

Reflexive intervention

Considerations on the role of the researcher in BEST project

Research on the sideline of the intervention

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The objective of the BEST research programme is to evaluate to what extent intervention with the aim to improve psychosocial working conditions are successful, and what prerequisites and conditions are enhancing or obstructing the success. The empirical background is the observation of 15 case studies selected among companies and institutions that by themselves have launched an intervention with the aim to improve the psycho-social working environment (PSWE). The role of the researchers in the BEST project is thus not the one of the active interventionist who plans, implement and management an intervention but to observe and reflect the observations.

The BEST project design is based upon the experiences from The SARA Research project (ref). Which similarly was a multi institutional and multi case study with the aim to develop the quality of workplace interventions that aims to improve the psychosocial working environment. One of the important conclusions from this programme was that the researchers had difficulties in defining their role in relation to the concrete intervention process. Ownership to the process or the methodology was sometimes in the hand of the researchers, sometimes in the companies and sometimes even fluctuating. This experience posed a clear demand to establish the partnership (relation) between the company and the researchers upon a very clear definition of the roles of the parties and the distribution of the tasks relating to the intervention. The aim for us as researcher is to describe the changes, that the participating case companies will undergo. And to assess what consequence they will have upon the PSWE. We will not act as process- or change agent, but as a sparring partner to the parties in the case companies. Utilising our background knowledge and experience, and the results on the way to reflect what we observe. To acts as a mirror, wondering, examining.

This is the point of departure for our definition of the BEST researcher role as *Reflexive intervention*.

The reflexive interventionist is within a given timeframe observing the process of an intervention prioritised, designed and conducted by the company itself or affiliated consultants. The reflexive interventionist is undertaken the observation by the use of validated and appreciated research

methodology, quantitative as well as qualitative. The reflexive interventionist is providing his/hers observations and reflections (analytical and preanalytical results) to the relevant parties in the companies, in order for them to evaluate the progress and on going results of the intervention. This implies that the intervention cannot be considered a well-defined research object, but on the contrary it is a developing process, which is very much influenced by the research to which it is the object. The aim is to improve the intervention, if the stakeholders themselves find it relevant due to their own 'reflections', but not to consult the companies to change in a specific direction or to include a special methodology. The key is systematic and valid observations.

The conduct of the reflective interventionist

This researchers observation is organised with respect to recognised methodology of intervention studies, following the phases in a well-organised intervention study:

- Comprehensive analysis of the background
- Establishment of truth worthy partnerships and co-operation between researchers and counterparts
- Validated and adapted design that can meet the research questions
- Strict, well documented and systematic conduction of the research
- Dissemination of the result to relevant stakeholders in the companies and in the society

The background analysis

The researchers will through the initial phase have access to relevant documents and information describing the company/institution and the concrete activities related to the intervention in the psychosocial working environment. Qualitative interviews and the "biographic group interview." provide the researcher with a broad knowledge of the companies background history, culture, experience with OHS activities, power relations etc.

The research team is constituted with an extensive and broad expertise of psychosocial working environment exposures and health related consequences, as well as long experience with the performance of intervention research and concrete workplace interventions. This expertise will be applied in the analysis and reflections of the observations.

The relation between researchers and case companies

The relation will be defined through a formal contract between the case companies and the research team. This includes how the researchers get access to information, the activities conducted during the project (questionnaires, interviews, benchmarking seminars etc.) and the role of the researchers. All case companies will appoint a committee of relevant managers, representatives and employees to be the direct counterpart of the researchers. This committee should preferably represent as many different approaches to the intervention as possible. Further it lays out the frame for feed back from the researchers to the case companies, through systematic presentations of the survey results, through benchmarking seminars and to the project committee.

The design

The intervention that is conducted in the companies will be evaluated before, during and after the intervention. Basically two parallel studies will be undertaken. A quantitative study based upon the COPSOC Questionnaire (ref) and a qualitative study based upon interviews, observation and the "biographic group interview."

Conduction of the research

Performing any of these methods will in self be an intervention and as such have a considerably impact on the on going intervention. We are not using control groups; the only blinded test is the comparison between the qualitative and the quantitative analyses. The "intervention" of the researchers participating will be registered and the results will as described above be offered along the way to the companies (questionnaires as well as interviews) for their reflection and utilisation in the performance of their own planned intervention.

The individual researchers do the observations, from their individual skills in performing qualitative research. In order for the project as a whole to analyse the observations crosscutting the case studies we have defined a list of factors that must be observed in order to address the research questions:

The objectives and the aims of the intervention

- What are the defined and what are the underlying motives for the company the launch the intervention?
- What is the origin of the ideas, and who has brought them the life?

- Is there a need for change, how is it defined and by whom?
- What circumstances pushed the intervention ?

The intervention in itself

- All facts in relation to planning and execution of the intervention: information of objectives, institutional allocation, management etc.
- What internal organisation and structures are build up to support the intervention
- Duration
- Distribution in the organisation, who are involved?

Interventions, which are result of the research project.

The research project is planning and offering the following activities to the casecompanies:

- Biographic group interview
- Questionnaires before and after the intervention
- Interviews with key persons
- Reflexive feedback of results of questionnaires and interviews
- Benchmarking and networking between case companies.

The active parties in the companies and their underlying perception of PSWE risks and change.

- Based upon the interviews with focus upon the interviewees role in the organisation
- Who are the committed and driving forces?

What are the objects for the intervention?

- The intervention can address several levels in the organisation:
 - o The organisation itself
 - o The social relations
 - o The individuals
 - o The technology, premises, methodology etc.

The process of the intervention

The way in which the intervention is executed is crucial to the outcome. Some relevant factors to observe are:

- What coalitions are formed ?
- Who in the organisation have confidence in the intervention and who don't?
- Are the risk perceptions tested and inclusive or based upon preconceptions?
- What is the possibility for learning?
- Who are actively involved and how?
- What activities are performed?
- The critical phases:
 - o From survey to action plan
 - o Execution of the action plan
 - o When priority shifts to other problems
 - o Involving the relevant parties openness
 - o Assessing the results under the way and adjust
 - o Involvement of external consultants
 - o Competing change projects
 - o When the air runs out

The impact of the intervention. Have conditions been improved and negative exposures been reduced?

- observation and interviews

Evaluation: Has the intervention had the expected results?

- Analysis of the surveys

The above research questions are of course for the researcher to analyse, but at the same time they are illustrating what sort of feedback the companies can receive from the researchers. The companies who are participating have accepted the conditions of the project. They have agreed to plan and execute the intervention in focus, and keep the objective of improving the PSWE.

Dissemination of the results

Reflexive intervention implies that the results of the research will come the case companies as continuous feed back, not restricted to a final report. What information that will be found useful and

actively have an impact on the intervention is for the companies to decide, But for the researcher to document.

The general aim of the BEST project is to influence the standard of workplace interventions, it will therefore be important to report the results not only to the relevant scientific research environment, but also to relevant consultants, unions, authorities and networks and organised company or institutional partnerships.

Dilemmas

This role implies a number of difficulties or dilemmas, which it is relevant to consider:

The not doing what is obvious dilemma

How does one draw the borderline between reflection and being an active interventionist. In spite of all attempt to explain to the companies which role we expect to fulfil, the researchers will be met with the expectation of being an expert and of being able to define the direction or lay out the what activities are relevant.

How does one refrain from doing so, if the answer is obvious to the researcher, just to avoid taking ownership?

The not being an expert dilemma

How does one administer giving feedback, presenting the results of the survey, and raise relevant problems, but not acts as an expert who holds the right answer?

The whole arm dilemma

Our resources in relation to time are very limited. Still even if we strive not to we will create expectation of expert support. How do we avoid *to lose the arm when we offer a finger*, and still keep our respect and reputation at the companies when we deny them activities they ask for?