberate action. Preunderstanding, role duality and organizational politics are likely to shift as the consequence of deliberate action or as unintended consequences of actions.

Action researchers have to deal with emergent processes, not as distractions but as central to the research process. As Buchanan and Boddy (1992) remind us, the desire to be involved in or to lead radical change involves high hassle and high vulnerability. This requires a combination of self-reflection with vulnerability, realistic expectations, tolerance, humility, self-giving, self containment and an ability to learn (Bell, 1998). Meyerson (2001) calls those who quietly enact change in their own organizations, 'tempered radicals'. Cooklin (1999) refers to the insider change agent as the 'irreverent inmate', one who is a supporter of the people in the organization, is a saboteur of the organization's rituals and is a questioner of some of its beliefs.

Developing insider action research theory and practice

In his notion of ‘innovation action research’, Kaplan (1998) presents an action research cycle of: i) observing and documenting practice; ii) teaching and speaking about it; iii) writing articles and books; iv) implementing the concept; and iv) moving to advanced implementation. After several years of observing and documenting practice, teaching and speaking about it, and writing articles and books, thereby implementing the concept, we hope that this special issue will contribute to advanced implementation. The theory and practice of insider action research has advanced, and this special issue marks a further moment in innovation action research.

We see this special issue as a way to share deep reflections on the experience of being an insider action researcher, rather than detailed accounts of projects which have involved aspects of insider action research. Therefore we asked insider action researchers to explore what doing this was like, what the challenges and difficulties were, what they learned, and what they want to share with readers who might be considering it, in order to contribute to building up a theory of IAR.

Caroline Humphrey’s article arises from her doctoral thesis about the rise of self-organized groups for women, black people, disabled people and lesbians and gay men within trade unions in Britain. Her reflexivity as a researcher hinged upon her capacity to recognize her new position as an insider-outsider in relation to the university, the union and each of the self-organized groups, whilst the fertility of the project hinged upon her capacity to activate the hyphen by journeying between different life-worlds. Her article explores the personal, professional and political dilemmas in becoming an insider-outsider with a view to assisting future generations of action researchers.

Drawing parallels between his experience of undertaking insider research and the original sin Adam and Eve committed when they ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, Bruce Moore examine his motivation for undertaking research and considers how his focus shifted from his original research questions onto himself and his role as both a senior executive and researcher. He discusses his experience of the need to discover and develop his own interpretation distinct from the orthodoxy of the organization. He identifies the influences that caused him to embrace the inherent conflict of being both an insider and a researcher and the consequences that ensued.

Jonas Roth, Rami Shani and Myleen Leary explore insider action research as means and ends in the development of new organizational capabilities. Building on the literature that is based in the fields of business strategy, insider action research, learning mechanisms, and organization development, they develop a model of new organizational capabilities development. Three longitudinal action research projects within AstraZeneca are described and examined using

the model. Many of the challenges faced by the insider action researcher, such as linking IAR project to business strategy, preunderstanding, acting in a political landscape, managing multiple roles, designing and managing a variety of learning mechanisms, and the ongoing need to maintain balance between opposing forces are identified and discussed. Directions for future research and recommendations for insider action researchers are presented.

The article by Rhonda Braithwaite, Sarah Cockwill, Martin O'Neill and Deanne Rebane examines the authentic experience of people who live in a community categorized as disadvantaged as they enter into a radical action research process. This entails them adopting a changed role while remaining community members and they describe how they manage the tensions involved in this process. They explore, in their own words, their experiences as they encounter the struggle, conflict and injustice inherent in the process of community regeneration and tell a story of how these tensions are managed and sometimes resolved both within the community and within themselves.

Sharon M. Ravitch and Kathleen Wirth examine an action research study of a collaboratively constructed professional development programme for teachers in an urban elementary school. They discuss this research process in order to explore the systemic, institutional, personal, and professional implications of engaging in school-based, practitioner-driven research that works within an action research paradigm. Key themes discussed are: 1) the contextual, relational, and systemic issues of insider action research in terms of negotiating roles as a colleague, researcher, and school leader; 2) navigating the practical and ideological spaces between facilitating change and not imposing beliefs and values; and 3) reflexivity and methodological adaptations around issues of power and authority.

Insider action research is an exciting, demanding and invigorating prospect that contributes considerably to researchers' own learning and contributes to the development of the systems in which we work, we live, and with which we have affiliations. It also daunting, with a high potential for self-destruction, particularly if roles and politics are not managed well. So what does it take to do insider research? Our learning from our own work and the work of those managers we supervise have enabled us to gain some insight into the attributes, competencies and methodological tools that support effective practice.

Postgraduate student-insider researchers can have impressive levels of expertise and enthusiasm, a well developed rationale for a substantial research project and be in a role with access to an abundance of highly relevant data and information. They can be highly motivated to address an organizational problem that is also a significant academic issue. They may prefer a supervisor who can be part mentor/coach who can help them explore reciprocal links between theory and practice, someone they can trust to advise and support them when the going gets tough (Coghlan & Davis, 2006). Insider research can involve higher than usual risks of becoming a little 'lost', in terms of time and revenue but also cred-

ibility within one's organization, and any negative consequences are likely to have more impact on the student than their supervisor. While a 'failed' organizational research project may still form the basis of an excellent academic thesis, it could be a career limiting experience.

In the past we have been asked questions such as: 'Given that doing insider research seems to be so complex and can be fraught with danger, wouldn't it be better to advise people not to select this approach as a means to do any academic research, particularly a major thesis for a postgraduate qualification?' In our view, while it can be difficult at times, the challenges that have to be overcome are usually well worth the effort. Intending insider researchers do need to be aware of the issues they may face both to help prepare them to address these when they arise, and to know that this is a 'normal' part of the process. The stories included by the contributors to this special issue are one way of sharing these experiences and so contributing to building knowledge and expertise in this field.

Acknowledgements

When we launched the call for contributions to this special issue, we did not expect that we would receive 40 responses, both proposals and enquiries. The response showed us that insider action research is alive and well and indeed thriving. We regretted very much that we could not accept all that was offered to us. In most instances we encouraged contributors of proposals to pursue and develop their enquiry and take it to publication, although regrettably not in this special issue. Our thanks to all who shared their work with us and to them we repeat our encouragement to get their work published.

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