

CHAPTER 4

Method and design

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the problem statement it was mentioned that organisations provide education, training and development practices based on determining performance deficiencies in individual employees. This approach tends to focus on the negative – on those skills that the employee lacks. Resultant training is then aimed at addressing the employee's weak points rather than building on the employee's strengths. This study researches the question whether strengths-focussed training will affect team performance within an organisation within the food and beverages manufacturing industry positively. The main research question for this research is: *What is the effect of strengths-focussed training on team performance?* To address the problem the following four specific objectives are stated:

- To establish a theoretical foundation for using strengths-focussed training to improve performance;
- To identify parameters and criteria for determining the effects of strengths-focussed training on team performance;
- To gain new insight on how people who have undergone resilience training as an example of strengths-focussed training, experienced the training; and
- To gain new insight on whether the people who have undergone resilience training as an example of strengths-focussed training, implemented the training within the workplace.

With regard to the above-mentioned no substantial research had been conducted previously regarding the relationship between strengths-focussed training, resilience, behaviour and motivation as performance variables within organisations.

In Chapter two an overview and a critical summary of the motivational theories of Bandura and Skinner and resilience as a construct relevant to this study were undertaken. During this overview the relationship between the individual, the environment, systems (team, department, organisation, etc.), behaviour, performance and the psychological aspects of the individual was investigated. It was concluded that a positive relationship exists between the variables. A theoretical foundation for using strengths-focussed training to improve performance was therefore established. The theoretical foundation guides the process of identifying parameters and criteria for determining the effects of strengths-focussed training on the individual and the team for the purposes of this study.

In Chapter three a literature review of training, learning and performance within organisational context was conducted to identify parameters and criteria for determining the effect of strengths-focussed training on team performance.

The review of literature in Chapter three has in conjunction with Chapter two established a theoretical foundation for using strengths-focussed training to improve performance. This review also supported the identification of parameters and criteria for determining the effects of strengths-focussed training on the performance of both the individual (see Annexure D section A) and the team (see Annexure D section B), which addresses the second specific objective of this study (see 1.5.2).

Chapter four gives an account of action research – its cycles and phases. The account includes the data collection and data processing methods of this study.

4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is seen as “a general plan and structure of an investigation which the researcher uses to obtain evidence to answer research questions” (Dzivhane 2000:12).

Studies that employ a qualitative research design usually make use of interactive research methods (i.e. the collection of data through the interaction with selected persons in the research field) or non-interactive methods such as the gleaning of information from documents (McMillan & Schumacher 1993:374). The design utilised for this study is action research.

The social base for action research is involvement, whereas the educational basis is improvement. Action research can further also be described as a form of self-reflective investigation. It is participatory since it involves the researcher with her own enquiry and collaborative since it also involves other people as part of shared enquiry. The 'action' of action research implies change in people's lives and therefore the system in which they live. This design also allows the researcher not only to declare the complex interaction between individuals and the social environment but to examine the influence that the researcher has on these interactions as well (McNiff 1988:2 – 7; Carr & Kemmis 1986:34; Heller, Price, Reinharz, Rigger & Wandersman 1984:44). Action research was chosen as design for this study because it allows optimally for the reflection, application and readdressing of personal issues resulting from the resilience training. For the purposes of this study the research will only focus on the changes on people (in this case senior managers participating in the study) and the effect that these changes – brought on by strengths-focussed training – will have on team performance.

Action research is a cyclical process. Every one of the following six phases discussed entail four steps which include:

- planning of the phase;
- action, which is the implementation of that which is planned;
- observation of the implementation; and
- reflection on the implementation.

Should it follow from the reflection that any aspect was not addressed or left out, the cycle repeats itself.

These four steps were followed in all four phases of the action research utilised for this study, although it might not be discussed or specified under the above-mentioned four steps.

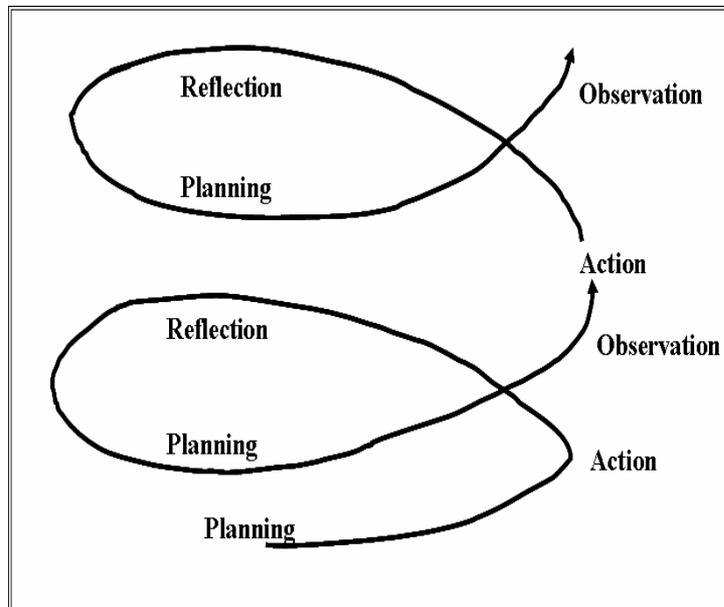


Figure 4.1 The spiral of the action research cycles (Adopted from McNiff 1988: 44)

4.2.1 Phase one: Orientation phase

For this study to take place in the workplace, permission had to be given by the production manager of the organisation within this food and beverage manufacturing site. An explorative discussion was held with the production manager to present the following aspects:

- the rationale for the research (discussed in 1.2);
- the problem statement (discussed in 1.3);
- the research question (discussed in 1.3);
- the general aim of the research (discussed under 1.5.1);
- the specific objectives (discussed in 1.5.2).

The environment in which the study was done is always inundated with deadlines, changes and the delivering of production against a set plan. It was important that this study does not infringe on any activities within the organisation. Otherwise the participants within the research could experience the research negatively and consider the study as a burden rather than a valuable input, not only to the organisation but also the field of research in which this study was conducted.

This phase and the following phase were run parallel to each other to save time for all the parties involved.

4.2.2 Phase two: Exploring phase

After permission from the production manager was obtained, the sample group, which was selected purposefully and comprised of four managers from the senior management team, had to be orientated regarding the following aspects:

- the rationale for the research (discussed in 1.2);
- the problem statement (discussed in 1.3);
- the research question (discussed in 1.3);
- the general aim of the research (discussed under 1.5.1);
- the specific objectives (discussed in 1.5.2);
- methods of data collection (see 4.2.4.2);
- the sample group (see 4.2.3); and
- the envisaged time period foreseen for this research to take place.

Other aspects that were discussed with the sample group individually during the information sessions were:

- Understanding that participation within this study is voluntary.
- Agreement from the individuals within the sample group to be included within the study.
- Permission to use information obtained in the study as part of the research.

- Permission to audio-tape the interviews that were held.
- Confirmation was given to the individual that the audio-tape would be transcribed ad verbatim because it will reduce the risk of any misinterpretations accounted for in the transcripts (see Annexure B).
- Confirmation to the individuals within the sample group that the researcher would keep their identities confidential.
- Confirmation to the individuals within the sample group that the researcher did not foresee any emotional harm that could come from their participation within this study other than that some of the individuals could find the personal reflection required within the training to be difficult. To minimise this, qualified psychologists were used as consultants to present the training and to support the learners should they experience any traumatic emotional issues during the training. This relationship between the learning facilitator (psychologists) and the learners would ensure the confidentiality of the individual's personal affairs. Any personal issues that the learner might encounter during the training were discussed by the individual experiencing the problem or concern with the consultant facilitating the course. This information would not be revealed to the researcher.

During this phase an implementation plan was developed wherein the different activities were scheduled to take place (for example, the training sessions, submission of the written sketches, interviews and observation report). This plan was implemented and monitored to ensure that the participants were always aware of when the activities were happening and what was expected of them either during or after the activities took place.

4.2.3 Phase three: Recruitment of participants

Purposive sampling was used for the purpose of this study. This was done for two reasons:

- Purposeful sampling allows maximum utilisation of data obtained from the small sample that was used in this study.

- Purposely selecting a range of subjects to observe was more likely to uncover “multiple realities” relevant to the inquiry, which ensured that the problem statement of this study could be addressed (Borg & Gall 1989:386).

The researcher took note of the warning given by McBurney (1994:203) that “a judgment could be made” on making the choice of the sample. This “judgment” could influence the results of the undertaken research. The researcher assumed that personal knowledge regarding the population might be useful in judging which participants to sample, so that rich data about the topic under investigation could be obtained. The researcher is an experienced education and training practitioner with 16 years of education, training and HRD exposure. Furthermore, the researcher has studied research methodology in education as well as research management in training practice.

All of the participants, four in total, were part of the senior management team. This senior management team consists of seven members overall. The four participants, from the senior management team, were well experienced and qualified for their positions. Four individuals out of the total management team of seven were chosen in the following way: Two of the team members represent core business departments and the other two represent service departments to those core departments. All four of these individuals have roles and responsibilities within their management team, which forms the senior management team for a site within the food manufacturing industry with which the researcher is associated. Each of the members had team goals against which their performance was measured within the team.

The participants were interviewed individually and the process of the entire programme and research was discussed. Questions were answered and concerns were addressed where applicable. Each participant gave his informed consent to be part of this study.

4.2.4 Phase four: Evaluation of the situation

The study's main research question is: *What is the effect of strengths-focussed training on team performance?* Four specific objectives as stated in 4.1 were identified to address the problem. The research method for this study included both the review of literature and an empirical investigation. The review of literature supported the identification of parameters and criteria for determining the effect of strengths-focussed training on the performance of both the individual and the team. These parameters and criteria were used in performing the empirical investigation of this study. The empirical investigation was conducted to evaluate the literature review and ultimately, to address the problem statement of this study.

4.3 Research method

The method for this study included both the review of literature and an empirical investigation. Resilience training as mentioned earlier in the study was decided upon as a divisional training project for all the different sites within an organisation in the food and manufacturing industry. This training formed the foundation on which the results of the empirical investigation were attained. The empirical investigation and the literature review are discussed in more detail in sections 4.4 and 4.5.

The background on both the process that was followed with the resilience training as well as a summarised description of the "tools" utilised within the training are now discussed. The training was conducted with trained psychologists as learning facilitators for the middle management and senior management teams. The main purpose for using qualified psychologists as consultants was to ensure that no emotional harm came to the participants during the training process which required the participants to do considerable self-reflection. For some people this can be very traumatic or stressful and the psychologists would then handle any related issues that could be seen as harmful and stressful to the participants.

All four individuals, who were purposively selected as part of this study, attended a four-day resilience training session. The resilience training is used for the purpose of this study as an example of strengths-focussed training and is divided into two two-day sessions. The training includes different tools, which aid the individual to acquire different skills. Resilience training is discussed in didactic context in more detail in section 1.2.4.

The training attempted to allow a period of approximately seven to ten days after each two-day training session. This was done so that the individual could utilise the break to go back and apply the different tools and strengths, which were discovered or confirmed during each training session. This also gave the individual a chance to reflect, internalise and look at application in the workplace. When applying the various concepts the participant was able to evaluate whether he encountered any problems during the application. When the employees attended the second session, questions were answered, home exercises were revised to ensure understanding, and problems in the application were addressed, where applicable. In addition, a physical resilience session of two hours was presented as part of a more holistic approach. This physical resilience session had both a theoretical as well as a practical component. This physical resilience session addressed statistics relating to the importance of physical well-being. In the practical session participants did exercises that are good and practical to use in the office or whilst they are in a meeting. This created the understanding that physical well-being should be seen as part of a total lifestyle.

It was expected of the individual to implement the learning from the training, in not only the workplace and the management team members' respective departments to improve performance, but also at home or in the community whichever is applicable.

This study did not make the assumption that all individuals knew their strengths. Moreover, even though an individual might have known his strengths, it was

assumed that the specific strength would be confirmed. It was anticipated that the individual would discover other strengths that he / she either did not know about or had forgotten.

4.4 Data collection

The researcher used four methods of data collection.

- Literature review. The approach for the literature study undertaken for the purposes of this study was deductive, in that a literature review preceded the empirical research.

In Chapter two an overview and critical summary of the motivational theories of Bandura, Skinner, Bronfenbrenner and resilience as a construct relevant to this study was undertaken. During this overview the relationship between the individual, the environment, systems (team, department, organisation, etc.), behaviour, performance and the psychological aspects of the individual was investigated. It was concluded that a positive relationship exists between the variables. A theoretical foundation for using strengths-focussed training to improve performance was therefore established. The theoretical foundation guided the process of identifying parameters and criteria for determining the effects of strengths-focussed training on the individual and the team within this study.

In Chapter three the literature review of psycho-education, adult learning and performance within the HRD context of an organisation was conducted to identify parameters and criteria for determining the effect of strengths-focussed training on team performance. The review of the literature in this chapter has indicated a positive correlation between behaviour, attitude, cognition, morale and self-efficacy on team performance (see 3.4.2).

The review of literature in Chapter three has, furthermore, in conjunction with Chapter two established a theoretical foundation for using strengths-focussed training to improve performance. This review has also supported the identification of parameters and criteria for determining the effect of strengths-focussed training on the performance of both the individual and the team. These parameters and criteria were used in performing the empirical investigation of this study.

- Written sketches. A written sketch refers to a short account that sketches what an individual feels or perceives about a specific situation.

The participant had to give a written or typed account of approximately one page on "How did you experience the resilience training over the four-day period"? No further guidelines were given, to allow the learners to freely express all their perceptions, feelings and experiences without having committed themselves to specific designated parameters. The purpose of the sketch was to meet the third specific objective: *To gain new insight on how people who have undergone resilience training as an example of strengths-focussed training, experienced the training.*

- Individual interviews. Interviews of approximately one hour were held with each participant. Each interview was taped on a cassette to enable ad verbatim transcribing after the interviews were complete. An example of the interview protocol is attached as Annexure C.

The reasons for using open-ended interviews were threefold:

- To meet the third and fourth specific objectives of this study: *To gain new insight on how people who have undergone resilience training as an example of strengths-focussed training, experienced the training;* and *To gain new insight on whether the people who have undergone resilience training as an example of strengths-focussed training, implemented the training within the workplace.*

- To allow the interviewer to probe where information was considered to be outstanding.
- It did not restrict the individual and the interviewer to a specific set of questions.

The following two questions were asked as part of the interview:

- *Please tell me how you experienced the resilience training over the four-day period?*
- *Describe to me in detail how the resilience training affected your performance within your team.*

- Observation report.

The production manager was requested to submit an observation report on any behaviour or attitude changes that he observed of the participants within the team after the training.

The purpose of the report was to evaluate whether the participants implemented the skills, attitudes or behaviours that they had attained during the resilience training to ensure attainment of the fourth specific aim of this study: *To gain new insight on whether the people who have undergone resilience training as an example of strengths-focussed training, implemented the training within the workplace.* There were no other specific guidelines given for the compilation of the report. The reasons for this were twofold:

- This is an explorative study and by giving guidelines it was anticipated that important aspects that could relate to this study might be overlooked.
- It allowed the production manager to freely observe important changes within the learners without any restriction by specified parameters. Due to the sensitivity of the observation report, it will not be attached as part of this study.

- Follow-up observation report. Insufficient scientific information was derived from the initial observation report and a follow-up report was compiled. The detailed questionnaire is attached as Annexure D at the end of this study.

The purpose of the follow-up report was to observe the learners in terms of identified parameters and criteria. The observation report applied the parameters and criteria and therefore enabled the researcher to reach a conclusion both on how the learners experienced the resilience training and whether they implemented the training within their working environment.

This observation report contains two sections, compiled for individual learners to be observed against specific parameters and a five-point rating scale. These aspects are important outcomes of the resilience training for this study:

- Section A: The effect of resilience training on the **individual** within the team (Any team comprises of individuals).
- Section B: The effect of resilience training on the **performance** of the team.

Section A addressed the question of whether the following four sets of skills of the individual within the team were affected:

- Mastery skills that include the following:
 - Sense of control;
 - Decision-making ability;
 - Individual's ability to organise and set priorities;
 - Self-efficacy.
- Internal support skills that address the following aspects:
 - Internal support (inner strength, hardiness, self-efficacy and positive self-reflection);
 - Interpersonal support (receiving, giving and empathy);

- Systemic support (within the organisational context);
 - Spiritually (values, intuition, mindfulness and beliefs).
- Bounce-back ability of the individual that includes:
 - Individual's ability to handle stress;
 - Effective utilisation of past successes to create a positive mindset for the present (boosting of self-esteem);
 - The individual's optimism;
 - The individual's capacity to handle change.
 - Resourcefulness of the individual includes the following aspects:
 - Creativity and out-of-the-box thinking;
 - The individual's ability to use networks effectively;
 - Learned resourcefulness of the individual.

Section B addressed the question of whether resilience training affected the performance of the team with regard to the following five aspects:

- Shared commitment of the team;
- Synergy and agreement among the members;
- Goals, roles and responsibilities;
- Interdependent and interchangeable interaction amongst each other;
- Holding each other mutually accountable.

It must be noted that the information of all of these sections are interdependent and interchangeable with each other and each section can therefore not be seen as a separate entity.

4.5 Data processing

The researcher collected the written sketches from every individual directly after the training was completed. The interviews were recorded by using a tape recorder after permission was acquired from the employees. An example of the

format in which permission was obtained to record the interview is given in Annexure B.

The interviews conducted with all the participants were transcribed ad verbatim from the tapes. However, due to the sensitivity and personal nature of the content of these interviews, and for the protection of the individual's identity, the verbatim content of the interviews are not attached to this report. The patterns from the observation report were done separately as this data was considered to be an evaluation against desired outcomes by an external observer and not a reflection by the learners themselves. All the data results were recorded, interpreted and related to the literature review and the results presented.

4.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter a report has been given on the method and design of the empirical phase of this study. This study is an explorative and qualitative study with action research as design that endeavours to meet the main research question for this research (see 4.1). Purposeful sampling was used for the purposes of this study.

The research method for this study included both the review of literature and an empirical investigation. Four methods of data collection was used, namely, literature review, written sketches, individual interviews and an observation report. A follow-up observation report was compiled as insufficient scientific information was derived from the initial observation report. The purpose of the follow-up report was to observe learners in terms of identified parameters and criteria. This enabled the researcher to reach conclusions on the effect of resilience training on both the individual within the team and on the performance of the team.

All the data results were recorded, interpreted and related to the literature review. An account of the findings from this empirical investigation is given in Chapter five.