Reducing Workplace Stress and Aggression: An Action Research Project at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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Few action research projects intentionally set out to do multi-stakeholder, longitudinal, mixed-method action research in a large complicated organization. We describe a multi-year project in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs designed not only to improve organizational performance by reducing workplace stress and aggression, but also to embed competencies for learning and change. It involves 11 pilot sites and a highly diverse project team. It embodies high degrees of design emergence/adaptability and participant diversity. All participants operate, in varying degrees, as co-researchers and co-managers. It fuses rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods and extensively uses reflective practices. Major outcomes include: generalizable knowledge about the linkages between specific organizational conditions, stress/aggression, and business performance; more powerful conversations and learning capabilities; and measurable work life improvements. A key finding is that the reflective inquiry practices provide a bridge between the organization and the university researchers and may increase knowledge transfer.
Action research projects come in many varieties (see: Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2002). Many are well-planned in advance and closely resemble traditional research projects. Some rely on “hard” quantitative methods; others rely on “softer” qualitative methods. Most involve a small set of like-minded practitioners and university researchers in projects of modest scope. Few intentionally involve multi-stakeholder, longitudinal, mixed-method action research in a large complicated organization.

We describe a multi-year project in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs designed to improve organizational performance measurably by reducing workplace stress and aggression, and to embed enduring competencies for learning and change. Our action research design was partly planned and partly emergent. The project started quietly in the middle of the organization to address the root causes of recurring employee misconduct. It came to involve 11 pilot sites (with over 7,000 employees) and a highly diverse governing project team comprised of VA managers from varying levels and operating domains, VA union leaders, and academics from varying disciplines at four universities.

We employed a cyclical process typical of action research. This involved analyzing pre-existing data to inform action, collecting contemporary data specific to the project’s goals, designing and implementing local interventions, assessing hard and soft impacts to generate transferable knowledge, and modifying actions based on learning. The project has several unusual distinguishing characteristics. It embodies high degrees of design emergence/adaptability and participant diversity. All participants operate as co-researchers and co-managers. The project also fuses rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods and uses extensive reflective practices.

The highly complex, collaborative, grass roots, reflexive, mixed-method type of action research undertaken with the VA was necessary because of the VA’s structure and culture, the challenges it faced, and the specific goals of the project. Among the major outcomes the project generated are: generalizable knowledge about the linkages between specific organizational conditions, stress/aggression, and business performance; more powerful conversations and learning capabilities; measurable improvements in work life; awareness, interest, and even enthusiasm among a broad array of VA constituencies around both the focal problem and the inquiry process we used. In this article we discuss in more detail the project’s process, its fit to the VA challenges faced and responses to them, the conditions under which our approach may be beneficial, and ways to increase the likelihood of success.

The Organization

The Department of Veterans Affairs is the second largest department in the federal government. In 2003, it employed over 220,000 people, and had a fiscal year 2002 budget of $50.6 billion. It has three major business lines.

1. The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) employs about 13,000 people in 57 regional benefit offices, assisting veterans financially through disability compensation and pension, education, and home loans;
2. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) employs about 200,000 people in 163 hospitals and over 700 community-based outpatient clinics, providing medical, surgical and rehabilitative care to veterans;
3. The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) employs about 1,400 people who work in 120 national cemeteries.

All three administrations are unionized and are experiencing extraordinary change. VHA and VBA are responding to the migration of older Americans from the Rustbelt to the South. VHA continues its shift from hospital-based to community-based health care delivery. VBA has a new claims processing system to handle a backlog of compensation cases that legislative changes and the veteran enrollment initiatives helped to create. NCA has an increasing workload, averaging 1,200 memorial services a day.

At times, the organizational behavior of all three administrations shifts between that of a top-down, centralized bureaucracy and a somewhat loosely coupled decentralized network operating under centrally determined guidelines. This can create a strain between headquarters and field elements. The general culture leans towards encouraging employees to seek permission rather than act independently. Because the VA highly values using numeric data to monitor progress and make decisions, all business lines have implemented outcome-oriented, measurable performance management systems with nationally established numeric goals. The VA's size, scope, diversity, and organizational complexity offered many opportunities to learn more about how people interact with each other and with the people
they serve, and how action research projects adapt to changing realities common in organizational life.

These factors strongly affected how the project’s design evolved. Voluntary participation, grassroots enrollment, and labor-management cooperation were clearly necessary, because of the sensitive nature of the project’s subject, and because they would engender ownership and willingness to act on recommendations in the VA’s loosely-coupled system. Because the VA valued data, we needed hard numbers to build support and, eventually, to provoke deeper inquiry into what those numbers meant. Because the project was an amalgam of social psychology, learning theory, quantitative methods, performance management, change management, and organizational development, we needed a multi-disciplinary team drawn from the VA and academic worlds. Because employees were used to asking permission, we would need to find a balance between expert consultation and process consultation. We also needed educational interventions to provide training on the project’s methods, practices, and substantive issues, as well as relational interventions to model the new behaviors necessary for project practices to work. Admittedly, we did not recognize all of these requirements when we began. We came to recognize that the action research cycles and reflective practices we used were essential to enabling the project to evolve and adapt.

The Project at the Macro Level

The Workplace Stress and Aggression Project can be viewed as a network of 12 separate action research projects—the governing project team and local action teams at each of 11 pilot sites. The field of practice involves the activities within each team, as well as the interactions between the project team and the action teams, and between the action teams and their sites.

Project Foundations

The Workplace Stress and Aggression Project actually began with one person who through his networking skills brought together a small group of people interested in improving the quality of the workplace, and, in so doing, the service and care the VA provided veterans. How the network began provides insights into its structure and helps explain how the network enabled the project to develop and grow.

In 1998, a VA central-office employee relations specialist believed there were connections between discrimination complaints, grievances, worker’s compensation claims, and stress and workplace violence, but that the VA had never addressed their root causes. He brought together a transdisciplinary group of university researchers and VA managers to discuss the issue. The group decided to begin a research project examining stress and aggression in the VA and its impact on business results. Knowing the VA’s culture, they realized a “business case” was needed to get support for studying and acting on this problem. They decided to develop statistical models from prior survey data to identify issues affecting business results, develop and administer a special survey to assess the causes and effects of stress and aggression, analyze results from the new survey, and make recommendations to address issues that surfaced. They would track effects over time, comparing where recommendations were and were not implemented. The project’s original design followed an “expert consultation” model, with “quasi-experimental” assessment methods.

Expanding Our Horizons—Change to Action Research

Two key interventions at the project-team level changed the project’s focus and illustrate its emergent and adaptive nature. The first was a professional development workshop (at the Academy of Management 1999 meetings) that exposed many members of the team to models of participatory action research (e.g., Elden & Levin, 1991; Elden & Chisholm, 1993), and the challenges of doing insider action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2002). This learning led them to realize their original approach was unlikely to make a difference in the VA, given the organization’s loosely coupled nature and suspicions in the field of initiatives that originated in Washington. They would need broader and deeper participation in developing recommendations to build commitment for local-level action. They adopted a participatory action research model and took a series of actions to enroll local teams in the project and to involve other key players such as the Office of Resolution Management (which handled EEO complaints in VA) and the America Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) union.

The project team quickly learned they needed additional funding, and more structure to deal with the project’s growing complexity. Leaving the structural issue for later action, they decided...
to acquire a National Science Foundation grant to fund some of their research activities and help leverage greater VA resources.

Securing a three-year grant from the National Science Foundation's Innovation and Change Division proved to be a second powerful project-team-level intervention, in expected and unexpected ways. It caused them to add to the team a specialist on organization learning, to provide substantive expertise and to serve as the team's "learning coach" (O'Neil, 1999). This exposed the team to models of organization learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993) and various forms of participatory collaborative inquiry (Bray, et al., 2000; Cooperider & Srivastva, 1987; Heron, 1996; Reasons & Bradbury, 2001; Torbert, 1999), to reflective practices (Bray, et. al., 2000; Roth, 1999), and to an array of qualitative and "mixed-methods" research approaches (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002).

Project team members refer to their action research approach as "data-driven collaborative action inquiry." This reflects their commitment to mixed-methods research that strives toward realizing the governing values of "Model II" organizational learning systems (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Among these governing values are norms of full disclosure of valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment to testing of information for both single- and double-loop learning. In addition, the project team recognizes that their emergent research approach displays many of Gibbon, et al.'s (1994) "Mode 2" knowledge-production characteristics. These involve transdisciplinary inquiry around a thematic issue by a socially distributed, nonhierarchical research network that is seeking to produce new knowledge in the context of application. Much of the learning described in this article results from the project team's struggles to put these Model II and Mode 2 characteristics into practice.

A key learning from their experiences in using reflection techniques such as the "Learning Window" (Stewart, 1998), "Ladder of Inference" (Argyris, 1993), and "Stop and Reflection and Dialogue" (Boud, et al., 1985) was that they deepened the team's inquiry into important project issues and accelerated their process. They decided to model these reflective practices in the way they governed the project and diffuse them to the action teams in the field (although their understanding of what this meant evolved and deepened over time).

Engaging the Organization—Enrollment

The project team began to enroll the organization in Winter 2000, when it briefed directors and union officials from potential project sites. Participation was voluntary, and both union and management had to agree. Eleven sites joined the project. Union and management then jointly selected local action team members based on selection criteria the project team had developed. The criteria included selecting people from across the local organization with demonstrated leadership skills, credibility with employees, an action orientation, and a commitment to learning.

As the project unfolded, the project team and its surrounding network grew to involve in various ways individuals from VA organizations who challenged or demonstrated an interest in the project. The strategy of inclusion in the face of opposition reflects the team's conscious decision to model non-aggressive behaviors—the values and practices at the project's heart—and to build upon and take advantage of positive energies in the organization around improvement, learning, and growth. A consequence was considerable diversity in terms of the backgrounds, agendas, experiences, and geographic locations of team/network members.

Roles and Overriding Structure

The virtual project team governed the project by establishing timetables, identifying critical events, monitoring progress, evaluating and assessing accomplishments, sharing practices and results, and supporting action teams. Although a core group has remained involved from the start, over time, others from the VA and its union partners joined while others became less involved. The team now includes 20 participants at 17 locations across the country, with both organization- and university-based members co-managing the project's research design and implementation. The 11 action teams, located at five medical centers, five regional benefit offices, and a cemetery, are actively participating in all project phases, including survey design/administration, the inquiry process, coaching, and implementing site interventions. The growth and acceptance of the action team members as true co-researchers and co-managers in the project was not originally envisioned, but became more important as the project gained experience and learned from its cycles of action and reflection.
Developing Core Competencies—Education, Training, Modeling

The project team wanted to build within the organization the capability to inquire and think about actions being taken in a deliberate way. The goal of our first action-team-level intervention was to educate the action teams on workplace stress and aggression and to begin involving them as co-researchers. The project team also wanted to provide the teams with a model that would explain how stress and aggression affected business results—critical because the VA was so data-driven.

The project team used a two-day session to introduce learning practices to the action teams, aiming to develop in them the same reflective competencies that it was trying to develop in itself. As a first step, the project team conducted an experiential training exercise, using a case study that required analyzing data about the causes and consequences of aggression. To analyze the case, they asked the teams to use learning practices, including reflection techniques such as the Ladder of Inference, Stop and Reflect, and Learning Window. One member of each team acted as a “learning coach” responsible for monitoring and supporting its reflective processes. These coaches received additional training. The project team hoped the practices would help the action teams look beyond the obvious answer to all the possible causes of a phenomenon, step back and think about what was happening to test their assumptions, and examine how its members were interacting and what the team could do to move forward.

Survey Design

In Fall 2000, all the action teams met to discuss the project’s aggression survey design and administration. Following their action-learning model, the project team used these activities to help the teams learn more about stress and aggression and about the types of decisions researchers make. They showed the action teams a survey draft for the first time, and invited them to help revise the items. Among the comprehensive list of aggressive behaviors were items about such things as “silent treatment” or “glaring.” Many had never considered such actions as aggression. Yet during the ensuing discussion, a few acknowledged how much they had felt upset and shut down when someone hostilely stared at them.

What the project team and the action teams members learned during this discussion had a major impact on the project. Working together on the survey items, and relating them to actual workplace experiences, had sensitized project participants to a broad array of low-level aggressive behavior, including unreturned phone calls and arriving late for meetings, that were rarely discussed but could mount up to create conflict. As a result, project participants began to notice and address them in their own interactions. They also began to appreciate how the reflective practices provided a way to expose those issues to discussion.

The ensuing discussion about administering the survey heightened awareness of the implications of adopting a collaborative, action research model, in which the action teams that best understood their own context would truly co-manage the research process, making decisions in light of what was best for their sites. University researchers feared that pre-educating employees at the site about the problem of stress and aggression would bias survey results, but organization-based researchers felt some explanation was necessary to gain employee responsiveness. University researchers feared that interpreting results would be compromised by highly varied administration procedures, whereas those from the organization countered that consistent procedures were impossible given wide differences in the size and logistical factors across the 11 sites (evidenced in the “Micro Project” section). A deeper and somewhat disturbing appreciation began to emerge among the university researchers that working with co-researchers from an organization meant some reduction of expert control and scientific purity. Nevertheless, acceptable compromises were reached, balancing science with organizational realities, and when the teams left this meeting, they were primed to take action.

First Site Interventions: Briefing Employees and Administering the Survey

The action teams agreed to brief employees before they took the survey, using an agreed-upon briefing package. Employees were given an overview of the project’s goals, the survey process, and sequence of future activities. With sizes across the 11 sites ranging from 30 employees to 3,000, and work schedules varying from eight hours to around the clock, one size would not fit all and each action team took different delivery approaches. Some briefed employees at large Town Hall meetings, some in smaller
groups. Some conducted the briefings over several weeks before the survey took place, others just prior to distribution. Some teams used newsletters, posters, and emails to increase participation.

The teams distributed the surveys during December 2000. Employees mailed the surveys directly to the university researchers who compiled the results and prepared analyses for the sites. Later, 15 comparison sites also completed the survey, to help further validate the instrument and provide a measure of control in assessing project impacts.

**Feeding Back the Data to Action Teams**

*Survey Descriptive Results*. In a series of meetings during spring and early summer 2001, the university researchers provided action teams with descriptive data showing the prevalence and sources of all types of aggressive behavior within each of their facilities and across all the pilot sites. Twenty-six percent of the respondents indicated they had experienced aggressive acts. Most were low-level aggression (e.g., verbal, passive); few were physical or violent. Exhibit 1 lists the top 10 aggressive behaviors across all the pilot sites. Although organizations rarely discuss these types of behaviors, the people experiencing the behavior perceived a negative impact.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 10 Aggressive Behaviors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treated in a rude and/or disrespectful manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not given the praise for which you felt entitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glared at in a hostile manner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others delay action on matters that were important to you</td>
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<tr>
<td>Given little or no feedback about your performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Given the “silent treatment”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others fail to give you information that you really needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lied to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevented from expressing yourself (e.g., interrupted when speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone interfered with your work activities</td>
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*Quantitative Models – Searching for Action Paths*. To make sense of the data, reveal patterns, and explore potential action paths, teams collaboratively examined a variety of statistical models that were based on a comprehensive array of VA data. Using systemwide employee survey data, personnel data, and business performance measures for 1997, 1999, and 2000, the university researchers developed and shared with the action teams a variety of statistical analysis, including structural equations models, showing which organization conditions most affected employee satisfaction, how stress and aggression appeared to interact with these factors, and how they all impacted business results. Eight work climate factors seemed to be the root drivers of stress, aggression, satisfaction, turnover, grievances, sick leave, and service delivery time and costs:

1. Involvement;
2. Goal alignment;
3. Creativity and improvement;
4. Information and communication;
5. Supervisory trust and supportiveness;
6. Development;
7. Respect and fairness;
8. Work and structural factors.

Exhibit 2 shows a simplified model of these linkages, ultimately associated with millions of days of faster service and hundreds of millions of dollars in reduced service delivery costs systemwide (for more detailed reporting, see Harmon, et al., forthcoming). These “path maps” provided a context in which the aggressive acts were occurring, a business case for attacking the roots of the problem, and possible specific leverage points for action.

The project team learned that the usefulness of these maps varied greatly across the action teams. Some experienced them as powerful aids to designing interventions; others seemed to have great difficulty extracting meaning from them. This troubled the project team, until they later discovered a way to ground quantitative data in experiences to which project participants could better relate (discussed later).

Some of the action teams, after conversations at their sites, began to ask the project team for additional information. As part of this process, the project team would test with them the assumptions being made about the types of information requested and why they thought they needed it. At this time, the project team was conscious of its desire not to act as experts, but to provide the teams with the opportunity to learn from the questions they asked. Teams with employees who had data analysis and interpretation skills had an advantage with statistical analysis. We also learned that many action teams appeared to be “getting” that numbers are not...
answers, but rather opportunities to ask more questions. They also appeared to be embracing the process of “triangulation,” juxtaposing quantitative data and qualitative data, including their own contextual experiences.

Second Site Intervention: Feeding Back Data to Pilot Sites

A major intervention across the project was having the action teams present survey results to employees and engaging employees in the questioning process. Rapid feedback and engagement were unprecedented in the VA’s prior experience with surveys; however, the speed and depth at which the teams inquired into their data, and fed back survey data to employees and the facility’s leaders, varied greatly. Several teams analyzed data, delivered presentations, and involved employees in sense making relatively quickly; in other cases, there were considerable delays. Briefing thoroughness also varied greatly. Among key factors causing this variation were differences in facility size, management support, and the workload and competencies of action team members.

Developing Site Interventions

The action teams began designing interventions and an implementation plan, including a business case to justify support by their site’s leadership. During this period, the project team learned several disturbing things. First, many action teams lacked requisite knowledge in change management. Second, the project team knew relatively little about the unique context in which each action team operated. Changes in directors and supervisors, site-specific reorganizations, major storms, and the tragic events of September 11, 2001 had an impact on the actions the teams were taking and the speed at which they were working. Third, the project team was becoming disconnected from the action teams because many months had passed since the last gathering. With little consistent face-to-face contact, they had little idea of what many of the teams were doing and why. Conference calls and emails did not provide a clear picture of each team’s context and why things were happening. While one project team member had visited all of the sites in the spring of 2001, and had helped to address some concerns, his visit was not enough. When the teams started reporting the interventions they were designing and submitting to their leadership for support, the project team began to wonder whether the interventions were too superficial.

Site Visits—Reconnecting

During late 2001, the project team decided to strengthen the connection with the action teams. While the survey had provided quantitative data, the project team needed reliable qualitative data to assess learning and change at the sites. Throughout early 2002, subgroups of organization and university researchers visited with each action team. They conducted in-depth interviews with each member and other key people at their sites, and engaged in a collaborative sense making session that produced “maps” of their site’s key context factors and action team processes.

These site visits turned out to be one of the project’s most powerful multi-level interventions.
From them, we learned about the unique-context factors/issues at each site and the common-context factors across sites. We also learned that:

1. Many of the interventions that teams recommended (or had begun to implement) were not nearly as superficial as they first appeared.
2. Most action teams disconnected from their site's leadership (site directors appreciated their inclusion in the process during the visits).
3. Most of the action teams were using reflective practices in their own ways, and data to make decisions in ways they had not before. They had created spaces for conversation that were unlike and more powerful than those they could have in any other forum at their site.

Anchoring in Their Stories: Qualitative Modeling

From the qualitative data collected during the visits, the project team produced “context maps” graphically depicting the complex webs of forces, events, behaviors, feelings, values, and attitudes at play at each facility. Each action team easily comprehended and validated its map during the visit. Exhibit 3 shows a composite map that draws upon general trends from several medical centers. Although there were overriding themes involving change and behaviors that existed across sites, what happened within each site’s field of practice was uniquely borne out of the relationships and site-specific events and factors.

Project-Level Intervention: Harvesting Learning, Connecting with Site Leadership, and Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Following the site visits, the project team organized a meeting to harvest the action teams’ unique and common experiences and engage site leadership more in the process. At a two-day meeting attended by the action teams and their directors, each team told its own story. The project team unveiled a map that combined the context maps obtained from the site visit interviews and the path maps obtained from its statistical analysis of survey and organizational performance data. Recall that many teams had trouble extracting usable meaning from the statistical models the university researchers created for them but no difficulty in doing so for the context maps portraying complicated dynamics in their own words. Creating combination maps that linked quantitative survey data with the qualitative context maps appeared to be a useful intervention for helping project participants more fully understand and talk about the dynamics at

**EXHIBIT 3**

Work-Stress Project Composite Context Map: Medical Centers
their sites and in the VA. As depicted in Exhibit 4, it juxtaposed quantitative modeling data (circles and rectangles) with qualitative site-visit interview data (hexagons and plain text). By combining the separate streams of data, the combination map displayed relationships, providing a clearer picture of the way people might have responded to survey issues based on their environment. Mixed methods combining quantitative and qualitative techniques (of which this is an example) are becoming more central to organizational research in general, and action research in particular (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002).

Current and Planned Actions
By summer 2002, all action teams had begun to roll out their interventions to address the concerns they saw in data. In December 2002, the project team re-administered its survey in pilot and comparison sites. Some local action teams added questions specific to their interventions. The project team continued collecting personnel and organization performance data, and is carrying out analyses to assess project impacts over time. In mid-2003, all the project’s participants will attend a joint sense-making session to interpret the data patterns over time and harvest the learning from the project. The project team also will visit each site and meet with the action team, to gain an in-depth understanding of changes, provide closure, and explore opportunities to extend/transfer the project.

The Project at the Micro-Level
Working with 11 sites provides a degree of variation not found in a traditional research project. The following three examples illustrate how the sites are acting within the project’s broad guidelines. They are three separate organizations, varying in size, work environment, and challenges, and are, in a real sense, three different action research projects.

Rural Healthcare Site
This site in the upper midwest involves two medical centers that are 95 miles apart. Employees, who numbered 950, were dealing with the tensions inherent in the merger of the facilities, the reduction of hospital beds, expansion of outpatient services, and the redirection of limited resources. Roles were ambiguous and changing. Employees who were formally organized through job function were now in multi-discipline service lines focused on patient care needs (i.e., mental health) and could have supervisors located at the other facility. Action

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**EXHIBIT 4**

Linking Context Maps and Survey Data Analysis
team members were from both sites and various occupations, and included representatives from the two AFGE unions and management. The team’s depth was significant, including an AFGE Officer who had strong data analysis skills, plus members trained in mediation and facilitation techniques. The team saw its challenge as reducing stress and increasing client satisfaction using multiple low-level interventions. The team viewed connecting with employees as critical. In addition to briefing employees on survey results, the team obtained employee suggestions for interventions and used a variety of communication mechanisms, including newsletters, all employee e-mails, posters, and monthly updates at the director’s town meetings. To reduce stress and increase customer satisfaction, interested work units began to have fun at work by adapting aspects of the FISH philosophy, that stresses each individual’s control over the attitude one brings to work (Lundin, et al., 2000).

The high degree of union and management cooperation and mutual respect that developed through the project’s practices is significant. The action team members and the director have commented upon how the practices the team developed as they worked together helped change the labor management environment. They learned that both sides are able to work together when they share a common goal. Team members have used the project’s practices in other groups and committees that are dealing with tough facility issues.

The Urban, White-Collar Site

This team operates in an urban, midwest environment at a site with a current staffing level of 218 employees. The action team drawn from different occupations and business functions includes the assistant director. Employees are on different floors, sometimes with other building tenants. A small number of employees work in distant sites. Over the past two years, the site has faced a significant influx of new employees coupled with an increasing workload and a change in a major business line’s basic work. Early during this period, employees found it more difficult to interact, or to know what was happening. The survey results surprised the site when data showed that many employees believed they were being “glared at” and experienced it as “aggressive behavior.” Based on a series of conversations among themselves that relied heavily upon asking questions and challenging each other’s position, and with facility employees, the team realized that its challenges primarily involved improving communication and changing the perception that favoritism determined promotions.

The action team acted quickly on data, even though they initially expected the project team to provide more guidance. The site instituted “Flake Offs,” which are regular, voluntary, informal meetings that the assistant director or director host with a different small group of employees selected from various parts of the organization and, when possible, veterans. Flake-Offs provide employees with a chance to get to know one another in a different way, to learn that others may view situations differently, to discuss issues of concern, to make suggestions, and to learn that leadership within the facility is approachable. A team member commented that the Flake Offs showed the “power of being empathetic and sharing your humanity.” The director stated that EEO complaints and grievances have gone down since the Flake Offs started.

The Small, Blue-Collar Site

This site in the southwest has only 30 employees with a large blue-collar workforce and a strong union presence. When the project started, the site was tense. Unfair labor practices, grievances, and discrimination complaints were common. The employees drew a clear distinction between employees who worked in the office and those who labored outside; therefore, the action team included both groups. The team’s challenge was overcoming years of mistrust and low morale.

The action team presented the survey’s results to employees during a facility-wide meeting, and asked for their ideas and concerns. The team used the Learning Window to sort through the comments received. Based on the feedback, the team focused on improving communications. To do this, the team told employees to feel free to raise issues with any team member. The team also selected one of its members to serve as a “rover.” The rover periodically walks through the site to talk informally to employees to find out what is on their minds and to bring issues to the team. Although the team does not talk explicitly about “reflection and inquiry,” team members do question each other’s positions or views and bring sensitive issues into the open that before would have festered.

The director recently commented, “While I was initially skeptical, the project has helped to reduce the number of complaints and grievances
The Union’s involvement in the project and the team’s interventions helped to make this happen.” In addition, the director admitted that initially he was not happy about being selected for the project, and had placed two employees on the team whom he did not view as “team players.” He then said the project had changed his views and has also positively affected the two “problem” employees he had assigned to the team. He “relies on the team” and they are a very important part of his “daily decision-making process.”

The Action Team Sense-Making Process

These three sites illustrate that there are no “silver bullets” that can be used across all sites. Action teams selected interventions based upon fairly extensive conversations and questioning. The “Action Team Sense Making Process” illustrated in Exhibit 5 is to a great extent based on the learning practices the project introduced and may be the most fundamental and powerful practice developed as a result of the project. The key is how the teams decided to take a particular action (its practice of inquiring together) rather than what they eventually did. The teams, for the most part, discussed data fairly thoroughly and had selected actions that were grounded in survey data and the teams’ explicit and tacit knowledge of their local context, were “doable,” and that could make an immediate impact. Although they may not always have performed a deep and intensive statistical analysis, they made sense of data as a group through conversation and inquiry.

Key Project Outcomes

Although our formal comprehensive assessment of project impacts is ongoing, we already have identified four major outcomes:

1. Contributions to general knowledge;
2. More powerful conversations;
3. Measurable improvements to work life;
4. Greater awareness and interest around the organizational impacts of stress and low-level aggression and around the project’s inquiry process.

Contributions to General Knowledge. The survey designed for this project represents the first, and a much needed, comprehensive instrument to measure all forms of aggression and their sources. The patterns of aggressive behavior found in the VA are quite consistent with those reported for other contexts (e.g., Baron & Neuman, 1996; Keashly & Jagatic, 2000). Further, the key work climate factors we identified closely parallel core features of “high-performance work systems” (e.g., Pfeffer & Viega, 1999; Lawler, et al., 1995). Finally, our findings...
replicate and reinforce the linkages between these factors and organization performance established in prior empirical research (e.g., Batt, 2002; Huselid, et al., 1996, 1997).

More Powerful Conversations. Another major project outcome involves how conversations changed and became more powerful at multiple levels in the organization, attesting to deeper learning capabilities. Individual project team and action teams members talk about “What I know” and “What I think I know” (a key distinction in the learning window). This practice presents thinking in a more open, non-authoritarian, and nonjudgmental manner. Conversations have also changed in other business settings and within families. Several action team members who had become supervisors while working on the project stated that they use the practices as they work with employees.

The way people discuss data has also changed. While the organization relies heavily on quantitative data, the systematic use of qualitative data, such as data we collected during the site-visit interviews, is not widespread. Using qualitative data to explain the context in which hard numbers operate adds an important dimension to local sense making that we attribute to the project. Those who previously had relied solely on quantitative data now include qualitative data in their discussions, and those who had relied solely on qualitative data now also use quantitative data. Together qualitative and quantitative data provide a fuller picture of what is happening.

Measurable Improvements to Work Life.
Quality of life improved in sites where the action team followed the project’s operating framework. The types of improvements noted for the three sites discussed previously exemplify those being experienced at the other sites, as well. Labor-management relations have improved. Sites have also reported a reduction and elimination of grievances and complaints, and some have reported a reduction of sick leave as a result of project interventions. The rural blue-collar site discussed in this article is a dramatic example of such results.

Greater Awareness, Interest, and Enthusiasm. Awareness, interest, and enthusiasm have also grown, around both the presenting problem and the collaborative action inquiry process we used. Prior to the project, stress and low-level aggression were not common conversational topics within the VA. The survey itself, with its list of aggressive behaviors, has made the project team members, the action team members, and employees at the sites aware of a wider range of aggressive actions that create workplace tensions. Although VA managers receive sensitivity training with regard to sexual harassment, the project data showing that many employees who had not perceived “glaring,” not returning phone calls, and withholding information as hostile acts that could escalate into formal complaints have started serious, intense, and thoughtful conversations about perceptions and intent. The director of the VHA National Center for Organizational Development now raises incivility as a widespread problem in her work with VHA facility leaders and teams. A new partnership with two Veterans Service Organizations will focus on examining incivility between veterans and VA employees.

Challenges, Lessons, and Success Factors
Because the Workplace Stress and Aggression Project involved such complex action research challenges as a large organization, multiple sites, and researchers from both VA and academic settings, we learned some valuable lessons.

Balance Grass-Roots Involvement with Leadership Support
Although the project’s grass roots emergence and initial decision to “fly under the radar screen” was a conscious choice given the VA’s tendency to sanction or impede action at lower organizational levels, the decision contained a design weakness that unfolded over time. Senior leadership at some sites remained skeptical of the project’s underlying counter-cultural values, and consequently less supportive. It would have been better to connect with leadership far earlier in the process.

Be Mindful of a Project’s Scope and Complexity
Excessive complexity is distracting and demands resources. Early in the project, an experienced academic/consultant warned us that the scope—11 sites and 7,000 employees—would exceed our ability to “feed the elephant.” Although we knew he was right, we failed to heed his advice, perhaps owing to our drive to make a difference in the organization through opportunistic inclusion. We did not fully appreciate the reality and implications of dealing with the organizational and relational systems existing within the 11 pilot sites and within the larger VA system. We chose to favor a decentralized emergent model that enabled deep change to emerge at the more intrinsically self-motivated sites. If
we had been able to devote more time to discussing the project with the participants, developing a more explicit contract with them, and using the collaborative process earlier in our discussions, a greater percentage of the sites might have made greater progress.

Scope matters when faced with the need to project manage a geographically dispersed, "virtual network" of participants. We had limited funding for face-to-face meetings, which frequent electronic interaction could not adequately replace. Each participant had a full-time job in the VA or a university, so time was limited. To keep the project moving, the project team had to divide into subgroups, which complicated information sharing, and created miscommunication and misunderstandings. We should have identified and seriously discussed the challenges and implications of working virtually, and held more face-to-face meetings both within the project team and with the action teams.

Creatively Balance the Tensions and Tradeoffs Inherent in Collaborative Action Research

Although the shift to a more collaborative action research/inquiry model made the project more relevant to the organization, it also entailed tensions and tradeoffs that were difficult to balance. The project’s university researchers desired time to establish causes and effects, and evaluate whether particular approaches had worked. VA researchers needed to act, recognizing that having even descriptive survey results about low-level aggression provided them with greater credibility in discussions about workplace behavior, and allowed them to have a positive impact in resolving issues that developed during the organization’s day-to-day life. We learned how to balance these needs and to recognize when enough verifiable data existed to take action.

A second related tension concerned scientific control. It became quickly evident to the university researchers that our research project (affecting 7,000 employees) was not a major defining force in an organization employing over 220,000 employees. They had to adjust to such things as a site withdrawing from the project at the local union’s request, unfortunate changes in the timing of employee surveys, and a business line changing a key outcome measure that was being used in longitudinal statistical models. It helped that we started with a highly rigorous, quasi-experimental research design, because organizational realities in action research inevitably eat away at scientific rigor. By originally aiming so high in our research methods, we have been able to preserve a good degree of science.

A third tension is that between direction/structure and natural development/emergence. Early on, the project team was very conscious of not wanting to provide “answers” and not acting like experts. University researchers did not want to provide examples of interventions taken elsewhere to deal with stress and aggression, because this would influence the teams and the project’s results. This deliberate choice frustrated the teams, because they were expecting more direction. We should have been more explicit about timeframes and about how the project was using reflective inquiry practices. We also should have visited each site at the project’s onset, modeling inquiry behaviors, creating a context map of forces at each site, and providing a more structured framework in which they could begin their work.

Use Reflective Inquiry Practices to Bridge Worlds and Increase Knowledge Transfer

The inquiry and learning practices helped to create a safe conversational place to raise and confront the tensions and concerns we confronted in our project, thereby building a bridge between the organization and university researchers. The learning practices allowed us to surface problems earlier, become more aware of changes as they occurred, and more readily challenge assumptions. As a result, we made modifications as necessary, making the project more nimble and adaptive. The site visits are an example of the impact of these practices. If we had waited until the project’s formal evaluation phase, we would have missed important data about the context within which the sites were operating and about the teams’ sense-making process.

Further, by using reflective inquiry practices we might increase the transfer of knowledge within and across action research projects. These practices provide the mindfulness needed to monitor and assess actions and learning for the individuals and teams engaged in the project, and within the organization itself. The practices may also help define how things happen and the rules and conditions needed for specific results to occur, or for a certain theory of action or behavior to work. Reflective inquiry practices help balance the need for action and practical application in which time moves quickly, with the need for generalizable science in which time
moves at a more measured pace. The forces of organizational dynamics and of pure science constantly tug at the project, making perfect equilibrium difficult. If we are mindful of the actions we need to take and mindful of the discipline we need to maintain, we are more able to adjust in real time, keep on course, and continue moving forward. The “Generative Inquiry and Reflection Model” shown in Exhibit 6 suggests a way for organization and university researchers to use the inquiry and reflective practices to build a place where together they not only co-create knowledge, but also, through their practice, they provide a method for its transfer to others. Although we are just beginning to understand the implications of these practices, we will continue to feature and strengthen them in future projects.

Endnotes
1. Department of Veterans Affairs, Annual Secretary’s Statement 2002-2003 http://www.va.gov/OPP/SAS/SecAnnSt.pdf
2. Keashly, L. and Neuman, J.H. (2000), “Workplace Aggression Research Questionnaire (WAR-Q)" Work on this project was partly supported by a grant from the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF), Innovation & Change Division. Findings do not necessarily represent the views of the NSF. The VA Learning University and the Office of Resolution Management have also provided support.

Acknowledgements go to Loraleigh Keashly and Joel Neuman for their valuable expertise in the area of workplace aggression, John Hancock and Jim Scaringi for providing essential organizational support, and the many members of the project and action teams who are too numerous to mention but without whom the project could not have gone forward.

Biographical Sketches

Rita Kowalski is special projects manager for the Workplace Stress and Aggression Project and works for the Department of Veterans Affairs in the New York regional office. Her responsibilities on the project include project strategy, knowledge transfer, communications and consulting support. Between 1992 and 1999, she worked on a number of national projects that have involved leadership development, peer assessments for executives, and organizational outcome measures. Prior to that, she served as a personnel officer and has worked in human resource management in both the Department of Defense and the General Services Administration. She has presented case studies on such topics as change management, action research, learning, teams, and pay for organizations including the Academy of Management, the Society for Organizational Learning, The Brookings Institution, the Office of Personnel Management, and the American Compensation Association.

Joel Harmon, the principal investigator for the National Science Foundation grant that partially supports the VA project, is a professor of management and the director of the Center for Action Research at Fairleigh Dickinson University. A past president of the Eastern Academy of Management, he specializes in organization strategy and transformation, focusing on the links between high-involvement work practices and business performance. He earned his doctorate in organizational development from the State University of New York at Albany, has published in a variety of academic and practitioner journals, and recently won the best theory-to-practice paper award from the Academy of Management.

Lyle Yorks is an associate professor in the Department of Organization and Leadership, Teachers College, Columbia University, where he teaches courses in human resource development, strategy, leadership, and research, and is director of the Adult Education Guided Intensive Study (AEGIS) Ed.D. Program. He consults with organizations on performance management and executive development issues with companies world-wide. Currently his research focuses on forms of collaborative action inquiry and learning transfer. His articles have appeared in The Academy of Management Review, California Management Review, Human Resource Development Quarterly, Performance Improvement Quarterly, Sloan Management Review, and other journals. He earned master degrees at Vanderbilt and Columbia Universities and his doctorate from Columbia University.

Dan Kowalski is a consultant in the Veterans Health Administration Human Resources Management Group—a small, virtual self-managed internal consulting team that supports senior VHA leadership. Prior to joining the group in 1999, he was the HR manager in the VA’s New Jersey healthcare system for 12 years. Dan is active in the Center for Human Resources Management Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University, a consortium of academics, consultants, and practitioners dedicated to pursuing academic-practitioner collaboration.

References
EXHIBIT 6

Generative Inquiry and Reflection Model

Building the Bridge between the Organizational and University Worlds

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