

# Uncover Your Personal Methodology

Use an action-research mindset to examine how you work and achieve success.

BY MIES DE KONING

**A**s talent development practitioners, we devote ourselves to supporting others' careers. However, to be taken seriously, we must do more than talk the talk. We should also walk the walk as role models of professional growth and advancement, constantly asking, "How can I get even better at what I do?"

As individuals, we should explore every opportunity to uncover and share new practical knowledge. One way to do that is by challenging ourselves to develop personal methodologies. Doing so will not only stimulate our own professional growth and career development; it also will enable each of us to contribute to the ongoing development of our field, from within.

## Let's get personal

Different areas of talent development adhere to different methodologies. For example, those of us working in the corporate world may have different experiences from those working in non-profits, and those in higher education may have different approaches from those in healthcare.

Each talent development department—more or less intentionally—constructs its own methodology, which underpins and explains its work. Within our groups, we debate which theories, methods, or beliefs to base our actions on so we can evaluate those approaches and keep them up-to-date.

That isn't enough, though. Experienced talent development professionals should take this conversation even further and develop a personal methodology. We should ask ourselves, "What philosophies, ideas, convictions, or beliefs influence my work? What behaviors give me the most success?"

At first, you might use the methods and programs your organization has provided you with to answer those questions. But when you reflect more critically, you'll find that there is something unique and unspoken about how you do your best work—an unidentified, personal practice that sets you apart from your peers, something that defines you beyond your role or position. Likely, this unique talent is the cumulation of

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## Five Sets of Reflection Questions

1

What moments make you feel like your work is most meaningful? What is your contribution to those moments?

2

What qualities, values, and intentions do you bring to the table no matter what—regardless of context?



## Share Your Findings

It's great if you can use an action-research mindset to uncover your personal methodology, but at times the process might feel a bit self-centered. That's why it's a good idea to get others involved after you've developed a level of comfort.

Start small by having a conversation with a co-worker. Talk to colleagues about your search, then ask others to observe you and describe what they think sets you apart. Use those insights as you process your data, and then ask your peers to test your working theory and explore if it works for them too—and if so, under which circumstances.

Over time, you can start building a community of practice where participants share their insights and develop their talents. Eventually, you can consider presenting your findings to a bigger audience. Organize a learning lunch, write a blog, or give a presentation. Start writing books and become a leader in your field. Keep up the hard work, and before you know it, you might find yourself on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

## Observe and investigate your daily work experience from a new viewpoint.

There are different methods and approaches to action research, but in general you could describe it as a participatory process of reflective, inquisitive, and progressive problem solving. Historically, action research has been a popular approach for leading organization development and change, with a focus on building and leveraging communities of practice in the process.

When it comes to your career, applying an action-research mindset means to incorporate the principles of action research on a day-to-day basis for the purpose of self-development. Without pretending to be in any way scientific, this can help you build a habit of looking closely at how you do your work and what makes you successful—the secrets of your personal methodology.

years of work and life experiences. Once you succeed in uncovering it and can describe the distinct and hidden mechanisms that make you successful, you will have uncovered the heart of your personal methodology.

After you've described your personal methodology, you can share it with others. It can be your contribution to the development of other professionals and the talent development field at large.

More importantly, though, this process helps to hone and develop your own talents. It takes you beyond a superficial understanding of your core strengths, revealing how you translate your talents into actions and the effects of that process. Then, once you understand the critical behaviors that drive your success, you can practice them more intentionally, with a deliberate effect. You'll gain a mature understanding of what type of work you're best at now, and what you might excel at in the future.

### Discover yourself

When it comes to uncovering your personal methodology, consider adopting an action-research mindset. Action research is a concept Kurt Lewin first introduced in 1944 during his tenure as a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that behavioral scientists such as Chris Argyris and Paolo Freire further developed over the years.

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In your work, how do you balance freedom and responsibility? Which side do you lean to more, and why?

4

What do you value more: the experience of success or the ability to express that experience? What is your reasoning?

5

If you radically changed your career, what best practices would you hold on to?

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## Four ways to get started Unlock your curiosity.

It's easy to take our jobs for granted. Challenge yourself to look at your work with a fresh set of eyes and start unpacking assumptions. Ignite your curiosity and excitement. Imagine yourself as Jacques Cousteau on the verge of exploring an undiscovered underwater world.

First and foremost, observe and investigate your daily work experience from a new viewpoint. To do that, ask yourself all sorts of questions to challenge the obvious. Search for articles, theories, or books that offer a fresh outlook or dispute what you believe. Train yourself to wonder again. Prepare to be surprised.

**Document and analyze your work.** Action researchers are meticulous people. To become like them, you'll want to put a magnifying glass over everything you do.

Get started by creating a portfolio of your individual work products. Almost any job produces some sort of outcome that can be saved in a digital folder or a physical archive. Save as many as you can—these are the data that will inform your research.

Once you've collected substantial data, reflect on them. Ask yourself, "What do these examples reveal about how I do my work? What makes it successful or not? What skill set becomes apparent, and how could I transfer it into another context?"

Next, gather more data by keeping a journal of your daily work experience. The activity of writing rich descriptions (a known data collection technique in action research) about how you do your work and what goes through your mind at the time can give great insight. Later—especially after you've kept your journal for a while—analyzing the texts with others can uncover root beliefs and effective courses of action. How do you do this? Get your markers out and start circling statements that are particularly meaningful. Then go back and look for a pattern.

**Develop a theory of how you work.** To identify the heart of your personalized

methodology, you'll want to focus your action research on the situations where you've had the most success. Then try to identify patterns of behaviors that led to that success.

In action research, the term *emergence* is often used to describe how the insight you are looking for will come into being in a way that seems spontaneous. Trust that when you do the work (observing, documenting, analyzing, and reflecting), a valuable thought eventually will come to the surface. All you have to do is keep looking and trust that something will appear. Keep asking yourself: "What exactly did I do well? What beliefs led me to take the actions I did? Which of my behaviors contributed to my success?"

After you have identified these behaviors, start looking for the right words to describe them in a sentence or paragraph. Develop a hypothesis, a working theory, of how you work best.

**Cycle between action, reflection, and theory.** Action research is not just studying and reflecting; it also involves taking action. When you have identified a hypothesis about what makes you successful in a specific work situation, you can start testing it.

Often, the first test of your hypothesis won't work. After all, it can be difficult to reproduce moments of great success. But even when you do fail, document and write about those experiences. Create more data. Then analyze again. Step by step, you will add to your working theory and refine it.

Continue searching for existing theories that describe what you do and why it works. It is possible that you uncover a personal methodology that isn't completely unique. What has worked for you for years might have been theorized by someone else, too, without you ever knowing.

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