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Article

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South African Journal of Business Management

Provided in Cooperation with:

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Suggested Citation: Orpen, C. (1984) : Action research in management, South African Journal of Business Management, ISSN 2078-5976, African Online Scientific Information Systems (AOSIS), Cape Town, Vol. 15, Iss. 1, pp. 1-7,
<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v15i1.1098>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/217845>

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Action research in management

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This paper attempts to separate Action Research from more traditional or orthodox research methods in management, especially experiments and surveys. It is argued that in many respects Action Research is a reaction against the failure of conventional methods to provide generalizations about the behaviour of individuals in organizations that are both valid and useful for managers. A number of reasons for this failure are advanced. Action Research is seen as a legitimate alternative to conventional research methods and one that is worth pursuing. Examples of two common techniques employed in Action Research are briefly described, namely, sensitivity training and survey feedback.

S. Afr. J. Bus. Mgmt. 1984, 15: 1–7

Hierdie artikel onderskei Aksienavorsing van die meer tradisionele navorsingsmetodes in bestuurstudies, soos eksperimente en opnames. Die skrywer redeneer dat Aksienavorsing tot 'n groot mate 'n reaksie teen die tekortkominge van konvensionele metodes om oor die gedrag van individue binne organisasies bruikbaar en op 'n geldige wyse te verklaar, is. Redes vir dié tekortkominge word voorgestel. Aksienavorsing word gesien as 'n regmatige alternatief tot konvensionele navorsingsmetodes en besonder toepasbaar. Voorbeelde van twee algemeen toegepaste metodes in Aksienavorsing word beskryf, naamlik sensitiviteitsopleiding en opnameterugvoering.

S.-Afr. Tydskr. Bedryfsl. 1984, 15: 1–7

Introduction

Management research is at the crossroads: on the one hand, there is growing disillusionment with the capacity of orthodox or traditional methods to both enhance our understanding of management and to help organizations improve their performance. On the other hand, there seems to be no clear alternative, no other method that looks capable of achieving both those objectives any better. The present article is offered as a personal view on the present situation in the hope of pointing one way ahead. It has two essential points to make; first, that the current disillusionment with experiments and surveys (the traditional or orthodox methods) are well-founded; and second, that Action Research represents an alternative of some promise, even though it has yet to be fully tested.

Since Action Research in many respects grew out of a disillusionment with orthodox or traditional methods of inquiry, an appropriate starting point is to consider the varied criticisms that are now being levelled at experiments and surveys — which still enjoy a dominant position in that part of management research which is directed at telling managers what they should do to get things done through individual employees; i.e. at what needs to be done to get individuals to do what is necessary for the organization to be effective. In my view, when dealing with something as difficult to grasp as Action Research, it is sometimes more helpful to start by identifying those things from which it is designed to differ, rather than by trying to distil its essence from the start. This is the approach I have adopted in this article. Hence, my first task will be to show what it is that advocates of Action Research feel is wrong with surveys and experiments (orthodox or traditional methods of inquiry), and what 'errors' they want to avoid.

What's wrong with survey research

As I have just indicated, experiments and surveys must be judged by whether or not they explain what *causes* individuals to act as they do in work situations. For one thing, managers need to know why individuals act in different ways if they hope to be effective in anything they set out to do. For another, as any management text will tell you, surveys and experiments are *designed* to lead to laws and principles that explain the actions of individuals at work. Put more formally, they are supposed to produce law-like generalizations (summarized in textbooks) which 'explain' individual acts causally by reference to antecedent events that exhibit a predictable relation to them. Let us thus look first at surveys and then at experiments to see if they are capable of doing these things.

Now, as we all know, all that survey research can do is to

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Accepted October 1983

develop relationships between things in terms of which people differ. The trouble with such research, as statistics texts never fail to tell us, is that it can only produce correlational data that necessarily leaves the cause-effect relation ambiguous. This is because the mere presence of a positive or negative relation between things, even in cross-logged correlational studies (Feldman, 1975: 667; Cook & Campbell, 1976: 293) tells us nothing about which is the cause and which is the effect, or even whether the correlation is itself determined by a third phenomenon which affects both of the other two. This difficulty, which is basic or essential to the survey method, makes it incapable of uncovering the causal laws or principles so earnestly sought after.

Secondly, even if survey research could provide the basis for causal generalizations, it is defective because the questionnaires or interviews on which it relies cannot provide the subjective meanings of actions or situations, which it is essential to grasp if one is to understand why an employee does something in a particular work situation. If the management researcher is unaware of what a situation of action *means* to an employee, he cannot hope to understand why he does what he does. Moreover, aggregating the responses of very different individuals to the same question (in interviews) or the same item (in questionnaires), as is done in survey research, cannot uncover or reveal what an action or situation means to individuals, for the following reasons:

First, the employee may not place the same interpretation on the item or question as the investigator does, or thinks the employee does.

Secondly, the employee may not be completely honest with himself or with the investigator, and may give either more desirable or undesirable responses than he should. This is an important point, since the context in which interviews or questionnaires take place is never seen as completely neutral by employees (Orne, 1969: 162; Orpen, 1982: 96). Again, as Freud has so brilliantly shown, employees may simply not know themselves sufficiently well to answer honestly, even if they want to, especially when (as is usually the case) the question or item deals with something that affects their view of themselves. Unfortunately for survey researchers, it is not possible to try to 'solve' these problems by yet more interviews or questionnaires, as has been advocated by Erdos (1970: 96) and Hauck & Steinkamp (1964: 126), because *they* are open to the same basic difficulties as the initial questionnaires and interviews they were supposed to improve upon.

Finally, action researchers criticize the recommendation that whenever possible the investigator should employ measures that have been previously developed and standardized, typically on other different samples. The problem in following this advice is that the investigator necessarily *imposes* predetermined views as to what is important or relevant onto the employee. By using items or questionnaires decided upon in another context, the researcher is likely to omit, or neglect to deal with, those things that give coherence and meaning to the particular employee's working life. It is thus little wonder that when employees and investigators are asked what they understand by particular responses (of the employee), they typically give quite different answers. Because the investigator concentrates solely on what the respondent says and employs measures developed in another context, he usually fails to grasp the significance for the respondent of what he says. To appreciate what is happening, say action researchers, investigators must not be content with describing what respondents say, but must try to uncover why they say what they do. This requires in-

dividualized and often lengthy conversations with individuals — something ruled out by survey research that necessarily has to rely on aggregated data.

Another fundamental difficulty in applying the results of interviews/questionnaires to situations beyond themselves is that this can never be done with known accuracy, since all interview/questionnaire situations possess features that serve to separate them from ordinary work situations. For one thing, when being interviewed or answering a questionnaire the employee knows, or is aware, that his answers are being recorded and will be used afterwards, something not true of ordinary conversation. For another, there are conventions and rules that characterize all interviews or questionnaires, but are absent in usual discourse. Unfortunately, the only way of removing this difficulty would be to destroy the very things that make interviews and questionnaires what they are in the first place.

Action research avoids these difficulties in the easiest possible way — by simply not relying on standardized interviews or using questionnaires in an aggregate fashion. According to proponents of this approach, management researchers must concern themselves with the more direct and immediate involvement in, and participation with, employees themselves than is allowed for by survey research using questionnaires or interviews in the conventional way. For this reason, action researchers do not impose their questionnaires/interviews on others, but rather allow the actors themselves to generate the items or questions that are important or relevant to them, as individuals in the work organization.

What's wrong with experimental research

The other major mode of inquiry used by management research is the experiment. As even a cursory glance at any text will indicate, it is the favoured method because, unlike the survey, it is, in principle at least, capable of teasing out cause-effect relations. Unfortunately, it does so at the cost of saying anything important or significant about employee behaviour in work organizations. There are a number of reasons for this state of affairs, to which the following are most commonly referred by proponents of action research. Their first objection is that there is an inevitable loss of verisimilitude in any experiment, by virtue of the very things that make it an experiment in the first place. For instance, in any experiment the management researcher has to select from the infinite number of possible independent variables in the ordinary world, a very few, usually no more than three or four, to examine. Again, he deliberately holds a few others constant (or so he thinks), typically no more than six, and ignores all the rest. Finally, from all possible dependent variables, the experimenter has to select just a very few to study, omitting the remainder.

While the management researcher might argue that he is forced to abstract from all possible variables in this way in order to study things experimentally, the effect of doing so is to make it impossible, not merely difficult, to extrapolate or generalize from the results of experiments to the ordinary world of work outside the laboratory. This is because, as we all know, the real world of work does not consist of just a few independent variables acting on one or two dependent variables. It is also because, again as we all appreciate, the actions of employees at work are mediated by what things *mean* to them, which can only be found out by asking them individually. But the rules of experimental design forbid the researcher to ask the subjects what the experimental situation

meant to them and why they acted as they did — and to treat their answers as the results. Instead the researcher is required to treat whatever differences are obtained between the groups, which he has created specially for the purposes of the experiment, as the results, irrespective of the precise meanings the situation has for the employees concerned or what they intend to convey by their actions.

It is for these reasons that an increasing number of management researchers have decided, quite formally, to forego the experimental approach and instead to try alternative approaches, such as that represented by action research. It is one of the defining features of action research that it does not follow the dictates of the experimental method. In this way, it avoids making the errors and mistakes to which we have referred, that are a necessary consequence of applying experimental techniques to something like the management process. In fact, instead of trying to reproduce complex human events in a laboratory (as in experiments) or splitting out certain elements from an integrated system (as in surveys), action research attempts to understand things as they occur, with the researcher being an integral part of what it is he is studying.

Besides being unable to produce relevant and valid knowledge about people at work, the experiment (as a method) encourages researchers to adopt a completely wrong view of man — as an object *to* whom things are done, rather than as a self-defining creature who makes his own future by his various choices. It is partly because action research is based on the latter, more positive, view of man that so many researchers are now following it, instead of experiments and surveys. In contrast to the experimental method, action research attempts to study what happens in on-going work situations, relying on employees' *own* accounts of how they see things and why they act as they do. While the approach may be open to other criticisms, it cannot be faulted for repeating the error of experimentalists — of creating artificial and controlled conditions that bear little resemblance to what actually occurs in real-life organizations.

Difficulties in applying results of experiments and surveys

Action researchers express concern at the lack of applicability of the kind of 'knowledge' about management that is produced by orthodox research, with its reliance on surveys and experiments of one kind or another. They argue that rigorous research of the kind described leads to knowledge of a *form* that makes it difficult to use or employ effectively. There are three main reasons for this.

First, the generalizations which are produced by such research are frequently too complicated to be of any practical use in particular circumstances. Typically, the generalizations consist of descriptions of conditions under which employees will perform certain actions rather than others. However, as Simon (1969: 121) has so clearly shown, man's machinery for thinking is so simple and finite, as to make it impossible for him to store such descriptions in his mind for use in appropriate circumstances. In any case, as Von Neumann's (1958: 166) recent work has demonstrated, it is seldom that man had adequate time to analyse the environment sufficiently thoroughly to know whether the various conditions are present or not. But only if someone knows, is sure of this, is he in a position to employ the generalization should he feel so inclined.

Second, the results of experiments and surveys describe the *average* responses of different individuals and what a class of persons is likely to do in certain circumstances. The generaliza-

tions which are based upon these findings do not tell us what any one person will do in a specific situation. For this reason they are not useful to managers. For one thing, managers usually get things done through particular individuals who need to be understood as such, if the managers concerned are going to be successful. For another, if a manager acts towards employees as dictated by the results of surveys and experiments, his actions will only be appropriate for the hypothetical 'average person' whose responses are described in the generalization. Since people differ so much on things that are important for managers to know, it follows that the manager's actions will usually be wrong or inappropriate for most of the persons they are trying to influence. For this reason the manager may be better off if, instead of basing his actions on the generalization, he tries to understand each individual as an individual in his own way. And as long as we are dealing with important things about people at work this must necessarily be the case. The point here is that being ignorant of the generalization may be to the manager's *advantage*. If he is aware of the generalization, the manager will be encouraged to rely on it, instead of trying to find out exactly what the person with whom he is dealing is like, and how exactly he differs from the 'average person' to whom the generalization alludes.

Thirdly, rigorous research findings are unhelpful because they merely describe what things people do, not why they do them. This is because, as we have shown, surveys can only reveal relationships among things, while experimental findings cannot be generalized beyond the laboratory situation in which they were initially produced. Unfortunately for management research, it is only when we know *why* someone does something, that we can be said to understand it and be effective in controlling it (for his benefit or for that of the firm). To understand why someone does something it is usually necessary to ask him what was the point or the meaning of what he did. In normal circumstances, his answer makes his action intelligible to us, by providing a purposive explanation for it. This is quite a different sort of explanation from the causal explanations offered of events by scientists on the basis of their observation of regularities, and expressed in law-like generalizations.

Advocates of action research criticize orthodox or traditional research for confusing the two types or modes of explanation, by treating purposive explanations as a species of causal explanations. According to many philosophers (Peters, 1960: 27), the actions of people at work are explicable only in terms of such things as goals, purposes, and intentions, and that to give explanations in such terms is to provide a quite different type or mode of explanation than one couched in terms of causes and effects. They argue that causal explanations are only appropriate for the movements of animals and men, and not for cases of genuine human actions. If this is correct, it means that experiments and surveys do not provide the appropriate mode or type of explanation for making sense of the actions of individuals at work, something which is essential for effective management.

A final reason why law-like generalizations based on the results of experiments and surveys are useless when it comes to improving a manager's understanding of the actions of a particular employee is that the act has to be understood first before the manager knows whether the generalization applies or not. Put differently, in contrast to what happens in science, we do not rely on generalizations (from surveys and experiments) in coming to understand why people act as they do

at work, because an understanding of their actions must *precede* the development of generalizations in respect of these actions. Specifically, the essence of any human generalization is its claim that people act or speak consistently; i.e., that they do the 'same' thing in the 'same' circumstances. For such a claim to be made, it is necessary first to establish what constitutes a relevant similarity for the people concerned, what are the rules *they* use to decide whether they are acting or speaking consistently. In order to determine these, we must already know how the people concerned regard the world in which they work, what are the concepts or terms that serve as criteria of similarity and dissimilarity for them. Hence, in management (in contrast to the sciences), we cannot *begin* our attempt to make an employee's actions intelligible by looking for consistencies in his behaviour. To speak of observing similar behaviours — as the first step in developing generalizations — is to presume that we already understand the behaviour. But if the behaviour in question is understandable to us, we do not require or need any generalization to help us — it will be redundant or unnecessary since we already know what it seeks to tell us.

The action research approach

Since action research is in many respects a reaction against the sort of approach represented by standardized interviews and questionnaires, it is not surprising that it has quite deliberately set out to avoid making the fundamental errors or mistakes to which I have just referred. It does this by *not* trying to develop law-like generalizations that are supposed to subsume a range of instances, instead being content to 'get into' a particular problem situation and to try to solve it — as an end in itself. Anyone reading action research studies will be struck by the concentration on the particular problem at hand and on what to do to overcome it, rather on the development of general solutions to a class of problems, of which this one is a single instance.

The problem of developing generalizations that are too complex to be really useful in particular cases is overcome in two ways by action research. First, as mentioned above, the advice that is provided is in terms of 'here and now' and not in terms of law-like generalizations of any sort. The language used is that of the actors themselves and the advice given is spelt out in terms that are specific to the problem in question. Second, the action researcher does not stand outside the problem like an external researcher or consultant, but is actively involved in implementing his own recommendations. The aim of the action researcher (often referred to as the change agent) is to be accepted by the client to the point where he is responsible for seeing his advice put into practice. There is an involvement-in-change in action research that is conspicuously absent in traditional or orthodox research, where the investigator's task ends with the presentation of a report summarizing his findings. Because the action researcher is also the implementator, there is little danger of the advice being not understood or properly appreciated, as so often happens in normal circumstances. As Bennis (1969:121) and Argyris (1971:60) have argued, action research can be distinguished from other kinds of research by the *immediacy* of the researchers involvement in the action process and by the fact that the researcher or change agent introduces and observes changes himself while exploring a variety of solutions to the problem.

Although action research is neither of an experimental nor of a survey nature, it would be a mistake to think of it as unsystematic. On the contrary, action research, according to

Beckhard (1969: 28), is the process of systematically collecting data about any ongoing system, like a work organization, feeding this data back into the system, and then taking action by altering certain aspects of the system based on the data. This sequence tends to be cyclical since the action taken by the change agent alters the data which formed the basis for the change in the first place.

What is distinctive about the process is that the change agent or investigator is involved in the entire research and action process from the beginning, working collaboratively with key persons in the client organization. The problem is neither given to the change agent by the client, nor decided upon by the change agent working by himself. On the contrary, it emerges, or becomes clear, in the two-way discussions between the change agent and client that represent the starting point of any piece of action research. The change agent is particularly concerned to identify the antecedents of the approach made to him by the client. He needs to examine the organization carefully from a variety of perspectives, to try to establish whether the presenting problem is the real one, whether the causes of concern are external or arise from internal processes in the firm, and whether he is being called in to legitimize a course of action already decided upon. There are no fixed rules or set procedures to guide his inquiry, which must be done differently for different clients. However, a common feature of all such initial diagnoses is that they involve intensive interviews with key people in the organization. During those initial interviews, the change agent must refrain from giving advice, but must do everything in his power to get the interviewees to reveal as much as possible about themselves and the organization, naturally and un-selfconsciously.

Action research is distinguished from other forms of inquiry in the importance of the relationship between the change agent and client. According to Schein (1969: 42), Bennis (1966: 101) and Fordyce and Weil (1971: 72) it is essential that this relationship be a genuinely collaborative one in which the two parties work together to solve mutually-agreed problems. For this to occur, they argue, the relationship must be voluntary, with either party being free to terminate it at any time, each party must have equal opportunity to influence the other, and a spirit of enquiry should prevail, where both parties are governed equally by publicly-shared data.

Not surprisingly, the establishment of a genuine collaborative relationship with these features is difficult to achieve. It is seldom easy to identify the various sectional interests that are involved. It is also frequently not possible to conduct the research in such a way as to include all the interested parties. Finally, the task of getting agreement from the parties concerned to work together as equal partners on the problems is a time-consuming and tricky business. For one thing, those who are funding the research often resist sharing control of the project with others (e.g., the client agent). For another, the parties seldom are prepared to allow sufficient time to develop an effective working relationship *before* the various changes are introduced. As the case studies of Seashore and Bowers (1963), Higgin and Jessop (1965) and Emery, Thorsrud and Lange (1966) have shown, effective action research requires that the parties accept that they have to work through things from the start and establish collaborative arrangements at the initiation of the project. The intention is to relate to the client in such a way that the resulting research is acceptable to him and seen as relevant in overcoming the problems that are preventing it from achieving its goals.

This is not a difficulty in experimental or survey research,

where the investigator uses the organization to gather information for purposes often unrelated to any concerns of the organization. In action research, the initiative is with the *client* who has a problem that needs to be resolved, and approaches the change agent (or investigator), who responds by undertaking such research as seems required. This contrasts with the conventional approach where practical demands are removed from the scholar so that he may conduct the disinterested pursuit of knowledge with minimal interference. In this case, initiatives come from the internal logics of the discipline, not from pressing problems in the real world.

A common error is to assume that action research, because of its psychoanalytic origins, focuses exclusively on changing people within organizations. The reality is that action research is completely open-ended in terms of the sort of recommendations it makes. In some situations, the results of a piece of research may suggest that the goals of the client can best be met if the behaviour of individual members is significantly altered. On other occasions, the problem may be with an inappropriate organizational structure, in terms of the client's environment and the technology it is forced to employ. On still other occasions, the fault may lie with the groups in the organization and how they relate to the organization as a whole. In most cases, it is necessary for the change agent to intervene simultaneously at the levels of the individual, the group, and the organization as a total system, with the main difficulty being in the way individuals, groups and total organizations relate to each other.

The attitude of action researchers

As I have indicated, the investigator in action research gets himself involved in a helping role within the very system he is studying. Because of the impossibility of appreciating what is going on in human affairs without such involvement, as a matter of deliberate policy action, researchers do not seek the detachment and neutrality that are supposedly necessary for effective experimental and survey work. They argue that such complete neutrality and objective detachment are illusory anyway, existing only in the minds of the researcher, and not in reality. All research is influenced in subtle ways by the values and preferences of the investigator, whether acknowledged or not. The danger, it is argued, lies in pretending that one is neutral and detached when this is not the case — as it cannot be when humans study other humans. Instead of comparing the action researcher with the scientist, it is better to see him as akin to a detective or a counsellor. Like detectives, investigators doing action research are concerned with the search for evidence in order to provide 'proof'. They also attempt to build, within the system itself, the capacity and inclination to collect evidence, after their departure. Similarly, they are only temporarily involved in the client system and, quite frequently, are faced with attempts by the client to withhold information or to secure special consideration. Both detectives and action researchers draw upon their intuitions, scan for clues, avoid early focussing on solutions, and in order to bring more data to the surface, often dramatize things to shake up a client.

Like counsellors, investigators in action research often make use of their own behaviour as models from which the client can learn something. Again, they frequently adopt a non-directive stance, listening and clarifying what people in the client system tell them, rather than providing solutions. Often, they see their role as one of helping clients to develop their *own* ideas for solving problems, of seeing things for themselves,

instead of them being pointed out by the change agent. Action researchers, like counsellors, try to be supportive and helpful, even though it may be necessary at times to confront client members with unpleasant truths. Most action researchers feel that supplying 'answers' in the way experimental and survey investigators do, denies clients the chance of learning about those aspects of themselves which are preventing them from solving the problem at hand. Finally, like counsellors, they do not restrict themselves to a cognitive or intellectual aspect of the lives of members, but try to bring out their emotions and feelings and work on them as well.

It is characteristic of the action research process, that the investigator does not explain what occurs by subsuming it under a law or principle that has been verified by numerous studies. In this respect, he proceeds in a quite different fashion from the scientist studying things in the natural world. When he does refer to things that help to explain what occurs, they are more like guesses or surmises which are based on the available data, but whose application cannot be summarized by exact rules or determinate formulae. Unlike law-like generalizations, these surmises or guesses are applied tentatively or hesitatingly in a flexible manner in a particular case. If a particular surmise does not make things intelligible, it is discarded; if it does, it is kept provisionally. The whole action research procedure is characterized by a trial-and-error process that goes this way or that, depending on whether the investigator and client feel it helps them to understand what is going on.

This feature of action research should not be thought of as disadvantageous, or as constituting a weak point in the approach. On the contrary, it is the *only* way we can proceed when dealing with human problems in work organizations. To attempt to follow the canons of strict scientific investigation may make the research look better (to some), but it will be bought at extreme cost — that of saying anything significant or useful about what is occurring and hence how the organization can improve itself. As we have implied earlier, action research is defined, not by the techniques it employs, but by the way the investigator goes about the business of helping his clients. The particular technique that is finally chosen will be that which is most appropriate in the circumstances. The only reason why experimentation and surveys are ruled out is simply because they cannot help to solve a client's problems, because of their inherent limitations, as I have argued earlier.

In my view, a good way of concluding this examination of action research is by briefly describing two of its most widely-used techniques, namely sensitivity training and survey feedback. Although they are just two of many techniques available to the action researcher, they are both typical insofar as:

- (i) they deal with problems of the clients, rather than with intellectual difficulties of the investigator,
- (ii) the investigator gets deeply involved in the problem and works closely with client members,
- (iii) experimentation is avoided,
- (iv) standardized questionnaires are not employed,
- (v) whatever instruments are used are tailor-made to suit the client's situation, and are developed by the members themselves, and
- (vi) the investigator works with the client in putting his recommendations into effect, instead of 'walking away' from the problem when he has finished with his investigation.

Sensitivity training

Sensitivity training is a technique that is only employed when it becomes clear to the investigator that people in the client organization are not getting on properly with each other, and that this is preventing the organization from reaching its objectives. It requires the change agent to set up a series of face-to-face groups involving a variety of persons, each of which meets for a few hours a week. These sessions are designed to promote three related goals; those of increased self-insight, greater sensitivity to others, and increased awareness of group processes, through the mutual exchange of the feelings and emotions which the different members have toward each other. In such groups there are no predetermined topics or issues to be discussed. Although the change agent is present, he deliberately rejects the traditional leadership role. The participants discuss the way they see each other in the group on the basis of the behaviour emitted by each person during the actual session (a concern with 'here and now', rather than with past experiences). In essence, participants learn about themselves by simply behaving — and then allowing others in the group to tell them how their behaviour makes them feel. The role of the 'leader' is not to present members with answers, but simply to help establish an atmosphere of trust and of intensive inquiry, in which members are willing to look closely at their own behaviour and the behaviour of others. It is not a therapy group, because the 'leader' does not attempt to interpret motives nor to probe into the experiences of members outside the group, and discourages other members from doing so.

The key to successful sensitivity groups is 'openness'; i.e. straight talk between participants, in which they say things directly rather than obliquely. However, in a successful group, members are still free to resist any pressure to reveal things about themselves they would rather keep private. The important point is merely that, for instance, if X is angry with Y he may keep it to himself, but if he chooses to express it he does so directly, telling Y why he feels this way, rather than indirectly by making snide or sarcastic remarks or by tell-tale gestures. In this way, the basis is laid for exploring the process whereby motives and dispositions are attributed to individuals on the basis of their behaviour — the heart of what should occur in sensitivity groups. It must be understood that the participants are not criticizing each other, just indicating how they feel or react to the behaviour of each other. For instance, participants express whether they feel anger, joy, sadness, discomfort, etc., when another behaves in a certain way; they do not pass opinions or judgements, such as saying, 'I feel X is dishonest'. The main difference between what occurs in sensitivity groups and the 'outside' world is that in the latter people usually either camouflage their reactions to others for a variety of reasons, or rely on indirect expressions to convey their feelings. Feedback in the form of the feelings of others is a lot more useful and significant for the recipient than feedback expressed as opinions or judgements, because a person's opinion and judgements are just conjecture (which may be wrong) whereas his feelings are data or reality (they usually cannot be wrong), and because in stating his feelings about another, a person is also saying something about himself (which is not directly the case if he is passing judgement or expressing an opinion).

Very often sensitivity training is combined with role-playing exercises in which individuals assume designated positions and play its role as realistically as possible in imaginary situations, usually involving human relations. Unlike case studies, in which trainees just talk about solving the problems at hand, in role-

playing the trainees try to 'act out' solutions to the problems spontaneously as they see them, according to their impressions of the views of the persons whose roles they are playing. Unlike the case-study method, which deals with the emotional and attitudinal aspects of the problem mainly from an intellectual frame of reference, role-playing adopts mainly an experiential point of view. It is based on the assumption that people learn best *via* actual experience or the 'living through' of certain events or situations. This assumption is supported by studies which show that when a person is forced to verbalize a set of opinions as he actively plays a role, he tends to shift his private attitudes and beliefs in the direction of the role he is playing to a greater extent than if he remains passive and merely thinks about the situation. It is also supported by studies which show that when a person is required to defend a viewpoint he is more likely to end up convincing himself of its validity, largely because of the fact that, in so doing, he has been forced to improvise a defence, often for the first time. If done properly, role playing shows, to the persons involved, that emotions and feelings play an important role in determining behaviour. Also, through enacting certain roles, people should become more aware of, and sensitive to, the feelings and emotions of others. They should also come to appreciate the extent to which peoples behaviour is not only a function of personality, but also of the exigencies of the situation, thereby making them more tolerant and accepting of what others do and say.

Survey feedback

The survey feedback approach is designed to bring about desirable change in organizations by combining diagnosis with group methods for unfreezing and altering problem situations. The intervention starts by involving the leaders in the organization in the preliminary planning. Informal discussions are held with them to help identify the main problems and to get their cooperation in advance. Having done this, the next step is to interview key persons in the organization individually, and to develop from *their* responses a set of items for inclusion in a questionnaire that is specific to the firm. Members of the client organization then work *with* the change agent in developing the questionnaire, deciding what to include or exclude, how the various items are to be scored and even on the exact wording of items (which remain as close as possible to the actual words used by respondents). The idea is for the instrument to reflect the client's views of his own problems, not just that of the investigator's.

Data are then collected from different parts of the organization by means of the specially-developed instrument, often supplemented by informal interviews to allow persons to go beyond their answers to the various items in the instrument, or to explain what their answers mean. The most crucial step then follows: It is the feeding back to individual respondents of the collected data in a series of interlocking conferences, starting at the top and moving down systematically through the organization. The meetings are usually arranged and scheduled by a line manager. However, it is the consultant who acts as the informal leader of the feedback sessions. As in sensitivity training, the role of the data is to corroborate the client's beliefs about the state of the organization, or to *disconfirm* beliefs and attitudes, thereby unfreezing the client and encouraging *inquiry* about the reasons for the data. In order for the data to have the desired effect, it must be seen to be relevant. For this to occur, the data is broken down to reflect the specific condition of the unit receiving the feedback and not

left in an aggregate form. At these meetings the consultant 'works through' the data with the unit and tries to get their commitment to an action programme for overcoming the problem.

For our present purposes what is important to stress is the fact that there is no attempt to develop any generalizations from the data about what needs to be done in certain kinds of situations. Instead of *telling* group members what needs to be done on the basis of the laws and principles reflected in the findings, the consultant attempts merely to explore the data with the members of each interlocking group. His aim is to create a relaxed but supportive climate conducive to free discussion and constructive problem solving. To a large extent he deliberately refrains from advising, but instead concentrates on encouraging the employees to interpret the data from their own perspective. The idea is to create an atmosphere that encourages a process of self-discovery by getting members to clarify their own thoughts and work out their own solutions based on the data.

The plans that emerge from the series of meetings are then analysed with senior management. A final and agreed plan of action is drawn up between the consultant and senior management. Finally, the consultant is given responsibility for working with key people in the organization in seeing that the necessary steps are taken to implement the plan.

Both the techniques I have just outlined attempt to help organizations solve their own problems without relying on the research findings of external experts, presented in the form of recommendations as to what must be done. The organization, through its members, becomes an *active* creator in its own learning, instead of a passive recipient of advice based on the results of experiments or surveys conducted by outsiders.

It is perhaps still too early to pronounce judgement on Action Research as an alternative strategy to experimentation and surveys. However, it is my view that it is an approach that should not be dismissed out of hand, especially in view of the lack of success of orthodox or traditional methods — not only in helping clients but also in developing laws and principles

that are both valid and useful.

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