Participatory Action Research

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Participatory Action Research

Premise: Organization studies have a poor record for making a difference in organizations

- Might show an important person in a poor light
- The person who commissioned the study doesn’t have the power to make change
- Findings are too abstract
Greatly increases the chances of implementation!

- Members of the organization gain an understanding of the reasoning behind a change
- The suggested changes are more useful because they are offered by people who do the work
- The knowledge does not leave when the consultants leave
Formats based on similar principles

**PRINCIPLES**

1. Rigorously designed study of an organizational issue (social scientist)

2. Involves a team of internal employees as joint researchers

3. Engages the whole organization in conversations about the findings

4. Assesses the results of action as input to continuing organization change

**EXAMPLE**

- Long standing process to improve the quality of client reports
- Series of hierarchical reviews before report is released
- Process is too slow for the client
- Frustrating to the frontline report writers
- Reviewers concerned about complaints about poor quality reports
What does it mean to be joint researchers?

- Collect Data
- Analyze the Data
- Construct Recommendations
- 4 pairs of report writers and reviewers conducting interviews in departments other than own – ½ of all interviews
- Group meeting to discover themes in the interview data
- Group meeting to review report draft and develop recommendations
Ensuring validity and reliability

- Testing interview questions for ambiguity and clarity
- Using an interview protocol for multiple interviewers
- Identifying a representative interviewee population
- Taking verbatim interview notes rather than paraphrasing - reduces interviewer bias
- Focus group to validate themes
- Ensuring anonymity of interviewees and departments and keeping faith with those who offered insights
- Employing qualitative data analysis software
- Researcher conducts % of interviews
Findings are embedded in the organization

By the final draft 58 people had been involved in the study and had thoroughly read the report and findings.

- Interviewers - 8
- Interviewees - 37
- Focus group – 10
- Thought leaders - 3
**Value-add for interviewers**

“What is illuminating is seeing other processes”

“It was very helpful. You don’t realize that things could be better or worse in other departments. We asked interviewees what things needed to be fixed and we thought we could profit from those fixes too”

“It helped us look at our own processes. We’ve revamped a number of things”
Participatory action research is a conversational process

- Interview is a conversation
- Meeting of interviewers to revise the questions is a conversation
- Meeting of the joint researchers to identify themes is a conversation
- Focus group is a conversation
- Meeting to review the report and make recommendations is a conversation

Participatory Action Research is a conversation between organizational members

All of the conversations are a part of the change
In the end all organizational change is the result of conversation.

The only question is...

Who is invited into the conversation?
Formats based on similar principles

- Appreciative Inquiry
- Learning Histories
- Cooperative Inquiry
- Positive Deviance
- Most Significant change

- [www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/](http://www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/)
- [www.ccs.mit.edu/LH](http://www.ccs.mit.edu/LH)
- [www.people.bath.ac.uk/mnspwr/Papers/Heron&Reason](http://www.people.bath.ac.uk/mnspwr/Papers/Heron&Reason)
- [www.plexusinstitute.org/complexity/index.cfm?id=4](http://www.plexusinstitute.org/complexity/index.cfm?id=4)
- [www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf](http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf)
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For continued engagement

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