The Action Research Paradigm: An Alternative Approach in Negotiation

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The action research model has been widely used by practitioners in many social science fields as a practical problem-solving method. Unique to the action research paradigm is that it allows research and practice to coexist and cowork simultaneously in problem solving. Due to increasingly complex relationships between governments, organizations, groups, and individuals, scholars and practitioners of negotiation are mandated to address and resolve different types of disputes by using various negotiation models and techniques to thoroughly understand and study the underlying foundations of these conflicts. This paper attempts to investigate the potential applications of the action research model as an appropriate tool for the negotiation as a process of dispute settlement.

KEY WORDS: action research; negotiation; process; problem solving; decision making.

1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The process of negotiation has been widely used as an overarching approach by governments, institutions, organizations, and individuals engaged in responding to disputes and disagreements. The complexity of relationships, regulations, and power relations contributed to the demand to and emphasis on the negotiation process. As a result, the field has become rather interdisciplinary in nature. Although conflict is not necessarily bad, wrong, or intolerable, our society often views conflict negatively because it is equated with win/lose situations (Folberg and Taylor, 1984). To adequately address such demands and further successfully facilitate the negotiation process, scholars and practitioners in the field of negotiation began to seek multidisciplinary models, approaches, and tools (Ury et al., 1988; Constantino and Merchant, 1996; Rowe, 1997; Lynch, 1998; Susskind et al., 2000).

The literature on negotiation indicates that there are a variety of models and approaches to the process of negotiation. However, negotiation of disputes need

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not follow an established framework, although some have systematically studied the process (Williams, 1983). Therefore, it seems best to define “negotiation” as including all cases in which two or more parties are communicating, each for the purpose of influencing the other’s decision (Fisher, 1983). From this perspective, the power of knowledge is vital to carry out successful negotiation processes. Fisher (1983) suggests that a negotiator needs to possess the following categories of knowledge to strengthen his/her ability to exert influence:

- knowledge about the people involved,
- knowledge about the interests involved, and
- knowledge about the facts.

A knowledge process involves various forms of research to obtain the required knowledge. Inherently, action research model requires constant state of research to acquire further knowledge. Given this context, action research paradigm, in this paper, is presented as a potentially appropriate model for the negotiation process.

This paper attempts to provide an in-depth review of the action research paradigm as an alternative model; to present an overview of negotiation as a conflict resolution process; and, using a comparative analysis approach, to present the potential application of action research paradigm for the field of negotiation. As an interdisciplinary field, negotiation is in constant quest for quality research to lead to successful practice methods in effectively resolving the complex conflicts among individuals, groups, and organizations. Cummings and Worley (2001) proposed action research model as a practical problem-solving method; therefore, the field of negotiation can further investigate the processes involved in action research and, consequently, apply them in practice, which, depending on the nature of the conflict, potentially benefits to resolve conflicts at all levels.

2. ACTION RESEARCH

Action research is the process of systematically collecting research data on an ongoing system relative to some objective, goal, or need of that system; feeding these data back into the system based both on the data and on hypotheses; and evaluating the results of action by collecting more data (French and Bell, 1999, p. 130). Despite some controversy about the origins of action research, it has been considered a distinctive form of problem-solving method since the early 1940s. Kurt Lewin is generally regarded as one of the pioneers (Checkland, 1981; Argyris et al., 1985), and he is also the first person to use the term “action research” to refer to a specific research approach in which the researcher generates new social knowledge about a social system while, at the same time, attempts to change it (Lewin, 1946; Peters and Robinson, 1984). A distinctive emphasis on action research has also been given by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London after World War II as a groundbreaking method to deal with sociological and psychological