

Chapter 22

Eight-Point Project: Action Research, as a Development Tool for Non-Profit Organizations

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors report the outcomes of a year-long action research project in which engaged researchers of different professional fields tried to support non-profit institutions and their staff to develop the Hungarian care system for autistic people, re-instill the above-mentioned courage of individuals and teams (composed of psychologists, social workers, special education teachers and parents) and to invent and adopt new processes and procedures. Coordinated and supported by a central research team, 27 non-profit care institutions in the fields of education, employment, housing and social services, healthcare and crisis intervention from all over Hungary led their own action research.

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INTRODUCTION

“I am autism. When I come, I come to stay. I take the dreams and hopes of families and trample them with delight. . . . I am autism. I fear nothing except courage, which I thankfully see little of.” This is the way Marty Murphy describes autism in his poem in one of the well-known webpages focusing on autism (Child-Autism-Parent-Café, n.d.). In this chapter the authors report the outcomes of a year-long action research project in which engaged researchers of different professional fields tried to support non-profit institutions and their staff to develop the Hungarian care system for autistic people, reconstitute the above-mentioned courage of individuals and teams (composed of psychologists, social workers, special education teachers and parents) and to invent and adopt new processes and procedures. Coordinated and supported by a central research team 27 non-profit care institutions in the fields of education, employment, housing and social services, healthcare and crisis intervention from all over Hungary led their own action research projects aimed at the development of their institutional practices.

The purpose of the chapter is twofold: first, the authors would like to share the practical details of the complex research project and encourage interested readers to consider to apply action research in their work. Second, the authors would like to argue that action research could be a novel way to develop (non-profit) organisational practice and facilitate organisational and individual learning.

The structure of the chapter is the following: first the authors introduce action research, as a paradigm and as a method, and argue that AR could be a suitable tool to develop non-profit organizations and the managerial practices of non-profit organizations. Second, they explain the context of the research: autism as a growing phenomenon and the special characteristics of the care system in Hungary. Third, they outline the research design and show some of the results, especially those connected with the development of managerial practice, and share some concluding thought about the quality, the successes and failures of the research.

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

The theory of action research is far from an integrated or consistent theory. One can see a large variety of theoretical approaches and practical applications (developed dominantly in the past 30 years), but their common characteristics can be unambiguously identified. Reason and Bradbury (2001) define their ‘participative research’ and ‘action research’ concepts with the same meaning as a collective concept, and offer the following definition: ‘action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in participatory worldview... It seeks to bring together action and reflexion, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities’ (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 2).

The most important purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives („the primacy of the practical”). In a wider interpretation it aims to develop man and communities and propagate new forms of understanding, as well as establish a harmonic interrelationship between emancipation and the wider ecosystem. So action research is also about creating new forms of understanding and generating knowledge – it is based on the belief that action without reflection and understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless. Basically action research is connecting theory and action in order to create both practical and theoretical results.

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