Academy of Human Resource Development
International Research Conference 2001
Hosted by Oklahoma State University, Tulsa , Oklahoma, USA
February 28, 2001- March 4, 2001

Research and Theory Paper

Enhancing commitment and overcoming
the knowing-doing gap: a case study at
the Technikon Northern Gauteng in South Africa

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Abstract
Two European experts in human resources reports about their action-research project in a formerly disadvantaged Tertiary Educational Institution in South Africa. As an action-research project based on a social constructionist framework, they organized a strategic HRM-conference for all academic and administrative managers in a specific format. As a result the client organization starts to overcome its knowing-doing gap about HRM and commitment increases to coach subordinates towards quality and results. Process characteristics that made this change possible are formulated. Further research is planned to monitor and follow up long term effects.

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Abstract

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1. Problem statement

Since the elections in 1994 and with ANC coming into power, South Africa has undergone an enormous transformation process. South Africa is doing well. The economy is flourishing, captains of industry have expressed their trust in the new approach. However, South Africa with its racially and culturally diverse population, is still a country with high rates of illiteracy, unemployment and poverty, especially amongst the black population.

The South African RDP (Reconstruction and Development Program) which aims at reconciliation, reconstruction and nation building wants to have a closer look at and do something about the basic needs of millions of disadvantaged people. During this process, education and training are essential. "Due to a shortage of black manpower, especially in science, technology and commerce, it is essential to redress the imbalances through…. education and training of black people in higher professional education" (The Green Paper 1996). Institutions for professional education such as The Technikon Northern Gauteng (TNG) play a major role in this process of professional development.

TNG is a formerly disadvantaged Tertiary Educational Institution in South Africa. It mainly focuses on providing bachelor degree studies (3 year programs). Post-graduate studies are gradually being phased in[1]. The institution is situated in Soshanguve (a township near Pretoria), has six faculties[2], about 600 employees and

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[1] Technikon Northern Gauteng. *Institutional framework & Three year Rolling Plans 200-2002*
[2] Faculty of economics and management, faculty of engineering, faculty of health and food technologies, faculty of education, faculty of commerce, faculty of arts.

about 8.500 students. The TNG "strives to be a market and career oriented institution which provides relevant technological education"[3].

In the past 5 years quite a few things have changed at the TNG: structural changes were brought about, the personnel policy has been revised and a lot of coworkers changed. A lot of improvement plans were devised, some of these were worked out in close contact with key persons, others were made without consulting. Few of these plans have been implemented so far. Key persons have the feeling that they have to discuss problems concerning their daily working situation over and over again, and they *do* think about solutions to these problems; but they feel that few things really change. Many of these 'daily' problems affect more than one department and people of different departments reproach one another.

The Human Resources Department of TNG currently consists of five personnel officers, a deputy director and an acting director. Preparatory interviews and the project in itself (cf. next paragraph) revealed a number of needs.
The HR staff lack vision, there aren't any written plans, and HR tasks and responsibilities aren't divided up clearly between HR department and line-management, managers are complaining about the services of the HR department, reproaches are made towards one another. As a result, there sometimes isn't any staff to teach classes... HR-policies and procedures are not in place, some are outdated, disputed, unknown, confusing and sometimes even ignored.
The majority of the HR staff members are not sufficiently exposed to all relevant aspects of human resources and lack practical experience. From what we've seen we think that the department is understaffed, partially underqualified and subjected to great stress.
The problem with situations such as this one is that matters are usually dealt with on an ad hoc basis. Line-managers tend to go their own way and solve HR issues in a way that (sometimes) suit them best. In the meanwhile the HR people continue fighting their own uphill battle.
Next to a general feeling of discontent and discomfort on both sides and a strong need to improve the current situation, individuals and groups feel they don't have enough power to bring about changes.

Within the Dutch development co-operation, substantial efforts and allocations are made to improve education. The Joint Financing Program for Co-operation in Higher Education (the MHO program) is part of the Dutch bilateral development efforts. The characteristic feature of the MHO program is the mobilization of Dutch expertise through long-term inter-institutional linkages between an institute for higher education in a developing country and several Dutch institutions for higher education. Overall, the international linkage exists to contribute to the improvement in the general functioning of the institute: the co-operation is not limited to effecting improvement in teaching and research capacity but it is extended to the areas of institutional management and administration.
Referring to the key role of institutes for higher education in national development processes such as in South Africa, the development objective of the MHO program is to contribute to the national development of the country by supporting the higher education of the technical and supporting staff that is needed.

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[3] Technikon Northern Gauteng. HR-Department. *Induction Handbook. March 1998*

TNG (Technikon Northern Gauteng) is one of the institutions that presently participate in the MHO program. The Dutch Fontys Higher Institute for Professional tertiary education is TNG's preferred partner and the two have jointly developed a project to improve the Human Resources Management of the institution, the IPD (Improvement Personnel Department) project.

One of the European experts has accomplished several missions at the Technikon within the IPD project since 1997 and is familiar with the institution and quite a number of the participants. He started working with the HRM-department at the end of 1997; together with them and with representatives of the academic and administrative managers they put together an introduction booklet. In 1998-99 he organized several 3 days HRM-training sessions for managers were for e.g. basics of HRM, recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, MBO and project management were introduced and dealt with. Besides these training sessions he personally coached members of the HR-department and organized counseling for various HRD task forces. The second expert is an action-researcher and HRM professor at a Belgian university and only got involved in the project in December 1999. They were asked to develop a strategic plan that would solve most of the HR-problems within the "Institutional framework and Three Year Rolling Plans 200-2002" and to direct the Technikon's future activities in the field of Human Resources Management. In order to become a high quality long-term result, they together transformed this complex problem in this action-research project. To start with they offered to "facilitate a two days strategic HR conference " for both management and HR staff of all levels. This strategic HR conference was, of course, preceded and followed with several other research and practical activities. This process is still continuing... In October 2000 there will be a follow-up session to evaluate the outcome of this conference.

2. Theoretical framework

Involve people in research and action so that the organization benefits from its inside knowledge and skills, and, what's even more important, that people are motivated to help each other out. This is the framework of our research. Or in other words: this action-research project is based on a social constructionist view on organizations and focuses on overcoming the knowing-doing gap and on increasing commitment to work towards solutions.

As mentioned earlier, one of the HR-experts has completed several missions since 1997 and has built up very good relations with academic and administrative managers on different levels and as well as with the people of the HR-department. Joint diagnoses are made and improved over and over again. The social constructionist framework was chosen from the beginning, the other theoretical frames are gradually chosen because they're extremely useful. At the same time we want to do more than just apply a theoretical framework: we want to add or contribute to new insights in HRD.

We start presenting these frameworks here.

1. The desired output of *action-research* consists of solutions to actual problems on the one hand, and of making a contribution to scientific knowledge and theory on the other. French and Bell (1995) define action research as: "the application of the scientific method of fact-finding and experimentation to practical problems requiring action solutions and involving the collaboration and co-operation of scientists, practitioners and laypersons".

2. We chose to study an organization from a *social constructionist* angle (Wieck, 1995; Gergen, 1994; Bouwen 1988, 1994) and to see an organization as the result of ongoing negotiations between all the concerned parties in the organization. The creation of meaning is the basic process of organization. This means that an organization is seen as a co-creation, as something in a constant state of becoming. Members have their own meaning, their own viewpoint, their own views about everything. The members of the organization are continually involved in negotiating shared views of reality in order to define a common basis for joint action. The organization is the result of these permanent negotiations. In social constructionism organization diagnosis and organization intervention give out into each other completely. Working on a diagnosis and seeking joint visions implies a constant construction and deconstruction of shared meaning. We therefore deliberately avoid scientific research that studies an organization as an "object" from an exogenous perspective. This is research with the objective of steering present and future action from the inside, and with the typical co-operation between individuals working within the system (referred to as "clients") and individuals outside the system. (referred to as "researchers"). A productive interaction can then be created between research and implementation, between perception and action. We regard this action component, working alongside with TNG-employees and the implementation of research results, as a particular mission and challenge. This action-research research strategy implies an iterative process of purposeful data-collection, feedback to the client group, discussion of data, action planning, action and evaluation. The perceptions yielded by this cyclical process are continuously the subject of implementation and testing. This increases the validity of the generated knowledge in the context of the professional university sector. This increases the relevance and usefulness of the acquired insights and, in so doing, we avoid this research ending up filed away under F for Forget. In choosing action-research, we opted for a win-win operation between TNG and research. We opted for co-operation between researcher and clients and worked in close contact with top-management of the TNG. In line with this action research study, based upon a social constructionist approach, we work with each group and diagnose together with them their actual situation, discuss their preferred or ideal situation, their own expectations and those of their superiors, and discuss the way to act in order to reach the next step to the desired situation. We organized this process within each group and in between all groups. This process of collectively negotiate the new way of organizing is the most decisive within the learning process. (Swieringa 1990).

3. " Research demonstrates that the success of most interventions designed to improve organizational performance depends largely on implementing what is already known, rather than from adopting new or previously unknown ways of doing things." (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Many successful interventions rely more on implementation of simple knowledge available within the organization than on

creating new insights or discovering secret practices used by other firms. This means that *overcoming the gap between knowing and doing* is very important for a firm's performance. Knowledge creation, benchmarking, and knowledge management may be important, but transforming knowledge into organizational action is at least as important to obtain organizational success. Although there are differences in knowledge across organizations, a much larger source of variation in performance stems from the ability to turn knowledge into action. If the employees learn from their own actions and behavior, then there won't be much of a knowing-doing gap because they will be "knowing" on the basis of their doing, and implementing that knowledge will be substantially easier (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000).

4. The key to quality and productivity, to obtain sustained, superior performance is *employee commitment.* This is especially true in services, e.g. in research and education, at universities and schools where the performance of the service-people at the key-moments of delivering is decisive. The four supports of commitment read as follow: (1) clarity about goals and values; (2) employee competencies that allow success; (3) the degree of influence that employees have; (4) the expressed appreciation given to employees for their contributions (Kinlaw, 1993).

   Ad 1. For commitment to a job an employee must have a focus. Focus is created by communicating the strategic *goals* and core *values* of the organization downward through *each level.* At each level, these goals and values must be translated into the work and decisions of each manager and employee. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of establishing and communicating organizational values. It is equally impossible to measure the confusion and loss in performance that is created when values are *not* communicated or, are communicated and then not adhered to. Values bring clarity *if they are real,* if bosses and other people embody the values. Supervisors and their subordinates have to have the same opinion over: the number-one purpose as a work group and what makes this purpose important and over the values that currently and ideally drive the work group's performance.

   Ad 2. People develop commitment toward what they believe they can do well. People do not like to fail. They will try to avoid the things that they think they cannot do. If managers want commitment, they must make sure that employees have the ability and willingness to be successful in their jobs. There are two elements that managers must address in *building employee competence*. They must ensure that their employees have the knowledge, skills, and experience to perform their tasks, and they must ensure that their employees have the confidence to perform their tasks. These competencies have to be built by all kinds of training and learning. The most personal strategy for building competence - and, therefore, one of the most powerful ones - is coaching. It is the only way for managers to find out exactly what their employees do not know and what they need to know. Coaching also is a way to provide support and reassurance to employees who are taking on new tasks. Coaching facilitates learning because it is temporary and focuses exactly on the individual needs of the employee.

   Ad 3. *Influence* is the third "leg" of commitment. Employees do not perform nearly as well when they are consistently denied any input in their jobs and are expected to follow unquestionably the decisions of their leaders. There are three areas for influence innovation, planning and problem solving; and three kinds of

influence within each area: inputting, deciding and implementing. Inputting means identifying problems, researching data, providing technical information and expertise. Decision making means participating in decisions about problem definition, about which problems will be addressed, etc.; Implementing means designing solutions, undertaking and evaluating strategies, etc. Coaching is the key for extending the influence of employees. In their coaching conversations with employees, managers permit employees actively to identify their own needs and to help shape the ways these needs are met.

Ad 4. People work best when they believe that what they do matters to someone else - especially their bosses. The question is how to leverage acts of appreciation (especially the informal ones) so that they have the maximum impact. Of course, there is need to recognize superior performance. But one needs to recognize more than performance. Achievement is more than doing a job well. It may mean "hanging in there" when the going gets tough - such as surviving a reorganization or an IRS audit. It may mean being a loyal employee for ten or twenty years. It may mean doing some unrewarding, routine job over and over and still doing it well. It may even mean having the nerve to talk back to the boss. Employees often feel more appreciated for having their pain recognized than for having their performance recognized. Of course appreciation can also be something creative or even outrageous or can be deliberately made in public.

Coaching is the process by which managers stay in touch with their subordinates. *Coaching is eyeball-to-eyeball management.* Every conversation between managers and employees is potentially a coaching conversation. It is a chance to clarify goals, priorities, and standards of performance. It is a chance to reaffirm and reinforce the group's core values. It is a chance to hear ideas and to involve employees in the processes of planning and problem solving. More important than all the rest, it is a chance to say "thank you". Coaching is the key to employee commitment because it is face-to-face leadership that enables and facilitates. It frees up people so that they can do what they want to do: demonstrate their commitment to the best (Kinlaw, 1993).

3. Research questions or propositions

As mentioned earlier, one of the HR-experts has completed several missions since 1997 and joint diagnoses were made and improved over and over again which resulted in the following research questions or propositions. Our hypothesis is that the knowledge available in the organization is not put together and implemented because there are borderlines and obstructions in the context and in the process of implementation. We want to refine our knowledge about implementing, the theory about the processes and the context that stimulate or hinder the implementation.

This results in following questions:

1. How can the in the organization existing knowledge about problems and possible solutions in HRD be used as much as possible? What are the conditions, the stimulating and hindering factors for using this knowledge to analyze HR-problems, formulate solutions and implement the commonly agreed upon solutions?

2. How can we improve the quality of the communication and interaction between the different parties and levels in the organization in order to come to a shared opinion about purposes and directions to be taken in HRD?

3. How can we motivate managers of all levels to coach their subordinates, even if they themselves are not coached well and even if they themselves miss indispensable information, appreciation etc ...

4. Methodology and/or research design with limitations

We worked on a proposal in which several of the above mentioned questions could be tackled together. We discussed these proposals with the local coordinator in December 1999.

We would like:
- to unite academic and administrative managers of different levels and the top management or rectorate
- for the whole group to discuss and analyze the problems together and to focus on solutions rather than reproaches.
- to motivate every individual to deal with those aspects of problems and solutions that he or she can handle because he or she is able to take on that responsibility
- to make clear engagements about expectations, roles and contributions in the client – supplier relationships between different departments and services.
- for the rectorate to commit to and support the commonly agreed upon solutions and provide the resources needed to implement these solutions. If it should be impossible for them to provide these resources, they should explain why.
- to do all this in a very effective and efficient way

With this in mind a Strategic Human Resource Management Conference was proposed on 16 and 17 February 2000, which was open to all managers of the TNG. Before the conference took place, the two HR-experts sat together with the rectorate and with the participants (subdivided in small groups of 2-6 persons) to discuss and negotiate the purpose and the roles of all parties. The local TNG IPD Project coordinator called for the preparing interviews as well as for the conference.

The following objectives were discussed and negotiated with all participants before the conference took place:
1. Develop written and broadly accepted strategic plans for the near future
2. To work together as a HR department and line management and to learn more about   - where we are standing now.
        - what direction we want to take.
3. Develop shared perceptions on present and future human resources management.

The preparing interviews
This conference was preceded by a number of interview-sessions for the different groups or managers. The rectorate, the deans, heads of the departments and directors of administration and supporting services were all involved in these sessions. Out of

71 managers 60 individuals were interviewed in 12 groups of 2 to 6 persons. We always started with a short introduction to discuss and negotiate the purpose of the conference. Then we asked them about their experiences, expectations and concerns and what the outcome of this conference would or could be. We went on explaining that, to us, HRM covers the HR activities of the HR department as well as those of the line management. Then we showed them the proposed program and explained the methodological specificity. We put a lot of stress on the fact that we expected them to contribute to this conference and made very clear that we would just take up the role of facilitators.

In our interview with the *top management* we talked about a number of things: first of all, we indicated that if problems occur, they can be solved or at least controlled by the management team in 80% of the cases. We also asked whether they'd be prepared to support the results of the conference and whether they 'd take necessary measures, even drastic ones. We also asked them to open the conference, to express their expectations and to show their commitment.

In our interview with *almost all academic and administrative managers*, in small groups of 2-6 persons, we commonly investigated and discussed their problems and frustrations. We brought various kinds of expectations together and made them more realistic and finally we discussed their roles and responsibilities, and worked on motivation and trust. We handed out schedules with the purpose of the program and the two days procedure.

The conference
The rector opened the conference and pointed out the importance of finding sensible solutions to the many HRM-problems, so that TNG would be able to fulfil her mission in a better way. "Thinking about improvements is necessary", he said, "and we would have been forced to do so, if we wouldn't have had the external support of our two European colleagues."
Then we started with a reproduction of the results of the interviews, as summarized in the beginning of this article. 56 out of the 71 managers took part in the conference. We proposed to work together towards a solution to the problems discussed and to stop reproaching one another.
We pursued a very participatory approach. Ideas, perceptions and interpretations were prioritized and evaluated in a sequence of sessions during the two days of the conference. These sessions dealt with: (a) the trends or developments that affect HRM of TNG, (b) the stakeholders and their interests, (c) the purposes of HRM at TNG, (d) 4 steps of the SWOT-analysis and finally (e) the strategic action plans.
In order to assure an ordered course of events (i.e. inventarisation and prioritization), the participants were split up in heterogeneous groups of 6 or 8 persons, each sitting at a table. In each session everyone was asked to write down his own meaning on the available sheets (one meaning per sheet). E.g. what do you consider the most important trends or developments that are coming up and that will affect Technikon's HRM policy? After that, participants exchanged answers and opinions and voted on their importance. In this way, a ranking of topics that deserved priority was obtained. These were gathered on a central table and after an explanation by each table-leader, participants were asked to vote once more.

In this way we came to a group decision in each session. This decision consisted of the prioritized answers of the entire group. All this was done in accordance with a relatively tight plan.

So we started with a first session: the nomination of trends that influence the HRM at the TNG. The first session took more time than expected because participants still had to get used to the procedure. In a second session, the stakeholders of TNG were stated. Because there was a large diffusion as to what the field of HRM operations is and what the borderlines are between the work of HR department and the HR work of the managers, we decided to give a short lecture on the HR models of Tichy (1984) and Beer (1985), the expected results of a good HRM and different possibilities to divide the HR-work between the human resources department and the line-manager. We thought that this short theoretical lecture would be more valuable than an unclear participatory discussion.

In the third session the objectives for human resources at TNG were discussed and formulated. Then followed the interactive *SWOT- analysis,* with the present group of 56 managers (out of a total of 71). This took about half a day.

The most important part of the conference then, the *development of strategic plans* began. Because there are more projects on HRM running at TNG, some of the listed problematic issues are already tackled by specific project groups.

For instance, a project dealing with selection in which several people from this same group of managers had already put a lot of effort. They had already proposed plans and solutions. But these hadn't been implemented yet and only a limited number of people knew what had happened with these proposals. For the sake of learning we discussed this as an example and a case study. As a group we investigated why and where this proposal got stuck, what the different subsequent steps of a proposal are and how quite a lot of people have to take their responsibility in order to realize any plan. Finally some people took the responsibility to come to the finalization of these plans concerning selection.

We looked at 2 other projects within the framework of IPD: the first project deals with appraisal, while the second looks at training (for academic staff only).   Although appraisal is an interesting topic as such, we didn't go into it any further and decided to focus on the training project.

For the training item, we wanted to start off in a positive mood. So we asked the participants to describe the ideal training situation at TNG, the way they see training. This first step went very well and produced outstanding results. The participants' descriptions of such an ideal training situation contained complex solutions to complex problems. This group of managers' insight exceeded everyone's expectations, which partially explains why they're so frustrated: they have the ability to detect problems, they understand why they're there, they are creative enough to think of some sensible solutions. But they don't have the power to bring about changes when different departments are at stake... Implementing these kinds of solutions is the responsibility of the top management. The next step of the exercise however, when participants were asked to describe what kind of behavior, systems, procedures and rules are needed to make this desired situation possible, was more problematic. Maybe our instructions weren't clear enough. Maybe this kind of question was too abstract or too far away from their daily problems. In our reflections afterwards, we agreed on the fact that this was a weaker point of the conference: the

second part of the exercise didn't work out the way we wanted it to and needs to be given some thought. This is also a point of self-criticism. The motivation for and the formulation of the second question were maybe obscure and certainly evoked confusion: the participants didn't focus on training alone but on all kind of problems. The confusion had a rather negative effect on the energy level of the participants at noon on the second day.

In the afternoon we started off with the proposal to form workgroups of volunteers to develop an assignment for taskforces to solve the problems that hadn't been tackled yet. They suggested three themes: a first on human resources policies; a second on a human resources manual; a third on staff training and development. We added a fourth theme that came up often during the interviews: a clarification of the division of responsibilities and work between the human resources department and the managers.
We agreed to propose an assignment that consisted of defining objectives, activities and a timeframe.
As we wanted to work with real volunteers in these four workgroups we suggested another, short term assignment for the rest of the group, *a fifth group*. We asked them to make a shortlist of all things a manager has to do with a new appointee to clarify mutual expectations. They could put this immediately into practice in their jobs without asking anyone else.
Making these assignments had a positive effect on the energy level of the participants. It expressed their hope for a better future. The four groups worked on very differentiated, well-equilibrated and realistic assignments. When the four assignments were presented volunteers were encouraged to actually carry out the proposed work. Each taskforce chose a chairperson and was placed under the mentorship of a dean. Meanwhile, the fifth group had developed and presented a list of steps to be taken by the line manager when welcoming a new appointee.
At the very end of the conference, one of the black managers asked us the parole to initiate a short prayer of thanks and so the conference ended unforeseen in a very authentic and impressive way.
When they left the conference, participants pointed out that just at the end nobody of the rectorate was there. But one of the HR-experts was willing to personally follow up the results up till eighth months after the conference and promised to discuss possible problems with the rectorate. This meant a lot to the participants.

The debriefing at the rectorate
So, during the next day's debriefing at the rectorate, we asked one member of the rectorate to act as a godfather for the four taskforces and to pay attention to the links between the four task forces. We also asked them to take action, to provide the necessary professional staff at the human resources department in order to solve the most serious problems (e.g. no lecturers to teach as a result of delays). We wanted our two-day workshop to be inspiring and motivating: if the participants have a positive short-term experience, it stimulates them to keep developing and improving.

Limitations of this research design
This is a case study: an in-depth study in one organization on a given moment in its history. Results cannot lead to general. This study is a snapshot of TNG in a continuing, an ongoing organizational change process. Results cannot lead to general but they can offer findings as bases for further research.

5. Results and findings

There are two kind of results: the results of the action: (1) the strategic plans for HRM for TNG, (2) the intermediate results of the different rounds, (3) the increased quality of the interaction and communication between the participants and at the other hand the scientific findings about process and context factors to overcome the knowing-doing gap and increase commitment.

First there are the four project groups with specific strategic plans for HRM, a first on human resources policies; a second on a human resources manual, a third on staff training and development, a fourth on the division of responsibilities and work between the human resources department and the managers. The four groups have a very differentiated, well-equilibrated and realistic assignment, that consist of objectives, activities and a timeframe; volunteers to carry out the proposed work; a chosen chairperson and is placed under the mentorship of a dean. One member of the rectorate will act as the godfather for the four taskforces and pay attention to the links between the four task forces. Furthermore there is the result of the fifth group: a shared list of steps to be taken by each line manager when welcoming a new appointee.
And in de debriefing, the day after the conference the rectorate promised to take action, to provide the necessary professional staff at the human resources department in order to solve the most serious problems (e.g. a lack of lecturers to teach as a result of delays in selection) and follow-up was foreseen.

Second there are *the negotiated and shared intermediate results of the conference* about (a) the trends or developments that affect HRM of TNG, (b) the stakeholders and their interests, (c) the objectives for HRM at TNG, and especially (d) the SWOT-analysis of HRM at TNG. The consciousness between the participants of having an agreement on these questions can be a good starting point for further actions.
According to the participants, *the most important trends influencing HRM at TNG* were: the business approach of TNG is not on par with external trends and other Institutions. Due to a lack of funds, TNG is not able to provide essential services i.a. attracting qualified staff facilities. The difficulties they had with attracting qualified staff and providing standard facilities were also mentioned. But also political trends and developments in South Africa affect the personnel policy at TNG: because of the boosting economy, there's an improvement in employment, which makes it more difficult for TNG to find qualified people that are interested in an academic career. On top of that, they don't have the means to offer these people a flexible salary structure. Other struggles are: poor communication; HIV/AIDS; geographical location (which forces them to recruit beyond the borders and re-alignment of HR policies in line with Government policies and legislation (e.g. LRA, AA, EE, Gender etc.)
In a second session, the following *stakeholders of TNG* were stated: students, industry and corporate world; government; staff; NGO and donors; trade unions; local community; parents; alumni; prospective students media; accreditation boards and the global population.

In the third session the following *objectives for human resources at TNG* were formulated : development of policy in line with legislation that has an impact on labor relations in higher education; training, development and multiskilling; development of procedures for performance appraisal (update management information system: policy database, skills laboratory, staff profile) and business orientation in HR.

The interactive *SWOT- analysis* (in which a group of 56 managers were involved) took about half a day. The *strengths* of TNG were summarized as follows: external support and funding; commitment to improve; interactive relationships; a large pool of alumni who want to plough back knowledge to the institution; basic facilities and equipment; a core of competent staff members and a job evaluation system.

The *weaknesses* of human resources at TNG were stated as follows : HRM policies are not in place, not written and not brought together; there is a lack of implementation of plans and policies; the physical surroundings are not conducting to productivity and are rather demotivating; there is poor communication and reactive or crisis management and management and staff is inexperienced.

O*pportunities* were listed too: the funding from government and external bodies e.g. MHO, opportunities for training and development projects, grants and linkages with NGO's and other national and international training centers, the merging with colleges of education according to the department of education legislation, establishing services for the surrounding community.

Finally we listed possible *threats* : external and internal communication e.g. negative and bad publicity about the TNG and uninformed staff due to improper communication; competition between TNG and other institutions; over involvement of students on staff related issues; dwelling resources; increasing student debts; amalgamation of TNG and other institutions and incompetence of human resources.

Third there is *the process result* of sitting two days together in multi functional groups of people which have supplier-client relations between each other. Participants have been pressed to work together in mixed groups: young and old, black and white, academic and administrative, man and women, different religions etc. and they told us meanwhile and afterwards that they have learned to appreciate each other more then before. These two days of formal and informal talks and conversation have *increased the quality of the communication and interaction* between the different groups at the TNG, they reported.

At the other hand there are *the scientific results*, the reflection, the forthcoming and continuing research on context and process variables that help to overcome the knowing-doing gap, the implementation of the in the organization available knowledge and the way to increase commitment. During, before and after the two conference days, we frequently asked different groups and individual participants what they thought would be necessary to get good results and whether the conference would have an effect on the current situation.

We formulate our results as *context and process characteristics that have to be taken into account in order to overcome the knowing-doing gap and increase commitment of employees to act on solutions*. These results can be further investigated and used as advises for future projects.

1. **Take the viewpoints**, the opinions, the ideas, the perceptions, the limitations and the objections **of the other party** or parties **seriously**; unconditionally, genuinely and consistently **with an appreciative attitude**.

2. Propose or introduce **a long-term principle of co-operation**. Look for a jumping off point, a common value or goal of real interest to all parties, as this will have a positive effect on every participant. We seek a win-win relationship. For decision- makers or top management, this may take the form of contributions to the improvement of the system, the optimization of the running of the organization. With academic and administrative staff, co-operation may take the form of feeling and functioning better in their own jobs.

3. **Expecting an acceptable contribution** by establishing clear contact and by discussing the aims of the research, the requested contribution, the further processing and the expected output. This results in a feeling of empowerment, a feeling of being part of the flow towards a more direct exchange of experiences, suggestions and/or wishes towards the organization and especially towards the top. This creates a feeling of having an impact on problematic situations.

4. **Reaching joint agreement on the directions and the operational procedures to be taken** in the initial phase. The joint consideration and exploration of several possibilities in every step of the co-operation, creates a feeling of freedom to choose within the limits of the principles of co-operation subscribed to by different parties. Neither party has the feeling of being manipulated by the other. Every time a next step needs to be taken, careful consideration of all parties is required. A next step is not taken unless all parties **consider it meaningful and take their responsibility for it**. The end result of each step is jointly evaluated, and then the next step is taken.

5. **Openness in communication**. We encourage people to be honest with each other and to say what is really on their minds. Parties should encourage each other to be equally frank and forthright. In this way, an open atmosphere is created: there's plenty of space for questions, discussions and individual opinions (seen as model -2 behavior of Argyris, 1990)

6. **Reframing information, creating openings** for viewing things from different angles. By jointly analyzing HR- problems of the recent past in cross- functional groups in a rather informal way, a number of problems were looked at from different angles due to the fact that the constitution of every discussion group was different. For example, by appreciating different opinions yielding different views on reality (see 1), by "experiencing" that there is no such thing as THE ONE objective reality, participants learn that many subjective perceptions of different individuals finds should be considered contextual data which policy needs to take into account.

7. **Introduction and the support of top management** by opening and attending most of the conference. The top management was absent at the very end of the conference, but this point was taken up by the HR- experts in a debriefing the day after.

8. **Gradual recognition of the role of external facilitators, action-researchers and valid conversation partners.** During the interviews, a gradual recognition of facilitators, researchers and conversation partners was built up because we addressed people in their own languages, for example by referring to activities and forms in the abbreviations and the code names used by the TNG. Recognition came about for two reasons. On the one hand, we won trust once our understanding of the situation of the TNG was found to be deep and differentiated. On the other hand, we showed that we were able to interpret theories concerning, inter alia, personnel policy and that we were able to change management, devise and explain frameworks and concepts that the client can adapt to its own situation

with minimum initial difficulties, and then demonstrate their added value. Our
social constructionist position has always led to joint decisions.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

We can think of different kinds of conclusions and recommendations in this action-
research study, for the action at TNG, as well as for research purposes.

At TNG, we have run a conference on the strategic Human Resources of a historically
disadvantaged tertiary educational institution in South Africa. This conference was a
special event, embedded in a three year project, as mentioned earlier. The entire three
year project was worked out within the same framework. The interviews with the
participants just before the conference, turned out to be very valuable, not only as a
means of preparation, but also to establish a trustful working relationship and to
obtain insight in the current problems and feelings. However, trust and insight were
not just obtained by these interviews: the fact that one of both experts accomplished
several missions at TNG within the IPD project during the last two years helped a
great deal too. We can conclude that this trust or quality of the relation is a very
important success factor. It is important to use as a testing point but it is not possible
to prescribe exactly what to do in order to build up such a relationship.

We designed the intervention in such a way that the objectives of the conference
could be met. Looking back on the objectives we see that :
(1) TNG has written and accepted strategic plans for the near future now;
(2) we worked and learned together as a HR department and line and
(3) we also think we have contributed to the development of shared perceptions on
human resources at least at the level of the existing problems and what has to be done
about it in the near future.
Within TNG we stimulated to work on the general need to improve things and to do it
together. During the conference both personnel officers and managers from the rank
and file, jointly worked out a plan for strategic improvements. Working together
towards a common goal seemed to be a very good way to stimulate mutual respect
and understanding.
We made sure that every participant got a full conference report within one week after
the conference.
One of the consultants was willing to personally follow up the results up till eight
months after the conference and promised to discuss possible problems with the
rectorate. This meant a lot to the participants and will motivate them to keep working
hard. The participation and motivation of the group was great and encouraging.
Throughout these two days, we experienced a hard working and enthusiastic
atmosphere.

It is also striking that the problems we worked on, are also well known to our own
university as well as other universities, namely the co-operation of academic and non
academic staff or of professionals and supporting services.

From a scientific point of view, this is a case study: an in-depth study in one
organization on a given moment in its history. Results cannot lead to general. This

study is a snapshot of TNG in a continuing, an ongoing organizational change process. If one looks back at the process and context factors, we formulated (see point 5: results and findings), one might consider them as rather basic recommendations, as common sense. This doesn't mean that these things are common practice. There were quite a few projects in the running which were creating frustrations and were getting stuck, maybe because the higher formulated process characteristics were not applied.... Maybe we need to do more research and refine these context and process characteristics and make them more general so that practical principles and guidelines for action can be more accurate defined. There was a lot of knowledge available in this organization that helped to solve occurring problems; and this is often the case. But if this knowledge is not a 'shared knowledge', if it is not a shared meaning, then problems are difficult to solve: individuals alone, can't make it happen. So the process of sharing these meanings is essential and has to be researched and taught and practiced. As academics we need a shared meaning, a shared knowledge about these process and context characteristics. This case study wants to contribute to this knowledge.

This is not a South African problem or a problem of a specific country. It is an organizational problem.

7. How this research contributes to knew knowledge in HRD

The conclusions may be rather disappointing at first sight but they are so fundamental that they ought to be drawn. It is astonishing that a possible contribution to scientific knowledge can lay in the search of means and methods needed to put scientific knowledge into practice. The body of knowledge of HRM and Organizational Change is rapidly increasing. But the application of this knowledge, or putting this knowledge into practice is difficult and doesn't seem to be able to keep up the pace. As academics we need a shared meaning, a shared knowledge about these process and context characteristics, based upon research. This case study wants to contribute to this knowledge.

HRD-academics need the courage to be unconventional en need to be convinced that research on overcoming knowing-doing gaps is not an inferior branch of research. On the contrary, it's necessary and very useful indeed.

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