Research as a practice

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Case study

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Author biographies

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Introduction

Discovery has no end, as it always drives new questions. While practitioner-oriented research is a profession, it also requires improvement through repetition, experience, and ongoing learning. In facing change, we must remain fluid and learn from adversity. To do so we need to listen and adapt, while proceeding with resilience and determination. Despite the challenges, the rewards of our work are plentiful. We move to not only determine findings, but to also seek out what we might co-create along the way.

This article is based upon empirical research conducted at a pharmaceutical start-up, over a three-year period. Our views do not necessarily reflect the perceptions of every organizational member or the publisher. The content is based on the authors' scholarly inquiry, analysis, and professional judgment. Names, dates, and financial information have been modified to sufficiently anonymise the article, as requested by the organization under study.

Meeting the CEO

I attended an ethics programme in California, and chanced upon hearing a CEO share his insights about leading a start-up company in the Silicon Valley. As he spoke from a panel addressing business ethics, my interest was piqued. Jim was the first leader I had ever heard who openly talked about how to shape the culture of a company, even before it had a product. He recognised that, from the onset, getting character into the core of his organization wasn't going to happen as the result of an ethics code or a value statement. Instead, such concerns needed to be addressed at the firm's inception. Ethics had to be a part of how the firm achieved its goals, how it treated its employees, and how it recognised and dealt with shareholder and stakeholder issues from day one.

I went up to Jim after the meeting and expressed my appreciation for his approach. I asked him if he would consider letting me use his organization, *Start-up Pharma* (SP), as a possible case study. Inquiry within a start-up would ultimately provide educational tools to business students and offer insights for future research. He agreed to continue our dialogue. We met some months later. He then visited and spoke to my undergraduate students at Menlo College and, from there, we planned a study. Years later, I'm looking back at one of the most unusual research projects I've ever engaged in. In this article, we'll share what happened, how the study evolved, and what resulted from it. Let's just say, things didn't go exactly according to plan.

Original idea

We began our work thinking that the study would be about *Positive Organizational Ethics* (POE). Several colleagues and I had just completed a special issue on *Positive Organization Scholarship* and *Positive Organizational Behavior*. We defined POE as the study of people, practices, and contexts that cultivate and sustain individual and collective ethical strength to achieve successful and durable moral performance in organizations (Sekerka, Comer & Godwin, 2014).

Our goal with the SP study was to ascertain how using a positive lens might help us advance our understanding of ethical cognition, affect, and behaviour in the workplace. Scholars tend to recognise the value of research that leads employees to make poor ethical choices. But we saw the need for more inquiry into what encourages and sustains positive ethical decision-making and action in organizations. By going beyond ethical failure and examining the building blocks of ethical strength, the motivation behind our work was rooted in Positive Psychology, inquiry that strives to help people engage in productive and meaningful lives (Sekerka, 2016).

The original team consisted of myself and three others. I, a business ethicist, have a background in organizational behaviour, organizational development, and practitioner experience with Appreciative Inquiry. The others had complementary backgrounds, but also added rich expertise in personnel research, multivariate statistics, and leadership development. We decided to use a case study approach, complemented by a series of critical incident interviews as a means of discovery. At some point, we would gather internal organizational culture survey data from the firm, and correlate this quantitative data with our eventual qualitative findings, to execute triangulation, adding depth and rigour to the investigation.

The CEO agreed that SP's executive group (himself and eleven others) would participate. With busy schedules it took about a year to conduct all 12 interviews. We did the majority of them in person, which was important to everyone on the team (researchers and participants alike). The 'incident' question was designed to help leaders think back to a time when they faced an ethical challenge and exercised moral courage. The in-depth interviews lasted for 60-90 minutes; with probing questions used to collect details of job, role, how they felt about ethics within the company, and working for their organization. About half-way through the schedule, a member of our project team self-imposed a career shift. So, they stepped away from the project and we carried on.

Project Expansion

After having the data transcribed and performing some initial analyses, we had an interesting story. There were exciting strategic developments occurring within SP. But with some emerging tensions, we felt like we needed more information. We were missing important nuances about what was happening at the center of, and throughout the organization. While the bird's-eye view was magnificent, we wanted boots-on-the-ground details.

We met to report our initial findings to Jim and the entire SP leadership team, explaining what we had learned thus far. They agreed to let us carry the study forward. Together, the research team and organization initiated a snowball approach. Each leader would identify a handful of key people within their respective functional areas, which would represent each of their own departments. That way we would have all of the various areas and levels of the organization represented. Within a few months' time, we had a list of 35 people to interview, all over the world. This would be known as Phase 2 of the project.

With full-time teaching loads, service duties, and publishing commitments, my colleagues and I faced some tall hurdles. We maintained the method of conducting as many interviews in person as possible. But on the analysis side of the story, the Nvivo software we intended to use to code the vast amounts of data wasn't working out. The functional tools in the package were not in keeping with our training and how we intuitively made sense of the data using classic qualitative analysis techniques. We decided to shift to use of a purely traditional method, which meant coding all of the transcripts, including the original 12, manually. I think we held about 4 kilos of codable material after printing out all the transcripts. It was daunting, to say the least! But one paragraph, one page, one transcript at a time, we pushed into the data, and started the process of thematic analyses (Boyatzis, 1998; Glesne, 2016).

After conducting about half of the interviews, another colleague joined the project, an expert in workplace well-being, team optimisation, and training development. We could see that the output, once analysed, would provide useful input to the organization. Having an expert on board who had an active bridge between research and practice would be exceptionally helpful.

During Phase 2, major advances were happening at the company. The organization was growing exponentially through a series of mergers and acquisitions. This rapid expansion was coupled with a major strategic decision to bring the research and development function in-house. This modified the identity of the company from a manufacturing and distribution firm, to one that also develops pharmaceutical drugs. The company also faced external pressure, as a result of government investigation related to funding patient charities. Donations that the company had made to patient assistance charities were deemed by the government to resemble kickback schemes. The company co-operated fully and addressed the charges by paying a fine of 57 million dollars to the U.S. Justice Department.

The more we met with employees and listened to their experiences about what was going on in their organization, the more we realised that this was no longer a story about POE. Rather, it was one about the dynamics of organizational culture and change on a broad scale. The story was evolving dramatically, as the company's identity, growth, and transformation were being captured in our interview data. While the basic critical incident interview script remained the same, the prompts and probes that accompanied each interview revealed the nuanced challenges that employees encountered as SP went through this extended period of development.

Unexpected challenges and results

Learning that the organization had varied their questions in their annual in-house culture survey, the aggregated information to be used in our comparative analysis between the company findings and the thematic findings was no longer feasible. At that point our quantitative analysis expert stepped-off the project, realising their role was no longer viable. Around this same time, myself and another member of the team experienced unexpected medical issues. They decided it was best to leave the project completely. I was unable to work for three months, but then gradually reengaged in the coding chores.

As the sole remaining members of the team, Lauren and I completed the qualitative analyses using grounded theory (Straus & Corbin, 1997). We went through the entire dataset the old-fashioned way. Imagine mounds of index cards, colored pens, and post-it notes, laying across the table (and floor), along with multiple excel and other forms of computer files to check and cross check the data. If you've ever performed analyses in this manner, you can appreciate the fact that there's method in the madness! However, it's exceptionally time consuming. There were moments when we felt like this was a second Ph.D. dissertation. We carried on, knowing that we wanted to offer the company a final report, craft a case study for educational use, and write an empirical paper for publication. Most importantly, to finish what we started!

The results were stunning. We had actually been inside the organization, as they faced a compliance issue and, in the midst of a tumultuous period of growth and expansion, our themes reflected this protracted effort. Early themes included:

- CEO as father figure, trusted/admired leader, strong focus on optimism;
- tensions within the executive group;
- emergence of microclimates; and
- multiple perceptions of company identity stemming from different organizational groups (start-up, Research and Development, merger and acquisition hires).

While excited and thrilled, it was obvious that we now faced a new problem. The original dataset, with the twelve executives, had been collected over two years ago. The themes emanating from the participants in what was now referred to as Phase 1 of the project, now seemed dated and stale. If we used this data, we feared that our findings would not reflect the current perspectives of leadership to date.

After meeting with our project liaison at the company about this concern, we set up a meeting with Jim. Here, we shared an overview of our preliminary findings. Our initial themes identified some important observations, which corresponded directly with what the firm's internal culture surveys had found. There were also some additional nuances that added depth and rigour to their internal perceptions. Several of our key themes related to differences among the organizational members. Original members of the organization saw SP as an organic inclusive family place, one where participatory decision-making was expected and access to leadership was easy. As any organization grows, processes have to be put in place to organise operations.

The way SP began to impose these changes felt oppressive to some of the company's founding members. For new hires, or people brought in via merger and acquisitions, it felt like they were on the outside, somewhat excluded from Jim's inner circle. There were concerns that middle management did not consistently reflect SP's culture and there was much confusion about who owned decision-making authority. What's more, the Research and Development departmental function was being managed with a more command and control style, viewed in opposition to SP's inclusive culture. The upshot was a sense of emerging microclimates. While members ardently agreed "patients first" remained SP's primary value, frustrations were palpable, as growing pains were experienced throughout the organization.

During the meeting we worked together (the CEO, our SP project liaison, Lauren, and myself) to discuss the similarities and differences between the organization's internal observations and the external findings. Around several key areas, the company had already begun to augment their management training programme (re-emphasising SP's culture) and modifying their performance metrics. They also initiated some team development activities at the executive level and made some personnel changes at the top. Given our concern about the lapse in time, Jim agreed to another full round of interviews with the executive group (those still with the organization). This became Phase 3 of the project, and we labelled the method a "bookend" approach. Serendipitously, the executives provided a pre/post snapshot, with the center of the organization revealing the process of change, as it was happening. What started out as a discovery piece about ethics in a small company, grew to become a case study about organizational identity, character, and organizational cultural development over time.

Research as an intervention

Although our motivation was to consider the inner workings of a start-up organization, field research comes with interactive aspects that have a life of their own. The Hawthorne effect refers to people changing their thought-action tendencies and behaviours, because of an awareness of being observed (cf. Wickström & Bendix, 2006). Our presence at SP signaled to organizational members that their thoughts and feelings were important and valued by company leaders. Our questions about ethical challenges, strengths, and experiences signaled that this topic was being taken seriously. The conversations we had with employees had the potential to spark deeper reflection about members' work experiences, which they may not have otherwise considered. Thus, our presence had the potential to influence the stories organizational members were telling themselves about their company, its culture and identity, and where it was heading.

Beyond the reciprocal relationship that can emerge between qualitative researcher and study participants, our research afforded SP a unique opportunity to compare their company culture data against our findings. In effect, we became another tool and resource that Jim could leverage to understand what was happening in the company. We also shed light on any discrepancies, adding significant contextual information to the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of organizational members. When trying to gain research access to an organization, this is a very important benefit that research practitioners can offer leaders. If you can provide useful knowledge to the CEO, the concern "*What's in it for me?*" is addressed. Conducting research as an intervention opens the door to scholarly inquiry, providing a unique opportunity to conduct scholarship within a dynamic operation.

Report-out session

After all of the bumps in the road, detours, and hard work, the day finally came when we were ready to share our results with the interview participants, and to hear their reactions. We invited everyone who had participated in the study to an official Report Out Session. To effectively communicate our findings and to gather participants' feedback, we summarised our final themes and asked each participant to read and react to them, prior to the meeting. Specifically, we wanted to know if they were consistent with how they felt about SP at the time of their interview. Recognising that the clock keeps ticking, and the organization continues to change over time, we also wanted to know if our themes still applied.

In total, we interviewed 59 employees (including the CEO). At the time of our report out, 22 of the participants were no longer with the company and three were unavailable. Of the 34 who were still employed at SP, 13 provided feedback prior to the meeting. Five more employees delivered their written feedback afterward; making a total of 18 feedback responses. Nineteen employee-participants attended the meeting. Jim welcomed us, and demonstrated a surprising amount of appreciation for our work at the outset of the meeting. Given he had pushed back on some of our findings, especially themes that related to discontentment, we really had no idea how this session would unfold. He was complimentary and expressed a belief that our report offered value beyond the company's annual culture survey.

Our plan was to briefly review the themes, then have attendees break out into small groups where they could discuss them and share their thoughts. They would identify what themes stood out and why, what themes were still accurate today, and then comment on anything we might have missed. Once the meeting was underway, it was clear that people wanted to stay together, to discuss matters as a whole. We were in a large room with tables forming a huge square, with several virtual attendees clearly visible by large screens. This was conducive for collaborative discourse and reflection. We asked everyone how they wanted to proceed, and it was unanimous that we should continue as a full group. So that's exactly what we did!

Going theme by theme to consider each theme's merit, everyone appeared to feel comfortable in expressing their views, often validating what we had presented, and other times providing us with a deeper level of understanding and/or specific examples. The participants offered useful hints about how to refine several themes, especially when certain terms became problematic. For example, "ethics" was replaced with "compliance." By working together, we teased out distinctions between ethical decisions versus compliance-related issues. To the outside observer, this may have seemed obvious. But in retrospect, it was a breakthrough moment in terms of establishing shared understanding. At the end of the meeting the attendees expressed gratitude for our time and the opportunity to discuss the findings. They seemed to be truly affirmed by our results in a way that was much more personal, descriptive, and reassuring than via quantitative metric tools. Our findings told the story of SP in a way that deeply resonated with their personal experiences. It was an incredibly validating feeling for us as well.

The story so far

Our journey with SP has shown us the deep impact that founding members have on the culture and identity of a firm. A patriarchal leader that creates an experience of belonging and family in the company can successfully create excitement, engagement, and commitment among their staff, fostering a positive vision for what is possible. However, authenticity in communicating a realistic image of what is unfolding, as change occurs, is essential. While optimistic leadership inspires and energises employees, communicating through an overly-rosy lens may ring hallow to employees, prompting worry, and even skepticism and disappointment.

There may be limits to the influence that inspirational leaders can have on organizational culture during periods of explosive growth. An influx of many new perspectives within a short period of time bears an uncertain impact on a start-up organization. This may be especially true when newcomers have had previous experiences working for industry competitors, with vastly different organizational cultures. It may be difficult for them to check their expectations at the door when joining a company that seeks to be a positive deviant in its respective industry. When newcomers do not reflect quite the same values as the start-up's founding members, differences can create tensions that, if not addressed quickly, may generate an organic drift in the fabric of the company's identity. Young companies may be at considerably greater risk of cultural shifts in response to newcomers, than more established firms. These possibilities should be considered explicitly, particularly when deciding on a growth strategy employed via mergers and acquisitions.

Project takeaways

Applied, organizational 'real time' research is messy. It's imperfect, iterative, and dynamic. This project was practice in patience, endurance, and adaptability. Throughout our time working with SP there had been considerable growth, both within the company and for us as researchers. Many of the employee-participants that we interviewed, some who had been with SP since very the beginning, had left the company (37%) by the time the project concluded. New hires replaced some of these people, bringing their own unique backgrounds, experiences, and expectations. Certainly, SP's turnover has had an impact on their organization. Elements of SP's identity and culture of origin will likely endure, but it will also continue to be transformed by the ebb and flow of the people who work there and via the new processes and procedures being introduced. Nothing is static, after all.

That's what makes research in practice so vibrant. It's ever-changing and never truly finished. Thus, the goal of our organizational development and scholarship activity should not be to unequivocally determine *what is*, but rather, to ascertain *what is possible*. If we allow ourselves to stay open to on-going learning, the process of inquiry will take us in new directions that provide unexpected insights.

Conclusions

Looking back, the myriad of surprises, challenges, and nuances of this project were numerous. But with dogged determination and resiliency we believe that the outcomes are more profound than the original plans would have ever produced.

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