Summary

In this paper we highlight Action Research as a research method, where researchers and practitioners in joint action take part in development processes and in building new knowledge. By combining knowledge development and practical problem solving, understanding and changing, action research represents a way of bridging the gap between academia on the one side and business and community on the other, through building collaborative efforts for mutual benefits.

Our case is empirically grounded in an ongoing development project in the national krAft-program, run by the KK-foundation. With support from this program and EU’s Objective 3, we run three development groups for women managers. In our paper we point out the gender biased construction of these kinds of programs; and we investigate how business support actions can be better adapted to women’s needs and objectives.

Introduction

In a study on working life action research projects Hansson (2003) shows how action research have both practical and academic relevance. The projects studied contributed to practical actions in working life as well as to academic disciplines e.g. psychology, pedagogy, business administration and political science. They provided theoretical knowledge - new or further developed scientific theories, models and concepts - about communication, democracy, learning, networking, management, organisation development, and equality. The research problems had arisen from practical involvement and were the results from interactions between practitioners and researchers, having a subject-subject relation. Even though the researchers had entered the processes with theoretical assumptions or pre-understandings, the social research problems were not defined uniquely from the researchers’ perspectives but also considered those of the practitioners.
Researchers and practitioners contributed to the research processes with different knowledge and experiences and they developed new understanding through interaction.

Action research treats research problems in a pragmatic way. Different methods and tools are used and tested, traditional as well as innovative, qualitative as well as quantitative. The action researcher collaborates, often for extended periods, with the practitioners in their work environment; this enhances insight in the practical problems of the working place. The action researcher may develop a deeper approach to the theoretical questions than a researcher using more traditional knowledge-creation models where the distance between the researcher and the researched often is larger.

Interaction between researchers and practitioners in the action research process takes place in the practitioners’ reality, and involves practitioners in knowledge creation. Therefore, the results of the action research process – theoretical and practical – have direct implication on practice.

Development processes supported by research may lead to a number of concrete results applicable to practical life, in form of organisational, technical economical and social interventions. There is practical learning taking place and development of practical competence as well as of theoretical knowledge about specific problems related to the organisation. When practitioners and researchers act together in dialogue-based action research processes they both, through this interaction, obtain new tools for reflection. Their theoretical and practical questions tend to merge, into a fusion that action researchers (Gustavsen 1990, Elden & Levin 1991 and others) call local theory, a product of mutual contribution. Practitioners, bringing in their practical experience, contribute new aspects to the theoretical research questions. Researchers, bringing in their analytical competence and proficiency with processes, contribute to the practical development, which helps the practitioners scrutinise their work from new perspectives. In the democratic dialogue, researchers encourage practitioners to express their tacit knowledge, making it explicit. This reflective undertaking fosters understanding and development of practice and theory – within both parties. The democratic dialogue is simultaneously both aim and objective, both theory and method.

In action research three different types of results can be distinguished (Hansson 2003):

- Results that contribute to production of theories and to accumulated academic knowledge (theoretical results);
- Development of theoretical knowledge and practical competence related to the organisation as an effect of the dialogue-based interaction between researcher and practitioner (practical knowledge development);
- Concrete, practical results from the development process in form of interventions addressed to the referred organisation (practical intervention).

In this paper we present an action research process targeted at female leaders from small and medium sized companies (SMEs) in our region. It is a competence development project financed by the KK-foundation, a state initiated foundation, which, among other tasks aim to bridge the gap between the academic world and industry. The overall objective for the national krAft program is to reach economical growth in the region and to find out and test methods on how universities can stimulate regional growth by close co-operation with SMEs.
Besides promoting the process, the theoretical implication for us as researchers is to find out why women do not, to the same extent as men, attend central national and regional programs aimed at competence and business development. Are there conditions in these programs that favour men and exclude women and how can these conditions then be identified? Is it possible to adjust these centrally financed programs in ways that reach and attract women to the same extent as men? Can we find out and suggest concrete contributions in order to reach an economic development in the region that is based on gender equality and from which both men and women can benefit.

The aim for the business leaders is to develop their companies through developing their own skills and competence and by networking with business leaders from other companies.

Our project is still in its starting phase and the research questions are temporary and not yet clearly defined. In this paper we have chosen to highlight the narrative method we used when we started the project in order to create the necessary conditions for a positive and meaningful learning situation.

**The KrAft program**

The acronym krAft (which is Swedish for “power”) should be decoded as “K” for competence/knowledge, “R” for reflection, “Af” for business development and “T” for growth. The acronym mirrors the belief that business development in SMEs is not primarily about simple knowledge transfer. (krAft website 2003).

The krAft program is a national program financed by the KK-foundation, a state initiated foundation, which, among other tasks aim to bridge the gap between the academic world and the industry. A group of Swedish universities is, during a period of five years (2000-2005), engaged in organising, developing and applying the program.

The major aim of the program is to contribute to a continuing collaboration between SMEs on the basis of networking and the core themes for the activities are Leadership, Business Intelligence and Networking. KrAft is a new approach for fostering business development initiatives in SMEs based on the assumptions that business development is about “getting your act together” and take action to grow the business, and that knowledge is something that develops in the minds of people when they are exposed to stimuli (competence/knowledge) that make them reflect on their present situation. The aim for krAft is that all educational activities will follow a pedagogical style based on dialogue and problem-based learning. The ultimate goal is not to make participants learn a lot of theory but to encourage them to develop and grow their businesses. Leading words are flexibility and customisation (krAft website 2003).

In brief the “standard” krAft program has the following characteristics: KrAft groups containing 5-7 companies (2-3 representatives from each company) are created. Each group meets at 12 occasions during a one-year period together with a leadership team consisting of one krAft tutor, usually a consultant or some kind of business broker, and a project manager who is a university representative. The group decides about the content in their krAft project and, in co-operation with the leadership
team, suggests the topics for the different meetings, where university people are invited as lecturers or consultants. In addition to the group meetings about three days (for each participating company) are reserved for the implementation of projects emerging from the activities in the krAft group. Participation fee is about 4 000 Euros for each business organisation involved. All the additional costs, approximately 5 000 Euros per company are covered by the KK-foundation.

The krAft program is based on an action oriented approach where the process is characterised by mutual exchange between practitioner and researcher and where the results are supposed to lead both to theoretical and practical learning for both partners.

Male biased programs

As well as other central programs aimed at stimulating economic growth, the krAft program seems mainly to attract male target groups, in this case business leaders. The key persons in the central krAft managing team are men and the program is designed by men. Despite that the guiding policy documents talks about gender diversity and express a formal ambition to reach companies and entrepreneurs in all sectors of economy, there is no outspoken strategy on how to involve women in the program. On the contrary, the effect of this gender blindness is that the krAft program, as well as designed by men, in fact also is targeted at men. In the conditions regarding participation it has not been considered that women owned companies often are very small and face difficulties in allocating time and money for two leading managers to participate, at the same time, in competence programs or other external activities, or that women in male dominated business fields often discover a need for networks among females only, where they can express their experiences of being women in the men’s world. Neither is the recruitment process nor the marketing concepts used adapted to women’s conditions and experiences.

In the light of the low representation of women and female leaders in the krAft program our research group at Halmstad University in the spring 2002, supported by a female researcher from Lund University involved in the krAft program, adopted the challenge to start krAft groups consisting of only female business leaders. A local krAft managing team was created, including two researchers from the department of Working Life and Gender at Halmstad University (a man and a woman) and two consultants (women) from a private company. Our idea was to create a regional krAft project where we invited female managers from traditional male sectors and our ambition was to initiate at least two krAft groups that could start their development work in January 2003 and continue during the year. We felt that we were strongly supported to go ahead from the central krAft managing team. The heavy male dominance in krAft had turned out to be a bit of a problem, as it was not in agreement with the outspoken policy for the program.
Initiating female krAft groups

With financial support from the national krAft program we started the recruitment process. One of the tutors from the consulting company were delegated the total responsibility for all the administrative management. The other three of us were during the starting up process acting as steering group and advisors. The starting up phase involved different steps:

- to locate women in managing positions of SMEs in traditionally male dominated fields in the region;

- to send a proposal to these (about 90) female managers and to find out their interest to participate in a regional krAft project. More than half of the managers were interested in attending a krAft group consisting of women only;

- to invite these presumptive women to attend an information meetings about the krAft program;

- to organise and perform a one-day dialogue conference in June 2002. 14 managers attended the conference. Another 30 women were interested but could not attend the actual day. The participants worked in small groups where they should discuss and propose the overall theme for the regional krAft project. The women agreed on “Women’s leadership” as the leading theme;

- discussions and negotiations with the regional ESF office in order go get financial support from objective 3 for the participating companies;

- discussions and negotiations with the national krAft team about adjustments of the standard model of the krAft program, e.g. to be granted exempt from the standard model of being two managers attending from each company, and from the claim of additional funding from the companies;

- 40 applications arrived from women in managing positions in male dominated branches, who wanted to participate in our regional krAft program;

- a start-up meeting was held at the university in September 2002, where the participants discussed the lay-out of the regional krAft project. 23 women attended.

- Final application and contract writing. 27 companies including 33 participants in what we called “krAftverk Halland”, devided in three groups Nord-krAft (10), Mitt-krAft (12) and Söder-krAft (11);

- Two-days residential “kick-off” seminars for each group was held in November-December 2002, located in the north, the middle and the south of the region.
Individual stories and collective reflection

The krAft concept means that managers concentrate on their own business development together with managers from other companies. A successful and sustainable learning process has to be built on trust and confidence and the conditions for maximal result are that the group members establish such a confidence in each others that they can be open as well about themselves as about the companies they represent. To build up such a trustful relationship the participants have to learn to know each other as well as individuals as professionals.

In order to facilitate this introduction phase, where the participants should get to know each other and each others’ companies and together should formulate the themes for their future group meetings, we decided to organise the first meeting in each group as a two days residential seminar, which we called a “kick-off” seminar. In the design of this seminar we used the method “Storytelling”, where the discussions and presentations of the participants were well structured (Danilda & Stridh 1998). This method had earlier been developed and tested by members of the team in a European ESF project and after that used in different contexts. This “Storytelling” concept is a type of dialogue conference aiming at transferring tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. It has been developed from dialogues in dyads and is based on the theory of symbolic interactionism, mirroring “the other” and changing perspectives. Briefly it means that each participant write down a short key text that they tell as their “story” to the others in the group. This story is then discussed, analysed and reflected by the other participants according to their background and experiences (Stridh 2001).

The three “kick-off” seminars were held at small conference hotels in different parts of our region. They started at lunch on a Friday and continued until Saturday afternoon. 9-10 female managers attended each seminar together with 3-4 of the researchers from the krAft team. The three seminars were structured in the same way with the time balanced between discussions in groups and in plenary and also time for social meetings.

Before the seminar the participants had been told to write a short story about “a meeting I remember” and bring with them to the seminar. The idea by asking the participants to write down their chosen “meeting” was to start a reflection process in the mind of the writer. The dialogues in the seminar were held both in plenary (all participants) and in tandem groups (two participants together). The four of us in the krAft team were acting as facilitators, we were leading and documenting the process. The seminars were organised according to the following agenda:

Phase 1 – plenary session
Each participant tells her story. The listeners may ask clarifying questions about the content, but not (at this stage) value the stories or give their advice or opinions.

Phase period 2 – tandem group
The participants work in tandem groups (two together). Each tandem group deals with two stories from another tandem group. The first task is to read the two stories and get deeper into them. The tandem group discuss the stories and how they have interpreted them. They try to get their shared picture of the meeting told in each of the stories, which they illustrate at a flip-chart. In their illustrations they also try to cover the feelings and relations between the different persons involved in the meeting.

Phase 3 – tandem group
The two in the tandem group compare the two stories and their interpretation of them and also illustrate this analysis.
Phase 4 – plenary session

In a plenary session the tandem groups present their discussions and by their illustrations show how they have interpreted the stories. When the authors of the stories have made their comments on the interpretations the cases are discussed in plenary by all the participants. Together the participants compare the stories. They make a synthesis of what has been brought up in the discussion and formulate key-words referring to what they consider important to highlight.

Out from the analysis and reflections that had been brought up in the discussions the participants together formulate the aims for the future work in their krAft group. They also formulate themes and content for the coming group meetings. The results from the three seminars were quite similar. The stories dealt with: competence development; social competence; information and communication problems; to be able to argue; management and leadership; male contra female leadership; to dare to pose questions; to dare to take the steps forward; motivation; to show appreciation; to handle conflicts; group dynamics; to hit the “glass ceiling”; how to deal with changes; responsibility; learning and how to learn; self esteem; structure of organisation and hierarchy.

In order to give a picture of the content in the stories and to show how the analysing process lead to learning and reflection I have made a review of two of the stories and the analysis of them prepared by the tandem group.

Story 1: “The staff grew when they were given more responsibility”

The author is the managing director of a hotel. Each winter the hotel has a period of restoration and repair. The author was responsible for this work and the restoration was going to take place even this year. As there had been a troublesome period at the hotel and the manager had worked very hard, she had no spirit and encouragement to start the restoration process. The situation described took place at a planning meeting with all the hotel staff.

- The staff had been told some month earlier that six of the hotel rooms should be totally restored during the winter, but I felt so worn out by work that I couldn’t start the process. When I told this to my (female) staff at the meeting they got very disappointed. They frankly said that they didn’t want to book these rooms for the guests, as they considered the standard of the rooms not high enough to charge the same price as for the other rooms. They meant that these rooms didn’t hold the promised standard. The discussion was not constructive and we closed the meeting.

- I went home and reflected. I wanted to turn all the bad things that we had encountered during the last months to something nice and inspiring. The staff had already had a hard work. I also realised that if we didn’t decide to restore the rooms now, we would have to wait until next year. I invited the staff to a new meeting where I declared that I was too tired myself to manage the restoration, but that I wanted to make them a proposal to self take the responsibility of the restoration and that I would delegate to each one of them to design their own room. They immediately said YES. They started the work full of energy, they were free to decide, but got a limited budget.

- Something amazing happened. Everything was so positive. The hard time was forgotten and we now talked about colors, curtains, pillows, beds, chairs, light and lamps. The only work I had to do was to call in the carpenter and the painter.

- The staff had made a terrific work. They had shown that they could be responsible for the planning and performing of the restoration and me and my co-manager realized that we could hand over a much bigger responsibility to them as well regarding the work in the reception and in the kitchen.

- The rooms became very nice. Every room was different from the others. It has been so nice to hear one from the staff welcoming a guest by saying: “You will live in my room tonight. I have designed your room”.

- For me this was a totally new form of leadership – to dare to delegate to the staff to take a bigger responsibility. Of course I was there as a “helping hand”, which led to that I got to know the staff much better. This situation was a turning point for the organisation of the hotel. The staff has now got a much bigger responsibility than before, and even later employed staff have adopted to this way of organising the work.

- Of course we plan together and I still have the over all managing responsibility. But this dynamic in the group, when all the staff work together in a new way is amazing. Now they are waiting for new rooms to restore.
- From this I have learnt that I cannot myself be everywhere all the time, I have to let more of the work to the staff, and I now know that they can handle it.
- From all the sad and hard things that had happened to the organisation, something new and creative came out.

Story 2: “The manager who refuses to keep to the agenda”

The author is the financial manager of a family company that has become bigger and grown “out of its suit”. The founder of the company is still the managing director. Together with him the responsible managers form the managing group of the company.
- Besides me it is only men in the managing team. We have lots of ideas and are very enthusiastic and constructive. Before the meetings in the management group we usually discuss what we want to bring up at the meeting.
- But at every meeting our managing director leads the discussion away from the important matters we need to discuss. After a while we realize that he doesn’t understand or are not interested in our ideas and in what we want to bring up. After two hours we give it up and consider that seven of the ten items have to wait to another meeting.
- All of us who have high ambitions and want to develop the organisation feel very frustrated and disappointed about the situation. We realize that we need to have these management meetings, but the managing director doesn’t want them. He spoils them by passing the items we have set up at the agenda. An example on how he behaves at the meetings is that when someone of us wanted to discuss a problem we faced with an agent in one country, the managing director started comparing this agent with another agent in another country and instead he starts talking about this company, and then he gets over to talk about product development, etc. and gets further and further distanced from the subject.
- It seems hopeless to make him change his behavior. We have tried with no success. It is a requirement for our ISO certificate that we need to perform these meetings. We all feel in the same way, we try to take the command in order to be able to do a good job, but as the manager is very strong this is very difficult.

Guided by the reflections from the tandem group about these two stories the group agreed that the story about the restoration of the hotel rooms was about turning something negative to something positive, to share responsibility and to trust the co-workers. The author wanted to turn the situation. The group saw it as a good example of management, not to worn out oneself but to delegate. This was also a good thing for the organisation. The author commented that if she hadn’t been so overworked she had perhaps not come to the insight that she could divide the responsibility between the staff.

The story about the management meeting where the director doesn’t follow the agenda signals that he doesn’t respect his managers. This company doesn’t seem to have any functioning delegation order. The boss is very authorian, which prevents creativity from the staff.

When we compared the stories we found that they were both dealing with management and leadership and in the stories we saw a good and a bad example of management. In the good example we saw that it can be difficult for a leader to let the control to others and to delegate, but if you dare to do so, you can get a positive change in the whole organisation and build a good working environment. In the bad example the boss, despite he has got an enthusiastic staff, totally keeps the control. What will happen in the long run in the organisation and for the business if the leader block the creativity?
The key-words that was highlighted from these stories were: leadership and management; engagement; strategy; motivation; treating conflicts; willingness to change; organisation; information; communication; control; delegation; responsibility; and pleasure out of the work.

Aims and themes for the regional krAft project

In the analysis of the stories different themes were focused by the participants. They recognised the situations and could often identify themselves with the author. The participants together helped each other to put words on the incidents described in the stories. In this group process the participants mirrored themselves in each others’ cases and to a great extend they agreed upon what were the problems and how these could have been solved. The problems faced in the stories were often by the participants considered to be related to the situation of being a woman manager and to the relation between men and women and male and female in working life.

All the groups wanted the krAft project to deal with empowering the participants in her managing role. Through developing their role as leader they thought that they would effect the business development of the company they represented. Two of the groups wanted to approve their communication skills, while the third group wanted to focus on how to effect their management in a positive way. The overall themes that the three groups agreed about was: leadership; how to handle conflicts; self insight and awareness; and information/communication.

Moments that has later been scheduled for the group meetings are:

- cultural communication,
- men’s and women’s ways of communicating,
- body language;
- rhetoric – how to reach the listener with our message;
- leadership – motivation and strategies;
- relations, trust and power;
- prejudices and attitudes;
- how to handle conflicts;
- coaching and mentorship.
Trust and learning – dialogue based on narratives

By making links between universities and SMEs the KK-foundation wants, through the krAft program, to increase the competence and the business activity in small and medium sized companies. The aim is to develop sustainable relations between the companies and the higher education and research system. It has often been difficult to build these links between small companies as the owners and managers of these companies traditionally have not been academics and thus have had no idea about how the universities might contribute to their daily business life. There has been a language barrier and a distance between the business representatives and the teachers/researcher.

To overcome these two different cultures the krAft program has introduced the tutor role as a mediator between the two systems. The krAft tutor is someone with experience from the business system and her/his role is to facilitate for the participants to understand the academics and to function as the “translator” between the academic and the business world. In our project the tutors are also dealing with all the administration and the IT based documentation.

KrAft is designed as a program for learning. It is not only for the participants from the companies who is taking part in this learning process, but also the researchers from the universities, the consultants that act as tutors and the “experts” that are called in to cover certain specialities. Researchers and practitioners enter the process with their different experiences and pre-understandings and they have different aims and expectations. In the interaction between the different actors the questions are further developed and the actors learn together and learn from each other.

The Japanese authors Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) describe this way of learning as a transfer between different phases of tacit and explicit knowledge. In their book The Knowledge-Creating Company they discuss how Japanese business leaders use the tacit knowledge of their staff in order to create innovative organisations. They consider the tacit knowledge as “…the basis of organisational knowledge creation” (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995, p. 72). The tacit knowledge is personal and contextual and thus difficult to formalise and communicate. Contrary to tacit knowledge they talk about explicit knowledge. In a model Nonaka & Takeuchi explain the cycle between tacit and explicit knowledge. The first phase in the process of knowledge creation is the socialisation (from tacit to tacit knowledge). In this phase the actors share their experiences and build a relation of mutual trust. The authors mention this phase as “sympathised knowledge”. Next phase they call externalisation (from tacit to explicit knowledge). Here is the tacit knowledge articulated into explicit concepts in the form of metaphors, models and concepts. The knowledge in this phase they call “conceptual knowledge”. The phase that follows on this they call combination (from explicit to explicit knowledge). In this phase different concepts are combined into “systematic knowledge”. In the fourth phase internalisation (from explicit to tacit knowledge) the knowledge is transformed into “operational knowledge” in form of shared models of thinking or technical know-how. Provided that there are enough of time and possibilities for dialogues the knowledge creation continues in a spiral process.
Hägerfors (1994) has developed a model for, what she calls, co-learning, which both deals with learning together and how we learn to learn. This model build as well on communication and group dynamic theories as on applied practice. From her studies among systems analysers she notices that co-learning seems to be a more natural process for women than for men.

The knowledge creating process in our krAft groups is both collective and individual. To learn in dialogue with different actors does both lead to a common knowledge, relevant in the development of the project, and to specific knowledge, relevant to the actors in their different contexts and settings.

A prerequisite for the participants to share their knowledge and experiences in a way that lead to new and shared knowledge is that an effective dialogue can be organised where the participants trust each other and the process (Ljungberg van Beinum 2000). In our regional krAft project we have chosen to build the dialogue on narratives from the participants’ daily experiences. By using a method where the participants shared their experiences and, by signing secrecy agreements, prepare for an open dialogue, we have succeeded in creating a strong group feeling. The krAft meetings are not only learning activities, they are also social events where the participants can relax and have fun.

**Gender perspective on national business support**

By adding a gender perspective on the krAft program we have located a need among female managers to participate in competence development activities targeted at women only. The female participants in our regional krAft project are principally working in traditional male sectors and most of their work-mates are men. In our krAft project these women have created their “own room”, where they can change experiences with other women in the same situation and improve their personal development.

Adding the gender perspective also means that we, in the groups, discuss and reflect upon what Hirdman (1990) calls the gender logic – that women, even in a managing positions, are subordinated to men and that men and women (metaphorically speaking) are kept apart. As we are working with women in managing positions, relatively powerful in their organisations, it may look irrelevant to talk about subordination. However do the women give lots of practical examples of how men, in different ways and often informally, exercise power in relation to women, which is frustrating for the women, influences their leadership and makes it problematic to handle their role.

We have also noticed that the krAft program, in spite of its interactive design and its clear focus on process oriented learning, is very male dominated. As well the central krAft managing team as most of the participants from small and medium sized companies are men. This program, as any other national program aimed at support business and regional development, has no gender perspective. In the design of the program women’s and men’s different conditions has not been considered, e.g: that women mostly have families and the main responsibility for children and homework, at the same time as they are responsible for their companies; that women (because of this?) are less prepared to
take economic risks; but that they also - when they are prepared to take risks - have difficulties in finding risk capital. By including a gender perspective and by linking to theories from feministic research we think that both the methods used in order to support the SMEs and the result of the work will be another and more complex, than if SMEs are looked upon as the men’s world (Holmquist 2002).

From the governmental level as well as from industry and the public sector there is, in Sweden and in other western societies, a growing demand on universities to work closer with actors in their surroundings. The krAft program is an example of this policy. One way to meet these needs is through action research. In our case we find it as a great challenge to integrate practical development efforts towards a better society and working life, in this case economic growth and business development, with theoretical development based on as well gender theories as theories on learning, entrepreneurship and innovation systems (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorf 2000, Gibbons 1994). In regional development research and in success stories about innovation and entrepreneurship, often supported by national programs, there have been very few female role models for women to identify with. We hope that the results from our krAft project will be able to turn this trend.

As both action research and feministic research aim at changing conditions, we think that these fields of research linked together can improve the development of theoretical knowledge in the research society as well as the development of practical knowledge in working life. Together with the participating women in our regional krAftverk Halland project we now discuss and reflect on questions related to gender and power. We discuss why women managers seem to be invisible in official registers and statistics. We focus on how women’s and men’s language differ, how women look upon development of their companies and on their personal development, how women combine their family life with their professional life, etc. In the strong relationship that has been built up in the three groups, among the participants and between the researchers and the participants, we have a close interrelation between questions and answers, between theory and practice that makes the process both learning and very exciting.

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