Chapter 16

ACTION RESEARCH AND CONSULTING: 
_Hellish Partnership or Heavenly Marriage?

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Abstract: A number of criticisms have been levelled at Action Research over the years. Among these has been the observation that the practice of Action Research is insufficiently distinct from Consulting. Indeed, some academics appear to see consulting as little short of making a deal with the Devil. In contrast, we believe that there is the potential for a heavenly marriage between Action Research and Consulting: not only do they have much to learn from each other but they also can usefully complement each other. This chapter focuses on how the practice of Consulting would benefit from the adoption of specific Action Research principles. We briefly review the background literatures of both Action Research and Consulting, particularly Management Consulting. We also consider a previously-developed set of principles and associated criteria that help to ensure the rigour and relevance of Canonical Action Research. The discussion section highlights how the principles and criteria for Action Research can usefully contribute to high quality consulting practice. We conclude with a call for more dialogue and hands-on interaction between practitioners of Action Research and Consulting.

Key words: Action Research, Consulting, Synthesis, Relevance, Rigour

1. INTRODUCTION

Action Research (AR), as a methodology, has been the subject of considerable criticism over the years. Some critics have asserted that AR tends to produce either "research with little action or action with little research" (Dickens and Watkins, 1999, p.131). Others have suggested that AR has placed an undue focus on methodological rigour, at the expense of organizational relevance, and vice versa (cf. Cohen and Manion, 1980).
In response to these types of criticisms, we have developed, in an earlier article (Davison et al., 2004), a detailed set of structured principles and associated criteria that can be used to ensure both the rigour and the relevance of action research. Our principles and assessment criteria were designed specifically for Canonical Action Research (CAR), one of the twelve or so recognised forms of the AR method. Nevertheless, the five principles we have articulated represent a general framework that can be applied to most forms of AR, helping authors and reviewers to assure the quality of an AR project.

In response to criticisms that AR and consulting are almost synonymous, some scholars have attempted to identify the differences between these two areas (cf. Baskerville and Wood-Harper, 1988). They commonly assert that, among other differences, consultants work exclusively for a client, whereas action researchers work for both a client and the broader research community, to which they must report their findings. Subsequently, the related and vexed question of ‘serving two masters’ has been discussed in the AR literature (cf. Kock and Lau, 2001; Kock et al., 1999; McKay and Marshall, 2001).

For some scholars, ‘consulting’ remains a dirty word, an activity to be shunned as they pursue the truth and contribute to the advancement of ‘scientific’ knowledge. Academic researchers who cooperate with business consultants may be seen as making a deal with the Devil. In contrast, we see that there may be considerable potential for consulting (C) and AR to leverage each other’s strengths, each learning from each other. However, at present the two disciplines, and in particular their proponents, seem to be so far apart as to stifle any attempt to harness any complementary effects. In this chapter, we explore the benefits that may be realized if consultants in general, and information systems (IS) consultants in particular, were to use AR as one of their many process methodologies. Benefits can also accrue to action researchers, who can usefully glean insights and research opportunities through consulting assignments.

In the following sections, we first briefly review the relevant background to AR, with a particular focus on CAR. We aim to show that AR has the potential to enhance both the rigour and the relevance of research that focuses on organizations, management and information systems. We also summarize the five principles that we have developed previously (Davison et al., 2004) to ensure relevant and rigorous AR. We then provide a similar background section on consulting (C), which highlights some of its long-standing deficiencies. We aim to show that many of the key deficiencies are related to ideas that have been addressed in the AR literature. Following this background and literature section, we consider how the principles and guidelines that were developed in Davison et al. (2004) lend themselves to