

Action Research when your Boss Chairs

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Description of study

This paper is based on almost three and half years research with an economic sub- committee of a local development board for economic, social and cultural development of a county in Ireland. This multi-agency collaboration for economic strategy making was established in 2004. The 'economic collaboration' has eleven members, of which eight are public sector organisations, two private sector organisations and one from the local development sector. The collaboration is led by local government. Technical assistance is given to the team by myself, the Researcher, in my capacity as an employee of the same local government organisation.

The purpose of the study: is to understand collaborative working arrangements and to seek ways of improving local government's practice in leading out such collaborations.

The purpose of this paper

The purpose of this paper is to discuss and shed some thoughts about being an action researcher in an environment where one's own organisation is the lead in a multi-agency collaboration. Not only has this brought myself as the action researcher and my present CEO sitting at the same collaborative table as co-researchers, but it is a context in which the CEO is the chair of the collaboration, a role he defines as leader.

The paper discusses the politics of researching one's own organisation, and how using action research, may actually be threatening those taken for granted norms and rules which have been passed on through generations of organisational members (Schein 1992) which in the classical hierarchical structure are based on power and control. (Coghlan & Brannick 2005, Lowndes 2005, Williams 2002). Organisation here is taken to mean institutions rather than structures.

The paper offers discussion on managing political relationships, in particular the employee/employer relationship, and in this study, the Researcher/ CEO relationship, and the difficulties inherent in such a relationship within a hierarchical structure where linear thinking, embeddedness and negative power are constraining forces.

The paper draws on the concept on boundary spanning, Williams (2002), structure and agency (Bourdieu 2006) and Institutional Entrepreneurship, Battilana et al (2009) to make sense of my relationship and how I attempt to work with and around my own organisation.

The politics of it all

Research in any form, in any organisation is rarely neutral, therefore it is deemed to be political. When researching one's own organisation this political element intensifies. Using AR, which examines everything, thus promotes; listening, questioning, fostering courage and inciting action (Coghlan & Brannick 2005), may be quiet threatening the to larger classical institutions, such as local government where such activities are not innate within their culture as their 'rules and norms' have been taken for granted throughout the generations of organisational members. (Williams 2002) In such structures central players such as the CEO are the least likely to diverge from existing institutions as they are embedded by the norms and rules of their social position (Battilana et al 2009, Lowdnes 2005).

Action researchers inside their own organisations are referred to as "tempered radicals" (Meyerson 2001) and "irreverent inmates" (Cooklin 1999), because they are seen to support change and question rituals and beliefs (Coghlan & Brannick). There are portrayed as attempting to disturb the status quo, by introducing the word change to institutionalism and in this context opening the structure and agency debate, (Battilana et al 2009)

But there are no 'titles' offered for action researchers who attempt to seek ways of improving their own organisation's practice in leading out inter- organisation collaboration, or in other words, seeking ways to develop inter rather intra organisational capacity. In this situation the researcher is researching on one's organisation and well as in one's organisation. In this context one's own organisation's ontological stance can further complicate matters. This is particularly so when one's organisation has a "them" and "us" attitude, (McNiff & Whitehead 2009), with a presumption that the researcher will take sides, trying to change this stance is difficult, without harming the project or one's career.

There is no denying when one engages in action research one has to work with and around the existing institutions. There is an assumption made that because the action researcher is an insider she has pre-knowledge of the politics and the 'power' structures. (Coghlan and Barrnick 2009). The researcher's experience prompts her to question this for three reasons.

Firstly, it does depend on one's social position within the field as this greatly influences access, as politics and power can be hidden in formalities. Secondly in a large local government organisation non-core departments are often on the periphery and less likely to be exposed to the norms and rules of the 'institution'. Thirdly one can only begin to understand something when one tries to change it (Lewin 1946).

A Political relationship

Coghlan and Brannick (2005), advise that 'you need to be able to manage your superiors' p72. This can be rather challenging, in the researcher's situation her CEO is the chair of the collaboration. The researcher has found this relationship politically difficult to manage, embeddedness, a directive style, and an imbalance of power has some what constrained her ability to manage or influence .

In this formal position the CEO directs and has authority, phrases such as “delegation orders,” ‘manager’s orders’ are used in his organisational environment on a day to day basis. Embeddedness, means that this power and control seems to have transfer to the role of chair of the collaboration. This habitués of authority has made it challenging for the researcher to engage in a meaningful and legitimate manner when negotiating with the chair of the collaboration as it has been difficult to span the boundaries of the CEO-employee relationship. The Classical organisation is a world of silos, and linear thinking (Williams 2002), where taking a holistic view is far from prevalent. The dual role of the researcher although recognised, is rarely acknowledged outside of the collaborative meetings. This controlled environment has left her feeling constrained in her ability to act as participant observer and sometimes has left her feeling partially redundant. Thus she has resorted to ‘action research’ behind the scenes or what authors such Coghlan and Brannick (2005) may call acting politically astute, which involved ‘mobilising allies’ (Battilana et al 2009) within the collaboration, where she acted as a boundary spanner, networking, negotiating and facilitating them to act. This took time as members were influence by the CEO’s social position.

Relationships with significant others within the organisation helped to develop a ‘work smarter strategy’ this is not as easy as portrayed, yes, if it is on making contacts to get interviews, as Coghlan and Brannick (2005) suggest, but if it is as in the case of the researcher, to discuss ways to overcome barriers or blockages at senior management level, then it is a game of trust, particularly if you want to remain a ‘complete member’ in that organisation. It was not until the researcher began to apply this strategy of mobilising allies from the collaboration and began to frame her rhetoric as their concepts and ideas that she began to gain support at chair level.

Therefore reflecting what Pettigrew (2003) states that working as a ‘change agent’ cannot always be done with openness, honesty and transparency, this however contradicts everything that ‘collaboration’ the subject of the study promotes, another inner conflict for the action researcher.

Coghlan and Brannick (2005) acknowledge that senior management at corporate level may be difficult to influence and they consider the aspect of limited access. This does play apart, nevertheless the quality of the access is also important. One must consider whether it is a one way street, a cul de sac or aroundabout. Which ever way one looks at it the CEO has the balance of power, when the researcher is an employee there is always the danger of crossing that invisible line, which may impact on one’s present or future career, and therefore there is always the threat of negative power.

Yes, one needs to be politically astute in engaging in action research (Buchanan & Badham 1999), however this was something that this action researcher had to learn, as she did not expect to have to be ‘playing the game’ with her own organisation’ but she also learnt that the real skill is knowing that the game is everything (Pettigrew 2003) and knowing what game to play and when to play it.

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