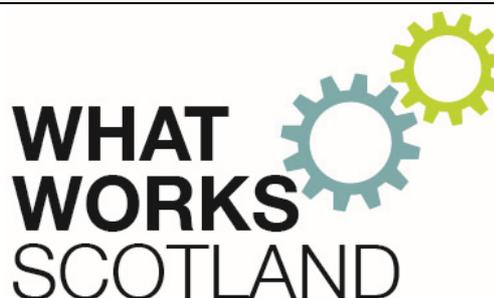


Collaborative Action Research

Advice for individuals looking to be agents of change within their own organisation



From experience of the What Works Scotland Collaborative Action Research Programme in Fife, here are some personal reflections on

- what it's like to be involved in researching an organisation from the inside
- what it means for how we work with others to change the way we do things
- how to survive the change process

Stay alive

Being an insider researcher is not without risks, both personal and professional. As an insider, you need to find a way of balancing your role in the enquiry with negotiating and surviving the process. It's a fine line to tread. You need to be willing to invest your whole self into the process, and be aware of the risks and the opportunities. The demands of this can be difficult to manage. You need to be both independent, and able to work well with others. Be careful not to burn bridges, as you still need to be accepted as part of the system at the end of it.

Start where the system is

Getting started is harder than you might think. When you are immersed in a system it is difficult to disentangle what led us here from where we want to go. Collaborative action research helps to create the space for discussion and reflection. It's important to have empathy with the system and the people in it. Be sensitive to the current situation. Go with the flow, but be open to going on a shared journey, wherever it may lead.

Never work uphill

Collaboration can be hard but rewarding work. It is important to work with the system, not against it. Focus on the areas that are most promising. Be mindful about how this connects to other related work to help achieve your aims.

Innovation requires a good idea, initiative and a few friends

You can do more together than on your own. Find the right people and get them to work with you on your idea. You are going on a journey together and through that you will have a stronger working relationship and a greater appreciation of other roles and abilities.

Load experiments with success

Build success in as you go. Plan for and celebrate key milestones along the way to mark how far you have come.

Light many fires

Collaborative action research does not take place in a vacuum but as part of a wider system of public service delivery and reform. It is important to understand the connections between different parts of the system, and to light many fires in different parts of the system. Understand who the key intermediaries - 'firestarters' – are who can keep movement going in the system. They know when to start a fire, when to draw back, and when to fan the flames again. Don't be afraid to create ripples.

Keep an optimistic bias

Believe that change is possible. Focus on the collective strengths of the group, not the differences. Stay focused on what you are trying to achieve. Be proactive. Be reflective. Consider where you can take action. Be realistic about what you can do, but don't be afraid to aim higher.

Capture the moment

Timing is everything, knowing what is relevant to draw on in a given moment. There's a lot of invisible work that goes into enabling people to work together. Stay in tune with yourself and the situation. The reflective and collaborative nature of the inquiry gives you a unique appreciation of the situation and your own and others' roles within the system.

Further information

Headings courtesy of Shepard (1997) rules of thumb for change agents, from Coghlan, D. and Brannick, T. (2001) *Doing Action Research in your own Organization*

You can find out more about What Works Scotland, and Reflections and Learning from the Fife Collaborative Action Research Work Programme at <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/casesites/fife/>

Reflections

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