

**MONASH UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS**

**ACTION RESEARCH AND
SYSTEMIC THINKING**

Beverly C Walker & Tim Haslett

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Abstract

This paper discusses action research intervention and total systems intervention (TSI) and their application in a not-for-profit membership based organisation undergoing strategic change. Specifically the use of strategic assumption surfacing and testing (SAST) to explore the divergent views of managers on membership is discussed. The effectiveness of the SAST methodology when used in conjunction with action research is considered.

ACTION RESEARCH AND SYSTEMIC THINKING

INTRODUCTION

Membership based health related organisations are fighting for **survival and relevance in a climate of competition** and rationalisation of services. These not-for-profit organisations began as **support groups, self-help groups and societies** where members of the community responded to gaps in services provided by government. Funds for activities were obtained through **donations, fundraising and group membership fees**. In the process of their development these groups formalised as legal entities such as companies, and friendly societies. The Board or Committee of Management was usually comprised of elected financial members. As the organisations developed, they have applied to various sources for grants to provide a range of health, housing and welfare services and have become **accountable to these funding sources** as well as to the membership. This **natural evolution** is the genesis of the dilemma they now face.

The purpose of the study on which this paper is based, is to **use action research and systems methodologies** to facilitate the **evolution** from a membership-based to a professional-based service organisation while still maintaining the **commitment of an active membership**. The organisation in which the study is being conducted provides membership and services for people with mental illness, their families and friends. It is a statewide organisation with branches and networks in urban and rural locations. The duality of membership, as recipients of, and contributors to, the work of the organisation (and often as elected Board members) gives rise to conflict around the purpose of the organisation. This is compounded by the fact that the organisation is currently undergoing major strategic change in response to five years of rapid growth in funded services.

This paper outlines **action research intervention, total systems intervention (TSI) and strategic assumption surfacing and testing (SAST)** and their application in relation to two of the research problems identified for the study. The two problems are:

1. How effective is the process of action research as a research methodology?
2. How useful is Total Systems Intervention (TSI) to understanding the organisation and for facilitating strategic change?

ACTION RESEARCH

The study uses action research as the method that 'aims to **contribute both to practical concerns of people** (including people in organisations) **and to the goals of social science**, via joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework' (Warmington, 1980, p. 25). The aim of action research is the same as that of science in that it is for 'the improvement of man's lot on earth, ... achieved by collecting facts through organised observation and deriving theories from them' (Bacon, In Chateaus, pxvii). The reductionist cause-effect approaches of the traditional methods of investigation were considered by the researcher not to provide the wholeness of the interactions to enable the understandings required. The use of action research is useful in this study as the problems to be addressed are linked to the people of the organisation and the way they **construct and experience the reality of a change process**.

Action research [Rapoport, 1970 #21; (Susman & Everard, 1978), action science (Argyris, 1992) and action learning (Revans, 1982) are often used interchangeably and are closely linked. The approaches are built 'on ways of linking theory to practice so that knowledge can be action based and derived from practice in the real world as opposed to being generated in scientific laboratories or through abstract survey methods' (Morgan & Kocklea, 1997, p. 297). Flood (1999), in a reference to Checkland and Howell and the words of Argyris, defines action research as a **collaborative process of critical inquiry** between the researcher and the people in the situation. This process involves the diagnosis of a problem, issue or intention for change, proposing and implementing action and evaluating the results of that action. The outcomes of evaluation

provide useful insight into the problem through reflection and generate further action. In this research, the aim is to contribute both to the practical concerns of the people and the goals of management. It is an inquiry in which ideas and practice are explored concurrently (Marshall & Reason, 1997).

There are a number of philosophical viewpoints for action research (Susman & Everard, 1978). In this study, an **ethnographic perspective** is being taken that includes the researcher and the members of the executive management (the participants) in the collection of formal and anecdotal data. It involves direct participation in, and observation of activity of the researcher and participants and the description, sharing and evaluation of that activity throughout the study. The **evaluation involves individual reflection** within a group setting and includes all available evidence from records, observations, and interviews used for theoretical purpose (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990, p. 165).

TOTAL SYSTEMS INTERVENTION

The systems methodology being used to complement the process of action research is Total Systems Intervention (TSI) (Flood and Jackson, 1991) or as Flood (2001) now prefers in the context of action research, local systemic action research. The methodology of TSI is underpinned by the philosophy of critical systems thinking of Churchman and the critical systems theory of Habermas (Flood, 1999). Critical systems thinking encompasses the view that different theoretical positions and methodologies can be used in partnership to deal with the complexities of management and to achieve the maximum development of the potential of all individuals while being aware of the social and organisational pressures.

Being critical has involved questioning in a way as to generate insights into the problems being addressed so as to provide choice and a practical approach to taking action. In the context of **this study**, it has been structured into the process of action research and by using the phases of TSI. It has involved **questioning** to generate insights into the problems being addressed so as to provide choice and a practical approach to taking action. It has also been used to ask questions as to which systems methodologies could be used at different phases of the research, why they should be used and the usefulness of the methodologies (Flood, 2001).

Phase 1 of the process of TSI uses a **range of metaphors** linked to different systems methodologies to enable the complexity of an organisation to be addressed. The use of metaphor provides the opportunity to consider problems through familiar analogies. Where likeness exists it brings into focus difficulties or issues that could be faced by the organisation. Once the metaphor with the best fit has been found the nature of the problems can be identified and the systems methodology best aligned with the metaphor used to address the issues raised. In this study strategic assumption surfacing and testing (SAST) was identified as one methodology.

SAST is used to focus attention on the **relationships between the people** involved in a problem context rather than the structures or the framework in which the relationships occur. These relationships between stakeholders, who may be '... any individual, group, organisation, institution that can affect as well as be affected by an individual's, group's, organisation's, institution's policy or policies' (Mitroff & Linstone, 1993, p. 141), can be better understood through the use of **the cultural and the political metaphor**. Metaphor provides a framework for understanding and comprehending behaviours, occurrences or experiences from the basis of previously known experiences or events which might present a likeness and is particularly useful for developing an understanding of complex or difficult events (Clancy, 1989; Flood & Carson, 1993).

SAST is a problem solving methodology used in situations where the policy-making is complex and where the problems and issues are inter-related and "messy" (Flood & Jackson, 1991, p. 122; Mason & Mitroff, 1981). The specific philosophy of SAST is based on **four arguments** about the nature and resolution of problems. These are that: (1) problems are strategic and are a result of organisational complexity in which the existing management strategies can only deal with simple problems; (2) organisations fail to challenge the accepted ways of doing things; (3) challenging the way it has always been done requires going beyond

exiting theories and requires the generation of radically different policies and theories based on different interpretations of data; and (4) the advent of tensions are likely to result from these interpretations.

There are **four principles** inherent in the SAST problem solving methodology (Flood & Jackson, 1991; Mason & Mitroff, 1981). The first is **adversarial**, where solutions on ill structured problems are to be found after considering opposite positions. The second promotes **participation** based on the belief that the knowledge relevant and necessary to solve problems and implement solutions is held by a number of participants in a variety of representative groups. A synthesis of the differences identified through principles one and two, is the third principle of **integration**, necessary for the development of an action plan. The fourth principle is that of **managerial mind supporting** which is based on the belief that exposure to a range of assumptions will result in managers developing an increased insight into the problems of the organisation.

The SAST methodology has four behavioural stages these are group formation, assumption surfacing, dialectic debate and synthesis (Flood & Jackson, 1991; Mason & Mitroff, 1981). The formation of groups is based on within-group and between-group criteria using principles to minimise internal group conflict while maximising differences between groups. To minimise internal conflict within the group, groups are formed with members who have the capacity to get along with each other. Whereas the number of groups formed will be influenced by the number of people involved and the requirement to maximise the different perspectives on the problem. The perspective of each group should be open to challenge by one or more other groups. Is this what you actually did or is this the theory that you worked from ?

The assumption surfacing stage is facilitated through the use of three techniques, **stakeholder analysis**, assumption specification, and assumption rating. Stakeholder analysis involves a process of identifying the stakeholders with an interest in the problem who in a position to influence the implementation and outcome of the strategy. The assumptions the stakeholders hold about the strategy and how they believe it will succeed are then identified and rated against two criteria in terms of importance of its influence on the success or failure and on the degree of certainty that the strategy is justified (Flood & Jackson, 1991, p. 126).

The stage of assumption rating (Mason & Mitroff, 1981) includes a **dialectic phase**. Dialectical debate is based on a principle of defence and attack. Each group presents their perspective and identified assumptions. These are then compared with each other. Assumptions where there is agreement are put aside and the debate focused on those that present the key differences. The desired outcome from the debate is a modification or synthesis of assumptions that will facilitate strategy implementation.

To be affective, communication is required whereby differences in views can be raised, assumptions can be checked and a mutual understanding can be developed. This process of **dialogue** facilitates creative thinking and is an '...essential element of any model of organisational transformation' (Schein, 1994, p. 1). With these views and assumptions revealed and resolved, common understandings develop. By thinking and feeling as a group or a team, new assumptions are developed that have a shared meaning.

Senge (1992) discusses the **value of dialogue** to team learning and the need to master discussion and dialogue as two distinct ways in which teams converse. Discussion is the process by which 'different views are presented and defended and there is a search for the best view to support decisions that must be made at this time' (p. 237). Or as Schien (1994) proposes in his road map of ways of thinking, issues that are deliberated through the process of discussion are resolved by 'logic and beating down' (p.2) of opposing views.

PROGRESS AND REFLECTIONS

The Strategic Problem You need to restate it : Maintaining the volunteer membership etc

The managers as a group did not have an understanding as to **who constituted a member** nor the role of membership within the organisation. At the commencement of the study the total membership, where they were active and their role was not known. The need to know these details and to **identify other voluntary contributors** to the organisation was important for the strategic directions of the organisation to be

implemented. An identified component for the transition of the organisation to a professional organisation was the continued and active participation of members. The difference in manager understanding resulted in limited and uncoordinated action being taken to maintain an active membership in the functions of the organisation. The inability to take action had continued for approximately 12 months.

The role of members in the organisation was based on an **historical perception of self-help** and advocacy for improvement in health and social well being of persons with a mental illness and their families. However, the strategic changes to the organisation resulted in a formal structure being introduced that placed and emphasis on both **advocacy and provision of services**. Not only did the role of member involvement in services need to be defined, there was competition for member participation between different member and service functional areas. There was also evidence that members continued to see their role as providing advocacy and self-help (Walker & Crowther, 2000).

THE PROCESS

Following the process of stage 1 of TSI, **two metaphors** were identified as reflecting current thinking about the organisation that could make sense of the difficulties and concerns of the organisation (Flood & Jackson, 1991). These were the **cultural and the political metaphor**. Members of the organisation and staff contributed to the development of the strategic plan and inclusion of a set of stated values. While the managers participating in this research accepted the direction of the strategic plan and the values of the organisation, they were **experiencing difficulties in the implementation of the plan** to meet these values. This was evident when considering the role of members and led to the use of SAST as a means of addressing the problem.

The SAST session was conducted using a process that had been previously established for the action-reflection forums. Each participant had the opportunity to express his or her understanding of what constituted a member of the organisation. Participants were asked to listen and ask questions for clarification of meaning but to hold debate until all participants had expressed their understanding of the problem. Discussion and debate followed. **The synthesis of the debate** resulted in a number of stakeholders being identified as contributing to the organisation in a voluntary way. **An action plan** was developed with key managers allocated the task to draft definitions of these stakeholders for discussion at subsequent meetings. Two action reflection forums were conducted before agreement on who were members and who constituted other stakeholders was achieved.

SOME VIEWS EXPRESSED

On the topic of membership a range of **divergent views** about members and membership surfaced. It was clear that **no progress** could be made by the managers on their consideration of the issue of maintaining an active membership until this was resolved. In the process of exploring the managers understanding of member or membership, it became apparent that there were a number of groups of people who contributed to the organisation in a voluntary capacity and who were loosely considered to be members of the organisation but were **not formally recognised**.

One manager felt that there was 'limited understanding, confusion - [the] role [of member] was not clear, [as to] what they can and can't do, [they are] important in terms of income and to increase community profile.' In an attempt to explain another manager stated, 'used to think I understood it, a member paid for right to receive benefits, a volunteer had an interest, active role expanding. Move from support to advocacy. Used to think members/volunteers were all the same thing. View changing.' There were also views about the role evolving as a natural progression from member to volunteer while another view was that the progression was from volunteer to member. This is a little disjointed.

There were broad as well as restrictive views expressed as to who were members. One manager stated that she did not take a literal view and that a member could be passive and could constitute 'anybody with any

association with the organisation' and gave the example of a financial donor, or a person who sold raffle tickets. This group was also referred to as 'supporters' of the organisation.

Members were considered by other managers to be of 'types, active and inactive'. Active members 'were integrated [meaning a member or volunteer] with support groups, help line, active in advocacy' and had 'potential with a strong voice [in the] promotion of profile [of the organisation].'

The legal position, as reflected in the constitution of the organisation, was that a member 'paid a membership to receive benefits, advocate for rights, active group with membership'. Not all managers were aware that there was a legal definition of members and membership within the organisation. This prompted another to say, 'Points to a problem, confusion of member and volunteer' and attempted to clarify for other managers that a **'member pays dues and own the organisation and participate through advocacy. Have a constitutional status that defines what is, who is and the role. Ultimate objective is to achieve change [for the improvement of mental health for individuals and families]'**.

The outcome of this session was an agreement that there were a number of stakeholders who contributed in a variety of ways to the benefit of the organisation. These were subsequently defined and agreed to by the managers and included as a glossary in the organisational manual. In addition to the different understandings managers held about members and membership, it was also apparent that there was a different understanding as to the meanings associated with 'active' and 'passive' contribution of stakeholders to the organisation. While this was not addressed directly in the session, it was addressed in the definitions. Does this section get into a little too much detail ??

EXAMINING THE OUTCOMES OF SAST AND REFLECTIVE PROCESSES

The SAST process used to tease out the meaning of membership and highlight the differing opinions held by the managers was effective in that an understanding of member and membership was achieved. This included the **formal definition of membership** as spelled out in the constitution of the organisation. In addition, the recognition that there were many stakeholders that **contributed to the viability of the organisation was significant**. Agreement on who were the additional stakeholders was achieved and subsequently described. This was a significant milestone for the managers as they were now in a **position to move forward and address the strategic structures and processes** necessary to ensure the stakeholders remain active contributors to the viability of the organisation.

The process was not dissimilar to the process established for the regular action-reflection forums established as part of the action research project. The structure put in place for the regular sessions occurred following reflection by the researcher and participating managers on the experience of a number of action reflection forums. These reflections identified the need to encourage participation and in depth discussion and debate on complex problems one at a time.

The structure implemented for the action-reflection forums incorporated additional processes that **replicate the cycle of reflection in action and on action**. At the commencement of the forum, the opportunity is provided to reflect on and question personal or collective progress on issues raised and action plans of previous forums before moving onto the task or issue of the day. The **task or issue to be addressed** in the current session is then identified and agreed upon. The tasks have included **both structural and process issues of concern** to the managers in their implementation of strategic change. Each participant has the opportunity to comment on the issue while others listen. Participants then have the opportunity to raise issues for clarification. If there is a disagreement in understanding, either discussion or a deeper dialogue occurs and action agreed upon. The session concludes with time for reflection on the process of the session and outcome for each participant. Key individual learning will then be shared with the group.

CONCLUSION

This paper has briefly outlined the process of action research and discussed the application of TSI and SAST in the context of a not-for-profit membership-based organisation. The next stage of the action research process will address **the requirement to maintain an active membership** within the organisation and **to proceed with strategic change to a professional management structure**. This will involve achieving agreement on whether the focus remains on membership or is expanded to include all voluntary stakeholders who are needed to maintain the financial and operational viability of the organisation.

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