

THE OD ACTION RESEARCH (AR) PROCESS

Action Research is a process which serves as a model for most OD interventions. French and Bell (1995) describe Action Research as a "process of systematically collecting research data about an ongoing system relative to some objective, goal, or need of that system; feeding these data back into the system; taking actions by altering selected variables within the system based both on the data and on hypotheses; and evaluating the results of actions by collecting more data." The steps in Action Research are:

1. Entry.

This phase consists of finding needs for change within an organization. It is also the time to quickly grasp the nature of the organization, identify the appropriate decision maker, and build a trusting relationship.

2. Start-up and contracting.

In this step, critical success factors and the real issues are identified. We link into the organization's culture and processes, and clarify roles for the consultant(s) and employees. This is also the time to deal with resistance within the organization. A formal or informal contract will define the change process.

3. Assessment and diagnosis.

Here data is collected to find the opportunities and problems in the organization. This is also the time for the consultant to make a diagnosis, in order to recommend appropriate interventions.

4. Feedback.

This two-way process serves to tell what was found out, based on an analysis of the data. Everyone who contributed information should have an opportunity to learn about the findings of the assessment process (provided there is no apparent breach of anyone's confidentiality.) The feedback should start with the executive client and his/her team. Usually it is cascaded down through the organization to reach all who have participated. This provides an opportunity for the organization's people to become involved in the change process, to learn about how different parts of the organization affect each other, and to participate in selecting appropriate change interventions.

5. Planning Change.

In this step recommendations are distilled from the assessment and feedback. Alternative actions are considered and the focus of the intervention(s) is on activities that have the most leverage to effect positive change in the organization. An implementation plan is developed that is based on the assessment data, is

logically organized, results- oriented, measurable and rewarded. The next step is to plan for a participative decision-making process for the intervention.

6. Intervention.

Now, and only now, the actual change process is carried out. It is important to follow the action plan, yet remain flexible enough to modify the process as the organization changes and as new information emerges.

7. Evaluation.

Successful OD must have made meaningful changes in the performance and efficiency of the people and their organization. An evaluation procedure to verify this success, identify needs for new or continuing OD activities, and improve the OD process itself to help make future interventions more successful is needed.

8. Adoption.

After steps have been made to change the organization and plans have been formulated, follow-up is started by implementing processes to insure that this remains an ongoing activity within the organization, that commitments for action have been obtained, and that they will be carried out.

9. Separation.

It must recognize when it is more productive for the client and consultant to undertake other activities, and when continued consultation is counterproductive. The change should be monitored for its success possibly to plan for future change activities.

Following these sequential steps is the ideal way to do AR. But AR is tricky in that the organization is dynamic and changes happen while we are in the middle of assessing it. Flexibility while keeping the integrity of the process as much as possible it is the art of the process. OD professionals need to know how and be ready to change their strategy when necessary. Often they will have to move back and repeat previous steps in light of new information, new influences, or because of the changes that have already been made.

But for successful OD to take place, all of these steps must be followed. It works best if they are taken in the order described. And, since learning is really an iterative, not a sequential process, we must be prepared to re-enter this process when and where appropriate.

Sources

- Rouda Robert & Kusy, Mitchell (1995) www ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT the management of change
- French, Wendell & Bell Cecil (1995) Organization Development, Englewood Cliffs, Simon & Schuster p.138