**Soft leadership in a hard organisation: Reflections of an insider action researcher**

* **Garry Hargreaves and Lisa Anderson**
* **University of Liverpool Management School**
* **Chatham Street**
* **Liverpool**
* **UK**
* **L.anderson@liverpool.ac.uk**
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**Abstract**

Purpose: This paper illustrates and expands Coghlan’s (2003, 2007) notions of first and second person practice in action research. It shows how relationships and power affect the research process in an organisation that has a strong command and control culture. It provides insights into how the research process provokes strong reactions for both the insider researcher and the participants.

Design/methodology/approach: the research was originally carried out using an ethnographic approach and this developed into action research as the researcher became conscious of the need for change through his own reflective practice.

Findings: the ‘story’ of the action research is presented through the first person practice of the researcher and the second person effects of his intervention.

Practical and social implications: There are implications for researchers working in militarised organisations and those seeking to understand the relationship between ethnography and action research.

Originality/value: This is the account of an insider researcher who is an organisational member working to being about significant change in an international and politically significant organisation.

Key words: Insider action research; leadership; reflective practice.

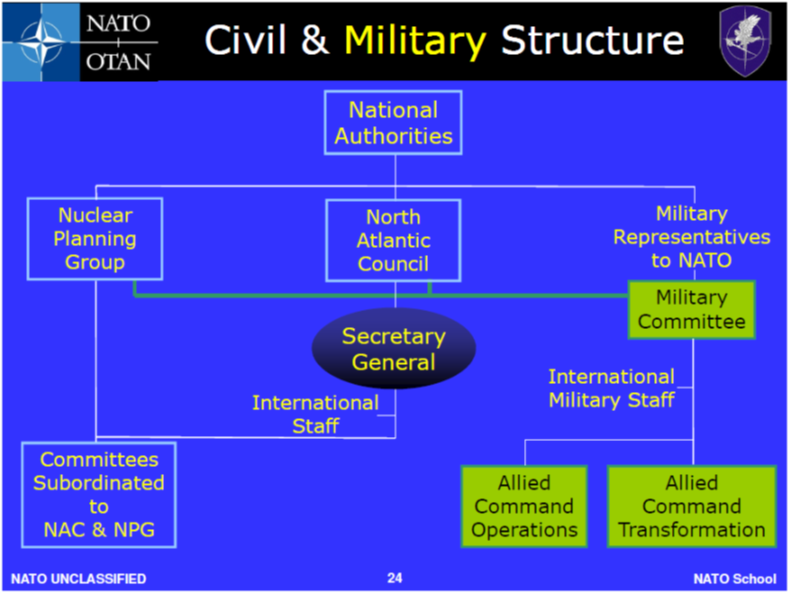
**Introduction**

This paper describes the experiences and findings of an insider researcher whilst embedded within his own organisation. It provides an account of a research project that started as ethnography and developed into an action research intervention. It highlights individual and organisational learning through a lens of organisational culture, leadership and language. Through the personal insights of the researcher, we show how ethnography may develop into action research in a context where organisational culture, leadership and the language of the organisation are under scrutiny. We use Coghlan’s (2003, 2007) notions of first and second person practice in action research to offer insights into the role of the researcher and highlight the reflexive practice that prompted the researcher to move from interested observer to change agent (Susman and Evered, 1978).

**Context**

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is a political body with a military arm. It is governed by , the North Atlantic Council (NAC), which is composed of political leaders who authorise and direct the work of various committees, comprising 13,500 military and civilian staff. One of these is the Military Committee which is made up of senior military leaders from the 28 NATO member Nations. This committee oversees the NATO Military Command Structure that consists of two distinct areas of responsibility and focus; an operational entity concerned with the conduct of NATO operations and an entity that leads organisational transformation initiatives within NATO. The organisational layout can be seen in Figure 1. The operational arm of the NATO military structure, Allied Command Operations (ACO), is charged with the planning and execution of all Alliance operations (1). The transformation arm of the military structure, Allied Command Transformation (ACT) has five major outputs (2):

* Promotes and oversees the continuing transformation of Alliance forces and capabilities.
* Identifies and prioritises future capability and interoperability requirements.
* Develops new concepts and doctrines and assesses these through the conduct of operational trials and process experimentation.
* Supports research & development and acquisition of new technologies.
* Delivers NATO’s training and education programmes.



**Figure 1 – High Level NATO Structure**

There is an inherent dichotomy in the close positioning of these two military entities; military operations encourage the use of institutionalised routines, standardized procedures and formalised processes, whereas transformation is inherently non-standard, seeks to refine or challenge existing processes, to embrace radical ideas and new ways of working. The Joint Warfare Centre (JWC), the site of this study, is part of ACT although it has some responsibility towards all the strands identified above, its primary role is one of training and education in a transformational setting. When considering how a “Transformational Command” might operate it could be assumed that such a remit would lead to a prevailing organisational culture that would support an engaged and/or distributed style of leadership (Bolden *et al*, 2011; Heskett, 2011) and that this would sit in stark contrast to the prevailing transactional leadership style in the organisation. However, this is not the case and there is a sharp misalignment (Lobovitz & Rosansky, 1997) between JWC’s transformational mission and the way in which leadership is practiced by many of its members.

For the most part the units reporting to NATO’s Military Committee are made up of soldiers, sailors, airmen and women from the 28 member nations. They have all grown up in an environment shaped by their own nationally influenced leadership contexts associated with a military command and control (C2) paradigm (Romie & Lapadus, 2004). This means that one size of C2 doesn’t fit all and an individual’s leadership and communication styles are also heavily influenced by macro level national dynamics ((Saideman & Auerswald, 2012). Nonetheless the general approach taken by most military members is one that is more akin to a “transactional” rather than a “transformational” leadership style (Raelin, 2003). In particular, national characteristics are evident in the way “power distances” (Hofstede et al, 2010, p.60) are reinforced or eroded.

Despite a clear mission differentiation between ACO and ACT the NATO member nations do not differentiate when matching military personnel to the various NATO entities. In staffing these organisations, they take little account of the rather different focus of the organisations into which they will be embedded. Since ACO (the operational unit) is around 10 times the size of ACT (the unit charged with organisational transformation), the C2 paradigm prevails and encourages a transactional style of leadership, highly appropriate for ACO but antithetical to the objectives of ACT. This differentiation became particularly pronounced when the JWC, within the transformation unit, instigated an organisational development process that used an inquiry into organisational culture to baseline, and subsequently try to change relationships and working practices in order to become better “aligned” (Semler, 1997) in order to more effectively deliver the mission of organisational transformation within NATO. The research described here, carried out as part of a DBA programme, explores organisational culture and leadership practice. This involved first identifying an appropriate cultural and leadership paradigm based on the espoused values of JWC. It sets out the understandings and insights gained from an insider action research intervention that originally began as an ethnography.

**Command and Control**

JWC has an internationally agreed mandate to prepare NATO Response Forces Headquarters (HQs)from ACO prior to their deployment on NATO missions such as the operational HQ ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) in Afghanistan and more recently in training HQs to defend against threats to NATO’s borders in the East. In the decade or so since inception the JWC has trained in excess of 50,000 military and civilian personnel within simulated training and exercise missions. JWC operates under a leadership and management philosophy loosely described and often quoted as “Command and Control” (C2).

*“describing what people commanding others do: directing the work of subordinate units and coordinating their efforts toward a common goal (command) making sure that orders are carried out monitoring outcomes of all actions (control)”* Eriksson & Leifler (2010, p. 158)

C2 is not just a noun, a passive descriptor of a leadership system or paradigm, it is also a verb, people “do” C2; consequently it shows up as language (in the ***way*** people talk to each other) and in language (in ***what*** they actually say). That is not to say that C2 is specific to military organisations, there are many “hard” organisations operating within a formal bureaucratic framework where hierarchies are the norm and these can be likened to a C2 organisation. These types of organisations are not as rare as many academic writers might have us believe (Raelin, 2010; 2011; Harris & Ogbonna, 2000; Heifitz, 1998) and in spite of them being ubiquitous, providing an unequivocal definition of C2  seems to be problematic. Schein (2010, p. ix) makes the point that “Command and control has become a cultural archetype even as clear descriptions of just what this means have become more elusive when we observe organizations carefully”.

What is less problematic to recognise is that contemporary leadership seems to have evolved significantly (Schein, 2010; Manz & Sims, 1991; Novak, 2012; Sosik et al, 2009; Zaleznik, 1992) leaving C2 to be an even less understood paradigm when considering what it means for effective leadership within an international civil/military organisation. Whilst not referring specifically to military organisations there is considerable management research that indicates C2 styles of leadership are no longer effective in these times of globalisation and information overload (Raelin, 2010). The military is not immune to the effect of this evolving context and, the little research that does exist, suggests that the connectedness of the world today rewrites the rule book on traditional military thinking (Alberts & Hayes, 2003; 2006; Alberts et al., 1999; Cebrowski et al., 1998).

An increasing amount of academic and practice based literature predicts, if not C2’s demise at least its fall from grace (Raelin, 2003; Manz & Sims, 1991; Abrashoff, 2002; Novak; 2012) yet it appears to be alive and well and particularly resistant to change in NATO. Ironically, when military leaders reach the “top” of their profession, they often espouse the values of modern, pluralistic and inclusive leadership and appear to distance themselves from the behaviours of middle level leaders still grappling with the C2 mind-set (McChrystal, 2011; Myers, 2012; Dempsey, 2013; Powell; 2011; Welsh, 2013).

**Leadership and Language**

Looking again as the C2 definition Eriksson & Leifler (2010, p. 158) the link between language and C2 is evident:

*“Describing what people* ***commanding*** *others do:* ***directing*** *the work of subordinate units and* ***coordinating*** *their efforts toward a common goal (command) making sure that* ***orders*** *are carried out* ***monitoring*** *outcomes of all actions (control)”*

Language and leadership are profoundly related (Conger, 1991; Denning, 2007). Pye (2005, p. 47) claims that leadership and sense-making are re-frameable, to be considered as one and the same thing, and it is within this frame that language and leadership deeply integrate and influence an organisation’s culture; an organisation’s culture and leadership are deeply connected (Schein, 2010; Novak, 2012).

Clifton (2012, p. 160) reinforces the influential connections between language, leadership and culture when remarking that “Organisations do not have a pre-discursive existence. They're discursively created through the negotiation of meaning”. He goes on to state, citing Fairhurst & Starr (1996), that approximately 70% of a leader’s time is spent in the act of communicating. McClellan (2011, p.469) offers an insight as to why this might be so when he writes that “Communication thus creates organizations limited by the very language used to constitute them.” (McClellan, 2011, p.469). Some academics go further, attributing the very existence of organisations as being “networks constituted in and by conversations” (Ford, 1999, p. 488). Tulin (1997, p.101) claims that “how people talk together is how they organise. Talk cannot be separated from strategising, policy making, problem solving, decision making, confirming, delegating, or any other organisation activity” and Kuhn (2008, p. 1232) proposes that communication is “the very process by which organisations are called into being.”

Sathe (1973, p. 6) identifies speech as one of the “directly observable” characteristics of a culture. A view supported by Alvesson & Karreman (2000, p. 1126) who claim that, in terms of social and organisational research, language is the “most important phenomenon” that is “accessible for empirical investigation”. Fairclough (2001, p.19) has the view that “there is not an external relationship ‘between’ language and society, but an internal and dialectical relationship. Language is a part of society; linguistic phenomena ARE social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena ARE (in part) linguistic phenomena. Linguistic phenomena are social in the sense that whenever people speak or listen or write or read, they do so in ways which are determined socially and have social effects.”

Holmes (2007, p.1995) reports that “power relations between people who work together are constantly instantiated and dynamically constructed through talk.” and Ford (1999) claims that it is “within a conversation we construct our realities”. He goes on to indicate that there can be no organisational change without individual change and as individuals change so do the “conversations in which they are socially engaged and embedded”. “Work never appears in isolation” according to Cunliffe & Shotter (2003, p. 15) but always in a context created by conversation”. According to Ford (1999) “Conversations are and provide the very texture of organisations” and that the link between language and culture is critical for organisational evolution. He proposes that there is no organisational shift without conversational shift - people being willing to “speak and listen differently” - and that networks of conversations create realities and shifting these realities is intertwined with these.

Grant & Marshak (2008: S8) offer a constructionist perspective of organisational development (which they call the “new OD”) and within this propose “truth” as being immanent, emergent and socially constructed; “reality” as being “socially negotiated” and new ways of thinking being created through “explicit or implicit negotiation”. Although they also accept that the OD that existed before their “new OD” has a shared a focus on and interest in “conversations and other forms of communication” in regard to “shaping organisational process, behaviour and change.” (Grant and Marshak, 2008: S12).

A powerful symbiotic relationship exists between language, leadership and culture. They are “inextricably connected” (Tulin, 1997) and are thought to be so deeply dependent that shifting one of these attributes should have an impact on the others. Kegan & Lahey, (2001, p. 8) claim that “leaders have no choice in this matter of being language leaders; it just goes with the territory”. Some authors also propose the benefits of alignment within organisations so that “strategy, structure, and culture” are mutually supportive and seamlessly integrated (Semler, 1997; Labovitz & Rosansky, 1997). Organisational culture is described as being “a soft, holistic concept with, however, presumed hard consequences.” (Hofstede et al, 2010:47); and in a multinational military training organisation these hard consequences show up in how effective we are in delivering an output that involves preparing people to deal with the uncertainties of military operations and their inevitable deployment into harm’s way. This research is premised on the idea that an alignment of culture, language and leadership has the potential to deliver performance improvements (Denison, 1984), in NATO.

**Aligning Organisational Culture in a Transformational Command**

The next section of this paper set out a first person account (from Garry’s perspective) of how the research changed from taking an ethnographic approach to an action research orientation and an account of the experience of two distinct groups of senior staff through their vivid descriptions of organisational life. This is followed by a second person reflection on what was happening during their interviews.

**A First Person Account**

My research was performed as an “insider”, embedded into the organisation where my formal role had very little to do with the research topic. My formal role is one as the head of an IT planning team working technical solutions to user requirements.As a direct consequence of carrying out this research,, I am no longer in that role but now the head of an “organisational development team” planning a major restructuring and realignment of the JWC. Whilst I am unable to decide whether this is a punishment or reward it does highlight that insider action researching may have unforeseen consequences (Moore, 2007)

An insider researcher, especially one operating as a “complete member” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010) is in a negotiated privileged position that requires careful, sensitive handling; it comes with some risk (Mercer, 2007). Easterby-Smith et al., (2008) warn of the risk of a “crisis of identity” in this dual position of participant and researcher and of “preunderstanding” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 114) where a researcher may be experientially blinded due to familiarity with the context and the participants

Consequently, as Coghlan & Brannick (2010, p. 21) suggest “attending to experience is the first step to learning” and being aware of multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2007; Hassard, 1991) that will help a researcher navigate sensitively through the research. Creswell (2007) identifies a process model that has distinct phases of “determining the specific research question, determining the outcome and then selecting the appropriate research methodology”. One methodology stood out as I reflected upon how leaders communicate within the organisation and this was ethnography, a qualitative research methodology.

As part of this ethnographic orientation, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews; half of the participants were from the top layer of the organisation (referred to as the Command Group) and half of them operated as direct reports to the Command Group. I was interested in analysing the language of the Command Group, their own perceptions of their leadership practice and the language they used to describe it in light of the organisational culture alignment process. In interviewing their direct reports, I wanted to understand how they experienced leadership in the organisation also with a focus on their language and that of their leaders.

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Ethnography has research and investigation into a “culture sharing group” at its core (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008, p.78). It is a form of social research that features exploration on the nature of social phenomena, it works predominantly with unstructured data and “involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions, the product of which mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). March (2008, p. 4) states that “although students of organisations use effectively the full panoply of quantitative and statistical tools of social science, some of the more important studies are richly ‘ethnographic’ or ‘historiographic’ descriptions of the fine detail of organizational anatomy or functioning in a specific time and place.”

In relation to researching “descriptions”, Jarolmack & Khan (2014, p. 237) state that “Careful ethnographers interpret verbal data in relation to observations of actors’ situated behaviour across a variety of social settings”. They recognise the value of “ethnographic interviews” not just as a form of data gathering, but also as being part of the action that unfolds and potentially embeds within an organisational context; ethnography and action already being at least related in some way. This was particularly important for me as I was researching the nature of leadership through an examination of language (Anderson, 2010)

Some academics believe that ethnography falls under the broad umbrella of action research (Pedler, 2008; Coghlan & Brannick, 2007), this covers a broad spectrum of research methodologies that have “pragmatism” as a core attribute (Eikeland, 2007) and “explicitly include both a problem solving interest cycle and a research interest cycle” (Marshall & McKay, 2001). Its authenticity and credibility are wrapped up in utility and pluralism (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 63); a suitable match for an “insider” ability to flow across functional boundaries and operate at multiple layers in the organisation.

Some writers claim that theories emerging from action research are “subordinate to practical outcomes” (Friedman & Rogers, 2009, p. 32) whereas others suggest that it is the theories that influence and sometimes determine outcomes (Van de Ven, 1989); context is critical in action research. Action research represents an appreciation and understanding of the world as the participants view it and the potential to create, “through communicative processes such as dialogue” new organisational and individual realities.

“Good” action theory has, in the view of Friedman & Rogers (2009, p. 35-37) some important features and core characteristics:.

* It is bound in real life context and problem solving (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Coghlan and Brannick, 2010)
* It is cognizant of, and sensitive to, the “meaning making” of the participants (Friedman & Rogers, 2009)
* It takes participants’ inputs seriously through a process of collaborative democratic communication. (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Coghlan and Brannick 2010)
* It challenges “tacit processes, unconscious motivations and unawareness of unintended consequences” and creates, through inquiry, new previously hidden or unknown concepts (Friedman & Rogers, 2009)
* Its credibility and validity is judged upon workability and emancipation of participants (Greenwood & Levin, 2007)
* It enables reframing, reinterpretations and resetting of core thinking strategies providing a framework for “disconfirmability” (Friedman & Rogers, 2009, p.37) and placing the responsibility for causal effects at the feet of the participants.

Action research takes place within executives’ natural work settings t has the potential to develop “self-help competencies in organisational members” (Coghlan, 2007, p. 294). “Excellent action research” has a central “emergent development form” where practical issues exposed democratically through intimate knowledge of the practice are researched in order to pursue “worthwhile purposes”. (Reason, 2004: 270)

A number of writers support various core themes of action research that resonated with my context and aims:

* They are “Lewinian” in approach and follow a reiterative “unfreeze, change, refreeze” process,
* It is research done with people – not on them,
* It may prioritise understanding over explanation,
* It favours engagement over detachment, and all leading to action rather than theories or contemplations. (Cox 2012)

**Moving from Ethnography to Action Research**

My initial approach to “first person” learning was through a reflective journal that I created from merging Kolb’s experiential learning cycle and Schein’s cycle of observation, reaction, judgement and intervention (ORJI) models (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, p. 19-28). This is shown below.



Although I found this helpful to use immediately after an interview , my ongoing reflections were most insightful when I was not deliberately reflecting and when I was disconnected from the research per se. I would make connections when cycling to work, washing the car or whilst doing some other activity. Typically I did not need to stop what I was doing and reach for my journal and it was during one of these moments that I realised (as my supervisor long suspected) that I had already drifted into action research.

As my research progressed I found it increasingly difficult to remain true to “ethnography” as a methodology, becoming aware that I was not only shaping the context but also the emergent analysis. I found that I drifted from a pure ethnography (as pure as it can be) in the early stages of interventions, even as the interviews unfolded and certainly in the coffee shop conversations that followed sometimes weeks or months after the interviews took place. I realised that I was shifting into insider action research as an “interventionist, as contrasted with the insider research which focusses on observation and analysis only and does not aim to change anything” (Coghlan, 2007, p. 296).

I became aware that the language I was using, how I was using it, what I said and even what I did not say were changing the context in the moment. I was drawn to Grant & Marshak’s (2009) proposition that “changing dominant discourses will support or lead to organisational and behavioural change”. It struck me as ironic that what I had started to “look in at”, I was now “being part of” and as the interviews went on I found myself thinking of a saying from Heraclitus “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.”

I evolved the questions I used as conversation triggers through the first set of interviews discovering what worked and what did not. Later on as the research unfolded I discovered that following the questions dogmatically generated diversions in, or stopped altogether, the flow of information. Although I still explored each area of interest I did so more as the conversation evolved, instead of me guiding the interview I purposefully enabled the interviewee to do so. This generated different data, some of which was irrelevant for this research but some which would not have emerged had I been more formal in my approach. I intentionally made the decision not to religiously follow the prepared questions but rather allow the interviewee the room for manoeuvre to explore issues that were on their minds. Some themes that would have remained hidden emerged and this occasionally provided a rich vein of discussions and on other occasions time was spent on themes that were outside of my research question. Conversations became catalysts for new ways of thinking and offered actionable knowledge for both the “interviewer” and the “interviewee” operating within a “mutual learning situation” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007:51) which in turn impacts research and the ensuing actions. Action research also encourages the researcher to see themselves “as part of the problem that they wanted to resolve” (Greenwood and Levin: 46);

A number of core “themes” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) emerged as the interview process matured and these reinforced my move to an action research methodology. I found myself to be not content with just trying to understand our own microcosm of language, leadership and culture (a clear fit with ethnographic research), I also wanted to be part of taking that new understanding, even if just a small portion of the whole, and using it, evolving it and learning from it; cogenerating actionable knowledge in the moment that might have been lost in the more passive approach associated with ethnography. The ethnographic approach initially revealed a number of interesting dichotomies but did not help to explain them nor solve them and I did not want to leave the issues that I was uncovering to go unchallenged especially as, Pedler (1997) defines it, ‘I am part of the problem and the problem is part of me’.

**The Story**

The organisational culture alignment process is now part of a wider activity that is detailed in our “JWC One Team Organisational Culture Plan”. It focuses on improving the overall quality of our interactions with each other and those we serve.

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| A major part of the initial activities was centred around personal awareness of our interactions, how we speak to each other, how we view the world and relate together. Using a whole staff survey (65% response rate) we determined areas where we wanted to improve that led to the development of our “JWC One Team values”. |  |

My interviews were a way of researching what impact these activities had had on our senior staffs. What was revealed was that there was a very different world seen from a Command Group view compared with the view from the layer directly beneath them. This was initially exposed when asking about language shifts exemplified by thethree quotes below from Command Group members:

*“It’s been really exciting to see a common language across the Joint Warfare Centre. With the culture shaping process that we’ve gone through for the past year or so has been really good for me personally because it has given us all a common language to speak.”*

*“I think it’s a huge, huge leap forward probably one of the most significant things that we have done, there is a common language across the organisation, things that are understood the same way by everybody so I think it’s good.”*

*“I think the senior leadership is doing well, and telling people that they are doing a good job, in a credible way, I think they are very good at what they do.”*

Contrasting this with the “reality” some of those working directly for these leaders:

*“There is definitely a change in communication but I’m not sure it’s all for the better, if you really want people to care you need to talk to people directly not send an email, not make a phone call, and you need to seriously listen to what people have to say, not just to pay lip service”*

*“I hear them speaking a lot of good speak but it’s not believable and that actually makes the whole situation worse”*

Now in action research mode and feeling that I was having a real impact, the interview content came as a shock to me. It was clear that we had no real shared awareness regarding leadership and language and further exploration into language specifically no longer seemed especially relevant. There was a significant gap between what was being said, compared with what was being observed. I created a “thematic matrix” (Braun & Clarke, 2008) to help me to identify and weight the themes emerging. For example almost every senior leader stated that they had learned nothing new, that they “knew all this stuff from before” but it was only a reminder. Yet almost all of them also claimed to have changed their styles through the process. However, this was not noticed by the staff they lead. There appeared to be profound gaps between what was “known”, what was “said” and what was “done” as these interview extracts from the staff working directly for the command group illustrate:

*“I think they are more aware of what their problems are, being aware is not the same as acting on it”*

*“If you want certain behaviour then you have got to live by it, you know you can’t criticise staff for a lack of communication and be guilty of it yourself. The humility bit comes into that again, to say look I am aware of what our weaknesses are and we will jointly work on that, I get that, but they have got to be in a position to do that, do as I do and do as I say.”*

*“The relationships between the command group aren’t always productive and that’s because they are not having those, you know those professional behaviours that you expect, you must live by what you say because if you don’t it’s a credibility issue again.”*

As an insider action researcher, these revelations opened new research opportunities and understandings as to why my organisation might be struggling with these issues and why we needed to work towards a shared view of organisational culture and approach to leadership. We were ‘skilfully unaware’ of the difference between our espoused theories and theories-in-use (Argyris & SchÖn,1974; Argyris, 2010) Our leadership appeared to be “trapped” (Argyris, 2010) and caught “speaking in the language of one theory, acting in the language of another, and maintaining the illusion of congruency through systemic self-deception” (Argyris & SchÖn, 1974; 33).

Asking senior leaders to identify their espoused theories, and to compare them with in-use theories would effectively ask them to show vulnerability, defencelessness and doubts about their own leadership and this sharply contradicts their training and the behaviour for which they have been rewarded, during successful careers spanning in many cases more than 30 years. Argyris (2010) claims to take the journey to avoid “traps” means eliminating “the pathologies associated with formal hierarchy such as top–down authority structures that provide followers with little or no influence in choosing their leaders, that perpetuate power disparities, and that undermine the self-worth of those who have little formal power.” – the very antithesis of C2.

There seems to be a theme associated with leadership authenticity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) that might be connected to increasing the level of “self-awareness” which could in turn enable “self-regulation” (Sparrowe, 2005). Self-awareness to attempt to deal with the “know-say” gap, in effect the theories espoused (Argyris, 1995) and self-regulations to influence the “say-do” gap closely related to Argyris’ “in use” theories.

Enabling an environment where leaders can explore their own leadership story and re-reveal their formative experiences might offer a venue for not only looking in the mirror, but also having that reflection witnessed, even commented upon by their peers. Sparrowe suggests that self-awareness does not have to be only down to “self” and offers (citing Luthan & Avolio, 2003, p.248) that “self-awareness and self-regulation” requires input from others, that “true self is not discovered absent of others, but is constituted in relation to others”.

As a civilian in a predominantly military organisation I am not considered equal to the leaders I am trying to influence and almost all of them felt “they know all that already” and were considered accomplished leaders in their field and within their own National context. Military leaders are, by training and selection, action oriented problem solvers, and as Shamir & Eilam (2005) point out “some people are action-oriented and less reflexive than others. I wanted to encourage these proud mature “leaders” to be ready to tell their leadership “life-story” and furthermore for it to be discussed and challenged. According to Shamir & Eilam (2005:410) “life stories are continuously constructed and revised, the ‘lessons of experience’ can be learned not only close to the experience but also much later.” Using Shamir and Eilam’s (2005:412) “guided reflection” I encouraged them to identify, expose and revalidate their leadership story. The safest way to do this was for them to have a trusted peer as their guide through the reflection in order for it to be as non-threatening as possible for them to be authentic by creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and openness in order to “find an ‘internal compass’ and become more authentic leaders” (Shamir and Eilam, 2005: 412).

This intervention is planned during a one day senior leader off site that takes place one week after the UFHRD conference.

**Second Person Practice**

In this project, Garry was an insider researcher in a unique position in the organization; a civilian member of staff with the ability to influence senior military colleagues. His starting position as an interested observer and an ethnographic researcher, with no desire to write himself into the research at all, gradually changed to one of a central figure in understanding both how the organization functioned and the possibilities for change. Whilst the outcomes of the research showed how culture alignment interventions had affected leaders in the organization, the interaction between the researcher and participants – the second person inquiry described by Coghlan (2003, 2007), told its own story of how the organization functioned and particularly how middle-ranking leaders used the research as an opportunity to communicate with more senior colleagues in a way that the prevailing organizational culture and leadership style prevented. The responses can be categorized in 3 ways.

1**. In relation to the research project and the researcher**

In terms of supporting the organisational culture alignment process the responses from the interviewees followed a fairly normal distribution. Some of the participants had respect and even enthusiasm for what Garry was trying to achieve and these responses were more supportive and encouraging than others. Equally, a vocal minority were not so supportive and wanted to highlight that it had been a somewhat foolhardy venture, perhaps even a distraction.

Despite these personal positions in regard to the experience Garry felt that in some cases , personal relationship factors were also at play. Insider action researchers will inevitably fall under a spotlight and become a figure of discussion around the coffee tables and invoke responses that you will be difficult to predict. This is likely to persist even when the research is completed. and the researcher inevitably becomes intrinsic to the story and the action.. Spending time ensuring that there is support from senior and/or influential people in the organisation is worthwhile, especially as a number of participants were strongly critical of the research taking place at all.

Garry’s re-positioning from passive researcher to change agent (Susman and Evered, 1978) afforded him a new status as a key influencer in the organisation and this provoked honest and heartfelt reactions to the research and the change process.

Whilst some colleagues were supportive:

*“, More than anything else what was really good about that cultural shaping session was meeting a lot of people you don’t interface with on a daily basis, a lot of people got to finally see what the other side is doing, whatever the other side is. So that was a good, and now there are (sic) awareness of what the other elements, organisations are doing.”*

*“I think it's important because we were, until the start of the cultural shaping session, we were in a kind of routine of work, delivering exercise fine, we were happy but know nothing else, now I think we are opening up a bit more and with what we are building, why we exist and I think we are able to make a difference. We start to see some results and I think it's really linked to the … cultural shaping thing because it really does strengthen the first move it was, in that respect, I think it was really valuable.”*

Others were ambivalent:

*“Certain things that are out of reach for the headquarters that you know you as an employer cannot really do anything about that. Nations bring in different perspectives, some are native speakers and some are not,* *so there is something about the business we are in that causes us frustration and frictions. If NATO at some point comes to realise that cultural shaping is so important that we want to make it an overall concept for NATO that could be, but I would think that require a whole program of studies.”*

*“In the military it is not like that, in the military you have always a situation of fluctuating personnel, fluctuating staff, so they see that their environment is a very fluid environment so they will understand. Officers are moved every second year, in my organisation, in others every year, or three years and some are in-between, so ok, that is the way it is”*

And some colleagues were openly cynical:

*“It’s also been commented at lot, down below, that the guys, this is a very cynical comment, but you have a team evaluate you then the team gives you training on how to improve and then that same team does an evaluation on whether or not you have improved of course you are going to improve, you have to improve or else there service was not worth anything. Total cynicism, I don’t ascribe to that but I have heard it noted.”*

*I don’t believe that, that effort was useless, ok, although you didn’t see the immediate effect, in a long term or medium term I think it will be forgotten, it is not easy to maintain this.”*

2. **About the subject of organisational change**

To many, the softer side of leadership was an uncomfortable place to explore; the discussion of personal relationships and emotions is not an everyday occurrence and some colleagues found it difficult to open up whereas others’ discomfort came from having no clearly defined ‘end state’

*“Hearing those stories, telling my own, it literally sucked the life out of me. I hated every moment of it.”*

*“The most important thing was the openness we created so we had the situation and from time to time it was quite emotional because people open themselves they also show their weak spots or soft spots and this only natural that shows that they are not leader of a certain type or responsible person for a certain deliverable with JWC but they are Human Beings with expectations, anticipation, fears, reservations whatsoever and that helps a lot to understand how people tick.”*

*“Top down to the lowest leader. It was great that we know how to do it and what he would do he would walk into the bows of the ship and he would talk to the Lance Corporal “You know what we’re doing? What is the intent? What do I want you to do? If all else fails and the Lieutenant gets a shot in the head, what do you want? What are we supposed to do?” so from the bottom it was clear and understood. It also meant the path in which we were going was understood by everybody, the end state, the mission was understood at the lowest level.”*

*“Let me clarify here, I am not criticising the effort nor the programme, these may sound like harsh words or criticisms, I just feel like what we’ve got is different than what was intended, and it’s not really clear what was intended, but the beginning of the process, at some of these, all hands calls, they were asked, ‘so what is the problem we are trying to address?’ and there was not a good answer that came back from the Command Group”*

3. **About the senior leaders:**

In some cases Garry felt he was directly being “told” things in order for him to transfer these themes to the senior leaders because he had the ear of the Commander and Chief of Staff in a way that the direct reports do not have.

*“Why does the leadership not actively influence the Nations, actively influence the SNR’s, actively doing something to change if there are problems and use that as a leadership tool, they don’t and to me it’s just mind boggling Garry that the Command Group does not see the SNR meetings as a Leadership tool clearly, if they had seen it as such they would have used it. But to me it’s like a fantastic rifle sat in the gun rack not being used. But that’s just me.”*

*“You’re the first person Garry, the very first person who actually deliberately asked me, for instance as a worker bee, to speak about this. If the Chief of Staff, or the Dom or the Com or whoever would have done that fantastic, it just doesn’t happen”*

*“From the General I don’t, I get to chat with the General regularly about sailing so I do get some face time with him, but I don’t necessarily see him walking his establishment as it were and really if I were to give him advise I would suggest that he did that because there is a perception that smokers, because he smokes, will have an opportunity to chat informally with him whereas those of us that don’t smoke don’t have that opportunity,”*

*“Culture, rank, political correctness, time, frustration but it’s all, dare I say, coming back to the leadership through walkabout, get out of your offices, go and sit down and mean it, go and sit down and look people in the eye and say ‘How can I help you?’ In the four years I have been here I have never once in the four years had anybody from the Command Group come down to my desk and say ‘how can I help you?’ not once, in four years.”*

**Conclusions**

Using Coghlan’s (2003, 2007) notions of first and second person practice, we have sought in this paper to examine the nature of insider action research through the lens of a researcher who felt compelled to move from ethnography to action. We suggest that a deep engagement in, and commitment to the research, coupled with a reflective and reflexive approach to inquiry led to this change in approach. We have illustrated how the collaborative engagements entered into by this researcher in action research serve to shape the outcomes of the project in a manner that is infused with unexpected issues of power and relationships in an organisation attempting to move from command and control to a softer approach to leadership.

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