
Continuous Professional Development: Why Improving Managers and Management is difficult

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This paper looks at the difficulty of applying Action Research (AR) theory in real life management practice. No one would disagree with the concept of Continuous Improvement, or Continuous Professional Development, but perhaps some would disagree with the method. AR, in principle, appears to be an excellent way of combining professional practice with improvement professionally, but there are issues to overcome.

INTRODUCTION

Doubt is not a pleasant mental state but certainty is a ridiculous one.

Voltaire

British management and managers have long been castigated for an apparent lack of professionalism. This has been equated with an apparent lack of relevant professional qualifications. By this we mean that people who end up managing a team, department, or even a division, usually have (in industry, for example) a first degree in Mechanical Engineering, but by implication, know nothing about, say, motivation or the mystique of managing other people. The assertion appears to be that without a rigorous, formal, academic qualification, you cannot improve yourself and become a better manager. The solution offered is usually to be found in seductive, glossy magazines: attend a business college, or a series of seminars, or search for that American Holy Grail, the MBA.

Whilst not gainsaying any of these formal, usually didactic programmes, our contention is that they may be a necessary but not sufficient method for bringing about change in the performance of a manager, that is, converting knowledge into action. Hence our descent, or ascent into Action Research as the method and vehicle for bringing about change and improvement.

In Elliot's working paper, *Action Research: A Framework for Self-Evaluation in Schools*, he emphasises that Action Research provides the necessary link between self-evaluation and professional devel-

opment [1]. Elliot in the same paper gives us a broad but eminently workable definition of Action Research as *the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it.*

He makes two very important points. The first is that the process involves reflection, ie the development of understanding articulated in Elliot's use of the phrase *self-evaluation*. The second is that the process involves changes in practice, as indicated in the phrase *professional development*. Thus the manager as the practitioner is the researcher, and is almost obliged to act on the result of that research. Thus:

A distinguishing feature of Action Research is that those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on courses of action which seem likely to lead to improvement and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice [2].

INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANISATION LEARNING

There is a word that has been a buzzword in training for the last decade and is used to describe the *raison d'être* for, and of, teamwork. That word is synergy. It is used to describe the notion that the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. The whole that we would like to refer to here is the organisation. The individual parts being individuals who are learning. What the benefit for the individual is, is relatively straightforward, but what is the benefit for the organi-

sation? There is almost certainly going to be substantial investment on behalf of the company in time, if not in money. Surely the company is entitled to see the organisation grow and improve as a result. Pedlar *et al* have stressed that individual learning is a necessary prerequisite of organisational learning, but without individual learning, no organisational learning can take place [3]. There is a conceptual problem here that is elegantly put by Argyris and Schon:

There is something paradoxical here. Organisations are not merely a collection of individual, yet there are no organisations without such collections. Similarly, organisational learning is not merely individual learning, yet organisations learn only through the experiences and actions of individuals. What then are we to make of organisational learning? What is an organisation that it may learn? [4]

Many of the concepts that have been applied to individual learning have been adapted to explain organisational learning. These have included the single and double loop learning models of Argyris and Schon which have been interpreted by some as describing mental models, that is, the ways in which individuals and companies construe the world which, in turn, affects their perceptions and actions. The concept of action learning has equal validity in the organisational as well as the individual context, and there is a body of literature that stresses the importance of the emotional context of learning, as well as its level and content. The message seems to be that learning impacts on individuals and their organisations in many different ways. It is the view of the authors that the potential of learning to transform is not the result of training and development in the institutional sense, but the acquisition of critical powers and skills to challenge the status quo.

Garvin describes learning organisations as being skilled at five main activities [5]:

- Systematic problem-solving
- Experimentation
- Learning from past experience
- Learning from others (ie benchmarking)
- Transferring knowledge through information flows and education

On the other hand, just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water, Torbert has written about the barriers to developing simultaneous individual and managerial learning [6]. In his view:

- According to development theory only those at higher levels of development can possibly appreci-

ate the benefits of developing others to such levels, therefore in many organisations no-one will be committed to the process.

- The development of others requires a non-coercive, but confrontational style, which few people routinely demonstrate.
- There is nothing that will routinely cause organisational learning.
- The types of organisational structure that will integrate individual and organisation learning are not known.

Is Torbert right? It does not matter. Is the glass half full or half empty? If he's wrong, then the organisation will flourish. If he's right, then what a wonderful role for Action Research.

Adults appear to find satisfaction in problem-solving, as suggested by Gagne's proposal for a hierarchy of learning, where it is the highest rung of Gagne's ladder [7]. They learn better and with greater motivation when it is presented in the form of subject matter required to solve a problem which is relevant to them. Life is too short and the day too complex for the typical manager to want to, or indeed, be able to tackle all the problems. Some, it is true, seek solutions or enlightenment for its own sake, but for most managers problems relating to their work, their life, and their relationships are those which command greatest attention. Gagne also mentions what he calls *integrative, holistic thinking, where some people dissect whole pictures by analytical thinking to see how the parts relate to each other*. This appears to be what Senge calls *Systems Thinking* [7]. He describes it as a discipline for seeing wholes, as a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static *snapshots*.

It is our belief that, unfortunately, too many of us fail to think this way as a matter of course. How then can we deal with those barriers that Torbert intimates exists, and turn the whole process into something positive?

That we should set aside all previous habits of thought, see through and break down all the mental barriers which these habits have set along the horizons of our thinking, and in full intellectual freedom proceed to lay hold of these genuine philosophical problems still awaiting completely fresh formulation which the liberated horizons on all sides disclose to us – these are hard demands. Yet nothing less is required. What makes the appropriation of the essential nature of phenomenology and its relation to other sciences

so difficult, is that in addition to all other adjustment, a new way of looking at things is necessary, one that contrasts at every point with the natural attitude of experience and thought [9].

In Husserl's sense, the only knowledge of the world we have is through phenomena. We must then learn to strip the phenomenon down to its basics, its essential feature. But because we have a *consciousness*, this, according to Husserl, gets in the way. Consciousness reaches out and grabs things, and the way things appear to us depends both on their character (essence) and on our preconceived way of *grabbing*. We have a hand in the making of objects of our world – by giving them meaning. The ideal, then, would be to be able to look at an object, or an experience, and deal with it at its most basic level, hearing only the message it tells you as fact, not decorated with *extraneous* detail. Perhaps we can explain how difficult that is. If you were to ask, *What is that in the car park?* one could perhaps answer, *It's a very rare red Ferrari Dino* proudly showing off one's knowledge of exotic motor cars. According to Husserl, if the answer had been, *It's an object painted red on the side that's facing us*, then one would have seen it as a phenomenon. We would need to be able to strip away its purpose (driving), its history, who made it (Ferrari) and its value (rare). The ultimate aim is to be able to describe as fully and correctly as possible the most basic ways in which we make sense and meaning of the world we live in. Schutz makes a more meaningful contribution when he involves the application of Husserl's phenomenology to social phenomenon [10]. We can work to uncover the concepts by which actors, our managers, in inter-subjective ways, organise their everyday actions and construct *common sense knowledge*. As he saw it, everyday knowledge, unlike scientific knowledge, cannot be studied by abstract methods. Rather, the careful inspection of everyday social life reveals that social actions operate with *taken-for-granted* assumptions. Thus the phenomenological reduction of both Husserl and Schutz is aimed at revealing *a priori* essences of thought divested of the inconsistencies of perception.

At this stage the reader may be forgiven for thinking that we are in an impossible situation. The manager, having a concern, is encouraged by the organisation to take responsibility for his or her own learning. Using Jean McNiff's Action Research model, and the ability to reflect with critical friends in small groups, he or she is invited to discover, to illuminate, that which already exists, then synthesise via Hegel's model, a new way of understanding good management [11].

To do this, they need to use language. But

Wittgenstein tells us that the meaning of words can and will change with the actor articulating them [12]. The actors believe what they say to be true, for they have been judged as successful on the basis of Kierkegaard's subjective and individual truths. Having acted, and perceived the result of those actions, their consciousness, according to Husserl, has given them individual meanings. The social actors are now recounting and reflecting with personal integrity, but with *taken-for-granted* assumptions, that they will find hard to discard.

THE NEXT TWO YEARS

The task is simple. To allow managers to make informed choices about their management. Allow them, through reflection, to understand the shifting landscape of the swampy lowland where they presently are. To identify the skills needed to become the reflective practitioner and, ultimately, Pedlar's critically reflective practitioner.

First, we need the set of questions identified by Jean McNiff to act as a starting point for our action-reflection spiral [13]:

- What is your concern?
- Why are you concerned?
- What do you think you could do about it?
- What kind of *evidence* could you collect to help you make some judgement about what is happening?
- How would you collect such *evidence*?
- How could you check that your judgement about what has happened is reasonably fair and accurate?

We can, at this stage, legitimately assume that managers are concerned. There is feedback from the *BEST* programme that tells us that we can improve our management style. There is even more specific data from the ACAS survey that tells us that we need to improve our people management skills. This is the *What*. The *Why* is straightforward: potential conflict, labour turnover and loss of personal reputation. What to do about it? Action Research in groups of five, as detailed in a previous transfer paper (Thomas), is a possible solution.

This leads us into the *How*. On the face of it, it may appear simple. Five managers meet, on a prescribed basis, in order to reflect on their management practice, and thereby improve it. Possibly a form of dialectic. In its original Greek form, dialectic meant *discourse*, but most people now use it to mean Hegel's philosophy of the process of contradiction and agreement in an argu-

ment – in which conceptual and/or real world contradictions are resolved. Put simply (and these are not Hegel's terms, or probably his intention): thesis, antithesis, synthesis. An established concept (thesis) eventually gives rise to a conflicting concept or force (antithesis), and when the shouting is over, something new and better than either (synthesis) will emerge. It also explains continuity, for thesis and antithesis do not annihilate one another, rather, the best of each is preserved in the new synthesis. But this synthesis will have its own opponents, provoking a new antithesis. In Hegel's view, moving on, changing perception, is impossible without conflict.

To relate this to changing the behaviour of managers, let us use one of Hegel's best known examples, the *master/slave relationships*. Imagine master/slave, or manager/employee, as thesis/antithesis. The master or boss is what he is because he has a slave or employee. He is defined, in this sense, by what he is not. The Paradigm shift here is that the master could reflect on this situation, realising that there could be a better way of treating, informing, involving the slave/employee, and thus create a new synthesis, a better way of managing.

So far, it appears to be fine. We have a group of managers meeting in small learning sets of 5/6 individuals, reflecting and learning from each other about concerns that they have identified, synthesising new understanding.

But that understanding depends on language, on words. Wittgenstein, however, in his *Philosophical Investigation*, offers the view that what words mean depends not on what they refer to, but on how they are used. Language, he said, is a kind of a game – a set of *pieces* or *equipment* (words) which are used according to a set of rules (linguistic conventions). Our world is constructed out of statements, but the emphasis is less on what statements *mean* (denote) than how, given rules and a context, they are deployed. It follows then, that managers, in a peer group, may be constrained by norms and etiquette or have things made even more difficult by the possibility that they are, in this dialogue, rehearsing a *subjective truth*. Kierkegaard (1813-1855) believed that some things, which although they can't be proved or extended to others, are the sole basis of individual actions. What we are, he believed, is what we do. If we are truly to be, we must act, and we base our actions on our values.

Such is the Bosch Leadership principle *We will walk the talk*. Purely subjective and individual truths, articles of faith, possibly unprovable but supremely real.

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BIOGRAPHIES



David Michael Holifield BSc (Hons), CEng, MIEE, PGCE (FE) is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Product and Engineering Design, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff; Course Director of part-time courses; and Industrial Liaison Officer.

As Course Director and Industrial Liaison Officer, Mr Holifield sets up short course training and main stream education for various companies to fit their needs, ie training needs analysis. He also develops strategies for the long-term needs of companies, marries company training to nationally recognised qualifications, and subsequently manages these programmes of study.

His career began in industry at the age of sixteen as an apprentice electrician for British Steel; he progressed to become an electrician, then junior engineer and finally an engineer. He was a research associate for three years and undertook research into pulse

magnetisation of amorphous ribbons for MoD at UCC. He has produced several publications/presentations about training and education within and for industry.



Nigel Thomas RBGB-CF/PER is a Training and Development Executive at Robert Bosch Ltd, where he has held the position for the past nine years. In that time he has created a unique training environment within the company, where he has formed highly successful, long-standing relationships with many local educational bodies, including UWIC and the University of Glamorgan. 20% of the Bosch workforce is currently working towards a

nationally recognised qualification, sponsored by the company, but working in their own time.

His career background is not typical of a training manager. After leaving school he undertook a traineeship as a metallurgist with British Aluminium Company before joining TRW Cam Gears, where he stayed for eighteen years. His career at TRW started on the shop floor, moving through quality, into management and was then seconded to the training department, where he became hooked. He was instrumental in introducing quality circles into TRW and then was part of the team that introduced JIT and cellular manufacturing as part of a major organisational change.

Three years ago he embarked on a PhD programme, researching leadership and organisational change, which has engendered some radical changes in thinking about the shape of companies in the new millennium.

2nd Baltic Region Seminar on Engineering Education: Seminar Proceedings

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The *2nd Baltic Region Seminar on Engineering Education* took place at the Riga Technical University, Riga, Latvia, between 26 and 28 September 1998, one of several regional meetings organised around the world in 1998 in conjunction with the extremely successful *Global Congress on Engineering Education*.

The on-going objective of the Seminar series is to bring together educators from the Baltic Region to continue debate about common problems and challenges in engineering and technology education; to discuss the need for innovation in engineering and technology education; and to foster the links, collaboration and friendships already established in the region. The 35 papers in these proceedings present the views of authors - senior academics from twelve countries, including most of the rectors of the technical universities in the Baltic States, and some from Sweden - on such issues as:

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