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Integrating action research paradigm into decision making -An investigation of an action research model

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ABSTRACT

Decision making normally occurs in a state of condition, which belongs somewhere on the continuum between certainty and uncertainty. Risk lies somewhere in between the two extremes of the continuum. It is a process of choosing between alternative to achieve a goal. A manager has to make quite a few types of decisions for the organizations where they work. Three widely recognized classifications of decisions are personal & organizational decisions, basic and routine decisions and programmed & non-programmed decisions. Action research has been used in many social science fields as a practical problem solving method. What makes this paradigm unique and viable is that it allows research and practice to work in achieving organizational goals. The implementation of the action research in the field of decision making is not common, thus this paper trying to present the methods and tools to utilize action research in decision making efforts and practice.

Keywords :

Introduction

As an important and established problem solving method, action research adds to theories of action that promote or inhibit learning in behavioral systems. Through action one can improve a situation, and through research one can formulate knowledge. Action is the focus to improve a situation and research is the conscious effort towards that improvement. Decision making is a process of systematically developing work-related knowledge and expertise in people for the purpose of improving performance. Specifically, this paper overviews action research model of Cummings and Worley for planned change and its implications in the field of decision making.

The purpose of this paper is twofold.

1. To present the implications of action research for decision making and
2. To determine the overall value of action research in the context of decision making.

Action research comprises a set of steps, which aim to define problems, pursue action, and assess outcomes. Action research, therefore, has some components that resemble analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. Action research is a model for planned change. The action research model has been widely used by practitioners in many social science fields such as negotiation, training & development etc., as a practical problem-solving method. Unique to the action research paradigm is that it allows researcher to coexist and co-work simultaneously in problem solving.

Introduction to Decision Making

Decision making is the study of identifying and choosing alternatives based on the values and preferences of the decision maker. Making a decision implies that there are alternative choices to be considered, and in such a case we want not only to identify as many of these alternatives as possible but to choose the one that has the highest probability of success or effectiveness and best fits with our goals, desires, lifestyle, values, and so on.

We all make decisions of varying importance every day, so the idea that decision making can be a rather sophisticated art. However, studies have shown that most people are much poorer at decision making than they think. All of us have to make decisions every day. Some decisions are relatively straight forward and simple; is this report ready to send to my

boss now? While others are quite complex; which of these candidates should I select for the job?

Simple decisions usually need a simple decision-making process. But difficult decisions typically involve issues like these:

- Uncertainty - Many facts may not be known.
- Complexity - You have to consider many interrelated factors.
- High risk consequences - The impact of the decision may be significant.
- Alternatives - Each has its own set of uncertainties and consequences.
- Interpersonal issues - It can be difficult to predict how other people will react.

With these difficulties in mind, the best way to make a complex decision is to use an effective process. Clear processes usually lead to consistent, high-quality results, and they can improve the quality of almost everything we do. In this article, I have outlined the process that will help to improve the quality of your decisions with the help of action research model.

Kinds of Decisions

There are several basic kinds of decisions.

1. Whether Decisions. This is the yes/no, either/or decision that must be made before we proceed with the selection of an alternative. Should I buy a new TV? Should I travel this summer? Decisions whether are made by weighing reasons pros and cons.
2. Which Decisions. These decisions involve a choice of one or more alternatives from among a set of possibilities, the choice being based on how well each alternative measures up to a set of predefined criteria.
3. If Decisions. These are decisions that have been made but put on hold until some condition is met. For example, I have decided to buy that car if I can get it for the right price; I have decided to write that article if I can work the necessary time for it into my schedule.

Action research

As the name implies, action research is a form of inquiry into how people design and implement action in relation to one another in practical settings. Hence, it is a science of practice

and not a research methodology. It uses the tools of scientific research in order to collaboratively solve problems in practice contexts. One promising avenue for research effectiveness is the model called action research model of Cummings and Worley. According to Rothwell, action research is considered both a model and a process. As a model, action research can be seen as a simplified representation of the complex activities that occur in a change effort and serves as a roadmap to the practitioners which provides them with the methods and techniques to guide them with their practice. As a process, action research is the process of systematically collecting research data about 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.

Despite some controversy about the origins of action research, it has been considered a distinctive form of problem-solving method since the early 1940. Kurt Lewin is generally regarded as one of the pioneers, and the first person to use the term "action research" to refer to a specific problem solving approach in which the practitioner generates new social knowledge about a social system, while at the same time attempting to change it. Action research model stresses the involvement of researchers with decision makers through the decision making process. Action research generates information about needs, solutions, and implementations, and above all it gets information back to the users.

Action research model in organizational development

The action research model, as an organization development involvement method, has the potential to enhance the organizational decision making process. In this paper, I illustrate how Cummings and Worley's action research model of planned change can be applied to decision making in two distinct ways depending on the diagnosed problem, in making a specific decision and in determining which decision making strategy or strategies should be used for a range of decisions.

Cummings and Worley view the action research model as one theoretical tradition of planned change. They explain that action research involves gathering information, applying it to an organizational, problem, and then collecting additional data on the results of the action taken, which informs future action. Cummings and Worley present the action research model of planned change as involving eight cyclical steps. These steps are shown in following chart.



Action Research Model (Cummings & Worley)

In the problem identification stage, an organizational problem is observed by one of the members of top management. In the consultation with a behavioral science expert stage, the initial contact with an organizational development professional takes place. In the data gathering and preliminary diagnosis stage, an organizational development professional engages in information gathering and analysis of the information to formulate it into data. Following this stage, the organizational development professional enters the next stage where he or

she provides feedback to the key client or group where the formulated data shared with organizational representatives. Consequently, a joint diagnosis of the problem occurs in the next stage where organizational representatives work with the organizational development professional to consider the problems to be addressed.

In the following stage, the organizational representatives and the organizational development consultant engage in joint action planning to identify methods to approach the problems and the decisions related to the problems. The next stage is where action takes place. This is where the plan is being executed. Finally, the action research plan involves data gathering after action to collect data and analyze the impact of the intervention, and feed this information base to the system to determine any further actions. In summary, "Action research is a framework for diagnosing, implementing, and evaluating a change process."

Action Research Model in Decision Making Process

Cummings and Worley define Organization Development as "a system wide application and transfer of behavioral science knowledge to the planned development, improvement, and reinforcement of the strategies, structures, and processes that lead to organization effectiveness." The field of organizational development utilizes the action research model as one of its intervention methods to bring change to the organization. The model is a cyclical approach to addressing organizational problems and identifying the ways to approach them. The decision making process, on the other hand, is based on decision making tools which are not viewed holistically and comprehensively. In this paper, I argue that integration of the action research model into the decision making process, where the decision making tools and strategies can be the focus of the action research model, could present the organization with the opportunity to systematically and strategically achieve decision making. Cummings and Worley's action research model can be applied to decision making in two distinct ways, depending on the diagnosed problem. Following discussion explain these two potential ways of action research on decision making.

1. How to Decide?
2. What to Decide?

First question represents a relatively small scale application of action research to decision making. In this case, after the initial data gathering and consideration of the diagnosis, the organizational problem is determined to be centered on making a specific decision. What should the organization decide to do in a particular instance? In this case, the levels of the model would be focused on the steps needed to make this decision, implementing those actions to make the decision, and then gathering data to assess the results of the decision. For example, the joint diagnosis of the problem in an organization might be uncertainty regarding which of several strategic directions to take the organization, and the action research effort would focus on deciding on the direction, implementing the decision, and then examining the outcomes of this strategic action.

A broader application of action research to decision making focuses on the decision making process itself, which has a larger potential footprint on organization performance. How should a leadership team, a work group, or members of an organization make decisions? Here, the action research efforts would be directed at determining what decision making strategy or strategies would prove most effective for the organization or subset of the organization. The outcome of this process would be implementation of a decision strategy or strategies to be used for a range of decisions. For example, the action research process might result in a joint diagnosis that the decision making processes used by the organizational leadership team are less than optimal. Then joint action research planning and action would be directed at planned change in the decision making process.

An action research process on how to make decision might focus on what strategy or strategies should be used for decision making. As a focus of action research, the joint diagnosis might be that members of the organization are struggling with how to choose among decision making tools and strategies. Here the result of the action research might be planned organizational change incorporating a strategy for how to approach decision.

With a focus on another side of decision problem, there is a greater potential footprint on organizational performance. By answering first question, performance may naturally be affected as a result of a particular decision. Depending on the nature of the decision, the effect on performance could be large or small. However, by answering second question, performance can be affected more broadly as the organization works to enhance its own decision making process by incorporating changes in decision making strategy to be used with multiple decisions. Perhaps the process also involves how most effectively select decision making strategies. In all of these cases, the action research process can remain to steps outlined by Cummings and Worley to produce planned change related to decision making.

Implications for Performance Improvement

Today, companies repeatedly emphasize entrepreneurship, innovation, and risk taking. Consequently, performance improvement has become an important goal of organizational development. Furthermore, applying the action research model as an organizational development intervention method to decision making in organizations has implications for organizational performance. Connections have been suggested to organizational performance and organizational process for several decision making tools and strategies.

In this paper, researcher suggests that the action research model as presented by Cumming and Worley can be applied to decision making in organization. Researcher proposes that this application can take place in two ways. In the first case, the organizational problem that is the focus of the action research effort deals with what decision should be taken in a particular instance. In the second case, the organizational problem to which action research is applied is the issue of how decisions should be made most effectively for a given range of decision. Both application of action research can influence organization performance, where the second application has a larger potential impact on overall performance.

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