

On the Bright Side: Using Interpretive Action Research to Build Relationships in Sport Management

Lesley Ferkins, AUT University, New Zealand, lesley.ferkins@aut.ac.nz

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Abstract

Aim of Paper

This paper discusses the use of an interpretive action research approach to investigate governance issues in sport. This unique approach allowed an unprecedented level of access to a setting often highly guarded in sport management, providing the opportunity to extend theoretical notions and allow the building of relationships between researcher and practitioner. The paper concentrates on the method employed to undertake this study and offers insights for sport management researchers seeking to build a bridge between theory and practice.

Theoretical Background

Action research has its origins in the work of Lewin (1997) who challenged the orthodox notion that the social scientist should be a disinterested 'objective' observer of human interactions. He advocated a form of research that involved collaboration between researcher and their research 'subject'. Lewin also reconceptualised the relationship between theory and practice.

Lewin sought to "erect a firm bridge between the concrete and the abstract, between social action and social theory" (Allport, in Lewin, 1997, p. 6) and considered that "theories to be worth their salt must be tested in action" (Allport, in Lewin, 1997, p. 9).

In commenting on action research within the sport setting, Frisby, Crawford and Dorer (1997) argued that action research as a method encourages researchers "to consider how they could become partners in transforming sport structures, rather than merely gazing upon them" (Frisby, Crawford & Dorer, 1997, p. 24).

Cardno (2003, p. 13) captured the philosophical underpinning of action research in presenting four phases of the action research process: (1) issue identification, (2) investigation and analysis, (3) planning and action, and (4) evaluation and reflection. Cardno (2003) also emphasised the spiralling nature of the process and suggested that one cycle of research and action can lead to another. This four-stage model was used within the context of three sport organisations to determine how their governing boards could achieve greater strategic function.

Research Design

The action research approach chosen for this study was drawn from the work of Heron and Reason (2001), Cardno (2003) and Coghlan and Brannick (2001), and was founded on the interpretive research paradigm. It engaged a range of data generation and analysis tools, namely interviews, focus groups, document analysis, participant observation, reflective journaling, memos, theming, writing and member checking.

The researcher also acted as facilitator in many situations, drawing out data and testing and reflecting on conclusions with the research participants. All focus group and interview situations were video or audio taped, producing a total of forty-nine tapes, comprising over three-and-a-half thousand hours of data across the three case studies. A written data collection template or memo was also used to record key information for all major interactions.

Discussion/Results

The discussion and results are focused on the implications of the action research method for this study.

Four factors are considered: first, the level of collaboration between researcher and research participants in how the research was undertaken.

Findings indicate the significant of a “scaffolding” approach to offer increased control by research participants (i.e., sport directors) in research design decisions. The second factor considered the extent to which social transformation or radical change was enacted and demonstrated the difficulty sport management researchers face in creating change that may be considered transformational.

The third factor considered the use of iterative cycles of action and demonstrated the need for a longitudinal approach for this study.

The final factor was the extent to which theory was involved in the change process and new knowledge created (in this case relating to board strategic function in sport organisations). Learning from this process demonstrated that interpretive action research allows the integration of theory into the practical setting and conversely provides a rich environment to build theory from practical experience.

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