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Case studies as learning vehicles for the future for consultants and managers

Abstract

This article considers two Master's degree programs, both of which specialize in the use of case studies in the Master's thesis, one applying the "research case study" and the other the "action research case study". Working on real-life situations in the form of case studies and applying practical and theoretical perspectives, students become researchers of their own practice; they alternate their focuses between practitioner and researcher, widening their perspectives in order to become systematic learners of their own organizational contexts and intervention practices. The practitioner as researcher becomes an active party in observing his or her own interventions and learning. Hence a research case study becomes a living contribution enabling consultants and managers to move more effectively within a constantly changing environment and add to their repertoire of available actions.

The case study is developed as an instrument for investigating unclear and critical phenomena in which the researcher is interested. It is used as a vehicle which translates a consulting and management phenomenon into a comprehensible language. By telling the core story it becomes an effective opportunity to create an appropriate distance and new mindsets, resulting in new opportunities to understand and act. Above all, the practitioner's future learning capacity is increased through the systematic renewal of perspective on his or her own actions in the context of organizations.

1. Introduction

The intention of the two Master's degree programs in using research case studies with MSc and MBA students (See also Spindler, M. & Bauer, E. M. 2010 and 2012) is to encourage the students to develop knowledge and abilities which will serve them in the long term in their careers as OD-consultants and managers. Students who already work as consultants or managers² focus as practitioners on real-life situations in the form of case studies, applying practical and theoretical perspectives.

The framework and support ensure that these practitioners have a different environment helping them to distance themselves from their own working contexts: fellow students with business backgrounds, the instructors and the programs' theoretical backgrounds all enable

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² Most of the students work as consultants or managers in Austria, Germany or Switzerland.

the researchers to step back from their own mindsets and emotional involvements and develop a critical perspective towards their own situations.

This article focuses on the question of what and how the research perspective of a case study can contribute to the learning of the managers and consultants and how this learning can be supported. This article is based on the author's³ experience working in two programs, the MBA in 'Communication and Leadership'⁴ and the MSc in 'Organization Development'⁵.

2. Theoretical assumptions for work with research case studies

2.1 Meta-perspective as provocation for managers and consultants

One of the reasons the concept of case studies is attractive is that managers and consultants have to deal with complex living systems (See Spindler & Steger 2008, p.512 ff. and Malik 2003) and learn to question strategy, leadership and corporate culture within their area of accountability and beyond. Managers and consultants are expected to deal with functionality, to have an idea where to use which structure, which style of leadership communication and which culture in order to reach their goals, and to know how to create and use change architectures, processes and designs in order to support innovation and transformation in organizations.

This requires:

- Maintaining an overview, acting on the meta-level rather than going into too much detail;
- Supporting experts rather than telling them what to do;
- Setting up the best-fitting scope of action in order to ensure a productive and appreciative workforce rather than telling them step by step what to do;
- Learning as a system, team and organization how to set up and tear down the adequate structure and leadership culture which are needed;
- Finding ways to build and increase the unity of a team or organization while exploiting the variety of the different interests and expectations, and while keeping the tailor-made products and special needs of the client in mind (See Spindler & Steger 2008, p. 512 ff).

2.2 Practitioners as researchers of their own practice

The initial concept of Kurt Lewin (see Lewin 1946 and 1997), the German roots of qualitative research like 'Kritische Psychologie' (See Markard 2000) and the Austrian action research perspective (See Altrichter & Posch 2006 and Spindler & Steger 2010, p. 52f and p. 317ff) led

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to the conclusion that case studies could be an approach to help managers and consultants switch roles from practitioner to researcher and to widen their perspectives in order to become systematic researchers of their own management and consulting practices. The practitioner as researcher is an active party in observing his or her own learning.

A case study here means an approach to investigating unclear and critical phenomena in which the researcher is interested. The practitioner is keen to investigate the unexplained past and present situation in order to find answers which will help both researcher and organization to learn and move forward. The research case study is used as a vehicle which gives an organizational phenomenon a face and translates it into a common and comprehensible language, thus raising the awareness of those involved and making situations and their specific phenomena visible both outside and inside the organization (e.g. for other managers and companies or consultants in similar situations). It is an effective opportunity to create both an appropriate distance and new mindsets, resulting in new opportunities to understand and act.

2.3 Storytelling as living access to change and learning for oneself and for others

Using the concept of storytelling should give access to the story behind the story and encourage investigation of learning within the case and the case writer him or herself. The story should be told in a way that moves the storyteller and potential readers. To focus on changes and 'lessons learned' the concept of Robert McKee (2003) is helpful. The story begins with a situation in which life is in balance and is thrown out of balance by an 'inciting incident'. Students are advised to tell their story within a certain timeframe in which a dramatic change forced the company to act. Providing a timeline as a graphic illustrating the main impacts and main changes clarified the students' thinking and helped them to stay in line and keep focused. With a focus on storytelling as narrative and an inductive approach, the students were advised to jump into the field and phenomena, start collecting data and writing. (See further the concept of storytelling of Czarniawska 2006.)

2.4 Learning from the past for the future

A variation of Kurt Lewin's circle serves as one of the main sources for the action research approach. The assumption is that research results will be more valuable for the researcher and the company if they have already been tested as implemented solutions for the 'inciting incident'. Thus the researcher tells his/her own story about the problem-solving process as the core of the case study. The resulting learning is derived from solutions already implemented and tested. The knowledge is already tested; it is not just a plan or criticism of a current situation. Thus the author can be certain that the plan has worked in that specific case and can be useful for other cases in similar contexts. (See further the topic of generalization in case studies at Spindler & Steger 2012.)

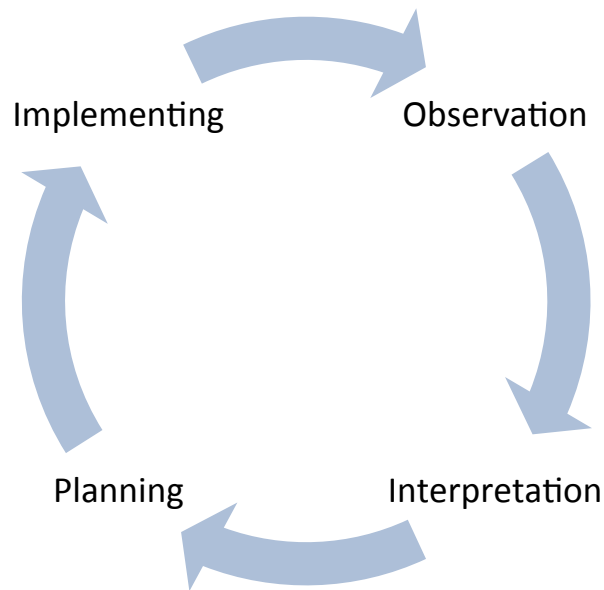


Diagram 1: Action research circle (Spindler 2010)

Through the systemized story including observation, interpretation, planning and implementation, the feedback from colleagues and instructors, and the reflection on theory, the past can be seen anew. Thus present and future perspectives can become different and lead to different interpretations, planning and implementing.

3. The research case study: How managers become researchers and leaders for organizational learning

The MBA programme 'Communication and leadership'

By the end of the third program⁶ the MBA program had developed a vast array of material designed to support the students in writing their cases, to help them open themselves by widening their perspectives for the past and the future of their own situations and opportunities for their company.

Through the use of the approach “Research Case Study”, the special learning focus in the MBA program is the discovery and understanding of the company’s learning potential from the company’s previously developed learning capabilities. This research process enhances the company’s learning potential so that it can be used by management for the future in a targeted fashion. The development of two to four scenarios (see graphic below Step 7 above) makes this organizational learning the focus once more, because the organizational context for the learning phenomenon is de-familiarized. Thus the researcher-manager is forced to define the core of the learning and to verify it for the changed context: to what extent can organizational learning stand up to the changed context? The manager’s faculty of abstraction in relation to organizational learning is honed further.

⁶ In 2009.

1. **The initial situation:** Why is the subject interesting?
Questions, initial problems, dilemmas contradictions, and what at first seems inexplicable.
2. **The phenomenon** in rough outline
 3. **The case in a narrower sense:** Brief history (one or two pages)
Chronological process clarification, completed sequence
Highs and lows, learning in the case
Everything documented and told as a story (maximum forty pages)
4. **Summary of the case:** Reference to the framework, to the process of learning. Realizations from the past in their interconnections and in context; connection to theory
5. **Theory:** Approach theory using the practical question and empiricism. Theoretical concepts relating to the case appropriately presented and interpreted. Theoretical reflection and discussion of the case in a narrower sense. (maximum of twenty pages)
- 6a. **Summary of theory:** Reference to framework, partial answer. Crux of the change, the learning and realizations from the case and its history.
- 6b. **Summary of the realizations of the case.** Which new perspectives have arisen? Theory, reference to the framework, partial answer.
7. **2-4 Scenarios:** Creating a story. How the case develop positively or negatively; what consequences can be expected under what conditions.
8. **Summary of interpretations.** Realizations spanning the entire work.
Tying everything together

Diagram 2: Overview of the sections of the Master's thesis (Spindler 2010)

Examples of topics of Master's theses that show the research processes the practitioners go through are:

- Merger as the motivation for the move from extended workbench to independent company
- How the concept of the learning organization can be put into practice in the X department of the Y bank
- The consolidation of seven professional associations into one umbrella organization

The process of supporting the students in their move from manager-mindset to researcher-mindset focuses on the learning process. A comprehensive and successful collaboration and learning environment are developed, resulting from the following steps:

1. Workshop 1: Set the framework⁷, clarify the requirements of the program, the needs of the students and support measures, consider first peer-group settings according to similar topics and intentions. The students explore and define their main interests and the phenomena of the research case study. The instructors pay special attention to emotional involvement and hidden agendas.
2. Workshop 2: The researchers present their first drafts in front of an audience (the other students/researchers and the instructors (seminar leader and program director)). The presentation and critical feedback force the researchers to explain as precisely as possible. The focus of the feedback is:
 - Where does the researcher start? What are the assumptions, motivations and involvements of the manager that act as the drivers for taking a closer look at this story?
 - Definition of the research question and/or assumption. In this step the researchers decide what should be investigated in detail and why.
 - Definition of the heart of the story, the phenomena, their interconnections and their limits.
3. Workshop 3: The researchers present the status quo or the progress of the case in front of an audience (the other students/researchers and the instructors). The presentation and critical feedback again force the researchers to explain as precisely as possible. The focus of the feedback is:
 - The research case study as a story within a timeframe, preferably using a graphic showing the 'inciting incident' that throws life out of balance.
 - Phenomenon – description of the origin, the changes and results from different perspectives.
 - The context of the core case:

⁷ Steps refer to the time plan for the case studies. See further Bauer 2010.

- A brief history of the company: foundations, mergers, the story of failure and learning, etc.
 - The present environment of the core case, for instance the technical requirements, the competitors, changes in the law.
 - An answer to the question is useful, so that further questions can arise concerning the phenomenon and the context.
 - The story is classified by topic and made comprehensible for the audience/reader.
- In this third workshop the students also receive guidance on the theoretical part of the Master's thesis.

After these three workshops the empirical part is finalized. Over the summer the students write the entire Master's thesis. During this period the members of the peer group help each other most. By this time they know each other very well from the workshops and have learned how to give and receive feedback. In September the instructors read the drafts of the entire case studies and the students receive one-to-one feedback.

The establishment of supportive peer groups is an important step for the development of the case studies and for the students' learning. It involves three approaches through the three programs:

- Self-organization into small groups sharing similar research interests: The students have nothing in common except content similarity of their work.
- Virtual community: discussion forums and feedback sections are established. Student concerns include the anonymity and great difficulty with the additional working hours on the virtual platform.
- Workshops based on presentations and feedback: a very successful approach, despite student reservations about giving feedback and helping each other. By the third workshop the culture opens up and mutual support becomes very welcome in terms of both giving and receiving.

4. The action research case study: How consultants and managers evolve their interventions

The MSC program: Organization development

The 'Action Research Case Study' as learning by reflecting and doing and as reflecting and doing: during the research into their own practice, the students in the MSc Organization Development Consulting program go beyond the interpretation of their own practice. Thus they close the action research circle (observation – interpretation – planning – implementation – observation: see 2.4) within the framework of a Master's thesis. The problem-solving cycle of action research itself becomes an object of the Master's thesis.

The students examine ongoing change processes and thus become practitioners who reflect on and create their own futures. The change case that the consultant accompanies becomes a research project during the production of the Master's thesis. Thus the practitioners are

challenged to think in multiple systems and frameworks, which is also in accordance with the requirements of organization development.

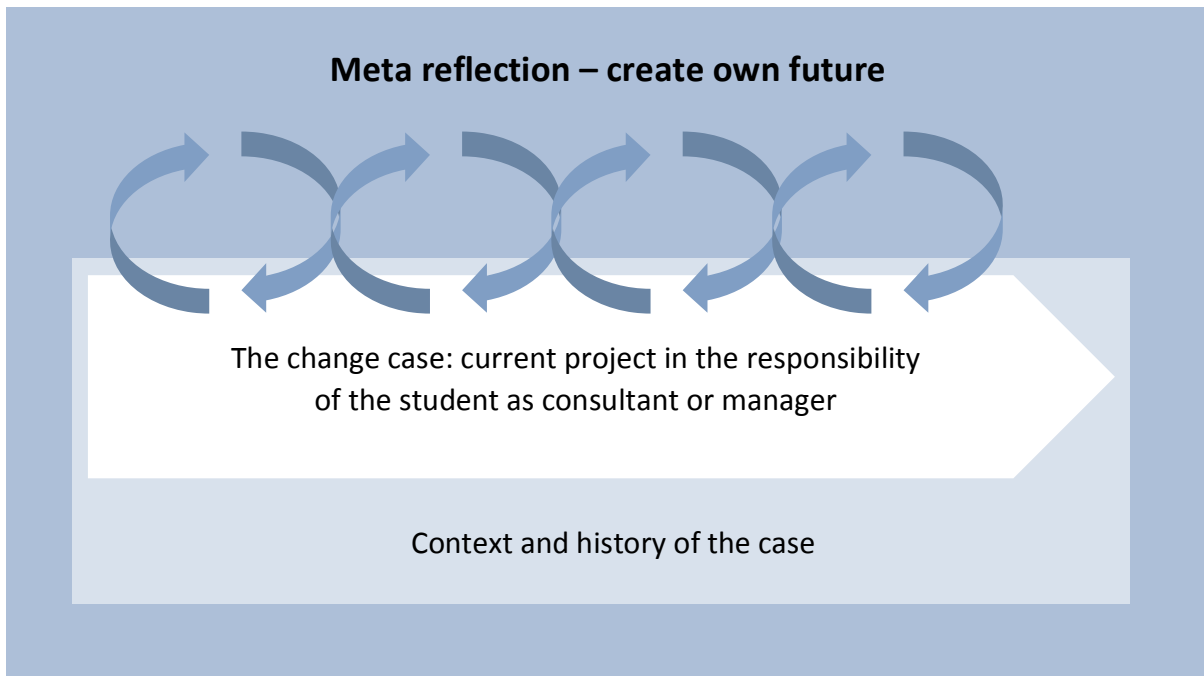


Diagram 3: The action research case study as Master's thesis (Source Spindler 2010)

This additional level of meta-reflection and learning is interwoven with the complete concept of the Master's program. In this process the perspective of observation and the various functions of the practitioner as researcher and actor receive special attention. As self-observing systems, social systems are learning systems that develop in ways that influence their future through the process of self-observation. How they perceive themselves has a great impact on their actions and development that implies that they are learning systems. For this reason, they cannot be considered stable realities because they are in a state of permanent change. Many people have noticed that how an organization is perceived strongly depends on which people, departments, leaders, and employees are observing it. The various self-observations of the social system and the differences in individual impressions are important elements of respective social realities.

The complex requirements for understanding of interventions by Organization Development practitioners are accordingly the focus of the complexity of the organization as living system.

The student as practitioner is interwoven with the complex self-steering system and thus obtains insight into its logic. His or her ability to reflect and the learning that occurs become the starting point for his or her own learning and the change of the whole system. Therefore it is important for the practitioner to be clear about the different functions - for example: line management, internal consultant, project manager or researcher: From which perspective do I interpret my actions at this moment? What is my goal from each of my perspectives? From which perspective do I set which intervention? In which context am I interwoven in which function at this moment?

Dealing with the following questions was central to the support of the practitioners:

- What do I do when my procedures fail? Is my Master's thesis then also a failure?
- What do I do when the change process varies from the goal, the time frame, etc.?
- How can I effectively limit the change process so that I can use my ability to act in these various functions and roles well?

System definition: Finding the right system framework for entry into the change process which will be worked on in the Master's thesis – i.e. the action research case - is usually a tedious process. The concept of the "case for action" (Prammer, K. 2010 p. 125ff) has proved helpful for this investigation and decision. This approach places the future both as a picture and as the energy for change readiness in the center of the work.

The special learning focus in the "action research case study" is observation and learning "with the engine running".

This action research approach for the intervention practice of the practitioner (and of course also for the case) is especially supported by the research and intervention laboratory situation of the program, which is integrated into the program for two years. In this protected and supervised "action research laboratory", the consequences of the students' own interventions can be meticulously studied and plans for interventions can be developed and evaluated.

The support of the cases is interwoven with the integrally developed Master's program:

- A requirement for admission to the program is that the applicant has a case study which can serve as the basis for the Master's thesis. Special attention is paid to this in the application interview.
- The seminar contents of the MBA program are systematically designed so that the case developments and the students' own interventions can be reflected on. Special consideration is paid to the principle of case studies in the methodological-didactical planning of the seminars.
- Professional supervision of the cases and of the students' own actions is provided in stable supervision groups.
- A mentor relationship is established between the student and a manager of the company for which the student works, which is also the location of the case study. This ensures that the student's work on the case study has the company's backing and facilitates the company's learning from the case study.
- Three workshops with consulting and scientific support of the case studies focus on enjoying the case studies through scientific and simultaneously learning-orientated work. Special attention is paid to the selection and boundaries of the case study in order to maximize the student's learning in his or her own role.
- The students consider the peer groups for reflection on their Master's theses to be a special support, both 'emotionally and with regard to content'.

This multidimensional, tailor-made approach to the students' own interventions in the case has proven itself valuable for organizational development over the years because of the developments and learning requirements which are relevant to the case: these are individualized with regard to the practitioners and their professional backgrounds and the cases are considered on a highly reflective level. Through this, customized learning paths and action solutions are considered and supported, for the students and indirectly for their organizations as well.

Examples of Master's thesis from these programs give an idea of the complexity that the students have to deal with in their cases and intervention research:

- Title: Organisational transformation through reorganisation of ICT services in the area of conflict between national and international changes
- The strategy process of a private hospital was the motive for moving toward centralization of its ICT services. The three-year ICT project turned out to be an important catalyst to balance national and international organisation and leadership dynamics for the hospital.
- Title: Development of cooperation spanning organisations and regions. Critical observation of and learning from the roll-out phase
- The head office of a health insurance fund pursued the goal of increasing the quality of its patient services as "case management". The implementation process and roll-out phase required the collaboration of the stakeholders.
- Title: Steering actions in public administration for education – dealing with momentum for change
- Massive criticism by teachers created an urgent need for a Ministry of Education to implement a project considering decentralisation of decisions relating to choice and application of teaching material. The long-term project weakened the "hierarchical-bureaucratic patterns."

Perception and mastery of complexity, the alternation between action and reflection are at the center. Meta-learning for complex, organized change situations is essential:

- Recognition of the connection between one's own perception and intervention.
- The necessity of questioning one's own mindsets, intervention sets and problem-solving patterns.
- Connecting one's own various observation perspectives with various links to action.
- Adapting one's own intervention capabilities in organizational contexts by changing and broadening one's observation perspective.

This type of learning and intervening is essential above all in complex change processes that are facing an uncertain future.

5. Case studies as a source to learn to research for oneself and for others

A case study makes the researcher a living instrument within the framework of the case study. It both enables and requires the researcher to use his/her interest and opens the door to his/her learning. The researcher as a living resource provides access to management and organizational phenomena and their connections. This accessibility exists both inside and outside the organization, for science as well as for other managers and consultants. Through this reflected interest, hidden phenomena and critical points of interventions into organizations become delimited and accessible for research.

The researcher uses interviews to obtain multiple perspectives on critical points, thus generating material, which is reflected on through the application of course theory. He/she perceives and comprehends different interests and contexts, achieving a necessary distance from the existing patterns of perception, learning and change. The respective phenomena in management and consulting are explored and translated into a language comprehensible to all involved stakeholders and other interested parties. In so doing the researcher contributes to the wellbeing of different stakeholders in relation to their organization. The researcher gains new options for action for him/herself and the organization.

Advisor experience on Master's theses has shown that a case study can become a comprehensive approach that makes the unexamined visible when:

- The researcher who is emotionally entangled gets support from a group of researchers and instructors. This assistance helps the researcher to disentangle and step back in order to gain the necessary distance for his or her own perception and action.
- A research diary is used to absorb emotional pressure so that it can be processed or worked through.
- Practitioners experience theory as a useful exploratory and descriptive tool. In this way a case study can be seen as an emancipating approach which generates knowledge and opportunities for development:
 - For researchers and their own practice as managers
 - For companies and their staff
 - For other organizations and for academic research.

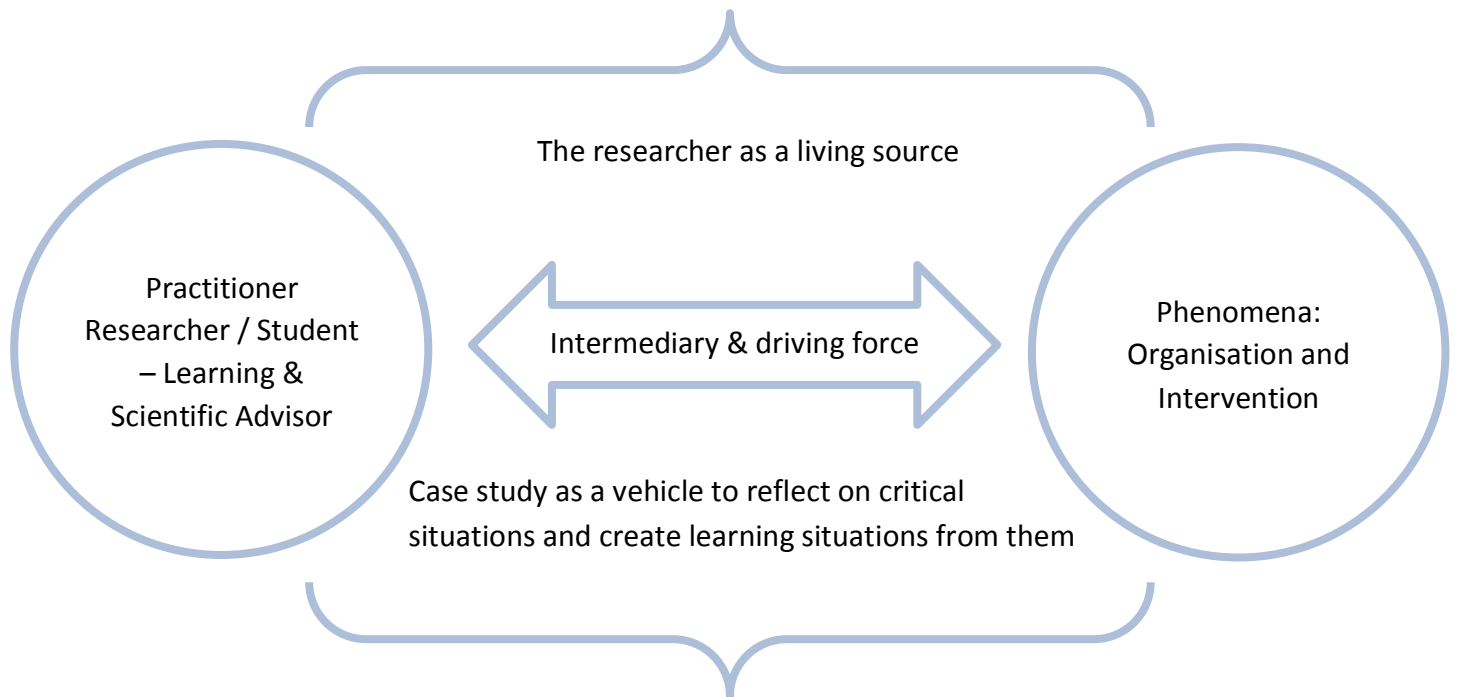


Diagram 4: The researcher as a living source (Spindler, M. & Schmerold, K. (2010, p.2).

Practice has shown that a case study where emotional aspects are included and consciously used becomes a rich and highly reflective technique. In such a case, organizations as well as the people living and working in them gain new access to the phenomena of organizations and management. Against the background of the interplay of different interpretations and interests, the culture of learning receives the central focus it deserves.

6. Conclusion: The learning potential of case studies

Precise observation of the two programs shows that learning for future action is not a coincidence. The learning potential of case studies can be supported in various ways and required a conscious decision of the concept of learning.

Research Case Study – MBA Communication and Leadership⁸: The central point is organizational learning from the past in order to use it for oneself and the organization as a new set of perceptions for future learning challenges. The company's organizational learning from the past is clearly systematized. Past organizational action is observed from a stricter learning orientation, which shifts the focus to the organization's learning potential for the future.

Action Research Case Study – MSc Organization Development⁹: Through the linking of various levels of action along the problem-solving cycle of action research: observation – interpretation – planning – implementation – observation, the practitioner's involvement and scientific reflection is interwoven in the change process. Thus he or she is forced to separate

⁸ At the Danube University Krems.

⁹ At the Faculty of Interdisciplinary Research and Further Education of the Alpen-Adria University of Klagenfurt.

the frameworks for action and reflection more clearly in order to be able to use them better as drivers for his or her own learning.

Valid points for both types of case studies include: The focus changes from an emotionally involved position to a research perspective; this role change is based on the students' obligation to find and use sources through which emotions and actions are scientifically justified. The shift of the focus is:

- From daily business and emotional behavior to well-grounded, reasonable interpretations;
- From self-centralized observation to observing from a 'third perspective' which includes and improves the system perspective;
- From practitioner to expert for analysis within the organization while it is changing.

As a vehicle for creating distance and new perspectives into the past the case study results in new opportunities for action in the future. The MBA and MSc programs ensure the managers and consultants a helping environment to distance themselves from their own working contexts. The other students with business backgrounds, the instructors and the program's theoretical background all enable the practitioners to step back from their own mindsets and emotional involvements and develop a critical perspective towards their own situations and interventions. Hence a case study is a living contribution enabling consultants, managers and organizations to move more effectively within a constantly changing environment and to add to their repertoire of sustainable observations and actions for the future.

7. List of diagrams

Diagram 1: Action research circle

Diagram 2: Overview of the sections of the Master's thesis

Diagram 3: The action research case study as Master's thesis

Diagram 4: The researcher as a living source

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