

Discussion questions for teams about decision-making and self-management



All previous experience of successful action research demonstrates that what team members do together at the beginning of an action research process is very important to the successful completion of their work.

This document is designed to get you thinking about some important issues and to help you establish some guidelines for how your team will work together. While some of the issues raised may not seem important right now they are likely to emerge as you begin your work. If your team has thought about them and established some guidelines for dealing with them at the start, they will probably be easier to deal with as they emerge.

Team building

Successful teamwork and team learning, like action research, depends a lot on high levels of trust between team members. This in turn leads to people being prepared to risk themselves, their feelings and their ideas with other team members. The more risk-taking, the more learning by all individuals and the team.

High levels of trust and risk do not necessarily occur naturally, particularly if team members have not previously worked with one another. Trust and risk needs to be built deliberately through activities shared by team members that demand trust, such as trust walks or trust falls or other forms of icebreaking/‘getting to know one another’ activities.

As a team you need to talk about the levels of trust in the group and whether you need to do some things to build those levels at the start of your work together. One test, that you might like to use, is whether each member of the team would be prepared to share with every other member of the team those aspects of their classroom teaching that they think are in need of improvement. Another test is whether each member of the team would be willing to have any other member of the team observe their classroom teaching.

Working together

Another important aspect of successful action research is agreeing on some principles about how you will work together as a team. Again, while some of the things raised below might not seem pertinent right now if they are addressed explicitly now they will make your working together more harmonious and effective.

a) Making decisions

You will be making lots of decisions in your action research, starting with the issues below. What process will you use to make decisions?

- Will it be by majority? If so, how will minority points of view be incorporated into your work? If by majority, will it be indicated by ‘hands up’ or secret ballot? What are the implications of this?
- Will you strive for consensual decisions? Implications?

b) Confidentiality/privacy

It is likely that in your action research you will talk about things that might be personal or confidential. Maybe it is important to discuss how much of the discussion that takes place in team meetings stays inside the group and what is permitted to be conveyed to others outside the team. Some previous teams have agreed that what is discussed inside the team stays inside the team. However, this raises questions about the need to keep other people in the school community informed of your work.

c) Keeping others informed

It is vital for the success of your work that you do become a close team. However, the danger in this is that other people in the school community may begin to feel on the 'outside'. So it is important to do some thinking and talking about what you will communicate (not in specifics but in broad outline), how you will do this and how often, and maybe most important, who will be responsible for doing this.

d) Airspace

It is also important for successful teamwork that team members both have equal opportunity to speak or introduce ideas and feel they have that equal opportunity. Meetings will often be rushed and squeezed between other commitments. Often what happens in groups is that some individuals dominate while others do not feel as though they can express ideas. This is particularly the case when there are people of unequal status in a group.

Processes such as having clear agendas for team meetings and sticking to them, having strict time limits with a timekeeper, using 'tuning protocols' to organise time and using activities such as team members working in pairs and then fours, and asking for written ideas before meetings will all help to maximise individual's opportunities to share ideas.

Action research is based on the idea that the total of knowledge and ideas generated by a group is greater than the sum of the individuals' ideas and knowledge. Thus providing opportunity for everyone's ideas to be heard is very important.

e) Conflict!

All of our learning theories are based on conflict—conflict of ideas, of feelings, of experiences. Someone once said, 'If you bring about a change without any conflict then it is not worth doing!' Be that as it may, conflict of ideas and perceptions, problems and solutions is part of any group or family.

It is useful at the start of your process to do some talking about principles of talking and working with one another that might lessen the detrimental effects of conflict. Some possibilities might be agreeing: that every idea (no matter how crazy) is accepted and treated respectfully; that it is ideas and evidence that are critiqued not persons, and; that as far as possible it will be reason rather than emotion that governs the team's work.

f) Planning across the entire project

Things can change during a project but some of these can be predicted and even used to advantage. For example, this project runs across the end of 2005 and the beginning of 2006. This could bring staff changes and will certainly involve changes for students. How can the entire project be planned to strategically use these changes?

g) Team roles

It may also be useful to do some talking about the roles you will have in the team to facilitate its work and what will be the responsibilities of each role. Distributing the work not only lessens the load, it also provides the opportunity to build skills and capacity.

Leadership of the team will be one of the most important roles. Having more than one leader is desirable, with possibly a leadership team nominated by team members to try to represent the interests of different subgroups or sites in the project. Sometimes, for a number of reasons, it might be better not to have principals as leaders.

However, in schools where team members are more inexperienced, having executive team leaders might be beneficial.

A variety of other roles would also be useful to support the work of your team. Which roles do you need in your project?

h) Recording

One vital role is recording the process of your action research journey. This will be important not only so that you can complete accountability reports for the DET but, more importantly, so that you have a record of the team's experience for the purposes of reflection on your learning and work together.

So, how will your team keep records?

- Will individuals keep their own record as a journal or diary?
- Will there be a team record? Who will be responsible for keeping this team record?
- How will records be kept? Will they be paper-based or electronic? Will each team member have a copy?
- What records will be kept? Will separate records form a project portfolio? Will evidence include photos, videos or CDs?

As you come to define the exact issue that you are going to action research and you begin your project, some of these decisions will become more specifically defined and may even change. However, if you have at least had some discussion of the issues outlined above at the beginning of your work together, your action research and your working together are likely to be more effective.