How to Do Action Research

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 About the Author

4 What Is Action Research?

5 Why Is Action Research Important?

6 A Step-by-Step Guide for Doing Action Research

11 Conclusion

12 Other Resources

14 A Summary of the Process
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Dr. Ward passionately believes that everyone can express leadership in their organizations, no matter what their official role or title.
What is action research?

Action research goes beyond just reading and thinking; it takes action for positive change.

Action research (AR) focuses on your experience as a facilitator for change rather than trying to become an “expert” on a topic.

Understanding is still important in AR, but your focus of understanding becomes larger. You try to understand from others' points of view as well as become a "local expert" on the issue.

AR often takes place often in education (where teachers focus on improving their own practices) and in community development (where a group of stakeholders work together to make positive change).

One thing that makes AR so useful is that it can work anywhere people want to improve something, in both for-profit and non-profit settings.
Why is action research important?

Because it produces measurable change that benefits both the project participants and the larger organization or community.

First, AR is important because it is practical and focused on change.

Second, you don’t have to be an academic researcher with years of specialized training to make it work. By following the principles in this e-book, you can put AR to work in your current location.

Last, the AR processes “democratizes” knowledge.

How so? Because the participant group shares in the outcomes. When a group collaborates to do action research, they all experience increased knowledge and skills.
A Step-by-Step Guide for Doing Action Research

Now that you know what action research is and why it’s important, here are four steps to start your own AR project.

ONE – IDENTIFY (which you can do by yourself)

Identify core values. What motivates you should become the driver for your project. Start by identifying the values that mean the most to you. That way your project is about meaningful improvement. Those values can be your personal core values or the core values of your organization. For fastest buy in, try focusing on core values that are publicly celebrated in your organization or department.


Any of these concerns - or far more nuanced ones - can become a strong motivating force.

FOR EXAMPLES OF LEADERSHIP VALUES, SEE EXHIBIT 4.1 IN DISCOVERING THE LEADER IN YOU.

(Or simply Google “list of core values,” and see what inspires you.)
Identify the gap. Look at your professional or community setting. What disconnects do you see between your values and what happens around you?

That “gap” becomes the focus for your action research work.

TWO - DISCUSS (Action research is not a solo sport. Time to start working with others.)

Talk with others. If you started with your personal values in step one, then you will want to know how others understand those values. Are your core values shared with others? If so, are those values defined the same way? Likewise, if you started with your organization’s values, you will want to hear how others define those values and how they express them at work.

How do others see the issues involved? Ask open-ended questions and listen for themes in responses. If themes get repeated, then they must be important to the group and should become part of your project.

Be sure to talk with those who can contribute resources to the project. You also need to hear from those who are affected by the project. As you talk with others, listen for the perspectives of key influencers in your organization or department. Their buy-in will be crucial for moving your project forward.

Read. What are some of the current best practices for addressing the issue? Take a look at professional journals and blogs written by recognizable authorities. Consider this as an opportunity to “talk” with experts – even if you are only reading what they’ve written.
Re-evaluate. After you’ve listened to the perspectives of others and considered examples of best practices, ask yourself a crucial question: “What is the real issue here?”

Have honest conversations with your stakeholders (those affected by the change you want to make). Make sure your group is addressing what’s most important for positive change. You can be confident that you are addressing the real issue, based on the feedback received through conversation and reading.

THREE - DETERMINE (After you’ve talked with others, carry out this step with a formalized group)

Determine Goals. What will you and your new group do together? As an action researcher, your goal is not to be a solo leader, but rather to empower a group to take action on something they all care about. The key here is to have a laser-focused goal - think of it as a “micro-resolution,” a “pilot study,” or a “small experiment.”
**Determine Methods.** How will you carry out your goal? Will you create a training program? Write a report about employee engagement for managers? Facilitate mentoring groups? Use a new lesson plan to teach writing?

As you are planning, expect things to take time. Rarely does everything come together quickly. Every organization has its own rhythm. Create a schedule that works with that rhythm, not against it. Also, remind yourself that taking time to involve others is worth the effort. They will benefit and so will you.

**Determine Measurements.** You need a way to assess how well you accomplished your goal.

Your assessment plan is especially important for the final stages of step four. In the final step, you will carry out the action, measure results, and share those results with others.

Measurements don’t have to be strictly *quantitative* (numbers-based). *Qualitative* measurements are also helpful (based on verbal feedback, written journals, open-ended surveys, and other experience-based records).

**FOUR - IMPLEMENT**

To identify, discuss, and determine the project is important groundwork for what’s next. After these planning steps is when you implement action based on all the preparation you’ve done.

**Act.** Action research is not just about reading and thinking. It’s research that takes action. Carry out the methods you and your stakeholders created in step three.
Assess. Take some measurements. As you assess your work, look for three layers of change:

(a) how you as an individual practitioner changed during the process,

(b) how your stakeholder group may have learned and applied new skills, and

(c) how the issue you addressed experienced change.

In your assessment, be sure to reconnect with your core values. Were you true to the values that inspired you? It’s possible that some of those values changed during the discussion and defining phases.

Communicate. Now it’s time to share what your group did and what you learned together. Communication can occur through whatever mode works best for your group - a written paper, a spreadsheet, a blog post, an infographic, or simply a face to face conversation.
Conclusion

One beautiful outcome of action research is that it empowers change agents in a variety of settings.

With minimal formal training, you can start the action research process in your organization or community. As a result, you will change. Others will change with you. And, together you will make a meaningful impact.
Other Resources

• Please see Claremont Lincoln’s Capstone Archive - a growing collection of resources for action research and examples of student work at CLU.

• Ernest T. Stringer’s *Action Research* is a helpful introductory text. Stringer’s model applies three steps: look, think, act, and includes discussion on how to report back to stakeholders.

• Another helpful text is Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead's *All You Need to Know about Action Research*, which explains some important factors to consider for a robust action research project. The authors discuss issues such as how to generate evidence that will support your claims to knowledge and how to test and critique your knowledge.

• McNiff’s website also has a brief booklet that she self-publishes to introduce readers to action research: *Action Research for Professional Development*. [http://www.jeanmcniff.com/ar-booklet.asp](http://www.jeanmcniff.com/ar-booklet.asp)

• For something more academic, see Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin's *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*. 
• For a detailed discussion of doing action research in your own organization, see *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization* by David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick.

• For help with the writing and doing of an action research project as part of your formal education, see Jean McNiff’s *Writing and Doing Action Research* and Stephen Kemmis, Robin Mactaggart, and Rhonda Nixon’s *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research*.

• For more on the concepts of small experiments and micro-resolutions, see *Rocking the Boat*, by Debra Meyerson and *Small Move, Big Change*, by Caroline Arnold.
A Summary of the Process

**IDENTIFY**
- What are your core values?
- Where is there a gap between those values and what's going on here?

**DISCUSS**
- Find out best practices for the kind of change you hope to make.
- Talk with others who are able to contribute to the change you want to make. Get their perspective.
- Talk with those affected by the change you want to make. Actively listen to their point of view.
- Revise how you view the project based on those conversations.

**DETERMINE**
- Connect with a group to carry out the project. Don’t work alone!
- What can you do together?
- How will you carry out the work?
- How will you measure success?

**IMPLEMENT**
- Carry out your plan.
- Assess the change in you, in your stakeholders, and in the issue you addressed.
- Communicate the change to others.
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