

TRAINING NEEDS ASSESSMENT  
AS AN ACTION RESEARCH INTERVENTION IN A FEDERAL AGENCY

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**(ABSTRACT)**

Consultants are frequently called to help organization leaders identify and solve problems. However, few research reports reveal the holistic nature of the process. This case study helps fill that void with naturalistic inquiry into a process consulting intervention.

This action research describes an external consultant's intervention with leaders of a large federal agency over an 18-month period to help conduct and implement a training needs assessment (TNA). A naturalistic inquiry design used multiple methods to gather quantitative and qualitative data through three action cycles.

The first cycle describes the TNA process and deliverables answering the organization's questions "What training was required and was being done, for whom, by whom, at what cost?" The second cycle revolves around the research questions "How do the organization leaders view, value and use the TNA?" and "What happens as a result of the consultant/researchers intervention?" The third cycle answers the question "What are the organizational dynamics that facilitate or inhibit the adoption planned change?"

Research findings were:

- 1) Organization leaders valued and used the TNA to help solve their training problem;
- 2) The intervention provided documentation and recommendations for short and long-term planned changes;
- 3) Organization and human dynamics inhibited and facilitated planned change. Hierarchical structures complicated and delayed planned changes to centralize training. Single loop learning, dynamic conservatism, and cultural bias cast training as important but a low priority for resourcing. But changes to improve training are happening.

The case study frames complex change through a systems perspective that combined theories from multiple disciplines. Integrated models describing process and structure were

developed to guide the process. The action research was heavily influenced by roles, relationships and interactions reflecting the importance of individual energy flows to understand organizational change dynamics as a continuous, fluid, and often counter-intuitive process.

Action learning from the research reflects paradigms and the paradoxes that are often unrecognized and usually unreported. Strategic training needs assessments are even less reported reinforcing the need to continuously improve ways to encourage candid, holistic research. The open-ended nature of the research identifies the need for a high tolerance for ambiguity, extensive personal knowledge and mastery, skill in systems thinking and modeling, visioning and flexibility, and teamwork through networking to continually expand use of technology and tools.

Recommendations encourage more collaborative consulting/research while recognizing traditional research paradigms make action research riskier to pursue and defend. Leaders in all fields are encouraged to continuously develop and use more tools, models, and networks to help improve human dynamics in future systems.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Author's Note**

The American Psychological Association (APA) Style Manual has been used with variation adding authors first names where known to enhance the value of the references.

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