



Chapter III

Action Research: Helping Organizations to Change

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter has been written to provide some guidance to researchers who wish to be actively associated with assisting change taking place in the organizations that they are studying. This means that they will not be detached observers interested only in observation and documentation, but will take on a role as a facilitator of the change process. This can be done through advice to management, in which case the researcher is operating in a manner similar to a consultant, but it can also be done more democratically. My own approach, which has been developed over many years, is to assist the future users of any new system, together with those who will be affected by its use, to play an important role in the systems design process. This role can take different forms but usually incorporates the design of the organizational structures that will surround new technology. Many groups have now become designers of their own systems ranging from clerks, salespeople and technologists to senior managers.

ACTION RESEARCH—WHAT IS IT AND WHY DO IT?

Action research is concerned with change. Its intention is to change situations in ways that are seen as better, either by the researcher or by groups in the research situation, and to draw some theoretical conclusions from this process. This means that it can have a political element associated with it related to the question: “What is better for whom and who makes this judgment?” Action research requires the researcher to obtain an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the situation being addressed before taking any action directed at solving identified problems. Today, this may even be its principal objective. Giddens tells us that many problems are now so complex that while they can be clarified and better understood, they are too difficult to be solved (Giddens, 1991).

Action research requires a more intimate and longer term relationship with the research situation than is usual with research methods such as attitude surveys. It differs from consultancy in that one of its major aims is a contribution to both practical and theoretical knowledge. Also it may have many different groups as its principal clients whereas the client of the professional consultant is usually management. It is often defined as a method associated with qualitative research but it does not necessarily exclude statistical analysis. The wise action researcher who wishes to demonstrate that beneficial change has been an important consequence of remedial action will ensure that careful statistical records, which may include attitude surveys, are made of the pre-change situation. This enables comparative measures to be made after change has been implemented.

A method close to action research is participant observation in which the researcher tries to obtain an in-depth knowledge of a group or situation through becoming a part of it. The researcher can either be a concealed observer, a role that is not dissimilar to that of the spy, or she can be quite open about what she is doing, asking the group if she can work with them so as to better understand the nature of their work and its problems. Professor Andrew Pettigrew used this method when he collected data from programmers and systems analysts for his seminal study of organizational politics (Pettigrew, 1973; Mumford and Pettigrew, 1975). My own research has usually included an element of participant observation although very early research did not

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