

Karen Dons Blædel:

From working with a development project to action research in own organisation

Background

Based on a survey from 2003 on sexually harassing behaviour the Danish Defense chose to establish an organisation of personal counsellors aiming at support for employees victimised by harassing behaviour. The management chose to go outside existing organisations and recruited an external person without internal knowledge of the Danish Defense to establish the organisation.

I was hired for this job as Leading Councillor in the Danish Defense in 2004. The original task was to establish an organisation to handle harassing behaviour consisting of personal counsellors who could advise and support employees who was feeling harassed and could also support employees accused of harassing others. The task also included support for managers in handling harassing behaviour.

Harassing behaviour is characterised in a comprehensive handbook as behaviour that can be characterised as mobbing, sexually harassment or discrimination.

The organisation is established outside the existing hierarchy by inspiration from the Dutch Defense. This means that the organisation refers directly to the chief of personnel in the Danish Defense. Personal counselling was formerly unknown in the Danish Defense and the promoters of this structure did not really know whether the organisation would be accepted and used by the employees.

In the last 5 years I have selected and trained some 50 personal counsellors from among the employees consisting of men and women, military and civilian, who can step in and support the employees anonymously – besides their normal duties.

The project has evolved over time. The involvement of the counsellors have changed in time with our common realisation: that we cannot just read about how to work with our practical dilemmas in the real world but we have to find adequate solutions ourselves. The project therefore has changed to be about participation, action and reflection in order to create common learning.

The project has gone through different phases:

- 1** Pre phase: from development project in own organisation to action research project in own organisation
- 1.** Initial phase: The project changes character. Incipient action research.
- 2.** Production phase: Co-operative inquiry

1. Pre phase: from development project in own organisation to action research project in own organisation.

From the start the project was thought of not as an action research project but as an organisational development project where the focus was primarily on training some counsellors to undertake a specific function. In retrospect the project development can be seen as an emergent process from idea to reality resembling to some degree action research.

The project can be perceived as having a pre phase, a phase where upper management wanted harassing behaviour to be taken care of, and where I was hired to train and implement a small organisation to this purpose. The Danish Defense gave me a guide that set out the framework for the task.

I planned and started the training of the selected councillors. From the start my focus was to give the councillors a communicative toolbox as described in the guide. My role was to train them as the leader or the consultant who supply others with new competences to be used in practise. In the starting course I set the overall framework, gave the councillors a basic understanding of mobbing, and trained them in active listening so that they would be able to handle a dialogue with a colleague who either felt mobbed or was accused of mobbing others. I followed up upon the training with quarterly meetings that I intuitively planned as get-togethers where I could give practical information about our task, and where we could exchange experiences about the use of our tools in our dialogues and also create a common knowledge of which harassing events that they and I got involved in.

After some time I realised that the task was far more complex than I had originally thought. I was in the process of creating a new, small organisation in a big and many faceted organisation with many different interests. From the start I had thought that we could start counselling with small cases where the councillors through training could better their skills in listening and supporting colleagues in a relatively limited context. However I soon realised that the problems of handling harassing behaviour locally and limited had both organisational and managerial implications for example in unclear boundaries to other experts and their interests. My judgment was that my organisation had to have a qualitative boost if it was to become viable in the big organisation and have the quality and impact that I wanted. With my boss' backing I applied for the project of creating a practical organisation handling harassing behaviour to become a ph.d. project at Aalborg University. The reason I chose AAU was that I had had contact with AAU earlier about handling conflicts in my former job and I knew there to be extremely competent researchers in the communicative area. With the contact to the university I at the same time had access to a professional milieu where I together with others could reflect on what I was doing and also which theories and methods could be used in order to create a viable organisation of practitioners who would be able to handle mobbing in the workplace.

2. Initial phase: The project changes character. Incipient action research.

In this phase changes happened on several levels including changes in my perception of the problems in handling harassing behaviour, the relation between the councillors and me, changes of the organisation and finally changes in methods used.

I started to get the clear impression that context, situation and relation between people plays an important role for mobbing to start and for solution of mobbing situations. In our exchange of experiences we very quickly focussed on what happens when we begin to work with a single person. In many cases we could not limit ourselves to the single person, sometimes we saw the need to get hold of whole groups or parts of the organisation in order to solve a given problem. From our practise grew a new understanding and through our exchange of experiences and shared reflection we "put it into words". We began through participation, action and reflection to create new knowledge (Coghlan & Brannick,2005).

My assessment was that it was important to create more room for the experiences of the councillors. They knew the organisation and operated in a culture that most of them were trained in and made a career in, and therefore they had a special knowledge of how the organisation was supposed to react to mobbing and to intervention, a knowledge that I did not have. I made space for reflection and dialogue of what the councillors did, and how they created changes for the people who contacted them – with a purpose to create a better common understanding of what actually had been done and to create a forum for ideas of what could be done in similar situations.

I drew on the experiences of the councillors and our roles changed. Gradually I came to see the most experienced councillors as co producers of solutions together with me,

and myself less as their trainer but more as their facilitator and fellow player in the use of our common experiences. I was clearly inspired by Greenwood & Levin (2007).

Our quarterly get-togethers changed character in that I and the councillors attached still more importance to hearing about each others experiences. Some councillors even worked with very complex problems where we reflected together on what could be done and how we forward-looking could intervene in such situations. I moved from being a trainer who should train people in the use of a toolbox to being a fellow player who together with the councillors started to look into the overall problems that com into play when harassing behaviour occurs.

By degrees I experienced that we were at a turning point. It was useful. We could change the psychological work environment. By interviewing the individual councillors I started to analyse the problems they met in order to see possible patterns in their practise.

Together we were developing new knowledge – that is how to tackle harassing behaviour in the context we find ourselves in. Our knowledge has grown out of participation, reflection and action.

3. Production phase: Co-operative inquiry

With the growing attention to action research I decided to implement yet another process with the most experienced councillors in order to make the processes we work with more transparent to our own benefit.

The project was expressed as an action research project, Co-operative Inquiry (Reason & Heron,2004):

- The project shall be participatory – all participants shall have the possibility to take part on an equal footing.
- Learning might be created. The goal is through reflection over own experiences to create new insight. Reflection over action.
- In the period the process takes place we will test our knowledge on the cases that may occur.
- Our knowledge has to be documented.
- The new knowledge shall be incorporated in courses for new councillors.

Until now these meetings has spontaneously been about areas we did not earlier touch upon in the full circle of councillors. When we start the meetings we don't know the subjects of the discussions, but they emerge out of the talking. These meetings have meant quite new awareness of certain aspects of our actions and created quite new learning to us.

Litterature:

Coghlan & Brannick (2005): Doing Action Research in your own organization. Sage
Reason & Heron (2004): A laypersons guide to cooperative Inquiry. University of Bath
Greenwood & Levin (2007): Introduction to Action Research 2nd Edition, Sage