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## Preface to The Action Dimension in Management: Different Approaches to Research, Teaching, and Development

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# **The Action Dimension in Management: Different Approaches to Research, Teaching, and Development**

## **Preface**

Joseph A. Raelin

This special issue has been constituted to distinguish the burgeoning action strategies which are now being practiced by organization and management development practitioners around the globe. Our aim is also to look for common ground across these popular action strategies.

Previous work on the action dimension in management has centered around two major themes: 1) elaboration of particular action approaches, be it action learning, action science and the like; 2) distinctions between the broad focus of action research and the popular empirical tradition of logical positivism. There are, however, some important exceptions. In the February 1993 edition of Human Relations, Max Elden and Rupert Chisholm produced a special issue on action research (Elden and Chisholm, 1993), which, like this current project, was a product of a symposium at the Academy of Management annual meeting. Although the editors proposed some definitive dimensions of action research, they assembled a panel to present some approaches and cases which extended and modified the ingredients of the so-called classical model. Then, in the October 1993 issue of Human Relations, the conversation on the special issue was continued as other authors were invited to present a critique of the prior February contributions.

More recently, Baily and Eastman developed a special issue for the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science (1996) which examined the tension between organizational science and managerial service. The contributors debated in this issue how their respective methodologies accomplished the mission of service in today's organizations.

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The case for making explicit comparisons between what were called "action inquiry technologies" was initiated with the contribution of an extraordinary volume by Ann Brooks and Karen Watkins (1994). Not only did the book present some six different - what we are referring in this issue as - action strategies, but the authors included chapters which for the first time evoked common themes which tied these strategies together.

This special issue continues the tradition of Brooks/Watkins but seeks to extend the conversation by engaging in a dialogue among contributors in a few novel ways. First, whilst all contributors will independently present their respective approaches, they will seek to coordinate with each other by applying their approach to a set of 'action strategy criteria' proposed in this preface by the editor. Secondly, they each will react as a facilitator to a common case, called, "The Manufacturing Manager Comes to Visit." In this way, we hope to highlight the distinctiveness of the action dimension in management practice, not only by comparing our view to the more conventional norms of modern social science, but by noting differences and commonalties among the six action strategies to be presented. Further, besides clarifying our research aims, we hope to assist practitioners of these action strategies, especially facilitators and change agents, to become more clear in their own theory and practice.

The six action strategies include: action research, participatory research, action learning, action science, developmental action inquiry, and cooperative inquiry. To explain each briefly, beginning with action research itself, it constitutes a process wherein researchers participate in studies both as subjects and objects with the explicit intention of bringing about change through the research process. Participatory research, sometimes also referred to as the "Southern School," is concerned with knowledge and power. It seeks collaboration between those from privileged groups who often control the production of knowledge and those among the economically disadvantaged who by questioning the dominant values within society can press for social change. Action learning is based on the straightforward pedagogical notion that people learn most effectively when working on real-time problems occurring in their own work setting. Action science is an intervention method based on the idea that people can improve their

interpersonal and organizational effectiveness by exploring the hidden beliefs that drive their actions. Developmental action inquiry is the systematic attempt to enrich a person's, group's, organization's, or society's awareness of the interplay among transpersonal awareness, subjective interpretations and strategies, intersubjective practices and politics, and objective data and effects. Finally, in cooperative inquiry all those involved in the research are both co-researchers, generating ideas and designing and managing the project; and also co-subjects, participating in the activity which is being researched.

This preface is presented to offer a framework to help our readers begin to think about the distinctions in these different approaches. In particular, it explores some similarities among the action strategies and then proposes a method to begin looking at differences. Although not always credited, Kurt Lewin (1946) is this author's nomination as the founder of these so-called "action strategies" in his reference to action research as a means of conducting systematic inquiry into group and organizational phenomena. The common basis for most of the strategies is that knowledge is to be produced in service of, and in the midst of, action (Peters and Robinson, 1984). Their emphasis is on the interplay between enactment and feedback in real time with the purpose of developing more valid social knowledge, more effective social action, and greater alignment among self-knowledge, action, and knowledge-of-other. As opposed to "positivist" models which were designed to develop theories purposely separated from practice in order to predict truth, action research does not separate theory from practice on the grounds that better validity testing can result from the interplay of knowledge and action. Theory can be applied directly to practice in the field using a collaborative approach combining scholars and practitioners.

The action strategies springing from action research are thus inherently participatory. Theorists and practitioners mutually open themselves up to an inquiry process which seeks to "unfreeze" the assumptions underlying their actions. Their methodologies are experimental and predominantly conducted in a group setting. Each encourages the presence and skillfulness of a facilitator or any facilitative participant who can help the group make use of actual situations as

opposed to simulated experiences. There is also considerable focus on re-education and reflection. This means that the participants, who are normally adult practitioners, seek to improve themselves especially in regard to their human interactions and practices. They accomplish this through impartial self-observation, critical self-reflection with others, and intentional, real-world action experiments which in raising consciousness tend to permit more control over one's actions (Torbert, 1997).

Action strategies are concerned with interventions in action that are useful to the client, but action researchers also value theory. In particular, they are interested in conceptualizing their experiences in a way that is meaningful and valuable to the members of their research community as well as to third persons who might be interested in the results of their research endeavors (Eden and Huxham, 1996). So they are as much concerned with developing new theory, that is with emergent theory, as with using existing theory or presupposing theory to begin with. Hence, theory building might take precedence over theory testing.

The final similarity to be considered here among these approaches is the role of context and feelings in the inquiry process itself. Positivist science for validity purposes requires the "subject" to be as detached from the research as possible so as not to contaminate the data. In a similar vein, the context of the research needs to be controlled so that findings can be generalized. The action strategies purposely engage researchers and participants in both the inquiry and its context so as to incorporate bias. Indeed, they prefer to work with and report about the instability of contexts. They also tend to encourage rather than reject the role of personal feelings within the inquiry process. As such, they sustain a commitment to an inquiry which seeks to unfreeze practitioners' assumptions underlying their actions. Accordingly, the reports of participants are thought to have reliability and validity because the data are rooted in real action, in circumstances that really matter to them (Pettigrew, 1990; Eden and Huxham, 1996). In Argyris and Schön's terms (1974), researchers and facilitators working in the action dimension are thus more able to get at participants' "theories in use," rather than their "espoused theories." The inquiry process is

thus not hypothetical, arising from a hunch or premise about subsequent action, as it is "parathetical," arising from proposition and action presented alongside one another.

But what are the principal differences between these methods? As readers prepare to take their journey through the provocative readings that follow, what questions might they ask? They should certainly consider what the advantages and risks are associated with each approach. Facilitators who believe they have the capability of deploying methods from each approach are invited to consider whether they should be using them sequentially or simultaneously and how each might be introduced. What are the differential effects on participants of deploying particular strategies? How does each approach handle the two-way interactions between action and reflection, between theory and practice? What is its interest in social change and what level of change seems to dominate its concern: individual, group, organizational, or societal?

These and many other questions will be explored in the papers to follow. One way readers can keep track of these distinctions is by considering how each action strategy handles a set of action strategy criteria formulated by the editor to analyze action research-type approaches (Raelin, 1997). We therefore present in this preface a comprehensive exhibit, Table 1, which juxtaposes each of the seven action strategies against these action strategy criteria. To assist in interpreting the table, a short explanation is provided below of each criterion:

## Action Strategy Criteria

**Philosophical Basis:** Each strategy springs from a tradition in social science and social change, the articulation of which can help readers trace its roots, preferences, and historical architecture.

**Purpose:** What is the underlying purpose behind each strategy's push for social change? Assuming it has achieved effectiveness in its interventions, what does each approach hope for in its ultimate effects?

**Time Frame of Change:** How long do exponents of the method deem it to take to achieve a reasonable level of effectiveness?

**Depth of Change:** As a developmental experience, does the action strategy affect systems and people in roles in these systems or does it also probe into changes which affect interpersonal relations or even personal or intrapersonal behavior and feelings?

Epistemology: Each approach is concerned with how researchers and practitioners acquire, utilize, and diffuse knowledge, and how the interplay between theory and practice is handled.

Nature of Discourse: What do people in practice groups tend to talk about; for example, is the nature of the conversation rational, instrumental, strategic, or emancipatory?

Ideology: What social and political needs and aspirations arise from the strategy in question; is there a sense of how the approach works toward the betterment of society?

Methodology: What are the principle procedures for transacting, measuring, and evaluating collaborative activity within the practices specified by the action strategy?

Facilitator Role: Facilitators in alternative practices can assume fairly directive or active roles in order to present and model the type of discourse promoted by the practice, they can be passive in order to allow participants to assume self-control over the practice, or they can blend their style to suit particular circumstances.

Level of Inference: Practitioners of the various action strategies can choose whether and to what degree their practice ought to raise the level of inquiry about inferences among participants, that is, their assumptions or interpretations that may be observed but left unstated.

Personal Risk: Since these action strategies are concerned with real personal issues and feelings, they may produce personal risk of a political, psychological, emotional, or spiritual nature.

Organizational Risk: Since the action strategies also tend to produce organizational and institutional change, they may expose organizational members and groups outside of the practice to unexpected effects.

Assessment: How do these strategies evaluate their effectiveness and what do they seek to measure, be it personal effectiveness, interpersonal behavior, workplace improvement, or systemic changes?

Learning Level: Is the level of learning first-order learning wherein preexisting responses or practices are questioned, is it second-order wherein the standard meanings and assumptions underlying our practices are challenged, or is it third order, wherein the premises underlying our theories-in-use are questioned.

\*\*\* Insert Table 1 about here\*\*\*

Besides comparing action strategies using Table 1 and the action strategy criteria, the authors of this special issue have also been asked to react to a common case in order to demonstrate for our readers some important qualitative differences in intervention ambition and method. The authors have been asked to take the point of view of an action researcher called in to help the team in the case solve a problem. Readers are encouraged to take a few moments to read this case and

begin to formulate their own thoughts and feelings that they might have in response to it. How would they intervene to help the team; what might they say to the team members, but especially to the team leader in the case, and what actions would they propose? It might be interesting for readers to compare their responses to those supplied by our contributors.



## Common Case: **The Manufacturing Manager Comes to Visit**

### Background:

In a large high technology company, a team of managers and supervisors were asked to work on a new project to achieve quality and cost improvement through empowerment and self-directed work teams. The senior manufacturing manager charged his staff with identifying individuals for this team, after which he signed off on the project. The team members were asked to learn more about the issues, take action to address problems that arose, and make recommendations about what the organization might do in the future.

It has now been six months since the project started. The group has invited the senior manager to each of their meetings, but this is the first time they have met with him.

Thoughts & Feelings	What We Said
<p>Whew, he finally came to a meeting. He's been invited to every session. Everyone is really nervous about this session</p>	<p>Team Leader (to Senior mgr): Our team has decided that our goal will be to identify ways that each of us can help eliminate non-value-added work in our area. Each of us will develop an individual project and implement it over the next year. The team will be our sounding board to improve the project, help us move forward and take additional steps, and so on.</p>
<p>What?? You finally come to a meeting six months after we start and suddenly don't like what we have done?</p>	<p>Senior mgr: That won't work. You were supposed to develop a precise plan for quality improvement to cut down on costs. We don't need a sounding board.</p>
<p>We should have known. This is what they really mean by "empowered" teams.</p>	<p>Team leader: We were told that you wanted us to be empowered and to identify our own work task. What gives?</p>
<p>Oh great---we asked for it so now we got it.</p>	<p>Senior mgr: You asked me to come to this meeting to hear a progress report and I am telling you what I think of what you've done.</p>
<p>You keep cutting us off at the knees -- how do you expect us to get anywhere?</p>	<p>Team leader: Well, we have done as much as we could with the membership of the team changing every time we meet. You keep adding people, moving people to different jobs, etc.</p>
<p>Can you believe this guy?!</p>	<p>Senior mgr: That's how things are now. Your team should be working to learn how to handle that problem. We all need better ways to deal with changing team membership, people being moved, or demoted, etc.</p>
<p>In a pig's eye.</p>	<p>Team leader: We need to discuss this and we will get back to you with our team's goals.</p>

What follows now will be the six articles in which our authors lay out their strategy's epistemological foundations and methods. The articles will also feature comparative remarks about the other approaches as well as each contributor's proposed treatment for the common case scenario.

Linda Dickens and Karen Watkins will start us off with a paper on the classic and, as indicated above, the foundational discipline for the burgeoning action strategies: action research. Their paper, "Action Research: Reinterpreting Lewin," while acknowledging that no unified theory of action research has ever been accepted, nevertheless contends that adherence to Lewin's principles of democratic participation and social action, and the cycling between analyzing a situation and then reconceptualizing it, has underpinned those activities designed to foster change on the group, on the organization, and even on society. The paper clarifies the two essential aims of action research as: to improve and to involve. Improving focuses on improving practice, improving the understanding of practice by practitioners - its reflective component, and improving the situation in which the practice takes place - its validity component. As for involvement, participants collaborate together with researchers since they are grounded in the context. Involvement also recognizes community members' psychological ownership of the data and leads to effective implementation since the methods of inquiry and the results of the inquiry can be put to immediate use.

Peter Park follows Dickens and Watkins with a paper entitled; "People, Knowledge, and Change in Participatory Research." Park initially makes a case for using the terms, "participatory research," rather than "participatory action research," in designating the so-called Southern perspective because it has been historically more allied with the acute focus on rank and file voice in contrast to organizational and administrative applications. In participatory research, the research relies on people's participation in the communities where they are working, both in gathering information about the communities' problems and in implementing solutions. Hence, participatory research emanates from the felt needs of a community. What motivates it are the

needs of the community for ameliorating the living conditions of the people. It is the people's needs that arise in the course of daily living that call for study and action. Furthermore, since any project that may unfold is the community's, the researcher joins and participates in the effort as a partner, taking on various roles, from community organizer to facilitator of meetings, from research coordinator to resource person for technical and material assistance.

Victoria Marsick and Judy O'Neil's "The Many Faces of Action Learning," points out that let alone the diverse perspectives that underlie the action strategies detailed in this special issue, action learning in its own right has split into different schools of practice. The authors, in particular, discuss the scientific, experiential, and critical schools. Common to each, however, is the view that the task should be the vehicle for learning and that there is no learning without action but no deliberate action without learning. Hence, participants in these programs work on problems or projects to which no one knows any final answer and meet on equal terms to discuss their problems and progress. Marsick and O'Neil take a cautionary stance in their admission that though action learning is looked upon as a relatively mild development strategy, it can produce experiences in participants which are powerful and even frightening. For some it is the first leg of a journey toward greater self-insight, especially the capacity to learn from experience and obtain greater awareness of the political and cultural dimensions of organizational life. For organizations, they say that it is perhaps the first step toward linking individual learning with systemic learning and change.

The action science perspective, captured in the article by Robert Putnam, "Transforming Social Practice: An Action Science Perspective," strikes me as attempting to perfect the action research methods of Lewin by pursuing our unconscious thinking, also referred to by Donald Schön as "knowing-in-action." Action science deliberately surfaces our "mental models" through a process of "reflection-in-action," especially focusing on the reasoning people use in their actions. As Putnam points out, most of us are unaware of our theories-in-use and are surprised how we become inconsistent with our espoused theories when they get placed into action. However, moving into the realm of organizational learning, action science practitioners

and researchers examine the organizational worlds that have socialized people, without their awareness, to deploy theories-in-use which are suited for command and compliance. As Putnam remarks, "even when they genuinely espouse empowerment and believe they are acting consistently with it, people in organizations commonly act in ways that disempower themselves and others." Hence, organizations are beset by a host of informal but firmly entrenched practices that constrain their ability to consider important matters. Action science takes the risky yet perhaps only effective step of addressing constraining practices that disempower people and limit organizational success.

Bill Torbert's paper, "The Distinctive Questions Developmental Action Inquiry Asks" posits that developmental action inquiry is unique among the action strategies in its concurrent consideration of three fundamental questions: 1) how, in real-time, to divide one's attention by actively turning toward its origin; 2) how to create mini communities of inquiry in real-time among friends, within one's family, and at work; and 3) how to act in an objectively timely manner. Torbert goes on to explain how developmental action inquiry (DAI) interweaves subjective, first-person inquiry; intersubjective, second-person inquiry; and objective, third-person inquiry, all at the same time or, at least, concurrent with one's actions. In this way, it attempts to accomplish a distribution of attention so that one may become aware of what Torbert refers to as the four "territories" of experience. In particular, one becomes aware of transformations between intuition, implicit or explicit strategic logic, verbal or non-verbal practice, and effects on others. In a similar way, DAI challenges people to digest and respond to double- and triple-loop feedback such that they can change the very quality of their present awareness and visioning. It also challenges individuals to diagnose themselves and others in developing analogies among personal, organizational, and social scientific developmental paths.

Peter Reason concludes the panel presentations with a paper entitled; "Integrating Action and Reflection Through Co-operative Inquiry." Cooperative inquiry begins with the classic action research perspective that all those involved in a research endeavor ought to be involved as both co-researchers and co-subjects, that is, conducting and participating in the research at the

same time. But what it does is provide a very specific technology to assist people, from all walks of life, not just academics or other elites, to develop the ability to act and reflect, an ability seemingly lost in the human condition. Cooperative inquiry cycles people through a number of phases of participation, starting with the need to agree to work on an area of human activity, applying the inquiry to experiments in everyday life, deciding whether to become deeply immersed in the experience, and then assessing and writing about the experience as a basis for further inquiry. The method calls for a research cycling between action and reflection, asking participants to look at the experience from different angles, developing different ideas and different ways of behaving.

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