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Creatively Embracing Action Research in Leadership, Personal Development and Growth

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Abstract: This study examines how employees apply action research models to support their personal development during periods of organisational change. It investigates the extent to which various action research models influence their growth in communication, leadership, creativity, and time management; the barriers most strongly associated with lower success in short-cycle personal action research; and how the number of reflective cycles relates to behavioural shifts. Employing secondary analysis of 86 personal development projects, the McMurray-Ryan model appeared most frequently (56.6%) and was valued for its adaptability. However, model type did not significantly affect behavioural outcomes, indicating that the primary driver of being innovative in learning and behavioural change is consistent, rather than choice of action research framework. The most common barriers for personal change included limited time, discomfort with initiating change, and either narrow or underdeveloped action plans.

Keywords: Action research; higher education; lifelong learning; personal development; professional capability; reflective practice

1 Problem

Leadership in the modern and increasingly global world necessitates constant adaptation and growth in response to ever-changing economic conditions and technological advancements. Higher education is well-positioned to equip its graduates with creativity and innovation mindsets so that they can respond effectively to change as leaders in the workforce and guide their organisations to

the forefront of their relevant fields. A Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme focuses on professional development with much of the training designed to produce emotional, social and cognitive intelligence competences which predict effective leadership (Boyatzis, 2006). An MBA curriculum can seek to nurture these qualities but is faced with an inherent structural challenge: for a successful education, it needs to transform short, course-based development projects into long-term, persistent behavioural changes through appropriate experiences in leadership, communication, creativity, and time management.

Action research is a methodology based in reflective practice, a tenet of several change theories, which seeks to enact transformative change in both individuals and organisations in a dynamic and context-specific manner. However, a recurrent challenge in innovation management is the application of action research with a rhetorical focus while lacking a solid understanding of how different factors influence its effectiveness, including the model choice, the impact of project structure, and the importance of contextual support in enacting sustained behavioural change. Consequently, this study focuses on the MBA classroom as an innovation context: it investigates how the structure, context and duration of action research projects for personal development conducted by MBA participants can facilitate a culture of experimentation, iteration, and learning for today's leadership professionals.

2 Current Understanding

2.1 Action Research as a Professional Development Methodology

Action research is a methodology seeking transformative change through a structured and iterative process of *taking action* and *conducting research*; these core components occur simultaneously and are linked through critical reflection. There are several different models which fall under the action research umbrella, but they all share a flexible and cyclical nature, placing emphasis on observation, practical measures, and reflection.

Action research has seen significant development since its early development as a method that links social practice with methodical inquiry. It originated from Lewis (1946) with its foundational premise of knowledge being contextualised in, and emerging from, action and observation in social contexts rather than existing abstractly and detached from real-world problems. At the time, this epistemological position was quite radical in how it deemed lived experience and practice as legitimate sources of knowledge, moving away from research traditions seeking objective, context-independent truths. Over the past several decades, action research has broadened across disciplines such as healthcare and education: instead of positioning people as only subjects of research, it engages them as co-researchers and values the knowledge and perspective they hold from their roles and lived experience. Recently, action research has been developed for contemporary work since research can incorporate modern tooling such as data

analytics and collaborative platforms to improve data collection and adapt to newer and more digitalised working practices (Siregar, 2025).

The principles of action research are compatible with existing principles of adult learning. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory conceives the process of learning as happening across several stages which include reflective observation and experimentation. The learning theory attributes ineffective change in both organisations and individuals to an imbalance between observation and action: prioritising the former, focuses too much effort and attention on information gathering whereas emphasising the latter leads to decision-making without clear understanding. This balance is particularly important to strike in a professional development context such as an MBA programme in which participants learn theoretical framework while bringing with them years of industry experience. Action research seeks to reconcile the balance issue; not only is it compatible with experiential learning theory but it can be considered an operationalisation of its premises, and within higher education, it has been employed as a pedagogical strategy to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Balthu & Clegg, 2025). By partaking in the action research methodology, learners engage themselves in systematic cycles of inquiry applied to real-world scenarios which supports their development of practical judgement and reflective capability.

Action research offers several theoretical advantages when it is applied to personal development. According to Schon (2017), it contextualises learning within authentic professional challenges rather than hypothetical scenarios, enhances metacognitive awareness through structured reflection, and recognises that meaningful behavioural change develops through multiple cycles rather than one single cycle (Mezirow, 1997). These characteristics are relevant to promote capability development in leadership, communication, and problem-solving: action research is a personalised experience in collecting evidence, analysing issues and self-regulation of learning. Mezirow's notion of transformative learning is instructive, arguing that genuine developmental change arises from shifting one's "frame-of-reference", making learners actively engage concepts in the context of their own lives and experiences, and requiring reflection on personal assumptions. Action research aligns with the principles of transformative learning: it places the onus of development on the learner.

Action research is not without its criticisms, especially in the educational sphere. Its studies aim to be context-specific so findings of research may not transfer to other settings and institutions an individual finds themself in. Because action research designates the role of practitioner and researcher to the same person, they may consciously or unconsciously interpret data in a manner which confirms their expectations and justifies their practices. In an MBA programme, the possibility of bias and interest-driven results could be exacerbated by the degree assessing student projects with marks and feedback. In terms of logistics, action research emphasises the importance of time and iteration in its cyclical nature which often runs directly in opposition to modular courses which must

adhere to university schedules by running in constrained timeframes, compromising the quantity and depth of the research.

2.2 Models of Action Research

A plethora of action research models has emerged since Lewin's (1946) foundational formulation. Each model is comprised of a cyclical structure, demands stakeholder participation, and provides mechanisms through which change is evaluated, but varies in the techniques and scope. In this research, participants were free to choose an action research model, and the most popular choices are subsequently outlined. The McMurray-Ryan model emphasises flexibility and a practical focus which makes it versatile to use for participants, consistent with its reputation for accessibility and adaptability in applied professional settings. The participatory model developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) follows a structural spiral of plan → act → observe → reflect, its clear structure documenting outcomes well. The Stringer model has a routine of the three steps "look, think, act": it is easy to follow and properly accommodates communities such as classrooms. Lewin's original model is considered experimental but places less emphasis on the reflective practices.

The diversity of the model choices poses a significant methodological question: do these distinctions significantly influence outcomes? Some scholars note that particular action research models may be more relevant according to the specific contexts, learner needs, or developmental needs (Balthu & Clegg, 2025). A model well-suited to reflective thinking in experienced professionals might not be as useful to younger learners undergoing experiential learning for the first time and cultural backgrounds may influence the readiness of information sharing. Other scholars such as Coughlan and Coghlan (2002) mention that when practitioners strictly apply the underlying action research cycle – problem diagnosis, intervention planning, action taking, outcome evaluation, reflection – the chosen model has narrow influence on learning and behavioural change. This finding suggests the discipline of reflective engagement underpins learning more than model architecture. This debate invites further research on the importance of model choice and the need to examine the mechanisms through which action research supports personal and professional growth.

Coghlan and Brannick (2001) describe the process of conducting action research internally and introspectively rather than a common external research approach taken by a consultant with that facilitative purpose. They note that outcomes may heavily depend on reflection quality and level of engagement instead of the specific methodological choices for making observations and taking action, often associated with specific models. They address the unique opportunities and challenges of research as an insider, similar to the position an individual holds in a personal development project: while the researcher has deep contextual familiarity and already established relationships, they must be aware of their biases, the potential political complexity of the findings which could implicate colleagues, and conflicts between their research and role.

2.3 Barriers to Personal Change and Development

Personal development efforts are repeatedly constrained by a mixture of organisational and individual barriers; from the organisational lens, desired change can be hampered by time constraints for reflective practice, inadequate action plans, and the absence of ongoing organisational support (Boyatzis, 2006). Organisational development processes such as training programmes and annual reviews can place large emphasis on areas of improvement while insufficiently praising good results, leaving a person feeling defensive and under stress which are counterproductive to growth. Similarly, individual barriers can impede personal development: a lack of sensitivity can result in leaders not noticing changes in others, psychological discomfort may prevent someone from experimenting with different behaviour, and fraught relationships reduce effective bidirectional communication.

These factors can hinder the effectiveness of development initiatives, particularly those requiring multiple cycles of action and reflection. Understanding which barriers most reliably predict poor project success is essential to designing and adjusting conditions to facilitate personal development action research projects and to mitigate hindrances.

2.4 Reflective Practice and Behavioural Change

Action research is grounded in the assumption that iterative reflection can foster learning and support behavioural change in higher education institutions. However, reflection is neither automatic nor standardised in quality. According to Schon (2017), reflection-in-action arises during practice whereas reflection-on-action requires planned cognitive engagement after the event. It is more difficult to structure reflection-in-action which occurs in the moment of practice and therefore more difficult to formally document. On the contrary, reflection-on-action can be scaffolded by providing journals and structured prompts, more easily taught in a curriculum and amenable to assessment and feedback.

The frequency, depth and timing of reflective cycles are crucial in influencing developmental outcomes. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that compares the impacts of single cycle versus multi-cycle action research processes in the context of personal development: understanding the effect of reflective frequency on measurable change would assist in scoping the relevant resources allocated to a personal development project.

3 Research Questions

Three research questions underpin this study. Firstly, to what extent do different action research models result in measurable improvements in communication, leadership, creativity, and time management? If one specific model archetype is reported to be notably more successful for personal development, it is natural to

choose it. In the contrary case where no models prevail, the one which feels most appropriate and approachable to the user is likely to be an appropriate choice.

Secondly, which barriers are associated with lower success in short-cycle personal action research projects? By knowing which barriers recur in projects and how obstructive they are, effort can be targeted towards eliminating or mitigating the most impeding factors.

Thirdly, how does the frequency of reflective cycles affect behavioural change and self-improvement? Action research as a methodology places emphasis on the repetitive nature of learning but with practical limitations on resources and time allocated to personal development, it is valuable to have a sense for what constitutes enough iterations for a moderate level of success.

By answering these questions, critical perspectives are offered on the design and support of personal development initiatives that can be used by leadership and management in pursuit of behavioural change and innovation.

4 Research Design

Prior to data collection, the study was approved by the institution's ethics department. The data included 86 MBA participant action research projects comprised of 59 individual projects and 27 projects completed in small groups, resulting in a final sample of n=86. The study's five primary variables are: (a) action research model type (McMurray-Ryan, Stinger, Kemmis & McTaggart, Lewin, and other models); (b) personal development focus area (leadership, communication, public speaking, creativity, time management, and interpersonal effectiveness); (c) methods employed (learning diaries, introspection, colleague feedback, observation, and questionnaires); (d) project outcomes (reported changes in capability or behaviour); and (e) reported limitation and barriers. The two derived variables are as follows: (a) barriers present (time limitation, discomfort with change, narrow/incomplete action plan, and lack of organisational support); and (b) approximate cycle frequency (single-cycle versus multi-cycle projects which is inferred from documentation of repeated planning action reflection sequences).

Success was rated on a five-point Likert scale: (1) highly unsuccessful – participants rejected the action research model or achieved no successful outcomes; (2) moderately unsuccessful – participants accepted the model but did not implement findings; (3) satisfactory – participants accepted the model and achieved some outcomes without long-term integration; (4) moderately successful – participants accepted the model and it resulted in some meaningful change; (5) highly successful – participants embraced the model and fully integrated findings into future activities.

5 Findings

The 86 action research projects were distributed across multiple focus areas: communication (n=22, 25.6%), leadership (n=18, 20.9%), time management (n=15, 17.4%), interpersonal effectiveness (n=14, 16.3%), public speaking (n=10, 11.6%), and creativity (n=7, 8.1%). Communication as the plurality is understandable given its breadth and application to many facets of both personal and professional life.

In their careers, the participants held roles across diverse organisational levels: 24.1% mid-level managers, 17.2% employees, 15.2% students, 7.8% senior managers, 5.8% first-level managers, 3.8% consultants, and others (12.9%). This composition reflects typical MBA cohort characteristics, with substantial representation from mid-career professionals.

The McMurray-Ryan model dominated project selection (54.7%) across all action research projects. This model's prevalence was attributed by participants to its accessibility, flexibility, and applicability to both organisational and personal contexts. The Kemmis and McTaggart model represented the second most frequent choice (13.3%), followed by Stinger (7.3%), Lewin (4.5%), and Wadsworth (4.7%) models. Notably, 4.5% of projects did not explicitly identify a discrete model, choosing to combine research methods and project structure across models. Participants' rationales for model selection centred on perceived flexibility, existing familiarity, mentor recommendation, and estimated fit with project scope. Selection appeared largely driven by accessibility and prior exposure rather than a deliberate matching of model type to project requirements.

Cross-tabulation of model type and success ratings revealed no clear pattern differentiating outcomes by methodological choice. Projects employing the McMurray-Ryan model (n=47 in the personal development subsample) achieved a mean success rating of 3.1, similar to the Kemmis and McTaggart projects (n=8) which achieved a mean success of 3.2. The absence of meaningful differences contradicts the hypothesis that specific model features substantially shape outcomes. The findings suggest structural reflection, common to rigorously applied action research approaches, constitutes the core mechanism facilitating learning. Both mean scores fall into the 'satisfactory' category of the scale: despite being able to conduct research and take some directed action, the average result of the personal development projects did not embed longer-term, procedural change.

Analysis of barriers encountered across projects highlights key factors reducing success.

(a) Time Limitations: 61.6% of projects reported time constraints and averaged a less than satisfactory 2.8 score, as opposed to the 3.4 success of projects without time limitations. Written feedback comments on time scarcity impeding cycles, narrowing action plans and limiting the depth of reflection. The likely explanation is that action research in all forms

depends on multi-step, cyclical processes which are left incomplete or skipped when the project is not allocated enough time.

(b) Discomfort with Change Enactment: 34.9% of projects noted participant discomfort in implementing behavioural changes, with these projects averaging 2.5 success as opposed to 3.4 for ones without reporting discomfort. Despite participants accepting findings from an intellectual perspective, they struggled to turn insights into behaviour, aligning with research on the intention-behaviour gap (Jekauc et al., 2025). Recent work recontextualises this issue: one-off intentions are often insufficient to effect change when there are regular fluctuations in motivation and environments, even possible between days of the week. Some behaviours are more difficult to automate and the social context can benefit or impede this. Furthermore, several intentions can be held at once which can compete for limited resources. In the context of this study, participant discomfort – fear, embarrassment, hesitancy – represents a volatile and internal barrier which sways intentions formed during reflection before it manifests in sustained behavioural change.

(c) Narrow or Incomplete Action Plans: 28.4% had insufficiently comprehensive or partially executed plans, averaging 2.6 versus 3.5 for well-developed, fully executed plans. This disparity is attributable to the structural logic of action research itself: each cycle of reflection directs subsequent action, so a poorly defined plan propagates its limitations forward. Furthermore, underlying issues might not be investigated at all and there are fewer opportunities to observe outcomes.

(d) Insufficient Organisational Support: 19.8% lacked systemic support such as reinforcement or structural alignment, averaging 2.3 versus 3.4 for projects with supportive contexts. Competencies under the focus of personal development goals, especially the outlined public speaking and interpersonal effectiveness, cannot be meaningfully practised in isolation and depend on an environment which provides opportunity and feedback. This finding aligns with Boyatiz' (2006) argument that sustained behavioural change requires resonant relationships and supportive environmental conditions as preconditions rather than helpful additions.

Notably, 73.3% of projects reported at least one significant barrier, with 45.3% reporting multiple simultaneous barriers; such prevalence highlights substantial resistance to personal change within organisational contexts from a multitude of sources.

Analysis of the documented reflective cycles distinguishes single-cycle projects (one iteration of planning-action-observation-reflection) from multi-cycle projects (two or more documented iterations). Approximately 58.1% of projects evidenced multi-cycle approaches, while 41.9% completed single cycles. Multi-cycle projects achieved a mean success rating of 3.4 versus 2.9 for single-cycle projects. This difference, while not enormous, suggests that sustained iteration enhances outcomes, a finding consistent with action research theory. Within

multi-cycle projects, those completing three or more cycles (n=16) achieved a mean rating of 3.7, compared to 3.2 for two-cycle projects (n=34). This incremental pattern of additional cycles is associated with a modest but consistent improvement in outcomes. This suggests that the iterative engagement operates cumulatively as the theoretical basis of action research suggests, yet the magnitude and feasibility of this effect appears to be constrained by time-related factors.

6 Contribution to Innovation Management Theory

In terms of innovation management in the higher education context, this study proposes reframing personal development projects: instead of solely applications of fixed models, they can be treated as design challenges in action research-based innovation. The finding that different action research models result in similar outcome distributions supports the notion that common methodologies, structural engagement, iterative reflection, and feedback constitute the active ingredients, which align with impactful evidence from educational research. The study's finding suggests that innovation efforts in curriculum development should prioritise enhancing reflective rigour, cycle, completion, and contextual support instead of switching methodological approaches. This finding supports the broader theoretical claim advanced by Coughlan and Coghlan (2002) that consistent, high-quality cyclical engagement matters more than the procedural template: internalising the process of diagnostic inquiry and systematic evaluation achieves more meaningful results than following model steps mechanically. Furthermore, by widening the scope of model selection, there is greater flexibility in selecting the models according to their structures and techniques. By giving autonomy and decision-making responsibility to the individual researcher, they must actively investigate and tackle their challenge rather than following a more prescriptive and standardised framework which may not best suit the user's intentions.

By quantifying how barriers and cycle frequency relate to outcome, this study advances our understanding of boundary conditions for reflective, innovation-oriented pedagogies. Without sufficient time, psychological safety, and organisational alignment, the potential of action research for capability-building is significantly restricted. Awareness of these temporal, behavioural and structural barriers may assist in planning the project's scope and the necessary resources in advance of project completion. The barriers are particularly salient in the context of Boyatzis' (2006) intentional change theory: 'effective leadership relationships at dyadic and larger system levels' and 'effective leadership on many levels' are required to facilitate sustained change. For the innovation management community, this study may facilitate theorising how micro-level innovation projects such as personal experiments in leadership might be structured to implement change in complex organisational systems.

7 Practical Implications

Institutions preparing professionals for leadership in today's workplaces should implement structured personal development initiatives incorporating action research principles into their organisational cultures. However, for more effective results and realistic practice, initiatives should emphasise sustained, multi-cycle engagement over single-semester curriculum projects. The ideal implementation might span multiple courses or integrate into capstone experiences, extending the timeframes for iterative development to enable more action research cycles to take place and a wider context to be covered. In practical terms, introducing action research as a framework for a project in an earlier module to familiarise participants with planning and the action-reflection cycle before returning to the methodology later would assist in addressing the most common barrier of time limitation in the curriculum architecture itself.

Explicit instruction in comprehensive action planning (e.g., identifying multiple intervention points, potential obstacles, contingency strategies) enhances plan robustness whereas insufficient planning is shown to reduce project success. Coordination with employer partners regarding developmental initiatives creates organisational alignment supporting innovation management and behaviour integration.

Rather than mandating specific action research models, institutions might take a menu-based approach with pre-selected models to reduce the decision-making burden on students while maintaining methodological rigour; participants may prioritise the allocation of sufficient time and rigour over specific model choice which appears to be less consequential. A curated set of choices enables familiarity and accessibility to be key factors while still enabling individual project requirements to be accounted for.

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