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### Doing action research in your own organisation

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# Book Review

Coghlan, D. (2019). *Doing Action Research in your Own Organisation*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. SAGE Publications, London.

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*Doing Action Research in your Own Organisation*, offers the reader both an outline of key theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of action research, alongside an invitation into considering the practical, interpersonal and organisational considerations of being an action researcher in one's own organisation. The intended audience are those carrying out insider action research within their place of work, and most particularly those who are doing so in the context of an academic project such as a Masters or PhD.

The book is comprised of twelve chapters, divided into three broad sections, namely 'Foundations', 'Issues and Challenges in Researching your Own Organisation' and 'Implementation'.

The 'Foundations' section is largely focused on the theoretical aspects of Action Research, and how this methodology approaches the generation of new knowledge. The next section, 'Issues and Challenges in Researching your Own Organisation', delves into considering the ethical and political dimensions of being an insider action researcher. The final section, 'Implementation', provides applied insights and examples of how to fulfil the role of being an action researcher, both in terms of the core project within one's organisation, and the requirements inherent to an academic programme of research.

*"We all knew in our heart and souls that we were making our present situations better by working together and that is one very good reason to use action research".*

The above quote, which are the words of a person who carried out an insider action researcher project, are the closing lines of David Coghlan's book. I imagine these words would resonate with the majority of those considering, engaged in or reflecting on being involved in insider action research project; that core desire to know that what you are doing together is enhancing the present. *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organisation* offers an in-depth, and expansive exploration of the theoretical and practical aspects of insider action research. This review will explore this book under the headings of: content, process and premises. I have used these headings due to their congruence with both action learning and action research, as they are said to evoke reflection that leads to increased awareness of self which can generate enhanced understanding of our learning (Mezirow,1991).

## Content

## Content of the Book

The Foundations section weaves between outlining the structure of action research cycles, alongside discussions on central ethical and quality concerns that are particular to this research methodology. The reader is also introduced to consider different ways of knowing, how we come to know what we know and how we then process this knowledge. This book firmly positions action research as accessing, acting from and developing 'practical ways of knowing' and so this discussion on knowing-in-action is, I believe, central to how the book goes on to talk about the applied aspects of action research.

Issues and Challenges in Researching your Own Organisation- These applied aspects are further elaborated on within the 'issues and challenges' chapters. I found these chapters extremely helpful for the information contained and sign-posting to further reading that would be beneficial to those preparing research protocols, and ethics submission; particularly if there may be a need to defend the action research approach to ethics and rigor to people/committees more familiar with a more traditional approach to research. The discussion re challenges focused on the political landscape when working with others on an action research project, and the possible obstacles that may emerge as the project develops as people respond to ideas for action being generated.

Implementation- Again in the Implementation section there is useful practical guidance with regard to developing the research proposal. These chapters offer insight into how the act of inquiry can be an intervention or action in and of itself. They also give further insight into how the 'core' and 'thesis' aspects of the action research project are enacted, and shared with others. Single, double and triple loop learning in the context of action research is also illustrated.

I would agree with Graham Cagney's summation of the 4<sup>th</sup> Edition of this book that it may be best suited to experienced action researchers and academics, particularly with regard to the foundations of action research (Graham Cagney, 2015). As has been outlined above there is useful guidance and sign-posting particularly with regard to the research proposal which may be very valuable to those who are newer to action research.

In summary, the content of this book gives attention to how you think about and question action research, your way of being as an action researcher alongside the doing of the research and the underpinning frameworks and philosophies which guide decisions regarding engagement and action.

## Process

### Processes used in the book to engage the reader

Processes the reader is invited into when reading *Doing Action Research in your Own Organisation* include: reflection with self and others, journaling, consideration of different ways of knowing through story vignettes, visual representation of concepts and online videos and additional resources.

The centrality of inquiry within action research is modelled through the bookending of chapters with questions for the reader to consider. At the beginning of the chapters are questions which underpin what the chapter aims to discuss, there are questions for reflection and discussion dotted the body of the chapters, as well as focused questions as part of the reflective Exercises at the end of this chapter. It stood out to me that these questions, and the thoughts and further questions that may emerge from them have potential to be ideal starting points for discussions in the context of academic supervision or action learning. As well as the process of answering the questions, the significant role that questions have in this book invites the reader to consider the craft of creating generative questions that disrupt, challenge and inspire.

## Premises

### Perceived premises about action research within the book

Some premises, about doing action research in your own organisation, that I perceived to be threaded throughout the book included: normalising the struggles through highlighting the challenges of being an insider action researcher, the substantial impact of power and politics within an action research study and the quality of the researcher's interiority to influence the direction of the study.

Each of these stand-out as being topics which would be well-deserving of further exploration within a context such as action learning to further tease out how the reader is interpreting their resonance and relevance to their own setting.

A reflection that emerged for me, in my own emotional responses when reading this book, was a question of realistic perceptions of the experience of being an action researcher. If there is an underlying premise that the action researcher should prepare for significant difficulties, is that in some ways suggesting that being an action researcher is in itself a problem to be solved?

When I was reading about power and politics within action research in the book, it led me to wonder about power and politics within action learning sets. I began to think about someone reading this book using their own experience of action learning or similar environments where growth and learning is valued, to reflect on how power and politics is experienced in these settings. I wondered also about language in action research and action learning, and if terms such as 'relational landscape' can potentially create a different feeling or response to 'political landscape' for the reader.

The role of interiority is highlighted in this book as being core to enhancing issues of quality, rigour and ethical research. Journaling is cited as being key to developing and practicing interiority. As previously mentioned the questions provided in this book support the practice of inward reflection; and action learning can then serve as a place for reflexive exploration of what emerges.

## Conclusion

To return to the lines referenced in the introduction to this review, "*We all knew in our heart and souls that we were making our present situations better by working together and that is one very good reason to use action research*".

Doing Action Research in your Own Organisation is a book that recognises and values the way people engaging in insider action research put their 'heart and soul' into the endeavour. It speaks to the heart, whilst also providing insights into how best to use 'our heads and hands' as insider action r.

## Citation

Graham Cagney, Anne. (2015). Doing action research in your own organization. Action Learning: Research and Practice. 12. 1-5. 10.1080/14767333.2015.1049453.

Mezirow, J. (1991). Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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