

Managing Action Programs for Organization Development

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The process of managing organization development is fundamentally a comprehensive, highly planned and systematic approach to implement and further improve a broader, long-range perspective of the change management efforts. The very organization development, as an emerging discipline aimed at improving the overall organization effectiveness, developing the potential of the individual members and creating the basis for a continuous and profound change is neither a micro approach to change, nor it refers to a single, random or an ad-hoc change technique. Therefore, it is often considered as an integration of action programs aimed at creating and maintaining the organization capability to predict, adapt and change, particularly the attitudes, capabilities and the morale of the organization members. Nowadays, the principal issues of organization development emerges from transformational restructuring, reengineering and responsible flattening the management hierarchy, to creating and managing a reconfigurable organization, as a flexible and able to change system on an annual, monthly, weekly, daily, or even hourly time frame. The reconfigurable organization focuses the attention to the continuing need for a long-range strategies to improve strategic organizational decision making process and the relationships among organization members, in order to meet the changing conditions. These strategies are the framework for the planned change techniques, well known as the action programs for organization development. The process of managing the action programs for organization development would be a central point in the proposed scientific work. It is of such an importance that determines the necessity to further modify, continue or discontinue the overall change efforts in the organization. Finally, a successful action program for organization development must result in a modified or changed organization behavior and capacity for further organization development.

Introduction

The fundamental evolutionary definition of the management discipline organizational development has been created by Richard Beckhard¹, back in 1969, according to whom it is determined as an effort, planned, organization – wide and managed from the top, to increase organization development and health through planned interventions in the organization's process, using behavioral science knowledge.

The content of the above principal definition implies to the integration of theoretically – systematic and practically oriented methods and techniques, fundamentally known as interventions, which are principally distinct from the general field of organizational change management.

The basic reason for the distinction between the organizational change theory and the practice of organizational development lies in the momentum that most of the change management implementation methodologies have been influenced by the core values, concepts and framework of the organizational development, as a long range, stable, deliberate and highly planned framework for any change management effort.

At early days, in 40's, 50's and 60's, organizational development has been quite sober and business oriented, emphasizing the fact that an individual could flourish only when contributing to organizational purposes, theories predominantly influenced by the work of McGregor, Maslow and Herzberg.

OD has been perceived as mobilization of information, energy and resources that are present in an organization, but currently diverted to unconstructive channels, for organizational improvement.

Starting from the 80's, an enormous accent in the organizational development is given to the human – centered strategies and tactics which contributed committed practitioners of the organizational development to build-up a clear and prescriptive value orientation.

The importance of creating a value principally for the overall organization, and also for the individuals and groups or teams, in accordance with the prevailing view of the foremost management authors, is centered in the following assumptions:

1. Every individual affected by change should be involved in the change implementation
2. Any effort in developing the organization should rely on the capability of the employees to prepare and implement the action change programs, well known as action programs

¹ Beckhard R., "Organization Development: Strategies and Models", Addison - Wesley, Reading, Mass, 1969, p.9

3. The prevailing focus of this programs should be placed in the organizational dimensions that constitute the core competence and competitive advantage

The goal of any organizational development intervention is to create a methodological approach in order to effect change in the target organization, or in a specific organizational section, and reframe the structure, context and the behavior of the specific organization.

Organizational development is an ongoing process because an organization can not remain static and effective, at the same time. Therefore, organizations develop anticipative management systems and methods, such as action change programs.

As a process for continuous improvement, organizational development states that the completion of one change cycle leads to another cycle in the development process, whereas changes on the following cycle are on a higher level than of the previous one.

1. Action research model

In the theory of management exist two classical types of intervention models in the field of organizational development²:

- ✍ The planning model and
- ✍ The action research model

Evolutionary, the strategy for action science in organizational development was defined and vigorously advanced by the work of Kurt Lewin, back in 1946, and also by Chris Argyris, Donald Schon, John Dewey and others. In the field of the organizational development, action science is also known as action inquiry, action research – most commonly used, or organizational learning.

Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in immediate problematic situation and to the goals of the social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework. As such, it is a type of applied social research intervention model.

Each action research focuses primarily on identifying and resolving difficult, complex, real – life problems, vital for the organizational change and development. It uses actionable data in order to detect and correct gaps between descriptive claims and practical outcomes.

In spite of the numerous individual methods and techniques for the organizational development intervention, such as sensitivity training, structural change,

process consultation, survey feedback, team building, intergroup development, role negotiation and many others, the fundamental types of intervention models form a broader perspective through which changes are planned, effected, monitored and controlled.

The first, planning model refers to creating, acting and stabilizing a plan for organizational development and consequently following a detailed prescription of the road to be followed.

However, the originally created plan is usually subject to modification and refinement, as a result of the internal and external unforeseen changes.

The organizational framework of the action programs for organizational development is placed in the action research model, that differs from the traditional planning model in the following respects³:

It is a cyclical or iterative process, meaning that the results from the interventions are fed back in such a way that further changes and improvements can be implemented

The very research signals the aim of generating knowledge which can be applied in other organizational settings

While planning model presumes a so called “one – off” intervention, the action research model emphasizes the cyclical character of the organizational change and development. At the same time, the goal of the planning model is to improve the personal and organizational effectiveness, whereas the goal of the action research model aims at generating new organizational knowledge and insights for application in different organizational circumstances.

The applicative importance of the action research model lies in the fact that it⁴ involves collecting information about the organization, feeding this information back to the client system, and developing and implementing action programs to improve system performance.

Fundamentally, the purpose of each action program is to increase the organizational effectiveness, by the ap-

2 Cummings T and Worley C., "Organizational Development and Change", West Publishing Company, Minneapolis/St. Paul, 8th ed., 2004, p.223

3 Huczynski A. and Buchanan D., "Organizational Behaviour", Prentice Hall International, 4th ed., 2001, p.567

4 Harvey D. and Brown R.D., "An Experimental Approach to Organizational Development", Prentice Hall International, 6th ed., 2001, p.16

plication of the organizational development value and techniques.

Therefore, the primary challenge of managers and change agents is to manage the above mentioned action programs, in order to direct the changes within the scope of the organization development.

1.1. Relationship between action research and organizational development

The challenge of detailing the relationship between the action research and the overall organization development, in fact, implies to creating an action research perspective to the organizational development. This approach stimulates continual inquiry, development and consciousness in our selves and our colleges, through creating processes and structures for so called collaborative inquiry.

The nature of their relations specifies the fact that both of them are pragmatic, rooted in participative management methods and aimed to improve the behavior through engagement of all concerned. In other words, both of them propose that we can not generate a valid understanding of a certain person, unless we fully engage with him/her.

Action research is a practice for systematic development of knowing and knowledge which brings together the action and reflection, theory and practice.

The organizational perspective of the action research bears the following dimensions⁵:

- a. Pragmatic and concerned with addressing practical issues
- b. Democratic, both in the sense of involving people and in seeking to enable people to create their own knowledge in learning organizations
- c. Extended epistemology of many ways of knowing and valuing, propositional and conceptual
- d. Value oriented in terms of contribution – economic, political, psychological, spiritual and ecological
- e. Developmental – from tentative beginnings toward more significant influence

Action research and the organization development involve an active interplay between me – my own experience and behavior, us – our immediate peers and them – the wider organization and encourage simultaneous attention to all 3 perspectives.

Initially, organization development, in relation to the action research, is needed in the following situations⁶:

- 1. The current nature of the organization is leading to a failure to achieve objectives
- 2. Change is required to react faster to external alterations
- 3. The introduction of factors, such as new technology requires change in the organization itself and
- 4. The introduction of change allows a new approach to be adopted

The contemporary state of development of the action research model, in the state of action programs for organization development, has been originally created as a model in consecutive phases, integrated with a feedback mechanism.

Table 1. The action research model

Phases	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
1	Key executive perception of problems		
2	Consultation with behavioral scientist consultant		
3	Data gathering and diagnosis by consultant		
4	Further data gathering		
5	Feedback to key client or client group		

5 Reason P. and McArdle L. K., "Action Research and Organizational Development", Organizational Development, Sage Publications, 2005, p.5

6 Paton R. A. and McCalman J., "Change Management - A Guide to Effective Implementation", Sage Publications, 3rd ed., 2008, p.217

Phases	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
6	Joint action planning		
7		Data gathering	
8		Feedback to client group	
9		Discussion and work on data feedback and data by client group	
10		Action planning	
11		Action (new behavior)	
12			Data gathering
13			Feedback
14			Discussion and work on feedback and emerging data
15			Action planning
16			Action

Source: *Regents of the University of California, Reprinted from California Management Review, XII(2):26, Fig. 1*

he popularity of the action research model grew in the 70's, owing to the intensive usage of the participative management and the concept of organization development. It is highly important to emphasize that the new behavior arises in the 11th phase, in the 2nd stage, which indicates the depth of the model.

In the essence of the participative management and the concept of organization development is the fundamental belief that effective change requires joint decision making by the managers and the employees, which is initially connected with the fact that the corporate environment and the conditions of business must be understood before the research begins, as a fundamental point of the action research model.

The fundamental scientific importance of the action research model is in the fact that it integrates the organizational perspective of the action research process.

As a phenomenological, i.e. qualitative management technique, action research possesses the characteristics⁷ of being:

- Subjective, as seen by the eyes of the study participant
- Interactive
- Value laden
- Inductive
- Showing interaction of factors
- Context bound and
- Imposes situational theory

The organizational dimension of the action research states that it links a highly persuasive demonstration of the linkage between the change program and the achieved performances. The original proof of this is the true that those individuals that participated directly in the change interventions are easily inclined to ac-

⁷ Graetz F, Rimmer M., Lawrence A. and Smith A., "Managing Organizational Change", John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd., 2 ed., 2006, p.316

cept the so-called the cause-and-effect relationship, that has been developed during the usage of the action research model.

1.1.1. Reconfigurable organization

In order to predict and achieve the dynamic and intensive changes in the market circumstances, today's forms of organizations dramatically change.

Global, cultural, technological, competitive and management determinants change the prevalent method of doing business. Therefore, organizations usually react by flattering the management and particularly organizational hierarchy, restructuring around partly or completely various core business competences, reengineering the processes, downsizing the number of the employees, outsourcing the less fundamental activities, benchmarking etc.

The contemporary term for the above explained type of organization is reconfigurable organization⁸, which is defined as an organization that is flexible and able to change on an annual, monthly, weekly, daily, or even hourly time frame.

The reconfigurable organization imposes the need to meet the changing conditions by developing a long-range strategies for improving the organizational decision – making process. The process of creating a set of change techniques in order to constitute a systematic approach to the future organizational perspective leads to the organizational development.

Within the organization development, the long-term capacity of maintaining and further developing the reconfigurable organization is effected through the action programs for organizational development.

2. Action change programs

Action change programs for organization development are based upon a systematic analyses of problems and an active commitment of the top management to develop and implement the change effort.

The initial step in creating a sustainable action program is determining the organizational perception that the state of equilibrium needs to be changed in order to bring the system to new, qualitatively higher organizational vitality and predictability for changes.

The relationship of the organizational perspective of action research and the action change programs is conducted through 2 types of principles⁹:

- ✍ The research principles, which suggest the need for being creative in defining the real research question, generating theoretical concepts from the field, integrating concepts with the real life assumptions, manipulating and using multiple perspectives, verifying interpretations with perspectives in the field and treating the research setting as a case study
- ✍ The change principles, that refer to developing a collaborative relationship, conceptualizing the need of the changes to be made, changing the behavior and recognizing that expectations amplify or reduce resistances

2.1. Action programs in the model of organizational change

The model of organizational changes that emphasizes the necessity of the action change programs consists of the following phases¹⁰:

- I Anticipating the need of change – meaning that managers must anticipate the need for undertaking changes through action programs. The need for change must be felt by the majority of employees in order to convince them to adopt the new behavior
- II Developing the consultant – client relationship – this phase predominantly determines the overall success or failure of the action program. It is important to stress that the leader of the change initiative can be a non manager, or even a person from outside the organization
- III The diagnostic phase – where actual collection of data, relevant to the situation perceived to be the problem, takes place. It is a very sensitive phase owing to the fact that weak, inaccurate or faulty diagnosis can easily lead to creating a costly or ineffective action programs. This phase sets the stage for the action programs, in the scope of the long-range strategies and techniques
- IV Action Plans, strategies and techniques – where various interventions, activities or programs, aimed at resolving problems and increasing organization effectiveness, take place. In the framework of this phase are placed the so called theories of action, as programs, patterns, designs, sets of rules

8 Harvey D. and Brown R.D., "An Experimental Approach to Organizational Development", Prentice Hall International, 6th ed., 2001, p.455

9 Cunningham J. B., "Action Research and Organizational Development", Praeger Publications, 1993, p.243

10 Harvey D. and Brown R.D., "An Experimental Approach to Organizational Development", Prentice Hall International, 6th ed., 2001, p.16

or propositions that people use to design and carry out their actions. This phase ends with the implementation of the action programs

V Self – renewal, monitoring and stabilizing – for assessing the effectiveness of the change programs in attaining the stated objectives. Once the problem has been corrected and a change program implemented and monitored, means must be devised to make sure that the new organizational behavior is stabilized and internalized. Indication of success is when the system develops capability to maintain innovation without outside support

VI Continuous improvement process – the most important issue in this phase is determining the existence or not of the capacity of the leader to deal effectively with the use of power, and at the same time to achieve the organization vision

A useful method to increase the potential of the action programs for organization development, in the model of organizational change, is to increase the range or the depth of the available data, by interview or questionnaire, as a fundament for a better prepared action programs.

2.2. Dynamics of the action programs

In order to create an action program for the organization development, that is dynamic and sustainable at the same time, measuring the organizational progress, stabilizing the changed desired behavior and overall evaluation of the action programs are needed.

The feedback of information related to determining how efficiently the action program has been effected is a beginning of creating a dynamics of the action programs. It's importance is higher owing to the fact that it creates an organizational commitment among organizational members, that derives from the open communication and management's capability to reinforce the new behavior. This changed behavior is a result of a continuous and profound change, implemented through the action programs.

Probably the most intriguing phase of the dynamics of the programs refers to creating a stabilizing effect of the changes made in the whole or a section of the organization. An effective indicator of the effects of the action programs is the level of direct or indirect reinforcement to maintain the reached modified behavior, the higher the direct reinforcement is, the lower tend to be the indirect reinforcement techniques, as a non desired state. In this cases, certain form of continuing assessment should be introduced against future time degradation of the achieved results.

The final evaluation of the action programs must take place in the framework of the detailed change process, leading to an increased performances and relationship among organizational members, and particularly in increased key factor indicators and bottom – line measures.

By integrating the action programs in the model of action research, we develop the stages of the action research program¹¹, on the following way:

1. Problem identification
2. Preliminary diagnosis
3. Data gathering from the client group
4. Data feedback to the client group
5. Joint evaluation of data
6. Joint action planning
7. Action or implementation of proposals for change
8. Repeat the cycle – fresh data gathering and feedback of results of change

The above stated phases are the most important approach to integrate the content of the action programs, within the model of organizational change and the process of organizational development.

Each contemporary organization must manage the action programs for organization development in the attempt to make the entire benefit in the organization processes, structure and entire behavior.

CONCLUSION

The organization development is not only a process of organizational improvement, but far more a process of deliberate and mutual inquiry and belief in the change efforts.

On the other hand, the action research is not only a methodology, but an approach that shapes the methodological practices. It fully endeavors to make the most appropriate choice in various organization circumstances.

The actual choice must be clear, transparent, articulated to each selves, to other inquiry partners, individually or as a members of the groups or teams and of the broader organization.

The primary difference between the organization development and other behavioral science techniques is the application of the organizational – wide approach to the functional, structural, technical and personal relationships in organizations.

11 Huczynski A. and Buchanan D., "Organizational Behaviour", Prentice Hall International, 4th ed., 2001, p.567

The organization perspective of the action research represents a major change from the traditional methods of management development and training. It functions through an iterative series of steps, involving data collection and joint problem solving, that brings about the new knowledge.

Action research is the process of systematically data gathering for the system objective, or the particular need or objective of the system, implementing the data in the system, involving the action programs for organization development with the application of altering selected variables that are based on specific data or on hypothesis and monitoring and evaluating of the action programs in order to achieve the continuous and profound change.

The fundamental action research model consists of 16 phases, organized in 3 stages, that comprise the entire sequence from the perception of the problems by the key executives, to the final action, whereas the new behavior arises in the 11th phase of the 2nd stage.

The research and the change principles are prevalent both for the action research and the action change programs for organization development.

Action programs are vital for the long – term capacity of creating and maintaining the reconfigurable organization, as a flexible and able to change on a various range of level, starting from the annual and ending with an hourly time frame.

Once the action programs are implemented, it's dynamics refer to measuring the organizational progress, stabilizing the changed desired behavior and overall evaluation of the action programs are needed.

Finally, while the goal of the action research model aims at generating new organizational knowledge and insights for application in different organizational circumstances, the objective of the action programs for organization development inclines to establishing a continuous improvement process, self aware of the change needs and of the potential to allow the flow of fresh data from the environment, in order to further develop the capacities for a qualitative and planned change technique.

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