CHAPTER 4

Action Research

The Anchor of OD Practice

Jeremy S. Lurey and Matt Griffin

A Tale of the Oversized File Cabinet

While working in his home office on a sunny Friday afternoon, Frank heard the doorbell ring. He went to answer the door, and as he opened it, he noticed Tom the carpenter standing outside next to a very large file cabinet.

Before Frank could even say hello, Tom eagerly greeted him with a firm handshake and said, “Hi Tom. I was so excited to get your call about the file cabinet last week that I started immediately. I designed a custom-made oversized cabinet to meet all of your current and future business needs. You’re going to love it!”

With a perplexed look on his face, Frank responded, “Tom, I’m not sure what you were thinking, but my message was very clear. I asked you to come over today so we could have an initial discussion about the file cabinet and review my specific requirements. I thought we could start with the overall design of the cabinet and then determine if you were the right person for the job based on budget and time constraints.”

“Yes, but I have known you for a long time Frank, and can tell you have a bright future as an OD consultant. I didn’t want you to have to worry about a thing. You have enough to worry about starting your own business, that I thought I would just take some initiative,” Tom enthusiastically explained as he gestured to his master creation—a 20-foot high, 30-foot long, 10-drawer monstrosity with a dark maple finish. “Besides, this cabinet is perfect for you. You will have enough space in this cabinet for years of growth. You will never need another file cabinet!”

At that point, Frank was very frustrated and could feel his face burning. “Tom,” he replied, “This simply isn’t what I asked for, and you would have understood that if you only waited to talk with me first. “Keep in mind that organizations are complex systems, and using a mechanical approach to ‘fix’ a ‘broken’ part rarely creates effective change.” I’m only planning to be in my home office for a year or two before I move into more permanent workspace with a few of my colleagues. I just need a small cabinet to hold a few important files as I get started. I’m sorry, but I can’t accept the cabinet. It won’t even fit in the house! I am very disappointed Tom, and think you should leave.” As the door closed behind him, Frank noticed the complete bewilderment on Tom’s face.

An OD Consulting Challenge

While this is a fictitious story, and an extreme exaggeration at that, it is not inconceivable that a carpenter would be so eager to please the client that initiative would be taken without fully understanding the scope of work.

Neither is it inconceivable that a skilled craftsman would be so confident in his abilities that he would jump right into the project without having more direction from the client. In fact, it even seems logical for a carpenter to take such actions after reaching a clear agreement with the client—especially if the busy client may be preoccupied with higher priority activities.

Although this story chronicles the tale of a carpenter and his client, the story speaks of an all too common event in consulting, especially organization consulting, as well. How often do we hear these stories:

- Clients who express a clear problem to a consultant, and then the consultant designs and implements his/her own solution regardless of whether or not it meets the true client need
- A consultant brings a solution to the client before the problem is understood or even discussed
- Situations where clients are completely dissatisfied with the performance of their consultants and the results they deliver simply because of a communication gap—one where the consultant implements a solution without first presenting it to the client for approval or at least discussing the possible implications in advance

What these examples indicate is that the quality and success of the project depends upon both the client and the consultant fully understanding the complexity of the issue. To illustrate this understanding, it can be helpful to think in terms of *multiple levels of awareness*. The client experiencing pain can represent the first level of awareness, and the initial client diagnosis the second level. Action taken on either of these two levels is not likely to truly address the issue. Action research is about reaching deeper levels of awareness, and thereby increasing the likelihood of addressing the issue in an effective way.

As the story suggests, it is critical for a carpenter, or an OD consultant, to develop and maintain a close working relationship with his or her client. Without this collaborative arrangement, the consultant will likely deliver an inadequate or inappropriate solution that does not meet the client's needs. In so doing, the consultant runs a great risk of alienating him or herself from the client, and more importantly causing potential harm or suffering to the client.

The story is also useful in illustrating a critical difference between the work of a carpenter and the work of an OD consultant. The "results" that a carpenter produces are tangible and cannot easily be undone. A file cabinet made from the wrong wood or with incorrect dimensions is difficult to fix without starting over from scratch, whereas a consulting project can sometimes be modified, even radically, as new information comes to the surface. Consulting projects, especially those found within the OD world, tend to be complex, subjectively perceived, and fluid. This makes it easy—if anything in OD is truly easy—to misunderstand or miscommunicate the nature of the project. At the same time, it also makes it easier to adapt your approach once you do gain a proper understanding of both the situation and the client's expectations.

The Value of Action Research

Although the origin of action research remains cloudy, and to some extent can be seen as an offshoot of the scientific method, Kurt Lewin is typically credited with bringing this methodology to the mainstream and to organizations specifically. It was the belief of Lewin and his contemporaries that in order to understand and change social conditions, those involved in creating those conditions must be involved in the process. Thus, one of the main themes of action research is enactment of social change. For this reason, action research is at the core of the OD practice. As an approach to organization consulting, it prescribes a positive and collaborative working relationship between consultant and client and therefore provides the basic foundation for the organization change process.

Using the action research process enables the consultant to better understand the system in which he/she is involved, and therefore mitigates the risk of following in Tom the Carpenter's footsteps. At the same time, an action research approach helps the clients to be more conscious of their environment and the conditions in which they live. With this heightened awareness, the consultant and client are then able to work together to realize the goals of the change process by uncovering deeper levels of awareness and understanding.

Because of the importance of client participation, this work method requires the consultant to accept more of a "facilitator" than "expert" role. It should be noted, however, that this is not an either/or choice. In addition, the choice need not be applied to the entire course of the change process. The consultant can act more as an expert in analyzing the data during one phase of the project while still being a facilitator in helping the client create the action plan during another phase. While there is often a delicate balance between the changing responsibilities of being an expert and facilitator, the process remains largely the same. The consultant creates an environment in which the client is always aware of what is happening when following an action research approach.

In this manner, the client actively participates in not only designing each step of the change process but also performing many of the required actions. One of the main reasons for this participative role is that change is usually easier to accept when those affected by the change are involved in understanding and driving the change process. This point is at the heart of action research, and therefore the client, in most cases, is involved in every aspect of the project, including:

- Establishing change priorities
- Collecting and interpreting data
- Analyzing and disseminating the results
- Creating action plans based on the results
- Implementing the action plans
- Evaluating the results

To help both the consultant and client maintain focus during the course of the change process, the action research approach consists of a standard phased methodology. The seven phases of action research are summarized below.

1. Entry—beginning to develop the client/consultant relationship and validating the fit between both parties
2. Contracting—determining whether or not to proceed with the consulting relationship and negotiating any final conditions of the engagement "contract"
3. Data Gathering and Diagnosis—collecting the necessary data and analyzing it
4. Feedback—presenting the findings, analysis, and any preliminary recommendations to the client organization
5. Planning Change—identifying specific courses of action that address the client situation and developing an action plan for implementation
6. Intervention—applying specific solution sets to the client organization
7. Evaluation—assessing project results and determining future courses of action, ranging from project closure to new contract development activities

Action Research in Action

To illustrate the value of action research to the practice of OD, the following section describes a real-life case example of how the action research approach can be used. This account details specific actions taken by both the client and consultant during each of the seven phases of a nine-month consulting engagement. The primary client group in this example was an IT organization within a regional insurance agency, and the initial presenting issue was a lack of collaboration and teaming across the organization.

Entry

After being presented with a viable business lead, the consultant arranged for an initial phone conversation with the client sponsor. While this first component of the action research approach only lasted approximately forty-five minutes, the consultant successfully gained some clarity on the presenting problems and primary concerns of the client. To summarize, the client suggested that there was a lack of collaboration and teaming across the organization. She also expressed a desire to have the consultant further assess the situation and recommend specific strategies for improving this unproductive work culture.

In conjunction with the consultant learning about the client situation, the client sponsor also took advantage of the opportunity to question the consultant about his professional background and relevant work experiences. Questions like "Can you give me an example of when you worked on a similar project?" and "What would your first step be in this situation?" helped her understand what value the consultant would bring to the organization. The client also gained a tremendous sense of confidence in the consultant's abilities due to his strong responses. As with any relationship, this is a critical step in building a positive working relationship early on in the Entry phase of the project.

While this short conference ended on a very positive note, it took approximately six weeks for the two individuals to speak again. The delay occurred for two primary reasons: first, a change in client priorities due to competing projects and second, the consultant's ongoing commitment to another client. While this may create some tension between client and consultant in some engagements, it is actually quite common within an action research framework. Both parties must be ready to move to the next stage of the relationship before any work can proceed, and in this case, the two quickly confirmed their interest in pursuing the relationship further when they did reconnect.

Contracting

The Contracting phase of action research can begin as soon as the client and consultant agree to work together. In this case, it began as soon as the two reconnected and discussed the actual scope of the project.

During a face-to-face meeting with the client, the consultant asked some probing questions to better understand the client's expectations. She repeated some of the same key phrases he heard before, namely "to help the group work better as a team" and "to help create a team identity". At this point, the consultant began clarifying the primary target audience and proposing some potential activities to get the project started. Thus, the foundation of the engagement contract included the following:

- Project objective—design and implement customized management training and development programs that improve management skills and foster stronger team leaders
- Current scope—management training and development for the seven members of the management team only
- Potential future scope—broader training programs for nonmanagers as well as organization realignment or business process redesign initiatives
- Project approach—phased approach including high-level activities, such as assessment, feedback, and intervention, over a specific timeline and with key project milestones and deliverables; requires active participation and involvement from key members of the client organization, including the client sponsor, each of the seven managers, and many of the employees during the data gathering and evaluation phases specifically

After this information was clearly documented, the consultant presented it to the client for review and approval. With a shared understanding of the project confirmed, the client then signed off on the contract. The importance of this action cannot be emphasized enough if you plan to follow an action research approach.

Data Gathering and Diagnosis

Having defined the scope of the project during Contracting, the consultant and client sponsor were now prepared to begin gathering data. In true action research form, both parties played an active role in completing this task. The client sponsor provided key organization data to the consultant to help him understand the environment, and then the consultant initiated more targeted data gathering activities.

Many members of the client organization participated in the process. All of the managers completed two different personality inventories, including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and participated in a 360-degree feedback process. They also participated in one-on-one interviews with the consultant so he could learn more about their personal strengths, areas for improvements, and their beliefs about the work condition. In addition, many of the employees participated in focus group sessions to share their feelings about the organization and complete a leadership effectiveness survey.

After completing these activities, the consultant assumed more of an "expert" role during the diagnosis part of this phase. There were two primary reasons for this decision: first, the client sponsor and her direct reports were all extremely busy with other project commitments, and second, the consultant had more experience with performing such analysis, and especially with using the diagnostic tools.

Feedback

When the diagnosis was complete, the consultant actively engaged the client, and the entire management team, in the feedback process. For the change to be successful, it is vital to share these findings with the client and guide them in determining the next steps, as opposed to deciding for them. They must direct the process if they are ever going to accept the change.

Thus, the consultant presented a summary report of the findings as well as his conclusions and recommendations for moving forward. In general, the findings did support the original contention that there was a lack of collaboration and team identity within the organization. More specifically, employees indicated that there was very little teamwork within or between units and that there was no reason to develop stronger team relations since the individual projects were so diverse in scope. One person actually stated, “I have no team … [This organization] is a series of fiefdoms.”

Once presented with these findings, all of the managers contributed to an open dialogue about the information and possible strategies to address the situation. For the most part, the managers reacted positively, voicing their agreement with the results as if they were almost expected. Some managers, however, did react a bit more defensively and questioned whether or not specific findings were truly indicative of their units or if they were more a generalization of the rest of the organization.

For example, one manager felt that she did seek input from her employees and included them in the decision-making process. The summary results for the entire organization, however, did not suggest that employees felt they were able to contribute in such a manner. Instead, they expressed a concern that they had very limited knowledge of the long-term vision for the organization and were somewhat unclear of how their individual projects supported the future direction of the group. In the end, each of the managers agreed on the next steps of the engagement and suggested several potential activities that would address the specific areas for improvement discussed in the meeting.

In parallel to this work, the consultant also shared the results of the personal assessments with each of the managers during individual feedback sessions. The individual results, similar to the team findings, suggested that the majority of the managers did not openly communicate about the organization’s future direction or inspire commitment to a shared vision, that they did not inform employees of how their work contributed to the organization’s goals. The results also indicated that the managers were very weak in the areas of performance evaluation and performance management, that they did not encourage performance discussions with their employees or provide any regular feedback regarding work performance. Again, the collaborative relationship between client and consultant becomes critical if the individual managers were going to take any responsibility in addressing these concerns or promoting their own personal development.

Planning Change

The goal of the Planning Change phase is to create an action plan that will guide the next phase of the process, intervention. For this reason, planning change is not about implementing the solutions being discussed. Instead, it is an opportunity to explore the potential solutions further and determine exactly how the intervention will proceed.

In this case, the management team identified two levels of intervention: one focused on the management team and the other focused on the individuals within that team. The team-based intervention was a management training program that involved a comprehensive curriculum of courses to address their specific developmental needs. The key aspects of planning this type of change, then, were to define the curriculum and coordinate all of the logistics for delivering the training, including preparing instructor and participant training materials, scheduling the training sessions, and ultimately facilitating the training.

The second intervention was aimed more directly at the individual managers and was intended to support the team training experience. Towards this end, the consultant co-developed personal action plans that focused on one or two critical leadership skills with each manager. While these plans varied from individual to individual, many focused on addressing the concerns with performance evaluation and performance management and all specified certain developmental activities, target completion dates, as well as any resources that may be required to achieve the developmental goal.

Intervention

The Intervention phase is where the plan is executed and the solution is actually implemented within the client organization. Unlike the Diagnosis phase where the consultant often accepts responsibility as the expert, this is one time in the engagement where the consultant can take more of a "facilitator" role. It is the consultant's goal to support the client's development, but the client must be accountable. The client organization is what must change, and only actual members of this organization (i.e., the client) can be "experts" of this environment.

During the intervention, the consultant facilitated several sessions to encourage the learning process. Topics ranged from recognizing great leadership to understanding how to become a more effective leader and were intended to help each of the managers improve in the key areas agreed to during the feedback process. As the consultant presented strategies for:

- Being a positive role model for others
- Being a coach and mentor to those you manage
- Providing the right mix of tools and resources to enable the team to achieve its goals the managers actively discussed how to apply these strategies to their organization.

Beyond the management team training, the consultant also continued to work with the individual managers on their personal development plans. Similar to the roles during training, the consultant merely supported the managers' actions, but the managers were responsible for taking the action. To understand the importance of this balanced relationship, consider those managers who did not actively pursue their plans—they did not require dedicated support from the consultant. This proves the point that both parties play a critical role in the process, otherwise the arrangement will not work.

Evaluation

In an informal manner, evaluation occurred during every phase of work during this engagement. For example, the consultant and client co-evaluated the results of the Contracting phase before moving on to Data Gathering and Diagnosis. Does the contract clearly define the scope of the project? If so, are there shared expectations between both parties as to how best to perform the work? If simple questions such as these are not adequately answered, then the individual parties must reconsider whether or not they are ready to move forward.

In addition, the consultant also performed a more formal review of the project. The consultant developed a standard protocol for measuring the success of each activity and then interviewed each of the managers to gather their thoughts and perceptions. Based on these responses, the consultant synthesized the data and presented it back to the client for review. The consultant also presented some basic recommendations for prioritizing future activities based on not only the achievement of previous goals but also the development of a more capable management team. Future scope activities may include developing a training strategy for non-managers or creating a more formal communications plan to share information more regularly across the organization. In essence, this evaluation, then, actually serves to start another iteration of the consulting process, one that begins with more advanced client problems now that the original concerns have been addressed.

Conclusions on an Iterative Process

As the "Tale of the Oversized File Cabinet" alluded, the process an OD consultant follows can be very similar to the process that a master carpenter goes through before taking hammer in hand. First, there are customer desires to be considered, then measurements to be taken, plans to be drafted and revised, and finally wood to be studied and prepared before any true action is ever taken. The consultant who is an "expert" in a particular technique is like the carpenter who can make beautiful and elaborate file cabinets. Both can provide value to the client, but what happens when the client thinks he or she needs a customized file cabinet (or can be convinced that a customized file cabinet would solve his or problems) when what is really needed is a standard desk?

This issue gets to the core of both action research and OD. Action research and OD are about understanding the real issues and identifying what really needs to be changed. Action research and OD are about providing solutions that address the contributing factors of a problem, not simply providing a solution to the presenting problem, which may or may not be at the core.

Keep in mind that organizations are complex systems, and using a mechanical approach to “fix” a “broken” part rarely creates effective change. In this context, organizations can be thought of as a web of interacting forces, interacting individually and as a whole to produce certain outcomes. Thus, effective change entails exploring these forces and their interactions. Within a single action research cycle (Entry to Evaluation), multiple levels of awareness can and will probably be uncovered. However, it is not uncommon that there are levels of awareness that will only be uncovered in subsequent cycles, as the client’s self-awareness increases and the ability to self-reflect and change develops. Thus, action research is most helpful as an iterative process, not as an event.

Action research can be a rather difficult and frustrating process to understand and use effectively. “Yes, I know *about* action research, but what do I *do*?” can be a common question for new practitioners. Understanding the process of and assumptions behind action research can make the difference between being a practitioner of OD and being someone who simply uses typical OD interventions without using the other parts of the process that make up OD. Or, to put it another way, it is like the difference between being a carpenter and being someone who knows how to swing a hammer.