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Developing organizations: a system of enquiry, action and learning

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Theoretical background

Organizational development (OD) is a planned change initiative to enhance the personal development of individuals and improve the effectiveness of organizations. Attempts to provide coordinated improvement for individuals and organizations often involves obtaining the services of an external consultant (Sullivan *et al.*, 2013). The consultant applies principles of OD to allow participants to understand the situation and facilitate learning, in order to bring about some form of positive change (French and Bell, 1999).

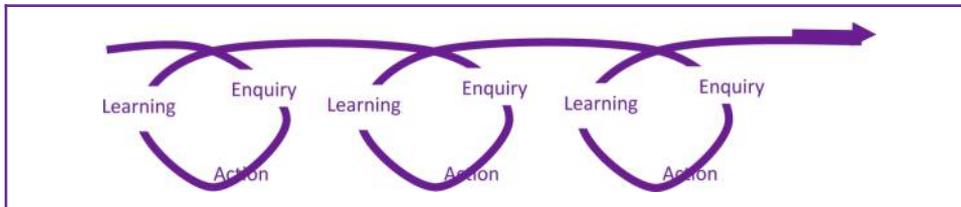
Methodology

Action research is a methodology that investigates situations to be improved or problems to be solved, particularly in management and business (Lincoln, 2003). Action learning is a similar approach to problem solving and is based on the premise that managers learn by actively working on problems and then taking some time to reflect on the experience and share this experience with other organizational stakeholders (Revans, 1998). This study undertook action research and action learning methods, whereby the researcher participated in regular business meetings to gain information about the issues and subsequently developed a series of options for the business owners to consider.

The system of enquiry, action and learning model

The system of enquiry, action and learning (SEAL) model (Figure 1) is a system to introduce the principles of OD to organizational members. In the first cycle, an enquiry is conducted to gain an understanding of the current situation. Then, some action occurs as a result of the enquiry. After the action, participants are provided with the opportunity to reflect and evaluate the enquiry and action to learn from the experience. From this, the enquiry begins again in the second cycle to gain a deeper understanding of the current situation that has changed due to the action of the participants in the first cycle. This process is ongoing and further principles of OD are introduced during each cycle, enabling the researcher, practitioner or consultant to be process oriented rather than content focused. The model (Figure 1) has previously introduced principles of soft systems methodology to stakeholders over several iterations to enable purposeful, positive change (Graham, 2003). In this study, the SEAL model was introduced to the small business owners at the first meeting and was referred to in subsequent meetings to help guide decision-making. A process (or system) of planning (enquiry), doing (action) and learning (monitoring) assisted

Figure 1 The system of enquiry, action and learning (The SEAL model)



the development of ideas and the evaluation of performance in a systematic and meaningful way.

Application of the system of enquiry, action and learning model

The organization that enabled the study to be carried out was a small business consisting of less than 20 employees operating in the health services industry. The problem situation was identified as “an ineffective business model” where multiple streams of income were provided from a variety of services. The first stage of enquiry identified a need to clearly articulate the existing business model and involved interviews with the business owners. The subsequent action was the development of a spreadsheet to calculate each revenue stream as a percentage of overall income. The learning that resulted from the earlier stages of enquiry and action was the need to develop alternative business models as options, so that a comparative analysis could be performed.

The second stage of enquiry was to determine how many alternative business models were possible. It was decided that four models would be considered. The second stage of action was to further develop the spreadsheet by inputting the current level of income against each of the four business models. The second stage of learning involved further reflection between the consultant and the business owners, and the result was to develop an additional four business model options, so that the existing income could be compared to the ideal future income. The business models were numbered one to eight for reference.

The third stage of enquiry was to determine an ideal yet realistic level of income from each health service function. The third stage of action was to input this amount to the additional four business models. The third stage of learning was an analysis of the eight models, and a decision was made by the business owners to adopt Model Number 7 as the most appropriate business model.

The application of the SEAL model introduced three main principles of OD. First, the method ensured that the intervention was process-focused, where the emphasis was on how decision and action occurred, more than just being interested in what occurred. Second, the intervention was informed by data to ensure that the rationale for decision and action was valid and evidence based. Finally, the intervention was client centered, confirming that the priorities and ultimately the decision and action were determined by the business owners.

Research contributions

The motivation for this research project was to apply a simplified action learning model to small business owners to introduce principles of OD to achieve organizational improvement. The SEAL model makes a contribution to the OD literature in that it provides a simple model that is practical in application. The principles of OD were introduced gradually yet systematically over several iterations, allowing the principles to be understood by practitioners and therefore easily transferred to organizational stakeholders. This process does not occur in a one-day workshop, rather over several weeks of consistent communication following an action research approach. The study confirms that

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OD principles can be introduced using the SEAL model to guide practitioners toward problem solving. This supports the proposition that the SEAL model can be applied in a variety of contexts and can introduce a range of OD principles and frameworks that are best suited to the particular business or industry. This research extends on a previous study of a business operating in the automotive industry.

Conclusion

The study suggests that the model is in the stages of infancy and would benefit from further studies that involved more organizations of different contexts, a longer time frame and using more cycles of enquiry, action and learning. It is proposed that future applications of the SEAL model could be applied to a variety of industries to understand and appreciate a range of situations to be improved or problems to be solved. This could provide further confirmation that the model as an appropriate framework of action research, action learning and OD.

Keywords:

Action research,
Action learning,
Organizational development

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