Building capacity for learning and change through reflective conversation

Coghlan, David; Jacobs, Claus

Building capacity for learning and change through reflective conversation

David Coghlan
Claus Jacobs

Conversation is central to the process of organizational learning and change. Drawing on the notion of reflective conversation, we describe an action research project, "learning through listening" in Omega, a residential healthcare organization. In this project, service users, staff, members of management committees, trustees, managers, and central office staff participated in listening to each other and in working together towards building capacity for creating their own vision of how the organization could move into the future, according to its values and ethos. In doing so they developed ways of engaging in reflective conversation that enabled progress towards a strategic direction.

Keywords: Action research, reflective conversation, organizational change, healthcare organization

Introduction

Central to processes of organizational change and learning is the engagement of members of the organization in visioning, planning, taking action and reviewing (Dixon 1998). Weisbord (2004) notes that over the twentieth century there was an evolution of practice in the development of organizational meaning making and community formation. In the 1950s everybody solved problems. In the 1960s experts improved whole systems, and now in the

twenty first century everybody improves whole systems. This engagement in systems improvement is enacted through conversation (Gustavsen 1992; Toulmin/Gustavsen 1996; Dixon 1998; Palshaugen 1998; Jacobs 2003). What is critical for conversation to take place is (a) there be an open space where participants feel a sense of psychological safety and (b) the participants listen to one another, respect one another, suspend their own opinions to understand one other and give voice to their own views (Isaacs 1999).

An understanding of stakeholder needs is considered a prerequisite for a strategic and organization development process. Understanding ("verstehen") requires an adequate conversational strategy to access and incorporate plural rationalities that are rooted in stakeholders' lifeworlds (Habermas 1984). A life-world can be considered a social system of individuals that share specific forms of life and language. These forms of life and language constitute the context in which these persons feel, think, talk, define daily problems, articulate values and interests. Drawing from Habermas (1984, 1987), lifeworlds are defined as areas of social interaction that are enacted and constituted by language games, i.e. rules of behaviour and language that are learned and developed by participants of these contexts. These rules provide a 'grammar' of the specific lifeworld and set guidelines for a contextual rationality, meaning and sense making. Consequently, members of different lifeworlds will have difficulties in communicating easily. Conflicting interests and goals for an organization emerge from different lifeworlds of participants. The pluralism of interests is underpinned by a pluralism of contexts and lifeworlds that an organization has to take into account. The most challenging consequence of this insight is the structural incommensurability of lifeworlds and contexts which increase the efforts to understand and coordinate the different preferences and needs (Kirsch 1991).

Lifeworld is the context of any process of reaching understanding or definition of a situation. This context consists of implicit knowledge which cannot be explicated and fully represented through propositions. It is not consciously created and can be questioned only to a limited extent. In the light of this implicit lifeworld knowledge, actors define and address situations by drawing from and referring to this knowledge. Consequently, no problem or situation definition can be formulated detached from the context of a life-

world. The meaning of individual contributions to situation definition is also inextricably linked to the lifeworld context and its implicit knowledge. Lifeworld then is conceived of as a vehicle of and resource for interpretation and sensemaking.

Language matters in this context as the notion of language as representing an internal state of affairs by the speaker or an external state of affairs of the 'real' world is replaced by an understanding of language as constituting the world within an interaction. Language gains its meaning from its use in action, i.e. enacted rules ('language games') determine what is considered true, valid and binding by these sets of social conventions.

Based on Wittgenstein's notion of language games, social constructionism (e.g. Gergen 1994) would suggest that the rules underpinning a form of life are highly context-specific and therefore not fully accessible to other forms of life. This is because meaning is ascribed and can only be deciphered with the knowledge and understanding of the rules of a specific language game. Language games constitute local systems of meanings. Understanding these systems of meaning is the goal of 'verstehen'.

How can we get an understanding of forms of life that are alien to us? According to Habermas, it is by participating and providing space where in a joint experience shared rules of making sense might be explored. Philosophical hermeneutics argues that understanding is not, in the first instance, a procedure- or rule-governed undertaking; rather it is a very condition of being human. Understanding is interpretation (Gadamer 1970). Hence, understanding is conversational and participative or dialogic. Understanding is intertwined with human interchange and language and is based on a logic of question and answer. Understanding is the very practice and praxis of human interaction.

Social constructionism holds that language games and life-worlds are distinctively different, while philosophical hermeneutics are slightly more optimistic that understanding is achievable through a dialogic encounter of speaker and listeners. If there is a chance to approximate different forms of life and their language games, it is through a space for conversation that is oriented to reaching understanding.

In this article we describe an action research project in Omega, a European residential healthcare organization. In this project, service users, staff, members of management committees, trustees, managers, and central office staff participated in listening to each other and in working together towards creating their own vision of how the organization could move into the future, according to its values and ethos. In doing so they developed ways of engaging in reflective conversation that enabled progress towards a strategic direction.

Omega Foundation

The Omega Foundation provides residential care in 14 centres for people with physical and sensory disabilities. It has currently about 300 places in its centres with a total number of staff of around 400. The nine larger centres have between 20 to 35 permanent places, whereas the five smaller centres provide independent housing in a quasi-apartment setting for about 10 tenants each. In total, Omega has 287 permanent places as well as 32 respite places. The service users are assisted by 353 permanent staff as well as 104 community employment scheme workers. Local managers of the centres report directly to the CEO who is supported by a head office team that covers central function such as strategy and organization development, service user development, human resource management and training, financials and administration among others. The board of trustees in which voluntary members from the wider community as well as service users and staff are represented has the accountability for ensuring a quality service delivery as well as the strategic development of the foundation.

At the core of Omega's service provision lies long-term supported accommodation service, which until the 1990s took the form of a traditional residential care model. Over the course of the last decade and in response to requests by service users, Omega's model of service has changed from an implicit benevolent paternalistic care model to an explicit professional service provision. The Omega Foundation provides three distinct services in its centers. Besides (1) long-term supported accommodation services, recent developments include (2) respite services and (3) outreach services. Respite

services are available to people who normally live in the community or with other voluntary agencies, and within Omega as to provide short breaks to service users.

The learning through listening process

In 1997 Omega was going through a period of serious change. Internally, this resulted in a change in governance structure, in policies and procedure, employment and funding operations. A major internal force for change was identified in the service users' changing needs and expectations with regard to the service provided by Omega. In line with Weick and Quinn (1999), we view organizational change primarily as a continuous, rather than an episodic phenomenon. This action research project would be framed as an organizational learning project which, given the limitations of the time frame, would aim at building the capacity for change through creating a shared learning experience for participants which would be grounded in Omega values and mission enabling it to develop capabilities and processes for continued organizational learning and change. To this end, work was done to create a friendly, catchy title for the project which would reflect Omega values. The outcome was "Learning through Listening" and a special logo of the founder listening to a wheelchair user was used to head special notepaper to mark communications on the project.

The dual aim of the action research project was to a) create conditions in which the stakeholders could engage in conversation together and listen to each other on what is important in the life of Omega and how it could create actions from the conversations in order to move purposefully into the future, and b) study how an organization such as the Omega can respond to the demands for change from both its external and internal environments in a participative manner which stakeholders can engage in conversation and articulate what can be learned from the process (Jacobs/Coghlan 2005). The stated aims, therefore, were both organizational actions by Omega and knowledge and learning from Omega's experience which would be useful to like organizations.

Consequently, the project was designed through an action research approach whereby the members and stakeholders would engage in managing its own change. If the members and stakeholders enquire into the workings of their own organization, identify issues which require change, move towards making those changes and learn from the experience, then a good and useful action research project would have been undertaken. Not only would change be managed but the experience and learning would enable members to manage the continuous change required in a continually changing world. At the same time, the process of such inquiry and taking action would be available to a wider audience so that the learning from the process would be disseminated and benefit other organizations within the third sector.

Action research

Action research is an approach to research which aims at both taking action and creating knowledge or theory about that action (Coghlan/Brannick 2005; Gummesson 2000; Reason/Bradbury 2001; Schein 1987). The outcomes are both an action and a research outcome, unlike traditional research approaches which aim at creating knowledge only. Action research works through a cyclical process of consciously and deliberately, a) planning, b) taking action and c) evaluating the action, leading to further planning and so on. The second dimension of action research is that it is participative, in that the members of the system which is being studied participate actively in the cycles of planning, taking action and evaluation. In action research the members identify issues, plan, implement and review action with the help of an action researcher who acts as a "friendly outsider" (Greenwood and Levin 1998) and facilitates exploratory, diagnostic and action-oriented inquiry in the organization (Schein 1995, 1999).

In the "learning through listening" project and with respect to the action research cycle, emphasis was put on the inquiry dimension of the cycle as a necessary formative condition for stakeholders to subsequently engage in further stages of the cycle not reported in this study. Thus, the overall goal of the project was to create such formative, enabling conditions in which the stakeholders could engage in reflective conversation together and listen to each

other on what is important in the life of the organization and how it could subsequently derive actions from the conversations in order to move purposefully into the future. The first named author acted as senior researcher, while the second author acted as facilitator of the process.

Design

The project was designed to facilitate both the local and national agendas. At the local level, each of the local centres would engage in three individual days of an action research process. The design placed a value on the independence of each centre in order to build a sense of psychological safety and to maintain confidentiality so each centre could work through its own issues. It was planned that on the first day, members of the local centre would work together on (i) identifying contextual areas of change, (ii) articulating a desired future for the centre, and (iii) agreeing on plans for action (Coghlan/Mc Auliffe 2003). Implementation would then begin. On the second day, some months later, the plans for action would be reviewed and adjustments to the implementation made, where required. On the third day, progress would be reviewed and the process evaluated. On this third day, neighbouring centres would hold joint review and learning sessions. This was designed to support the development of the regional structure, as well as to manage the cost of the project. On this third day, centres would have an opportunity to reflect on their own learning and to share that learning with neighbouring centres.

Central to the design of the "learning through listening" processes was the engagement of the members of the organization in visioning, taking action and reviewing. Drawing on Open Space Technology (Owen 1997), what was seen as critical in the project was the ability to engage in dialogue through (a) the creation of an open space where participants would feel a sense of psychological safety and (b) where the participants would listen to one another and give voice to their own views.

The project aimed at accommodating national, regional and local perspectives within Omega. While the interventions described above would take place at local level, there would need to be specific attention to national and regional level issues also. Accordingly a national conference was part of the

design of the project, where representatives from all the centres would gather together for three days to work on the strategic future for Omega. This would not be a conference in the traditional sense but a large group interactive event, which would be managed by the participants themselves. Large group interactive events, such as 'search conferences/future search' are well-established approaches to building participation in an organization's future direction (Holman and Devane 1999). Organizational members from all functional and geographical areas would come together for a number of days and,

– review the past,

– explore the present,

– create an ideal future scenario,

– identify common ground and

– make action plans.

The significance of these approaches is that they would enable the whole system to engage in strategic thinking and planning in an integrated manner within a defined period of time in a manner that would be dialogical and participative. It would draw on metaphoric approaches as well as rational ones and aim to build ownership of strategy and change agendas. In the design of the project, this conference would take place two thirds of the way through the period when the local centres had experienced two days of their own processes.

The setting for conversation was designed to be structured in accordance with Schein's (1993 1999) formulation of the structural components for facilitating dialogue.

– The physical space would be organized into as nearly as circle as possible.

– Initiating the conversation through a "check-in" in order to allow inclusiveness take place.

– Closing the session with a "check-out" enabling participants top comment on the process.

Based on the concept of dialogue and appreciative inquiry (Schein 1993; Watkins and Mohr 2001), the workshop sessions would be structured around three questions.

1. What do you really like about (your life, your work) in this centre/home? As most people in the organization had not been familiar with any type of group work, it would allow them to participate in a conversation that would start of in a positive, friendly mode.

2. What could be done even better? Based on the confidence built in the conversation around question 1, it was expected that participants would then speak up more freely with regard to opportunities for change.

3. How do we get there? Finally, concrete suggestions in terms of goals and action steps to be taken would follow from the discussion of question 3.

The contributions would be shared and discussed and common themes extrapolated.

The difference between design and implementation

All centres were invited to participate in the project. However, five did not participate for different reasons. One centre did not participate in order to avoid confusion with a parallel total quality management project that was in progress. Two centres did not participate as they were in the process of changing management at the time of the process. Another two centres chose not to participate having discussed the usefulness in a preliminary meeting with the facilitator. Eight centres opted to participate in the project. The central office and the board of trustees opted for one session each respectively.

The project as implemented differed in some respects from the project as designed.

– Some centres selected to have significant time between the three days; others preferred to have them in a shorter period of time to keep the momentum going.

- Centres that were already familiar with a certain meeting structure and culture fed the input of the project back into the established structures. Centres with little meeting structure were pleased to have the project and to experience the benefit of joint meetings. Centres with an established meeting structure questioned the usefulness of the project and/or suggested to make use of the project according to their own agenda.

- Most centres opted for separate group meetings on days I and II and a joint session on day III. Typically, on day I they talked about question 1 and started on question 2. Transcripts of the flipcharts were posted subsequently to the participants. On day II the issues of day I were revisited and discussion on question 2 continued and were completed. Then certain items that the group chose to share with the other groups on day III were agreed. Day III itself was then mainly driven by question 3. How do we get there? What are areas for improvement? What are next steps?

- Day III in most centres turned into a starting point for action, rather than into the intended reflection session.

- The envisioned national conference did not take place. However, a large scale strategy development "summit" was held later in 2002, and so is not considered to be directly within the project.

The differences between design and implementation are part of the contingent nature of action research. It is worth reflecting on the difference between plan and outcome and what can be learned from what adaptations needed to be made to the original design. The adaptations and adjustments were necessary to cater for the specific needs of local centres or stakeholders within each centre. Action research in general, but a project called "learning through listening" in particular would risk losing its credibility by ignoring the specific needs of participants.

The process was structured around creating a conversational mode in a safe atmosphere so that reflective conversation could take place. Many groups began in a suspicious mode – why should this project be any different from other ones? The initial meetings were characterised by politeness, though often anger and frustration about elements in the life of a centre were

expressed early on and subsequent talking was tough. Some groups moved to engaging in reflective conversation around specific issues.

First and foremost, the goal was to provide a psychologically safe environment for conversation. Throughout the three separate days in each centre, as one would expect the conversation developed into at least an open talking-tough mode. Some sessions were driven by a reflective mode of conversation. Each of the different conversational modes can be useful depending on what is to be achieved. Most centres opted for separate session on days I and II, which would then lead into a joint session on day III. In most of the centres, the first session started off in a talking-nice mode. This was mainly due to the appreciative character of the first question. But more importantly, the initial question allowed most participants to get involved and to voice their views in a large group. To listen to many positive aspects of the participants' daily life and business created surprises for many participants. Especially the expression of mutual appreciation of service users and staff, led to a very healthy conversational mode. Based on this experience, it was either later that day or at least on day II of the process that groups switched into a debate or discussion mode.

The second question, focusing on opportunities, encouraged people to engage in a debate or discussion. Most of the debates and discussions were not necessarily in a talking tough mode as to threaten or hurt other stakeholders, but it was crucial to give space for concerns and problems that would not have been voiced elsewhere. Mainly service users had difficulties with the debate mode as they would not want to be considered as complacent about the service. The comment cited earlier, "You don't rock the boat with the people that you rely on!" points to one of the core issues of the entire project, how to encourage and enable people that consider themselves vulnerable to give feedback on their service? It is based on this feedback that the organization can develop a strategic vision of the service.

Reflection occurred in several small episodes within the debate mode. It was when people realised the bias of their views, the appreciation and acknowledgement of different views. Surprises about different perspectives and their validity were crucial in that regard. These episodes were considered most helpful when asked about the benefit of the project. Firstly, they appre-

ciated the space that was provided for conversation, and secondly, the quality of the conversation which they referred to that was achievable in an appropriate conversational setting.

As most centres opted for separate sessions on days I and II, day III was designed as a joint session. Groups had discussed and decided on which items to share with the other stakeholders on day III. The conversational mode was mainly "talking nice" as the mutual observation did not allow for an adequate openness due to the feeling of dependency, both from service users or staff point of view. At best, day III provided a platform to develop a non-threatening mode for debate when people experienced that a facilitated meeting would help not to switch into mutual blaming and nagging.

Stakeholder needs, interests and lifeworlds – toward a communal rationality

The project aimed at creating conditions in which the stakeholders could engage in conversation and listen to each other on what is important to them. Phrased differently, the purpose was to enable stakeholders of this organization to become practitioners in their respective community of practice. Creating discursive arenas in which this could happen was the task of the facilitator. The non-discursive, structural environment in the form of relative power to define who talks to whom when about what were not neglected but the focus is on what happened within the discursive arenas. What we report here are indications of the formative process of stakeholders becoming members of their community of practice. For instance, some service users had never considered themselves members of a collective entity of whichever form or name.

Residents first and foremost expressed appreciation of the safety of the centres. In addition to that the service provided by staff was highly appreciated. Across all centres, residents faced a structural dilemma. There was a fear of giving even constructive feedback due to the high level of dependency or even vulnerability. Residents in most centres were concerned with staff training and induction as well as their own involvement in decision making

processes in the centres. They focused on specific issues relating to staff rostering, range of services, meal facilities and menu.

In terms of the lifeworld of residents, the *service quality* was at the heart of the discussion. However, residents did not refer to "the service" they rather referred to specific forms in which they experienced the service, i.e. the times to get up and be brought to bed, the quality of food, the general mood of the house, the communicative qualities of staff etc. For example, the quality and variety of food for people with physical disabilities is in their lifeworld a very prominent feature as this is one of the most important sensational episodes during their day. It also gives a structure to their lives in the centres.

Another important issue was the possibility for residents to voice their concerns, critique or dissatisfaction. It is not only limited because of speech impairments that some residents might have, but because of a *fundamental dilemma.* Because of their perceived dependency and vulnerability, residents fear to give honest feedback as doing so could and does trigger subtle sanctions and responses by individual members of staff.

The benefit of the project was in their view to eventually have a space where they were able to address these issues. Both issues, service quality as well as the dilemma not being able to criticize the service quality, were voiced in a discursive arena where participants were able in a psychologically safe environment to discuss the validity and relevance of both points. Especially long term residents who felt a certain agony towards the service were delighted to share their experiences with others. In one session, when one of the residents talked about her experience of the dilemma, other participants started laughing knowingly – and supported her view. In terms of language games and rationality, it was clear that even though residents claimed their individuality and independence, they also realized that they share experiences, language and the way service quality is experienced.

Staff also expressed appreciation of the friendly and caring atmosphere. The top issue for staff in most centres were the staffing levels, i.e. staff shortage. Fairness of pay was an issue as well, there didn't seem to be a uniform pay scheme. Empowering the residents on the one hand and giving them freedom of choice without empowering the people that deliver that very service created certain tensions and frustrations in the centres ("Does staff have

rights too?") There seemed to be a tension between the independence philosophy of the organization on the one hand and the medical model and/or ethos of care workers and nurses on the other. Staff also expressed concerns about role and responsibilities, rostering, relationship with management and training.

Staff members were mainly concerned with issues around their task of delivering the service. They referred to their job explicitly as serving and caring, whereby the meaning of 'care' was explored in different centres differently. For one particular centre staff, care was mainly the physical, medical and hygiene aspect whereas in some other centres, staff emphasized the communicative aspects of caring. The notion of independence which is very prominent in the care provider's mission statement was also critically discussed. Does independence mean that residents can do everything they want – regardless of staff or organizational needs? Again, two opposing views could be identified: on the one hand, a rather paternalistic view that "I know what's good for you", on the other, a very consequent "Do what you want but pay for the consequences". For most staff, the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their daily business outside the daily requirements was new, and also showed them where differences in worldviews lie.

The *local managers* proved to be crucial throughout the project. Without their support, the impact and sustainability of the project would be very limited. They also are very influential in shaping organizational culture in the centres. There seem to be some irritants with regard to roles and responsibilities between central office and centre manager. If the local managers are considered classical middle managers, it should be made explicit. But that might jeopardize some managers' commitment. In addition to that some managers feel their possibility to give input in terms of strategic decision making has been very limited.

The local managers can be considered the interface between the local centres and central office. Interestingly, they are able to use either grammar or language game. For example, in the house they refer to people as 'residents' whereas in discussions with central office, the official language requires to address them as 'service users'. Their commitment to the individual centre

related very strongly on the perceived possibility to influence the overall strategy as well as the support they get from central office.

The *management committees* (MC) were part of the original project design, but as the project evolved it proved to be essential to involve them where appropriate. It was also agreed that the future of MCs would not be part of this project. However, in those centres where an active MC exists, very stimulating sessions were held. Overall, MC members expressed feelings of insecurity (to say the least) about their role under the new constitution. Most active MC members are highly committed to their voluntary work and are also ambassadors for the organization in the local communities.

Not surprisingly, MC members are the most remote to the lifeworlds of staff, residents and local management. These volunteers from the local community have limited encounters with residents and staff, and sometimes a very romanticized view of the service. The paradox is obvious. Limited encounters with the centres do not increase their linguistic abilities to understand the lifeworld of residents.

Most centres opted to have separate sessions to start with. Within these sessions, little translatory work had to be made. People discussed and assessed statements and views in the light of a shared frame of sense making. Context jargon was used and it was also obvious to see political games going on, that are not accessible for outsiders. Still, there were surprises. People were surprised that others share their views, as well as they were surprised to hear different views from people that they had thought would be 'brothers in arms'.

In terms of understanding and language games, the joint sessions were of major interest. During these sessions, a conversation allowed to discuss topics and issues not primarily to resolve them but in order to get a shared understanding of the situation or the problem. For example, residents that asked for a higher flexibility of meal times were able to acknowledge that there are organizational constraints to that. On the other hand, staff and management agreed to look into the issue – by setting up an all-inclusive committee in which this issue then was resolved. Moreover, such a problem definition and resolving mode was agreed to serve as a template for future issues that might come up.

Discusion

The structure of the research project was congruent with action research principles (Reason 2001). It aimed at developing *practical knowing* whereby the knowledge generated from within this community of inquiry would help the organization change and develop. It was *collaborative* as the participants designed the process and owned it throughout. The research did not separate the knower from what was to be known and so it was conducted within the participants' experience of their *situation.* The intended outcome was *several forms of knowing* – experiential, practical and propositional. The following discussion provides a critical reflection of the project description in view of respective theoretical foundations we have drawn on.

Reflective Conversation

The process was structured around creating a conversational mode in a safe atmosphere so that reflective conversation could take place. Many groups began in a suspicious mode – why should this project be any different from other ones? The initial meetings were characterised by politeness, though often anger and frustration about elements in the life of a centre were expressed early on and subsequent talking was tough. Some groups moved to engaging in reflective conversation around specific issues.

Reflection occurred in several small episodes within the debate mode. It was when people realised the bias of their views, the appreciation and acknowledgement of different views took place. Surprises about different perspectives and their validity were crucial in that regard. These episodes were considered most helpful when asked about the benefit of the project. Firstly, they appreciated the space that was provided for conversation, and secondly, the quality of the conversation which they referred to that was achievable in an appropriate conversational setting.

As most centres opted for separate sessions on days I and II, day III was designed as a joint session. Groups had discussed and decided on which items to share with the other stakeholders on day III. The conversational mode was mainly talking nice as the mutual observation did not allow for an adequate openness due to the feeling of dependency, both from service users or staff

point of view. At best, day III provided a platform to develop a non-threatening mode for debate when people experienced that a facilitated meeting would help not to switch into mutual blaming and nagging.

Overall, three aspects regarding reflective conversation can be concluded. Firstly, how was the space for conversation created? The decision whether to have joint or separate sessions proved to be crucial. The trade-off between inclusion on the one hand, and a psychologically safe environment on the other was acknowledged. Most centres opted for getting "to the real stuff" by having separate sessions first. Centres that decided otherwise emphasised the benefits of a joint discussion. Secondly, how were people encouraged to participate in an open and honest discussion? The toughest part was getting started. Day I could be considered a confidence building measure. Complemented by an appreciative question, it is not surprising that the resulting conversation was mainly in a talking-nice mode. However, one function of question one was to get people involved into the conversation and make them feel safe in the group. A non-threatening question for a start proved to be adequate. The switch into a debate was mainly driven by question of the facilitator as to their assumptions or theories-in-use as why and how certain things happen. In addition to that, each group had its prime movers, which where participants that saw the micro-political potential of the project. In order to not letting them highjack the process but benefiting from their contributions, it was through explicitly asking for assessment of their views by other participants. Thirdly, how is a reflective conversation facilitated? The reflective episodes did not occur because they were deliberately planned to happen. The overall framework and design of the project and its session did certainly have an orientation towards reflective conversation. This reflexive character of the project has to be acknowledged. However, reflective episodes, i.e. people acknowledging different views while questioning their own, people aiming at understanding ("verstehen") other viewpoints, did only occur after an appropriate amount of time and energy was spent in a debate. The next step then was to reflect on what people had said and heard as to learn the multiple rationalities behind certain statements. It is mainly the acknowledgement and understanding of different rationalities that makes reflective conversation a key aspect of an organizational and strategic development process.

Conclusions

This article has outlined some of the core processes of an action research project in a residential healthcare organization in which a structure was created for the stakeholder groups in the organization to listen to each other and begin to work together towards creating their own vision of how the organization can move into the future, according to its values and ethos. As outlined earlier, the aim of this action research project was to create necessary, formative conditions in which the stakeholders could engage in reflective conversation together and listen to each other on what is important in the life of the organization and how such formative initial capability would prepare the ground for subsequent actions from the conversations to be taken in order to move purposefully into the future.

References

Coghlan, D./Brannick, T. (2005): Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization. 2nd edition. London: Sage.

Coghlan, D./Mc Auliffe, E. (2003): Changing Healthcare Organizations. Dublin: Blackhall.

Dixon, N.M. (1998): Dialogue at Work. London: Lemos and Crane.

Gadamer, J.G. (1970): Truth and Method. London: Sheed and Ward.

Gergen, K. (1994): Reality and Relationships: Soundings and Social Construction. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Greenwood, D./Levin, M. (1998): Introduction to Action Research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gummesson, E. (2000): Qualitative Methods in Management Research, 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gustavsen, B. (1992): Dialogue and Development. Maastricht: Van Gorcum.

Habermas, J. (1984): The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. I. Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1987): The Theory of Communicative Action Vol. II. Cambridge: Polity.

Holman, P./Devane, T. (1999): The Change Handbook: Group Methods for Shaping the Future. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Isaacs, W. (1999): Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together. New York: Doubleday.

Jacobs, C. (2003): Managing Organizational Responsiveness. Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitaets-Verlag.

Jacobs, C./Coghlan, D. (2005): Sound from Silence: On Listening in Organizational Learning. In: Human Relations, 58: 115-138.

Kirsch, W. (1991): Kommunikatives Handeln, Autopoiese, Rationalitat. Munich: B. Krisch.

Owen, H. (1997): Expanding our Now: The Story of Open Space Technology. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler..

Palshaugen, O. (1998): The End of Organization Theory? Language as a Tool in Action Research and Organization Development. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Reason, P. (2001): Learning and Change through Action Research. In: J. Henry (ed): Creative Management, 2nd ed. London: Sage, 182-194.

Reason, P./Bradbury, H. (2001): Handbook of Action Research. London: Sage

Schein, E.H. (1987): The Clinical Perspective in Fieldwork. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schein, E.H. (1993): On Dialogue, Culture and Organizational Learning. In: Organizational Dynamics, 22: 40-51

Schein, E.H. (1995): Process Consultation, Action Research and Clinical Inquiry: Are They the Same? In: Journal of Managerial Psychology, 10(6): 14-19.

Schein, E.H. (1999): Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Toulmin, S./Gustavsen, B. (1996): Beyond Theory. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Watkins, J.M./Mohr, B.J. (2001): Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Weisbord, M.R. (2004): Productive Workplaces Revisited: Dignity, Meaning and Community in the 21st Century. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

About the authors:

David Coghlan is a faculty member of the School of Business Studies at the University of Dublin, Ireland and is a Fellow of the university. His research interests focus on organisation development, action research, clinical inquiry, practitioner research, doing action research in one's own organization.

Claus Jacobs is a Research Fellow at the Imagination Lab Foundation, Lausanne, Switzerland. He received his Ph.D. from University of Dublin and an MBA from Witten/Herdecke's School of Business in Germany.

Authors' addresses:

David Coghlan
University of Dublin
School of Business Studies
Trinity College
Dublin 2 , Ireland
Phone ++353 1 6082323
Fax ++ 353 1 6799503
E mail: david.coghlan@tcd.ie

Claus Jacobs
Imagination Lab Foundation
Rue Marterey 5
1005 Lausanne, Switzerland
Phone +41 21 321 55 44
Fax +41 21 321 55 45
E mail: claus.jacobs@gmail.com