

the intangibles- make them tangible. It is hard to understand the intangibles (i.e. R&D, innovation, patents, trademarks, human capital stock, training, etc) contributions to the firm's competitiveness. To handle this measurement problem, brave attempts were made to quantify some of these intangibles. However, despite that these attempts were highly structured and rely extensively on various sources of data, graphs, tables, charts, and formulas, it is not easy to positively accredit them or find ways of making use of their results in measuring such assets.

Finally, the book concludes by pinpointing some general recommendations for the European policy makers to help them improve the European national as well as international competitiveness. Among those are a better dissemination of R&D results into products and processes, higher education and training levels, and giving at least equal priority to the other important "intangible" assets as of that given to physical assets in governmental policies. Intangible investment should be given the importance it deserves in comparison with physical investment. Perhaps a step in that direction would be to find an alternative word to describe those assets and reflect their vital role in determining competitiveness instead of keeping on using the word "intangibles" which literary means insubstantial, vague, or indescribable

Doing Action Research in your Own Organisation

Authors: D. Coghlan & T. Brannick. 2001, Sage Publications.

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Of those who have watched their organisation strive to implement change (and sometimes strive against it) there can be few who have not felt from time to time that what they observe should be written up as a research project. Such people see the abstractions of management theory brought to life in a way no textbook can manage, while the gritty realities of strategy, politics, and organisational change make themselves felt as soon as someone is serious about doing things differently. Perhaps they are right, and the story should be told; but action research, while it may include story telling, is much more than that. It is a deliberate attempt to do two things at the same time: to extend the boundaries of organisational science while attempting to solve an organizational problem. To paraphrase Lewin, it

is an attempt to understand something more deeply by seeking to change it.

Action research is, in fact, a distinct research methodology, valid alongside, and not beholden to, the experimental method: it is as well to get this straight from the start and this Coghlan and Brannick do right away in their excellent new book. But having laid down the marker that this is a methodology not to be entered into lightly, they proceed to give practical, confidence-building advice to those who wish to persevere.

The first two chapters are expository: the authors give a clear outline of what action research is and what it is not ("Regretfully it has become a glib term for involving clients in research and has lost its role as a powerful conceptual tool for uncovering truth on which action can be taken" p. 15). The action research cycle is explained in terms sufficiently general to encompass the many variants that now exist. It typically involves the systematic collection of data about an on-going system relative to some need; the feeding back of that data and a collaborative analysis of it; planning and collaborative action based on the analysis; joint evaluation of the action; and a re-starting of the cycle. The first of many complexities is explored - the need for meta learning on the part of the researcher and indeed all those involved in the action research. Meta learning depends on reflection - reflection on the content of the change, on the process, and the underlying assumptions on which the effort has been based. The willingness to engage in this reflection is of profound significance: not only is the organisation's identity and future strategy on the table but also its failures, internal conflicts, and perhaps destructive political behaviour. If this points up how demanding action research may be in terms of time, effort, courage, and honesty, it also gives a clue to its power, offering the chance to line up concerted intellectual wisdom and motivation in the service of making something work.

Having cleared the decks on what action research is, Coghlan and Brannick move on to the main focus of the book - doing action research in your own organisation. And here's the rub: if a practitioner of this methodology is called to be both an action researcher and a researcher of action research, is it possible to manage these demands in the organisation of which you are a member? Not only is this challenge cognitively complex (try reading it again), it immediately conjures up questions of role conflict, confidentiality, trust, and privileged access to data. The role conflict alone may be formidable. "Your organizational role may demand total involvement and active commitment, while the research role may require a more detached,

more theoretic, objective and neutral observer position." (p.49) That's the job: and, if you haven't given up the idea by this stage, the rest of the book sets out to help you do it by means of five 'implementation' chapters.

Coghlan and Brannick take the bull by the horns when they point out that doing action research in your own organisation is an intensely political - possibly subversive - act. Their chapter on managing organizational politics offers no magic formula: get in there and do deals, network, and be prepared for tactical withdrawals, while keeping an eye on ethical questions. They advise people to prepare by identifying the stakeholders and doing a Force Field Analysis; they might have added 'don't expect it to be simple'.

Framing a project - the way an issue for research is selected (according to whose definition) and how it is labelled (problem or opportunity) - will put the action researcher into the first of many reflections: a personal learning cycle applied to an action research cycle.

The chapter on *Making Sense: Using Frameworks to study Organisations in Action* is a gem. It packs a large amount of theory into a highly useful few pages (surprising, though, in view of the title, that Weick doesn't get a mention). In fact, this chapter, along with the previous one, could be used as a very brief but comprehensive coverage of organizational development in general.

Coghlan and Brannick balance their unflinching presentation of the challenges of action research in one's own organisation with examples from several authors to show that it *can* actually be done. Their command of the literature in general means that, while there may not be many books on researching your own organisation, this one is built on a solid foundation of social science theory. In fact, the book is strewn with pearls of organizational wisdom:

"Action research has a large degree of messiness and unpredictability about it." (p. 89)

"...any part of a system is the way it is because of how the rest of the system is. As you work towards change in one part, other parts will push the system back to the way it was." (p. 121)

"The very act of drawing the system's diagram is a learning process of explanation formulation and testing." (p. 100)

There is little to quibble with in this book. The chapters are short and have good quality summaries. Exercises are provided to help the reader try out the ideas on their own organizational context. Inevitably, choices had to be made on the sequencing of material and the personal preference of the reader will always find an alternative sequence. My personal preference would be to bring the short description of action research on p.85 closer to the opening page, while the *Final Word* might profitably be read early on, especially if things seem too daunting. But overall, this is a book to be read often, to be re-read in bits, to be scoured for another glimpse of the insight that stuck in the memory from the last occasion.

For many people engaged in part-time Masters or Doctoral programmes the idea of doing action research in their own organisation is an attractive alternative to other methodologies. For those of reflective and subtle mind, the very richness of the data around them, and the intellectual fascination of 'putting theory on it', will motivate them to face with courage the challenges it poses. For them, a well-thumbed copy of Coghlan and Brannick will be an indispensable *vademecum* on the journey.

Car Launch: The Human Side of Managing Change

George Roth & Art Kleiner, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, 222 pages, Hrdbk, £20.00 approx. ISBN 0-19-512946-6.

Oil Change: Perspectives on Corporate Transformation

Art Kleiner & George Roth, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, 235 pages, Hrdbk, £20.00 approx. ISBN 0-19-513487-7.

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Car Launch and *Oil Change* are two volumes in the Oxford University Press Learning History Library. A learning history is an approach to case study in that it is a written narrative of an organisation's recent experience of critical events, such as a change programme or a product initiative. It is a retrospective account in their own words by the people who initiated, implemented and participated in the events, as well as those affected by them, assisted by external researchers who see themselves as "learning historians". The aim is to present the organisation's story in a way that is true to the experience and that stimulates and informs conversation on what happened, why it happened and how future action can be improved.

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