

Review

SYSTEMIC ACTION RESEARCH: A STRATEGY FOR WHOLE SYSTEM CHANGE

by Danny Burns
Bristol, UK: The Policy Press, 2007

Since the term was first coined, Action Research has gotten the reputation as a solitary pursuit with limited generalizability. With *Systemic Action Research*, Danny Burns does his best to blow this idea away. Written from a personal perspective by a researcher who has spent the better part of his life grappling with the issue of “why Action Research?” this book defines the term from a more holistic perspective: it is not something to be engaged in as an add-on to one’s main workload, nor should it be seen as a one-person endeavour.

So, if you are looking for a “how-to” recipe book for action research or a quick fix solution to lay over your organization, you are unfortunately out of luck here. Instead, Burns explains the thrust of his book in this manner:

My approach is not to conduct a comprehensive analysis of all of the different variants of systems theory, and then apply my favoured approach to action research, but rather to use stories to illustrate how systems ideas help us to conceptualise and work with complex issues. (p. 21)

His examples are wide-ranging, eclectic and unexpectedly interrelated to his main thesis. No one in their right mind would naturally associate “The systemic impact of catheterisation on a hospital ward” (p. 23), “Football: A route to conflict resolution in Mount Elgon” (pp. 46-48), and Margaret Thatcher’s Poll Tax (p. 51). However, Burns manages to pull it off quite well in this work. He does so with his unshakeable belief that before any action can begin, researchers, facilitators and organizational leaders must be able to observe the larger system at work. This must go beyond any linear or positivist thinking: To see the true effects of systemic action, we must look at the unpredictable outcomes, systemic patterns, social norms, and power. To this end, he recommends a new method of inquiry:

We can never predict the detailed outcomes but we can make judgements about the direction of travel when we can see more of the picture. Despite this, things will not happen as we expect, so we need a process that allows us to change course flexibly and quickly. Systemic action research is a vehicle for that. (p. 39)

To outline his method he spends the rest of the book focusing primarily on 4 systemic action research projects: the first examines psychiatric care in Melbourne; the second concerns Early Years Initiatives in Bristol; the third looks at a national programme evaluation of a capacity building initiative involving 142 programmes across Wales; and the final project involved a whole organization inquiry into vulnerability with the British Red Cross.

Burns discusses these projects in great length and with a depth of knowledge. And well he should: as a professor of social and organizational learning at the University of the West of England, he is also the Director of SOLAR (Social and Organizational Learning as Action Research), the inter-disciplinary research and development team that undertook these research projects. This book, therefore, does double duty. First, as an official manifesto of this group, it represents SOLAR’s philosophy and methods, as well as outlining the details of the work they have recently undertaken. However, more importantly for the reader, it uses these examples as a springboard to larger issues when trying to combine systems thinking and action research.

After introducing the 4 projects, Burns then deals with a separate topic in each ensuing chapter. In Chapter 5, for example, he identifies 7 common characteristics emerging from the

studies which he describes as “the construction of a learning architecture that can hold considerable complexity” (p. 101): an emergent research design; an exploratory inquiry phase; multiple inquiry streams operating at different levels; a structure for connecting organic inquiry to formal decision making; a process for identifying cross-cutting links across inquiry streams; a commitment to open boundary inquiry; and the active development of distributed leadership.

Pinning the life or death of a project on its Systemic Action Research Facilitator, Burns spends an entire chapter on the key issues with which they must deal: support, communication, bridging actions, and the distribution of leadership within the system. Speaking from experience, he repeatedly returns to the point of mandatory enthusiasm and conviction for the project:

Good facilitation of action research depends on mobilising passion and building trust. It encourages emergence rather than pushes for solutions, and it sometimes requires the action research facilitator to go out on a limb and make strategic challenges. (p. 154)

Throughout the process, Burns notes that the facilitator should act less as an objective researcher and more as an active participant. Of course, if he merely promoted this belief and left it hanging in the air this would be a hard sell for the more logical-positive scholar (let's face facts – an impossible sell). For this reason, Burns includes a very sound chapter on maintaining quality and ethics in large scale action research projects. For anyone looking for a retort to those who criticize action research, this section is definitely worth a perusal. The same could be said for Burns' chapter on policy and politics in research which speaks with the voice of someone who has seen it all in his career.

Perhaps the most poignant and refreshing area of the book is Burns' section on communication within systemic action research. Here, there is hardly a computer-generated image to be found. Instead, using a great deal of black-and-white examples and 8 colour plates representing posters done by youth in the 4 related projects, he gives us insight into the groups mental processes. Flow charts are mapped out on pieces of brown wrapping paper, collages are created from magazines and colour markers. While these images lack the sophistication of anything a computer technician could do, they show the humanity of the process and do much to open discussion. It is refreshing to see one group not so swept into modern technology that it will sacrifice authenticity for the hypnotic affects of digital graphics.

In the end, Burns' book is more of a personal journey and a call-to-action rather than describing what precisely that action should be. He exhorts the point that a change must occur:

...from action research as a method, to action research as a hub or container for a variety of methods. (p. 179)

As such, his conclusion opens up action research as a whole field. To do so, therefore, commitment must be made on the part of the researcher to accept its philosophy, its methods and its consequences. No dabblers allowed! *Systemic Action Research* is available for the soft-cover price of \$39.95 CDN.

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