

Leadership Challenges in Research

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Introduction

Yukl (2002) states that “leading change is one of the most important and difficult leadership responsibilities” (p. 273). A leader may know intuitively that the organization needs revitalization and have a vision as to what change may be needed, but how does a leader objectively understand the current state of the organization and initiate specific efforts to effect change? One of the primary reasons a leader conducts research within their organization is for the purpose of gaining insight about the organization and its people so that specific transformational change can be initiated, guided, and brought to a fruitful conclusion. This paper discusses the challenges of conducting such research from the perspective of a leader within an organization, and concludes with a personal account of the challenge most likely to be faced by this writer.

Ethical Challenges

Ethics are a system of moral duty and obligation that deal with right and wrong (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Ethics in research is concerned about protecting the interests of people who are the subject of research from those who are conducting the research (Mark, 1996, p. 38). Ethical challenges that a leader faces in conducting research within an organization consists of two facets: considerations on how to do the research and considerations on what to do with the results of the research.

Ethical considerations on how to conduct research balance the principle of informed consent with the need to collect data that is valid and accurate. Informed consent is ensuring that the subject voluntarily participates in the research (Mark, 1996, p. 40) and

that the subject fully understands the purpose of the study and how the results will be used (Brewerton and Millward, 2002, p. 63). Thus, a leader conducting research must be careful to explicitly enlist participation of subjects and clearly explain the intended use of the information.

Ethical considerations on what to do with the results of the research must balance anonymity and confidentiality with the need to take action to effect change based upon what is learned from the research. A leader conducting research must understand the difference between anonymity and confidentiality (Mark, 1996, p. 46). Anonymity ensures that responses resulting from research cannot be attributed to a particular individual (Mark, 1996, p. 46). Confidentiality, while not providing anonymity, ensures that any information gathered will not be shared with others (Mark, 1996, p. 46).

A leader must resist the temptation to take direct action based upon information gleaned from research when that action might jeopardize confidentiality or put the interests of the leader ahead of the research participant through retribution or political gain.

Logistical Challenges

One of the primary logistical challenges for a leader conducting research in an organization pertains to the handling of the details of the research operation. Brewerton and Millward (2002) describe a research effort as a project “to be carefully and systematically managed” and requiring “planning, control, and continuous monitoring and evaluation” (p. 18). Application of project management techniques serve to focus

the research endeavor on specific results which tend to make the effort manageable, improve confidence, and enable successful completion (Brewerton and Millward, 2002, p. 20). To meet these challenges, it behooves a leader to ensure that the project is properly guided by a person with appropriate project management skills.

Project management is defining the work requirements (including quantity and quality), establishing resource needs, tracking progress, comparing actual outcomes to predicted results, and making adjustments as the project work unfolds. A project is successful if it completes on time, is within cost constraints, delivers desired results with sufficient quality, utilizes resources effectively and efficiently, and is accepted by the customer. Obstacles to achieving project benefits include project complexity, special requirements, organizational changes, project risks, changes in requirements and resources, and inaccurate predictions of the future (Kerzner, 1998, p. 3). All of these project management considerations apply to a research project, and a leader must ensure that the research is competently organized and managed to achieve the desired outcome within the constraints of time and cost.

Challenges of Interviewing As a Research Method

A leader that desires to initiate change within the organization must first understand the dynamics at play as well as factors that can exert influence toward a desired result. A leader can use qualitative research to confirm their perceptions and assumptions about the realities in the organization by engaging people within the organization in a research study (Mark, 1996, p. 61). Interviewing as a method of data collection in research is an

effective approach when the interest is developing a description or understanding of a situation toward the goal of determining and influencing a desired outcome (Brewerton and Millward, 2002, p. 53).

Generally, interviewing is a very flexible approach to research with advantages of ease of data coding, analysis, and comparison, ease of gaining cooperation and confidence of research subjects as well as consistent and robust coverage of topic areas across subjects (Brewerton and Millward, 2002, p. 69-70, 73-74). However, a leader must also understand the disadvantages of interviewing to avoid the pitfall of misunderstanding a situation and determining a course of action based on that misunderstanding.

Potential disadvantages of interviewing include high cost in terms of requisite skills and time requirements, and gaining access to potential interviewees (Brewerton and Millward, 2002, p. 69-70, 74). Perhaps the most significant disadvantage is the possibility of bias affecting the reliability of the research results. Bias in interviewing as a research method is error introduced into results by the encouragement of one particular outcome or response over others (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

An interviewee's responses can be affected by characteristics of the interviewer such as speech and other personal mannerisms, interviewing style, appearance, and even style of dress. These effects can be minimized by using the same interviewer (for consistency of effect) or randomly selecting from a group of interviewers (Brewerton and Millward, 2002, p. 71, 74). Response bias has perhaps the most insidious affect on interviewers' responses. Types of response bias include social acceptability, acquiescence, and

auspice. Social acceptability bias is the tendency of an interviewee to provide what they believe are politically correct responses (Mindshare Technologies, n.d.). Acquiescence bias is the tendency of some individuals to “agree with all questions or to concur with a particular position” (Zikmund, n.d., p. 17). Auspice bias is the tendency of an interviewee’s responses to be influenced by the authority of the organization or individual conducting the interview (Zikmund, n.d., p. 20).

The qualitative nature of many potential research efforts within an organization and the advantages of interviewing make this research method attractive. To obtain accurate results, the leader must carefully mitigate the potential disadvantages of interviewing.

Most Likely Research Challenge

The most likely challenge by this writer in conducting research is minimizing response bias. It’s easy for me to see the world in a way that justifies my views and discounts the perspective of others. Directly as an interviewer, or indirectly as the leader or sponsor of a research effort, it’s this self centered view that can inadvertently influence others to provide the expected response rather than an open and honest response. Boyce (Getting Out of the Box, 2003) describes this as self-deception or “being in the box.” If I can realize when I’m “in the box” by being sensitive to this phenomenon, then I can free myself and others to make more accurate assessments in research and other situations.

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