

# Account of Practice: Action Learning as an Organizational Change Vector

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## **Abstract**

This design-based case study examined the engagement between leaders during the implementation of the evidence-based management framework. The goal is to support more informed strategic decision-making and better organizational outcomes. The opportunity for the researcher and practitioner to serve in a dual role led to meaningful change and helped overcome challenges in translating a predominantly academic theory into practical application. The approach combined intervention research with nexus analysis and interdiscursivity, exploring the relationships among dual-process theory (intuition versus rationality), mutual learning, and critical thinking among leaders responsible for expanding evidence-based practices to improve organizational results. The study's findings support the idea that action researchers should engage in some level of risk-taking, focusing less on convenience and more on research that directly benefits managers and their practice. Consequently, this study provides a practical approach to change that supports decisions guided by the best available evidence. This reflective, experiential learning perspective proved valuable, filling a notable gap in academic-practice (A-P) research with a model for dedicated practitioners pursuing data-informed, evidence-based outcomes in service to the public interest.

**Keywords:** Intervention Research, Evidence-Based Management, Change Management, Action Learning

## **1. Introduction**

Accounts of Practice tell stories and offer insights to transition from learning to knowledge to action (Coghlan and Rigg, 2021).

The public agency, in this case, is no different from many others today, feeling the pressures of reestablishing new realities caused by operational disruptions ranging from a global pandemic and phenomena like the Great Resignation or, worse, quiet quitting, where the increasing number of employees with aging skill sets no longer go the extra mile. Even instances where massive numbers of qualified employees are summarily dismissed. For some agencies, operating environments fluctuate between the complex, daunting, and unthinkable. With operating environments that are less stable and less predictable than in the past, public sector agencies must respond and adapt to significant constraining factors. This account recounts the journey forward from when agency leadership recognized the interconnection of uncertainty with volatility, compelling a reassessment of previously successful strategies for managing change. The default toward traditional hierarchical power models made sense because it is an effective way to accomplish meaningful work in a stable and enduring manner. However, agency leaders were becoming aware that delays in speed, flexibility, agility, and responsiveness were taking a toll. It was also recognized that these attributes are among the most valuable during significant change efforts. An organizational quandary existed.

Any effort to deliver high value to citizens and stakeholders requires innovation and the gradual implementation of operating approaches that foster individual and organizational growth (Palm and Algehed, 2017). The integrated use of evidence-based practices, as a deliberate and thoughtful facilitator, has been proven to achieve the quality demanded in public service. Differing from the expectations for private sector leaders, public leaders are being pressured to exceed citizen expectations. In organizational management, social perception and complex environments alter the decision-making structure, as gaps between satisfactory solutions and optimal solutions continually compound (Martelli and Hayirli, 2018; Young, 2021). Such conditions intensify the decision-making complexities for public sector executives and their management teams with the propensity for ambiguous feedback, misaligned organizational psychological patterns across the team, and the compounding complications from a previous succession of decisions resulting in limited individual and agency improvements (Bakken, 2008; Del Junco *et al.*, 2010; Huggins, 2019). In some instances, the critical decision-making process involves competing narratives of circumstantial evidence, where constructive evidence plays a minor supporting role during the debates practitioners use to persuade one another. The limited emphasis on evidence collection and evaluation leads to unnecessary and unconscious organizational risks, which are often unbeknownst to decision-makers (Young, 2021).

Adding pressure upon agency leadership are the recent administrative laws and statutory requirements that direct U.S. federal agencies to enhance their service delivery and outcomes through more scientific, rational, and evidence-based methods. These objectives are clearly outlined in legislation such as the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act, the Program Management Improvement and Accountability

Act, and the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018. These legal mandates require agencies to develop strategies and approaches to modernize their data management, evidence-building capabilities, and statistical applications. Similar goals—integrating scientific evidence into policy development—are reflected in the Evidence-Informed Policy Making framework in Europe, where many governments lack the necessary infrastructure to build reliance upon sound evidence in the policy-making process (OECD, 2020). Through the international lens, the ultimate goal is to achieve better outcomes through decisions informed by scientifically rigorous methods. However, what remains unclear is the practitioner's roadmap for fulfilling these mandates, especially for agencies whose missions focus primarily on immediate operational results.

## **2. The context**

This organization operates within the U.S. federal regulatory enforcement sector, with over 700 personnel spread across regional offices nationwide. Since the primary researcher was a senior leader in this organization, having a strong understanding of the socio-cultural context of this setting was advantageous, as suggested by Mills and Gay (2019). The opportunity for the researcher/practitioner to serve in a dual-hatted role led to meaningful change, overcoming the difficulties in transitioning a most perceived academic theory into a practical application. The research support team consisted of three analysts and a contracted consulting team, which facilitated meeting events, took and aggregated notes, and prepared documents to serve as reference materials during and after all phases of the project were considered complete.

The organization has built a diverse, inclusive, and professional workforce. The study involved a sample of 36 members divided into three groups. The first group included 15 members of the senior leadership team (excluding the primary researcher). This team was responsible for developing and implementing an organizational strategy aimed at promoting evidence-based decision-making. The second group consisted of nine members from various disciplines and levels, selected from front-line employees, supervisors, and managers (the level below senior leadership). These members were chosen for their strategic foresight, analytical skills, and critical thinking abilities. This 'strategic resource team' served as the coordinating workgroup, offering perspectives, insights, and disciplinary expertise to support the implementation of directives from the SLT. The third group consisted of an existing employee advisory committee with 12 members, all of whom were considered front-line employees. This team was treated as a focus group.

As leaders advance in their roles within specific fields of expertise, external forces like technology (e.g., machine learning, robotic process automation, artificial intelligence, low-code applications), new regulations (calling for more sophisticated data management, rigorous outcome measurement, and evidence generation to inform policy), and advanced analytical methods (e.g., predictive modeling, prescriptive analytics, multivariate statistics) often permeate the sphere of expertise, frequently unnoticed by the subject matter expert. Evidence suggests that when leaders presume a complete understanding of their domain, overlooking that other specialized fields have encroached, it results in increased risk and reduced effectiveness. Although many

cognitive limitations apply to experts, this phenomenon counterintuitively occurs less frequently among those with less expertise. Unfortunately, in many organizations, senior experts often assume leadership roles and discover that their well-honed intuition may no longer be as effective as it once was.

### **3. Choices for change management**

There is an increasing number of branded change models available, such as Kotter and Hiatt's PROSCI ADKAR model. These models each offer benefits to organizations seeking a proven approach to managing change. Additionally, firms like Deloitte and McKinsey offer various levels of customization to meet their clients' needs. These expert teams are dedicated to delivering the outcomes specified in their contracts. However, what if the result is less clearly defined, or if the agency prefers an exploratory approach to discover what the learning process reveals? Can the full benefits of organizational learning be achieved with strict timelines and packaged deliverables? Not always. This case was created to promote systematic problem-solving, test evidence-based practices, and learn from shared experience.

Seeking transformative change through the interaction of acting and analyzing, connected by critical reflection, is the core of Lewin's action research as a research model (Bargal, 2006). Around the same time, Reginald Revans refined the concept of action learning with colleagues while working at the British National Coal Board in the 1950s. Action learning offers a practical epistemological approach to support organizational development initiatives by improving problem-solving (Boshyk and Dilworth, 2010). A few decades later, in his 1993 article for the Harvard Business Review, Garvin stated that continuous improvement requires a sustained commitment to learning within an organization.

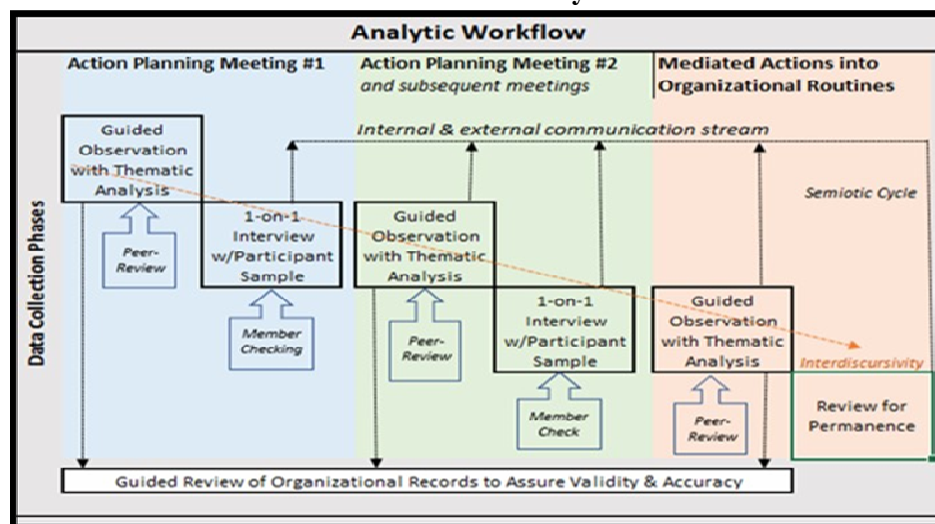
In this research, the agency navigated both sides of the line by utilizing the services of a talented consulting team to facilitate the development of a three-year organizational strategy. The research team collaborated closely, focusing on the data collected and drawing insights from the analysis. These insights influenced subsequent iterations of the work. After 13 months, the strategy document and several use cases were completed to demonstrate what "evidence-based management" looks like in practice. The consulting team finished its work as the action-oriented, evidence-based intervention was underway. The momentum for organizational learning and change continued to be driven by integrating initiatives, collecting data, deriving insights from lived experiences, and informing the following stages. Such a state exemplifies interdiscursivity in practice.

Interdiscursivity, as understood in Scollon's (2001) mediated discourse framework, refers to the dynamic merging of multiple discourse systems, such as professional and institutional, within a single communicative act, each contributing its own ideological weight and social role. In this case, the 'single act' was a series of facilitated planning sessions. Nexus analysis, as a qualitative research methodology, enriched this by situating such interdiscursive moments within concrete sites of engagement, tracing how new learning was being interpreted and adopted when understanding converged, was shared, and transformed through action.

In combining these approaches, the research team gained a powerful lens to uncover how and why overlapping discourses are integrated into practice, and to map their trajectories and shifts within organizational change efforts. Such a change amplified the significance of learning while doing. For example, the three-year strategy framework that was developed applied integrated or cross-disciplinary performance measures rather than the siloed measures previously used. In subsequent performance discussions, understanding the intersectionality of the work in a more contextualized way was a productive learning experience. Managing in this way exposed the complex, action-oriented social functions and power dynamics embedded in situational discourse. A focus on sharing experiences and generating new approaches in a collaborative knowledge-building process that fosters change efforts through a mix of rigorous methods guided by deliberation and intuition, as leaders are familiar with the organization's culture. Improvements in communications were explored by applying nexus analysis, as individual perspectives could be aggregated in ways to establish shared meanings that culminated in institutionally salient priorities for moving change actions forward.

The design-based case study involved intervention research using nexus analysis and interdiscursivity as an organizational intervention (OI) to implement evidence-based management (EBMgt). The objectives included significant improvements in strategic decision-making guided by data-driven evidence. The analytics workflow is shown in Figure 1. Das and Bhatt's (2016) description of OI as a series of activities, actions, and events to help an organization improve its performance and effectiveness was used.

**Figure 1: Applied Intervention Research workflow with nexus analysis and interdiscursivity**



Adapted from: Young (2021)

Organizations are increasingly relying on branded change models, such as Kotter's and the PROSCI ADKAR model, as well as consulting firms like Deloitte or McKinsey, to manage change. However, this case highlighted an exploratory approach to systematic problem-solving and evidence-based practices, promoting transformative change through iterative actions and critical reflection, grounded in Lewin's action research

and Revans' action learning. By partnering with consultants, the agency developed a three-year strategy that integrated insights from lived experiences and data to promote an evidence-based management (EBMgt) framework and set of practices. The research employed intervention research, nexus analysis, and interdiscursivity to enhance decision-making and organizational effectiveness, utilizing collaborative knowledge-building methods that align with the organization's culture. This approach demonstrated the practical application of EBMgt while advancing organizational learning and momentum for change.

In other words, OI refers to the intentional decisions made by organizational members that lead to actions aimed at reducing the gap between the organization and its environment, while considering constraints (Harrison, 1970; Sarta *et al.*, 2020). The data collected from guided observations at strategic planning workshops (the point of nexus) and transcribed one-on-one interviews provided insights that informed subsequent workshop content and the creation of written documents, enabling us to learn, adapt, and transform. The path to developing that capability involves influencing the cultural mindset (and practices) to shift from intuitive, reflexive thinking to rational, reflective data-informed judgments that guide decisions (Young, 2021).

#### **4. Learning from research in action**

There is usually an imbalance between experiential learning and operational focus, with the latter often taking precedence. The urgency of the problem or task typically reduces or eliminates the reflective time needed for learning. The individual and the team must recognize the value in setting aside time to capture learning opportunities through reflection. The World Institute for Action Learning promotes the idea that more organizations are acknowledging the critical importance of action learning and the benefits of efforts to learn at the individual, group, and organizational levels, thereby enhancing education and performance (WIAL-USA, 2025). Interpersonal communication has played a facilitative role in this process.

Data indicates that avoiding cognitive inhibition, identified by Miyake *et al.* (2000) as the leading cause of biased responses, is beneficial. Evidence from this study suggests that practitioners can use techniques from assertive inquiry, as proposed by Schwarz (2017), to overcome cognitive inhibition. As instances and episodes of engagement arise—such as sharing personal views, asking genuine questions, conveying all relevant information, explaining reasons and intentions, and testing assumptions and inferences—all focused on interests rather than positions, the organizational culture becomes ready to adopt evidence-based management as a routine when addressing strategic issues.

##### **4.1. Can action learning be a helpful vector for change?**

Without hesitation, the answer is yes. However, success relies on embracing two key concepts. The first is understanding that knowledge is both social and individual, and the second is that organizational social structures can act as platforms for developing capabilities. This approach to change leverages the idea that an organization cannot simply instruct employees to think more rationally using evidence-based perspectives.

Such a strategy would be ineffective and could harm morale, creating a false impression among the workforce.

The evidence suggests that action learning not only enhances individual skills—such as leadership, critical thinking, and confidence—but also integrates collaborative routines, including facilitated dialogue and constructive peer challenge, into organizational practices. These routines help build psychologically safe environments, share leadership, and promote a collective sense of responsibility. Participatory cycles foster systemic adaptability by allowing staff to internalize and co-create change, rather than just following top-down directives. Therefore, action learning serves as both a teaching tool and a means to shift an organization's culture toward continuous learning and agile problem-solving.

Action learning functions at the intersection of practice, reflection, and leadership growth. It changes individual mindsets and organizational norms through repeated cycles that foster critical thinking, peer collaboration, and proactive change. These elements together promote sustainable, systemic change, making action learning a strong method for researchers and practitioners who want to incorporate continual improvement synchronized throughout adaptive change in organizations.

#### ***4.2. The rigor behind the methodology***

A key challenge for practitioners is overcoming the belief that one can never honestly know what another person is thinking. Participants approached this idea in two ways—by observing and asking questions. One data set was collected by observing the workshops and noting when behaviors from Schwarz's (2017) mutual learning (ML) framework were observed in action. These behaviors, which indicated critical thinking and information processing, aligned with Schwarz's method for guiding intervention effectively within organizational groups. Such behaviors included expressing views, asking genuine questions, sharing relevant information, explaining reasoning and intent, testing assumptions and inferences, and focusing on interests rather than positions.

Additionally, one-on-one interviews were conducted with a sample of workshop attendees. These interviews used semi-guided, heuristic questions to identify semiotic cycles by verifying and interpreting the meanings attendees assigned to their experiences in the relevant context. The responses then helped fill the gap by asking leaders about their perceptions of the quality of engagement during the workshops. Since experience is not directly observable, data about it relies on participants' ability to reflectively recognize facets of their expertise and communicate their feelings through conversation, thereby exploring the dynamic between individuals and situational contexts.

Armed with insights from observational and interview data coding, a series of change-facilitation techniques were applied alongside interventional research where (1) engagements are observed, (2) opportunities to enhance subsequent engagement are identified (labeled as interdiscursivity by Scollon, 2002, and nexus analysis by Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2011), and (3) steps are taken to improve individual and group

behaviors, core system processes, and to create a psychologically safe organizational learning environment. Additionally, the benefits of mutual engagement, enterprise jointness, and a shared repertoire were discovered to align with findings from Iverson and McPhee's (2008) ethnographic study involving communities of practice.

Organizational interventions (OIs) are intentional, structured efforts designed to help organizations adapt and align with their external environment while effectively managing inherent constraints, such as resource limitations, cultural inertia, or operational hurdles. In this study, OI provided a basis for implementing strategic changes to close the gap between intuitive decision-making and rational, evidence-based judgments. Focusing on cultural transformation, the research utilized data from strategic planning workshops—key moments of convergence—and conducted interviews with participants to continually refine methods and outcomes. While this framework structured a change action, other benefits included improved employee engagement between themselves and with managers. Additionally, problem-solving took less time and energy to move into the remedy stages. A formal decision audit process blossomed and was inching its way into becoming a requirement for all major decisions involving two or more separate offices.

Action learning played a crucial role, highlighting the importance of striking a balance between operational demands and reflective practices. In many organizational environments, urgent tasks can overshadow opportunities for meaningful learning and growth; however, this study demonstrates that reflection is essential for achieving lasting performance improvements. By systematically encouraging participants to assess their experiences and extract actionable insights, the organization fostered a culture of continuous learning and adaptation.

The study also employed assertive inquiry and Schwarz's mutual learning framework to address cognitive biases and promote open, constructive conversations. These methods created an environment where participants could freely share ideas, question assumptions, and collaborate to develop solutions. The emphasis on transparency, critical thinking, and mutual respect established a foundation for making Evidence-Based Management (EBMgt) a regular practice.

A key element of success was the recognition that knowledge is both an individual and a social construct. By fostering collaborative spaces where individuals could build on shared experiences and collective insights, the organization cultivated a psychologically safe environment that encouraged experimentation, joint learning, and incremental change. Insights gained from observing workshops and conducting interviews were applied in real time to refine processes, address gaps, and promote meaningful engagement, resulting in an adaptable and cohesive approach to change management. Through this iterative and evidence-informed methodology, the organization made significant strides in aligning its culture, processes, and practices with its strategic objectives.



## 5. Conclusions and Reflections

From the perspective of organizational adaptation, interdiscursivity is not only one of the mirrors reflecting development trends through facilitated discourse and social engagement but also one of the tools that enable change managers to meet short-term communication needs and contribute to long-term strategic goals as a result of successful adaptation (Jones *et al.*, 2017; Sarta *et al.*, 2020; Wu, 2011; Young, 2021). To that end, applied interventional research can address each of the proposed areas identified by the branded model, providing a tailored, design-based methodology for data collection and analysis that can account for organizational differences. Ultimately, this research offers insights into the balance between practical relevance and scientific rigor.

From the perspective of practice, rather than attempting to seek the value or comprehend the complexity behind an applied methodology with an evolved history anchored in evidence, perhaps choosing a model less anchored in evidence but crafted within a more intuitive framework might be the better choice. For example, branded models make a robust case for organizations seeking a commercial, off-the-shelf solution that maximizes profit margins. They mostly work. However, the choice typically involves evaluating the scope, return on investment, resources, culture, stakeholders, competitors, and other factors that need to be calculated to determine which approach can facilitate the best results. Such comprehensive consideration in the public sector is most often limited to internal capability, spending, and benefits to the public served.

In 2014, Worley and Mohrman raised the question of whether change management was becoming obsolete. The research scientists argued that "the pace, complexity, and scope of change in the environment demand an organizational change approach that is pervasive, complex, agile, and integrated. Unfortunately, the change management models, tools, and processes used today were developed during a simpler time and are not generally up to the task" (p. 1). Their proposal offered an advanced theory for change, advocating that change agents apply awareness, design, tailoring, and monitoring, with data driving the next steps. In 1996, Burner pointed out that many branded models claim their approach is the best for all organizations. Some existing models might check many boxes; however, applying interventional or action research fully meets that goal.

One way to support the broader goals of a change effort, such as adopting data-informed, evidence-based management, is by fostering an analytics community of practice. As Pyrko *et al.* (2017) suggest, the idea of collective thinking is as important from an academic perspective as it is from a practical one. The change models (Kotter, ADKAR, interventional research with nexus analysis and interdiscursivity) all share a common element—the need for a strong connection between lived experience, as shown through the value proposition of qualitative-based intervention research (Young, 2021), and a genuine interest in socially and experientially learning from others who are sharing in the journey toward improved organizational outcomes.

### 5.1. Limitations

The main limitation concerns the goal of generalizing findings. As is the fundamental critique of qualitative research, it involves addressing its inherently interpretive nature. Qualitative research is often described as reflecting the researcher's beliefs and values, which may influence data interpretation. Such is a common belief among the scientific community, even as it acknowledges the value of these insights into human experiences and perspectives when developing mitigation strategies.

### 5.2. Future Research

Applied empirical measurement of improvements in the state of a particular condition before evidence is presented to influence the outcome. In this manner, organizations that utilize action learning can further explore strengthening collaboration, advancing system change, and driving innovation as a learning culture.

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