Insider Intervention Research – Organisational and group dynamics in a small-sized company

The following project aims at identifying existing organisational and group dynamics and its consequences for the company. The research was conducted in a small-sized company in Vienna which employs approximately 10 employees. Furthermore, it needs to be mentioned that I – the author – was working in that company during the conduction of the research. Therefore, the method of Insider Intervention Research which is part of action research (Cassell & Johnson, 2006) has been used for the research. Based on the aim and the method, two research questions have been derived: The first one was to identify underlying organisational and group dynamics in the company. As Intervention Research also involves researchers themselves, the second research questions aimed at identifying which aspects an Insider Intervention researcher has to consider during the research. (Klutz, 2019)

To specify the method even more, participatory action (intervention) research (Cassell & Johnson, 2006) has been used which is entered into via the management. Consequently, there is a chance that researchers act as agents for the management and this is why the researcher needs to pay attention to not getting misused as a management's mouthpiece. To start with the research, it is therefore reasonable to neglect the company mission and start with the research objects. This is also what has been executed for this research. After having received the approval from the boss, the research field was attended to observe what was happening on a daily basis and these observations were noted down. The notes were then analysed by myself, with the supervisor but also in a resonance group (research partnering). Out of these analyses hypotheses were drawn. The next time the research field was attended not only new observations were able to be made but also the already existing hypotheses were tested. This process shows that the research process is iterative and repeated for as long as enough hypotheses can be drawn to derive a background theory (Barth, 2018). The observations have been conducted over a three-month period of time. Based on the findings that were gained during the observations and discussions with the supervisor and within the resonance group, seven hypotheses were derived which built the basis for the background theory. The hypotheses were as follows (Klutz, 2019, pp. 41–47):

- "There is a possibility that family structures are transferred into the organisation.
- It might be the case that the boss gives orders in an informal and ambiguous way.
- Conflict avoidance can be observed in the organisation.
- Conflict avoidance can be observed again.
- Another situation where family structures might influence the actual group.
- It may be the case that the boss's action may have caused less irritations if it would have happened in a formal setting.
- Conflicts are not addressed openly which may cause fantasies."

The background theory – and this already answers the first research question – pointed out that the company is likely to not address conflicts openly and that members have a tendency to project their own family structures into the company. To strengthen the background theory, observations during the group activity will now be explained in more detail. Also, the aim of Intervention Research needs

to be highlighted (raising the awareness of all stakeholders (Heintel, 2005)) as the group activity served to give feedback about the findings to the researched group. In Intervention Research, giving indirect feedback rather than giving direct feedback about the findings is reasonable because the group members may not be able to understand it (Barth 2018). So, the decision (in accordance with the supervisor whose field of expertise is Intervention Research and Organisational and Group dynamics) on how to design the group activity was as follows: The employees should simply draw the company's structure according to their perception. The following criteria had to be met: all members should be represented in the drawing, an animal should be assigned for every member and the relationship towards the various members should be rated.

The drawings have been analysed afterwards with the supervisor and the protocol also with the resonance group. The analyses of the drawings showed following results: The drawing of the structure should serve as an indicator if the hierarchy is accepted within the company. All members placed the boss on top and all the employees underneath. Only the member who has taken the position of the omega in the group put his department at the centre. The usage of animal names enabled the members to give feedback in an indirective way, e.g. a bee is diligent, a fox is clever, etc. The boss has been described as the wise owl, the loyal dog, the fair lion etc. The person who has taken the omega position has been described as raven (shifty), the meerkat ("Timon") or as deer (independent). So the usage off animal names created an open space where all stakeholders could freely address their feeling towards each other without having the fear to harm somebody. To strengthen the first point of the background theory, the sole usage of positive ratings was an indicator that the group members are indeed not openly addressing their opinions. They indeed used different forms of positive ratings (++, +) but they avoided to use neutral or negative ratings. According to Wells (1985) not openly addressing one's feeling leads to projection which also supports the second point of the background theory that pointed out there is a tendency of the projection of one's own family structure in the company. This is also reasoned by the fact that there are real family connections within the company: two identical twins and also Klutz and her sister were employed in the company.

During the group activity, also various group stages were able to be identified (Krainz, 1994). Following is an example of one of the analyses: At the beginning of the group activity the group members received the information that they are free to stay in the room or leave the room. One person has left the room during the "storming" because the person was ready to be productive and move on to the next group phase. She did not want to wait for the others until they were ready as well. In an organisational and group dynamics perspective one could state that this is what also happens in real life. But it also needs to be considered that in real life people don't always have the chance to leave the situation and this is where conflicts occur.

The outcome of the group activity itself – and consequently the aim for Insider Intervention Research has been met – was positive: After the group activity, the drawings were put up in the kitchen of the company where all employees socialize during lunch time to make the employees think about and reflect on the group activity. Further observations showed that the employees were still discussing the group activity after two weeks. And this is exactly what Intervention Research is aiming for: raising the awareness of the relevant stakeholders. So the result of using Intervention Research was to create a room where all stakeholders were free to exchange their personal opinions without having to fear to harm any counterpart. Additionally, because of receiving feedback from the other employees also thought about and reflect upon themselves.

For me – the author – conducting Intervention Research for the first time was very challenging and this answers now the second research question. I had to admit a few mistakes in the aftermath: Firstly, I have implicated that the system is not able to draw clear boundaries between private and business life (which can be supported be the fact that I was able to observe that my former boss acted differently in informal settings). It showed that I was biased because I myself was not able to draw clear boundaries between being the researcher, the group member or the family member. This shows that researchers are likely to get sucked in the process but with the research partnering I was able to identify my biases to not project it any more to the researched group. Secondly, the fact that I have missed the proper introduction of the research to the researched group made me aware that not all group members may have had the same understanding of the research. Therefore, it can be highlighted that following the standardised process of Intervention Research is essential. And lastly, I had to admit that it took me some time to get to the core of Insider Intervention Research as it is a rather complex and abstract research method. The fact that I have been trained on classic social research approaches did not facilitate the process as well (Klutz, 2019). During the research I was so focused on finding a problem that I missed to realise that not finding a problem but raising the awareness of all stakeholders was the aim. During the research, I did not only get to know the method but also received a lot of feedback regarding my person from my research partners. Concluding, this is the most important aspect about Insider Intervention Research in my perspective.

So in the end, I realised that (research) partnering is a crucial element for Intervention Research. Openly addressing one's feelings and emotions and receiving open and honest feedback from another person can have a deep impact on all stakeholders. So, Intervention Research does indeed address all stakeholders involved in the research. Not only were the employees in the researched company able to address their opinions openly, also I myself have gone through a quite intense time conducting Intervention Research for the first time. It had such a deep impact on me personally that almost one year later I am still applying the method of Intervention Research in my daily private and business life. In business life, I am trying not to get sucked into a group pattern: e.g. in the company that I am currently working for there is a high level of fear of getting fired and losing one's job from one day to another. I've analysed the situation for myself and also by talking to others. In my fantasy and also because I was told so by my colleagues, the risk of getting fired form one day to another was very high. Focusing on the facts, I realised that actually no one is getting fired from one day to another without good reason. In fact, people are getting fired because they have made several mistakes and this is also my feedback during conversations with my colleagues. You need to look at the bigger picture (reality). In private life I try to investigate my feelings and their triggers. During a discussion within the resonance group I had one intense experience: A member of the resonance made a statement. While I was in the process of justifying myself, my supervisor stopped me and made me aware of what I was doing. Rather than looking at the statement as a statement, I took it as an accusation which demanded for justification. So, his statement triggered an emotion but rather than reflection on it I was reacting.

Nowadays, when I am able to realise that I am reactive rather than reflective in a conversation I try to stop myself, think about the situation and make a decision before I respond. And this is exactly what Intervention Research does: Making others aware of what they are doing, of what is reality or what is fantasy and the resulting feelings, thoughts and actions that impact a group.

References

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