



## SECTION FOUR

### CHALLENGES AND TROUBLESHOOTING

In implementing Action Research, it is quite possible that you will come up against some significant barriers.

This section draws on some existing resources. Many of the barriers were encountered by the Youth Homelessness Pilot services. Also, Quixley (1997, pp. 41-47; 1998, pp. 23-31) provides some insights into the barriers and suggests some strategies to overcome them. In particular, her *Learnings and Future Applications* (1998), more often referred to as The Action Research Commentary, identifies a number of them.

#### Making assumptions about Commonwealth expectations

***Service concerns that their Commonwealth funding would be at risk if they significantly changed their service-delivery approach***—Being concerned about this is understandable given services are bound by service funding agreements. These agreements involve considerable detail about the way a service will operate to reach program outcomes. However, this does not mean that the service-delivery approach cannot be changed. In fact for Reconnect, the funding agreements include Action Research as a way of bringing about better understandings and improved practices.

While the Reconnect Program operates within a framework underpinned by good practice principles, there is flexibility for Reconnect services and their co-researchers to feel free to explore what good practice means in their context. Action Research is a core part of the Reconnect Program, and well-founded change is not only okay but also central to the program's implementation.

#### Building Action Research

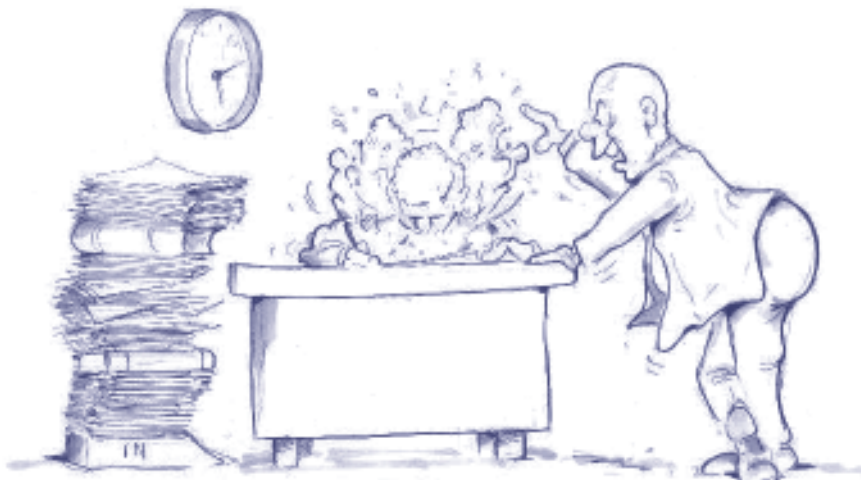
***Finding Action Research daunting because there seems to be so much extra work involved***—The full implications of using participatory Action Research can be daunting because developing an Action Research approach may require substantial shifts in how we think and operate individually and as organisations. Importantly, you will need to allow a reasonable time for a coherent, local approach to develop.

Strategies to help deal with the larger implications of Action Research include combining different methods to gain information. For instance, the Reconnect Program provides written resources as well as training and mentoring and an interactive web site where people can ask other service providers for information, ideas or strategies.

You could also start with a small number of fairly specific questions and gather data by making minimal changes to existing processes. And you can start with just a small group of stakeholders and build on from there.

## Setting priorities and timing

### *Insufficient time or pressures to prioritise service delivery over Action Research*



**"YOU WOULDN'T BE DISTRACTED IF WE COUNTED DOWN TO THE DEADLINE TOGETHER, NOW WOULD YOU?..."**

Time is a precious and limited resource. Inevitably you will face tensions over the time spent on both direct service delivery and on Action Research.

In the Youth Homelessness Pilot services, single-worker projects found this a particular problem. They often felt they risked credibility if they had to make a choice between 'being open or closed'.

Quality Action Research takes time. Within the context of Reconnect, taking time to implement Action Research is quite legitimate. At first, you will have to spend time working out how Action Research will become a part of your service. You will also need to take the time to educate and engage the stakeholders, develop systems and just get used to how Action Research 'feels'.

You will gradually be able to incorporate elements of the Action Research cycles into service delivery, so that there is less tension between these two parts of your practice.

So, it is worth setting aside enough time to develop your Action Research processes.



*It is important that clearly negotiated and legitimised organisational space is allowed for service development, including Action Research, to occur. This has been identified as part of good practice. This should be actively supported by both staff and management. You will probably need to establish new ways for people to come together, you'll invariably find you keep not quite having the time to discuss service development issues in a deliberate, critical way, within existing meeting structures.*

*An early emphasis on putting systems in place is likely to pay off in the long-term. Two types of systems would be useful:*

### **1. Processes that reduce the pressures that distract attention from Action Research:**

#### **Examples**

*Systems to ensure that you have negotiated realistic workloads based on sound time analysis can reduce the pressures on developmental work enormously—in the short and long term.*

*Systems which establish opportunities to educate and involve people in service development can pre-empt possible barriers down the track.*

### **2. Processes that establish the central role of Action Research in the service:**

#### **Examples**

*Allocating key facilitation and documentation roles (particularly amongst staff) makes this a clear part of their duties. (These can be included in job descriptions.) Even if these tasks are shared, it is important to articulate clearly who is doing what? When?*

*Establishment of explicit time and space to pursue service development (including Action Research) activities is an important way of acknowledging the place of these activities as core functions of your Pilot.*

*Formal organisational recognition of processes established can also be a useful means of engaging Management (Committees) with the culture of learning and change (Quixley 1997, p. 41-42).*

## **Developing Action Research skills and processes**

***Action Research is new to some or all of the people in our service—it may feel like a lot of extra effort, rather than a core part of normal service delivery***—It took around 18 months for Action Research ideas and processes to really become part of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme's organisational and individual practices. In the meantime, many people found the approach separate from normal practice, and often tedious.

Part of the solution to this was to make that situation itself a subject of Action Research: *'What would it take for our Action Research to become as integrated as possible into everyday practice? What processes do we need to use to get there?'* Another part of the solution is to give yourself time to get used to Action Research, for example, by identifying the resources you need, interacting with others in the same position and practising with small local questions.

## Committing to Action Research

***We like it, but others find it less responsive—Some workers found that while they became enthusiastic about Action Research, others did not***—Action Research requires the involvement and commitment of a range of people. On occasions, some Youth Homelessness Pilot services found that *'stakeholders with the power to direct or significantly influence the development of the service actively resisted attempts to function in a flexible, creative manner which valued the expertise of all stakeholders (including parents and/or young people)'* (Quixley 1998, p. 23–24).

### Removing barriers to responsiveness

Why do some people find it hard to respond to Action Research's more flexible approach? You might find it valuable to use an Action Research process to explore some questions about this.

*'Do the key players have the knowledge and skills required to work in this particular cultural way?'*

*'Are they committed to this approach?'*

*'What is their degree of choice about you using this approach?'*

*'Is this approach compatible with their preferences? Habits? Values?'*

*'Have they had an opportunity to think through the impact of using this approach?'*

*'How much is this approach going to affect their work?'*

*'To what extent can they have power over the manner in which the approach is implemented?'*

Treating people's fears seriously and addressing their discomfort with doing things differently can help remove barriers to Action Research.

*If you are really stuck, with a lot of resistance to change, as a first step try a dramatic change of physical environment. Even changing desks so you see the world from a different angle might help. Close the service for a day or two, so you can actively reflect on the Reconnect service, rather than slipping into a downward spiral* (Quixley, 1997, p. 46).





A similar problem can occur if an organisation does not have a ‘pre-existing culture of learning’ (Quixley, 1997, p. 43). Action Research fits far better into an organisation that is comfortable with workers communicating easily with other people than in an organisation that likes to insist it ‘has the answers’.

Improving practice is in part an ‘empowering process’. It allows staff, clients and others involved with the service to talk openly about what is done, how it is done, and what is necessary to do it better.

Making Action Research a core part of practice creates opportunities to develop an organisational ‘culture of learning’, endorsed and accepted by workers and management.

To achieve this, it will probably be necessary to keep management well informed of program requirements. As well, you will need to demonstrate positive outcomes and involve management in Action Research as partners. A medium-to-long-term view is often needed if significant issues of organisational culture are involved.

It can be especially important to make sure management understands Action Research is a required part of the service agreement—that it involves a significant amount of workers’ time and attention, particularly when the necessary skills and systems are being established.

*It is important to recognise that if these approaches are completely new to your organisation, time will be needed to:*

- *educate key organisational players about an Action Research approach to service development;*
- *examine the relationship between organisational and Action Research values, and decide how to deal with any tensions;*
- *identify existing evaluation/service development tools that work well and build on these in the way you approach Action Research; and*
- *develop an Action Research system.*

*It is critical that, whilst you actively pursue this type of development process, you don’t move so fast that key organisational players have insufficient ownership of the outcomes. In a situation like this, it might be useful to employ an external facilitator/consultant to work through these processes with you (Quixley, 1997, p. 43).*

It can also be useful to make Action Research an extension of other processes you already use, such as quality assurance processes and client feedback systems to work out how they can be adjusted to contribute to Action Research. In this way, Action Research may be seen as a tool for improving the service’s development, rather than as a completely new set of demands.



## Dealing with resistance to change



"EUREKA, LOOK I'VE DISCOVERED A NEW WAY..."

Carrying out Action Research may help to break down some obvious long-standing areas of resistance, or 'blocks', particularly in the reflection stages. 'Blocks' may come from individuals or they can be based in service models, in whole communities, in institutions or in policies. That these 'blocks' are recognised is a good thing, because it gives you a better chance to understand them and find out what is behind the resistance.

Resistance to change can come from a number of sources:

**Suspicion/fear—other groups who have had less involvement may not fully understand the issues and the need for change**—It is not always possible to identify all stakeholders, especially in the first stages of inquiry. This is an issue of involvement and ownership—people/groups who feel left out may try to prevent strategic change until they have a better idea of what is going on. The key here is to underpin Reconnect strategies with a culture that values openness and inclusion. Reassuring people that you genuinely want their input and involvement is an important feature of reducing people's suspicions and the fear that you are 'going behind their backs'.

We know better, or, it's the way things have always been done—within various communities there are cultural and/or psychological constraints on change

This is where having a good evidence base really makes a difference. To use a cliché, it can be hard for some people to 'think outside the square'. They may have a history or tradition of operating in a certain way and they don't want to 'let it go'.

The systematic nature of Action Research inquiry may help you to demonstrate that strategic change would in fact be better than leaving things the way they are, and that



this is not just based on a hunch, but on good evidence. This may also require involving and educating key people about your Action Research project. The idea is to get them to use their influence in areas where there is strong resistance to change.

**Concern about practicality—lack of resources to comprehensively develop newly discovered strategic options**—Sometimes, exploring a particular Action Research question will point to answers or strategies that will potentially call on time and resources that you simply don't have. This could be because you have uncovered some significant service issues that go beyond the scope of your Reconnect strategy, like drastically changing your systems.

However, there are ways to achieve change that can be less resource intensive or make innovative use of existing resources. Being creative with what you have and arguing for new systems are not mutually exclusive. They often go hand in hand.

**Concern about who is responsible for what is found—some groups/players not liking what Action Research finds and what this means for them personally, their organisation and the community**—This is also linked to the issues of practicality and resources. When big issues emerge, it can be difficult to find someone who wants to take responsibility! And it can be a bit confronting when Action Research reveals a significant amount of change is needed, especially when not everyone accepts this.

Often, it is easier to put the emphasis elsewhere, even if this is not the whole picture. It is essential not to see systemic change as the only answer to complexity. In any case, this can be beyond your capacity, or outside the scope of your Reconnect strategy. Using multiple cycles can help to make things clearer because you can break up complex issues into a number of more focused questions.

You may also not be ready to tackle difficult issues head on, especially if the other key players are not happy about the role they have to play in promoting change. Again, this is about taking the time to build relationships and to keep emphasising to other stakeholders what key values and goals you share—that is, promoting the well being of young people and their families and building an early intervention capacity in your community.

Working together with other people at a variety of levels to achieve your Action Research goals means responsibility for change is shared across groups and not 'dumped' on one sector or system.

**Lack of confidence in the research—a mistrust of research itself or a lack of credibility given to Action Research/qualitative methods**—Action Research is still a mystery for many people. They may not readily accept your Action Research findings because they are not based on 'traditional research'. There are no easy answers here.

But Action Research is rigorous and it does provide well-founded evidence. It forms a very legitimate base for inquiring into and exploring a range of issues in your practice and in your community. The key is communicating this to others who are sceptical.

Paying attention to and demonstrating rigour will give you a strong basis for arguing that your findings are credible and valid. There is a range of resources which help explain Action Research to people, especially people who have misgivings about anything with 'research' in the title. (*For more information about the resources, see Section Six*).

As well, involving people in Action Research processes can help them to understand more about it. This can often increase their confidence in the capacity of this kind of research to explore and respond to issues that confront them, their organisations, communities and other systems.

Dealing with resistance to change is about taking things slowly. It takes time to develop trust and build relationships. It also takes time to find and demonstrate evidence that says change is needed. In Quixley (1998), there is a useful discussion about change and the nature of resistance. Because of the 'culture' of the Reconnect Program, it is likely that services and their communities will be more willing to share insights and strategies as part of their Action Research processes, especially in relation to resistance to change.

*I think Action Research has the potential to reduce (resistance to change) substantially by using small, perhaps incremental steps as trial actions. Often the results speak for themselves and the resistance collapses (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).*

## Dealing with resistance to participation

In developing a local approach to Action Research, participation is crucial and, if possible, it should increase as the research processes develop. However, it is one thing to want participation, but quite another to achieve it.

There are powerful practical and ethical constraints on clients participating in Action Research. Not surprisingly, they are usually focused on their own problems and difficulties.

When working with other services there can also be constraints to do with what they do, the people they deal with, and how they operate.

In some cases, for instance, it just may not be appropriate or possible for all the stakeholders to be involved in every Action Research process. However, it is important for you to keep giving people opportunities to participate. This helps to shift some of the constraints, over time.







### **Actions rather than words—the key to participation**

People's willingness to participate is more likely to be changed by demonstrations of success rather than theoretical arguments—that is, by action rather than words.

Participation can often be built into everyday practice, as well as highlighted in events and processes. For instance, if you suggest seeing someone in their own 'territory' they might be more prepared to be part of a meeting. Or they may be happy to talk over the phone for half an hour, rather than meet in person.

As well, people need to know that their contribution is valued. There is more chance they will participate in future if you keep them up to date on issues and progress. And if you adopt another idea, rather than theirs, you need to explain why.

### **Some suggestions for encouraging participation in your Action Research include**

Always do what you say, and when you say you'll do it. Follow up every key interaction, formally or informally. Actively acknowledge all contributions. You can even do things like send out updates with your work Christmas cards.

As well, understand that stakeholders can be highly committed people, but they don't always share your priorities and concerns. So, focus on people's specific interests. Don't expect them to sit around for a three-hour meeting that spends five minutes on their pet topic. In fact, several short and focused meetings with small groups are usually more efficient than long meetings with large groups (Quixley, 1997, p. 46).

## **Separating conventional research from Action Research**

Although Action Research practices are not entirely different to the more traditional research methods, there is a danger that some staff and managers and other people involved in Reconnect services may have skills in traditional research and feel this should dictate the 'style' for Action Research.

Certainly, traditional research strategies can be very useful in answering certain kinds of questions. But as Action Research aims to improve practice, traditional research can only feed into and should not dictate Action Research processes.

If you use consultants or advisers to help you with your Action Research, be aware that they may not see Action Research as a stakeholder-driven process. The Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme evaluation found that some external consultants tended to develop Action Research questions which were analytical, rather than action-oriented (Quixley 1998, p. 24).

## Managing information and data



“...NOW WHAT DO WE DO?...”

Action Research generates a lot of information and keeping track of it can become a major preoccupation that distracts you from the main purpose of your research. The key is to have a simple and effective system that is accessible to all the people involved.

### Creating systems that work

Before you start, have a clear view about what you need to do to properly document your information and data. This includes working out how it will be presented, in what form and how long it will be (for example, a typical ‘case study’ is 100 to 200 words).

Create a workable system that several people can use. This could involve a simple filing cabinet that becomes a central place for all the data from whatever sites are involved. And to encourage spontaneous and new ideas, perhaps you could set up a special suggestion box or a notice board.

Whatever you decide to do, make sure your approach makes it easy to access the information you need to keep people up to date on what is happening—for instance, at a fortnightly Action Research meeting or at your staff meetings.

Sometimes projects end up with huge quantities of irrelevant data because they are exploring too many questions at once. It is usually best to focus on about two macro questions and two micro questions at a time.



*Another way of keeping data management simple, is to make a commitment not to change research questions for a full cycle—to only review how useful questions are at each planning phase, when they can be made either more general or more specific (Quixley, 1998).*

Remember to keep your data in an appropriate place and to be aware that if it includes any sensitive material that it should be stored securely.

To keep the paperwork down, it is worth destroying data from time to time. And after any interpretations are concluded, presented and confirmed, only keep the summaries and the outcome reports.

*(For more information, see Section Five, which has tools and proformas that may help you to develop effective information management systems).*

