

From words to action (research): a new generation of workplace training

New
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workplace
training

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Riikka Harikkala-Laihininen
Turku School of Economics, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

Sanna Fäldt
Bravers Oy, Porvoo, Finland, and

Erik Bäckman
Miltton Oy, Helsinki, Finland

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore how a new type of workplace training program can be created that truly enables participants to move from words to action. Recognizing the need to understand trainee–work environment dynamics the authors criticize training efforts that center on targeted learning events, instead highlighting the role of preparation and following up. In doing so, the authors tackle the lack of guidance practitioners experience when designing and implementing workplace training programs.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors present action research on a pilot workplace training program focused on wellbeing in an academic work setting. The data collection draws from the case study tradition. The authors collect data through interviews (21), field notes of participant observation (3 occasions), participant-produced written materials and a feedback survey.

Findings – The authors find that restorative practices, workplace mediation and reteaming enhance the participants' perceptions of self-efficacy and agency. Throughout the training program, facilitators observe the dynamics of the situation and take part in discussions to encourage exploration and reflection. Thus, facilitators likely need a coaching mindset.

Originality/value – The theoretical contribution stems from an in-depth exploration of trainee–work environment dynamics and novel insights brought to workplace training from adjacent fields of research. The authors introduce a framework for planning participatory workplace training and organizational development programs, which answers a call from practitioners.

Keywords Action research, Workplace training, Workplace wellbeing, Academia

Paper type Research paper

Prologue

Our story begins with a discussion on LinkedIn in September 2022:

Sanna: Here's a tough question for you, oh network: if you could order a training for your team on any subject whatsoever, what would it be?

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I'm looking for a kind of "good to great" idea. So what are you already good at, but would like to improve upon in order to be GREAT?

I'm asking, because we might have the opportunity to build a new kind of training program for one team with a cool group (even pro bono), if we find a suitable theme and team to work with. So put your brain to work and message me directly or below.

PS: Crazy wishes are allowed!

Riikka: From words to action – training would be the best! Meaning how we can harness all the great ideas into practice and cement them. Talk is cheap, but regrettably, often great ideas live on mainly as slogans. Riikka

Sanna came at the issue with experience in leading workplace training programs, looking for new opportunities, while Riikka had experience in researching emotions in the workplace, and was looking for ways to bring about lasting change. The initial plan was to create a new type of collaborative workplace training program for Sanna at Bravers Oy and Erik at Miltton Oy, but quite quickly, our trio noticed that all of our individual backgrounds and ideas contributed to the project. Thus, the collaboration deepened to include the academic sphere, and we decided to work together on building a path from words to action, not just for ourselves but also for others. The research question we set ourselves and the one we tackle in this paper is: *How can we create a new type of workplace training program that truly enables the participants to move from words to action?*

What Riikka identified as the core of the project was the tendency, even for great workplace training programs, to quite often be forgotten in the days that follow. Thus, a new approach seemed necessary to engage individuals in their everyday work, not just during the hours of training. However, to function, training needs a purpose – what it is that we act upon. As we were to pilot our new program at the Turku School of Economics, an organizational theme was selected in consultation with representatives from the school administration. At the time, the community was struggling with a return to a new normal following the COVID-19 pandemic combined with the ongoing pressures of academia, and wished for a wellbeing theme.

Introduction

Our starting point, moving from words to action, highlights the age-old dilemma of social research, where mere diagnosis is not enough – effective change is necessary to create an impact (cf. [Lewin, 1946](#)). While workplace training has received ample attention, the research tends to lack coherence ([Bills and Van de Werfhorst, 2017](#)). Indeed, existing workplace training practices have long been criticized for the assumption that the training, in itself, will lead to positive organizational outcomes. While targeted learning events successfully convey information, they often remain isolated rather than being reinforced through support and accountability. For most training, the event is the key; very little effort is put into preparing or meeting the participants prior to the training or following up after the event ([Kirkpatrick and Kayser Kirkpatrick, 2010](#)). However, this undermines the importance of the posttraining environment in facilitating the implementation of what employees took away from the training. This is a key reason why investments in training often fail to achieve the desired results ([Dixit and Sinha, 2022](#)). This problem is addressed particularly in the training transfer literature focusing on measuring the effectiveness of training as application of knowledge ([Dixit and Sinha, 2022](#); [Mehner et al., 2024](#)). However, more research is required to understand trainee–work environment dynamics ([Huang et al., 2017](#)).

Historically, workplace training literature focused on improving performance ([Taris and Schaufeli, 2018](#)) through seeking efficiency and honing employee skills to lower the cost of production ([Roan and Rooney, 2006](#)). Beginning from the 1930s, however, the field of work

and organizational psychology has slowly turned toward exploring employee wellbeing and emotions at work in their own right (Taris and Schaufeli, 2018). From the 2000s onwards, work psychology has been encouraged to move beyond the positivist paradigm and to engage in more reflexive research (Johnson and Cassell, 2001). Following the reflexive intent, we adopt a postmodernist stance to work psychology, aiming to reflect on our thinking throughout the paper and to question our own assumptions (cf. Johnson and Cassell, 2001).

The current state of the art requires employers to take a proactive stand in supporting employees' physical and mental wellbeing (Leiter and Cooper, 2017). Wellbeing at work reaches beyond the immediate subjective state to the relational level, where personal and organizational resources are balanced with challenges. Thus, both employers and employees have their role to play in increasing wellbeing, and while wellbeing training at work traditionally emphasizes safety, contemporary organizations have included the enhancement of physical and mental wellbeing while performing job tasks as part of training. (Leiter and Cooper, 2018.) However, contemporary organizations face increasing uncertainty due to external change trajectories, engaging employees in a changing world of work. Concerns over job security have encouraged employees to become proactive in redesigning their roles and take initiative to effect change at work. Such proactive behaviors refer to employee-initiated changes, the type and timing of which are determined by the employees themselves. These changes shape the work environment, simultaneously fulfilling employee needs and benefitting the organization. (Tims and Kooij, 2018.) In this paper, we focus on workplace training designed to increase such proactive behavior.

As psychological wellbeing is often the key determinant of experienced wellbeing at work (Hesketh and Cooper, 2019), we emphasize the mental aspects of wellbeing. Psychological wellbeing indicates the presence of positive factors, reflecting a change in considering mental health as something more than the absence of psychological distress or mental illness (Ng Fat *et al.*, 2017; Toma *et al.*, 2023; World Health Organization, 2004). Consequently, successful workplace training should pay attention to the individual's personal wellbeing as well as rewarding work design (Litchfield, 2021). Such workplace training deals with both being and becoming, considering learning to be a situated and social process (Roan and Rooney, 2006). Thus, training involves much more than a new dose of knowledge to internalize; it is a means of connecting with the everyday activities and experiences of the worker and is an inherently social activity (Gherardi *et al.*, 1998). Following this reasoning, we focus on employees' personal and professional development rather than performance improvement.

Scholars have studied wellbeing training closely over the past few years, with varying foci and results. For example, Talati and colleagues (2018) demonstrated that both online and face-to-face training can have similarly beneficial effects, Qiu and Rooney (2019) discovered possible adverse effects and ethical issues with mindfulness training, Karatrantou and colleagues (2020) revealed the benefits of activating office workers during the workday and Toma and colleagues (2023) found a wellness protocol had significant positive effects for teachers in New Zealand. Despite these efforts, much of the existing research explores mental health interventions or established programs rather than program design. We found very little practical advice on how to design and implement workplace training programs. Recognizing this gap in the literature and hearing the calls from practitioners in the field who wanted clear templates for planning workplace training programs, in the following, we aim to create a template for empowering the participants in the long term – moving from words to action. Thus, our contribution is mainly methodological, aiming to enable future workplace training programs informed by action research.

Methodology

Both our research project and the resultant training program follow the principles of action research. At the core of action research lies the idea of research that will help the practitioner (Lewin, 1946). Our approach follows the dual aims of action research (see e.g. Walter, 2009) in that (1) we seek to generate positive change through incorporating action into the research design, and (2) we embrace the proactive participation of the community of interest in the research process. In effect, we follow the school of thought that is sometimes more precisely defined as participatory action research (e.g. Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Walter, 2009) or participatory research (Cassell and Johnson, 2006). The participatory stance is visible in our project in several ways (see e.g. Cohen *et al.*, 2018):

- Our approach is highly practical, and we engage the community of interest to collaborate proactively.
- We highlight the role of learning, enabling ourselves and the participants to reflect on actions based on both theory and practice.
- We work with the community of interest to create records of practice and reflection, which are useful in exploring our own process retrospectively and are an inspiration for others.
- We engage the community of interest in analyzing the current and ideal standing of the workplace and empowering it to support change.

We started the project by recognizing the issue and planning the corresponding action. Our issue was twofold: Academically, we recognized the need for more practically useful workplace training program designs, while in the community of interest, we recognized the need for a workplace wellbeing intervention. Thus, our action plan tackled workplace wellbeing through a hands-on, proactive, participatory workplace training program. Our initial action plan involved four phases: (1) individual restorative interviews, (2) a workshop on recovery actions, (3) a workshop on co-creating an ideal future and (4) a workshop on building the future. Thus, this study includes roughly four reflective arcs of action research (please see Supplement 1 in Supplementary material for an illustration).

Our data collection and analysis draw from the case study tradition, in which naturalistic illustration is used to strengthen the merits of theoretical arguments. We acknowledge that this interpretive stance highlights the subject's own sensemaking and thus does not lead to a universal but rather to a contextualized explanation (Welch *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, our approach is informed by the ethnographic tradition, as the first author, who is also an insider in the community of interest, participated in the training program, taking field notes and joining discussions to make sense of the social context that the participants shared.

Data were collected throughout the four phases from voluntary participants in the community of interest. In the first phase, every member of the community of interest was invited to participate in the project using an informative email sent out by a representative of the community (portrayed in Supplement 2 in Supplementary material). We received 22 responses from volunteers wishing to be interviewed, 21 of whom were eventually interviewed. One respondent withdrew from the project due to time constraints. Nineteen interviewees were female and two were male, and the interviewees represented different academic professions (administrators, teachers and researchers) as well as tenures (fixed-term employees, project researchers and permanent staff). The interviews lasted approximately one hour each. They were not audio-recorded due to the sensitive nature of the topic, but the interviewers took careful notes. Each author participated in conducting the interviews, and we shared all interview notes between the authors. We analyzed the interview data inductively, grouping similar responses to form categories of experience. The analysis informed the planning of the subsequent workshops.

In the first workshop, we collected only observational data in the form of field notes, which we used to inform the subsequent workshops. In the second workshop, we collected data in the form of participant-produced written materials, as well as field notes. We used these data to track progress and inform the final workshop. In the final workshop, we collected data in the form of brief success narratives written by the participants, as well as a feedback survey. These data informed our reflections on the project as a whole. As the analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection throughout the project, we highlight the analysis of these sets of data as we explore the unraveling of the program phase by phase.

Our approach to the literature is abductive (see e.g. [Dubois and Gadde, 2002](#)). Rather than following the existing principles of workplace training, we looked beyond the organizational scope for inspiration. Thus, restorative practices, workplace mediation and reteaming greatly influenced the development of our training program. In the next section, we explore these fields in conjunction with the justification for and organization of our pilot program.

A new generation of workplace training

Phase 0: planning

We believed, based on Riikka's insider view (e.g. ongoing layoff negotiations, changes in office spaces raising many negative emotions) and research published about academia during the pandemic (e.g. [Ahmadi et al., 2022](#); [Bartolic et al., 2022](#); [Sverdlik et al., 2023](#)), that the community of interest was currently merely surviving (i.e. performing only vital functions). Accordingly, we believed we needed to establish the capacity to grow through personal recovery and develop through communal recovery before we could establish the capacity to renew (cf. [Fath et al., 2015](#)). Thus, we initially focused on restoring energy and functional capacity, and only then did we focus on collective change – a process we named “recovery” and “renewal.” This approach was inspired by the adaptive cycle first introduced by Holling in the field of ecology ([Fath et al., 2015](#)).

We decided to approach the first focus through restorative interviews designed to make each participant feel heard. Our aim was to use the interviews to recognize collective themes upon which we could later build collective action. Our approach to the second focus centered on radical renewal to generate collective agency. Throughout the program, we wanted to highlight open and appreciative dialogue. This is akin to Habermas's theory of ideal speech situations (as interpreted by [Gareis, 2010](#)), which highlights collective inclusion, equal opportunity to voice opinions, honesty within and between participants, as well as voluntary, noncoercive participation.

We believe that change is most successful when participants feel that they have an active part in creating the change objectives and implementing the change. Thus, we adopted the motivational elements from reteaming practices ([Ahola and Furman, 2021](#)) in creating a goal that the participants had ownership of, experienced as important and worthwhile and perceived as achievable while observing how they were making progress throughout the program despite potential setbacks. In effect, we wanted to facilitate the participants' journeys in creating activism and radical change. What we mean by activism in the workplace training context is employee proactivity which reaches beyond the immediate job requirements and improves personal wellbeing at work. Such activism can take the form of, for example, personal initiative to improve organizational issues, job crafting to increase the meaning of work at the individual level or idiosyncratic deals negotiated with the employer to satisfy individual needs, all of which have been linked to increased wellbeing at work ([Tims and Kooij, 2018](#)).

In planning our program, we also drew on the workplace mediation literature. While there was no specific conflict to resolve, we drew upon a comprehensive mediation model (Bollen and Euwema, 2013) as a means to consider the issues at hand from multiple viewpoints. Before coming together, we looked at the personal characteristics of our participants and ourselves, the beliefs we held, the reasons for participation, the motivation for change and the institutional context in which we worked. During the program, we made sure that each participant had an equal opportunity to speak about their opinions and emotions to feel heard and understood. By showing empathy and offering clarity on complex situations, we aimed to increase the participants' experiences of self-efficacy. We offered the participants several opportunities for active participation and interaction while maintaining control of the overall project. We engaged in an open dialogue and offered the participants the chance to shape the objectives, while we remained responsible for the closure. This, we believed, would lead to satisfaction with the process, as well as the outcomes, which again would increase the efficiency and effectiveness of joint outcomes.

Through these principles, we initially planned a four-phase workplace training program. The first phase explored the individual level and restored the participants' sense of agency and capability. The second phase created psychological safety among the group of participants. The third phase identified visions for the future and organized the participants into like-minded groups. The fourth phase paved the way forward, enabling the participants to use their agency proactively. We explore each phase in detail through the pilot program we delivered at Turku School of Economics between February 28 and August 29, 2023.

Phase 1: restorative interviews

The interview at the start was very liberating, as I was able (to) verbalize some thoughts that had been brewing but that had been buried under the daily tasks. (Participant feedback)

In wellbeing-oriented workplace training, support from the top is essential to establish feelings of care. Collective dissemination and an equal opportunity to participate are vital for discouraging competitive stands (Hesketh and Cooper, 2019). Thus, before starting, we discussed the project with the Dean, who fully supported our efforts. In addition, we engaged the help of the Head of Faculty Development, who sent out our invitation to participate. Our invitation email was delivered to all staff members (including research and teaching staff, support staff and affiliated grant researchers) on February 28, with a reminder on March 9. We organized a personal Zoom interview with all 21 participants as quickly as possible, following their signal of interest in the program. The interviews occurred between February 14 and March 24. Each interviewer used the same interview guide (Supplement 3 in Supplementary material) to ensure equal treatment of the participants and comparability of the interview findings.

Our aim for the interviews was to explore each participant's individual wellbeing at work to get a feeling of the baseline, as well as to enable each participant to imagine a workplace that would perfectly support his or her personal wellbeing at work. The purpose of doing so was twofold. First, Hesketh and Cooper (2019) suggested beginning any training program by exploring employees' interactions with the workplace – what the employees draw from the workplace. They proposed that probing different experiences of meaning and purpose is key to successful training. This is in line with conducting an audience analysis and familiarizing oneself with the needs of the participants while creating material designed to engage the senses and encourage interaction (Berge *et al.*, 2022).

Second, we wanted to use restorative practices to support the recovery of those participants who were struggling with their work-related wellbeing. Restorative practices stem from the sphere of workplace conflict resolution. They entail a proactive dialogue designed to build

stronger co-worker relationships and thereby build social capital. The key to restorative practices is to create a positive vision for the future of the organization. In conflict resolution, restorative practices steer away from punitive or defensive actions, and instead focus on the impact of the wrongdoing, and the perceived harm it caused, repairing any ill effects and preventing similar occurrences in the future. As such, restorative practices are more than toolkits. Instead, they resemble values that penetrate the entire organization. (Eisenberg, 2016.) In this project, the restorative stance is visible in allowing each participant to feel heard, but not engaging in the “blame game”. Instead, curiosity and optimism guided us toward a solution-oriented approach, seeking to avoid similar future problems. Following Lambert and colleagues (2011), we conducted the interviews (and all participant interactions) with respect, compassion, involvement and careful listening. This type of restorative conduct can strengthen relationships and help people change the way they treat each other in organizational settings. Restorative interaction can thus lead to increased sensitivity to other people’s situations and give organization members new tools to solve issues together.

The restorative interviews were the starting point for creating agency and activism in the group. In effect, we wanted to use the workplace training program to help the participants create the change themselves. This acknowledges the notion that every individual is potentially able to influence the process of meaning-making – that is, every individual has agency (Drewery, 2016). This is also in accordance with self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), which suggests that the fulfillment of three psychological needs (competence, autonomy and relatedness) leads to increased wellbeing and motivation. Competence refers to self-efficacy and mastery, seeking experiences of effectiveness. Autonomy refers to self-regulation and self-endorsement and indicates immersive engagement in actions. Relatedness refers to feelings of social connection, such as feeling cared for or having a sense of belonging. (Ryan and Deci, 2017.) In general, employees can be either intrinsically motivated, performing work tasks based on experiences of interest, enjoyment and satisfaction in them or extrinsically motivated, performing work tasks for their instrumental value, such as pay or career advancement opportunities (Taris and Schaufeli, 2018). However, self-determination theory suggests that both intrinsic and well-internalized (that is, autonomous) extrinsic motivation can lead to vitality. Thus, self-determination theory is a dynamic and organismic account of human motivation. (Ryan and Deci, 2017.)

Throughout this workplace training program, we fed the participants’ sense of competence and autonomy through acting as facilitators rather than as directors, and their sense of relatedness through introducing several group tasks, as revealed in the following. This also caters to the notion that highly educated employees have a strong intrinsic desire for personal development, which may influence their perceptions of workplace training programs (Coetzer, 2007). Nevertheless, as self-determination and agency can be considered basic human needs, this type of training program is likely to fit any workplace setting.

Our analysis of the interviews focused on exploring the current wellbeing of the interviewees, the work-related issues that increased or decreased the participants’ wellbeing, the things that gave strength to the participants or depleted their energy during the workday, the recovery actions the participants were using to cope with potential struggles and the visions the participants had for a better future. These themes became the backbone of the subsequent workshops, starting with recovery.

Phase 2: focusing on recovery

The small group meetings were excellent, since you had more time to reflect on relevant things with people you might not otherwise get together with and discuss things with. Keep them! (Participant feedback)

Previous research suggests that setting an overarching final goal at the beginning of workplace training programs increases learning effectiveness (Jiang *et al.*, 2023). We agree, but based on the interviews, we saw that some of the participants were not yet ready for change, particularly in terms of energy levels. Many struggled to cope, and most did not have the sense of agency necessary to carry out change. At the same time, metrics management is a key culprit in decreasing workplace wellbeing (Hesketh and Cooper, 2019). Therefore, before setting a mutual objective for the training (apart from the heading “From Words to Action” and the description that the program centered on increasing wellbeing in the community), we recognized the need for recovery. This would give the participants enough energy to engage fully in creating a vision and making it happen. Thus, to enable the participants to create the objectives, we needed to support their recovery in terms of them re-finding their agency and improving their immediate individual wellbeing.

Following on from these thoughts, we organized the first workshop on March 30. We focused on (1) exploring the findings from the interviews, (2) discussing the realizations the participants and the facilitators gained from the interviews, (3) sharing the individual and collective recovery tips collected from the interviews and (4) engaging in a recovery challenge until we were to meet again in the second workshop. We began the session by asking participants to reflect on why they wanted to participate and what they hoped to gain from the program. In doing so, we wanted to set the tone for the workshop, as well as awaken some agency. Next, we discussed the findings from the interviews, particularly in terms of things that supported and things that decreased wellbeing at work.

The most important part of this workshop was the individual and communal recovery tips suggested by the participants in the interviews. We spent most of our joint time discussing how the recovery actions the participants were already intuitively using were very close to suggestions in previous theories (see Supplement 4 in Supplementary material for an overview of the recovery actions). We believe this increased the participants’ sense of competence. What surprised us was the great number of collective recovery actions that the participants suggested during the interviews. This seemed to highlight the importance of relatedness and signal a strong hope for community spirit. To increase their sense of autonomy, we presented the participants with a challenge: to choose 1–2 (a maximum of one individual and one communal) recovery actions to try before the next workshop. We encouraged the participants to choose something that intrigued them that they were not already using. We then divided the participants into “sparring trios” with whom to share their ideas and plans. The sparring trios were encouraged to meet at least once before the next workshop to catch up on the recovery actions of each participant.

Phase 3: imagining the ideal workplace

The group work is very good, especially because the topics came from this group, thus making them meaningful. (Participant feedback)

Our second workshop took place on May 16. We naturally started with an overview of the recovery challenge from the previous workshop. We particularly emphasized that reaching the objective was not crucial; the fact that everyone had done at least something was key. We concluded the recovery discussion with three tips or insights from the participants:

- (1) Accountability to others helps maintain progress and provides support.
- (2) Simply taking the time to notice the need for recovery may be empowering.
- (3) Exploring what gets in the way of recovery actions may be as useful as performing the actions.

The core of the second workshop was to co-imagine the workplace of our (that is, the participants') dreams. This workshop was inspired by the steps of a reteaming process (Ahola and Furman, 2021), particularly describing dreams, choosing objectives, finding supporters, charting out the benefits, acknowledging progress and setting the criteria for success. However, we recognized the danger that if we were to ask directly about aspects of the ideal workplace, the participants would likely be constrained by their notions of resources, bureaucracy, etc. Thus, we decided to turn it around and ask the participants what the worst possible workplace would be – an absolute nightmare. Such negative brainstorming often produces a plethora of ideas, as it is easier to think “outside the box” when being critical. Negative brainstorming can increase willingness to participate, creating a fun, energetic and effective group work atmosphere. This method is extremely useful in harnessing negative energy to spark something positive, as following the negative brainstorm, turning the nightmares around represents the ideal situation (Evans, 2012).

Through this method, we first arrived at nightmarish work situations, which were turned around with the aid of a “miracle bingo” listing the descriptions of an ideal workplace from the initial interviews. The next steps were to reflect on what could be achieved in one year – that is, taking ourselves to a place one year from now and seeing what the workplace of our dreams would look like – and, looking back from one year from now, what the milestones were that we achieved along the way. We concluded this imaginary journey by returning to the present day to discuss how to start and why we wanted to start. What motivates us, and why is it worthwhile committing? To contextualize the co-imagined path, we also turned toward discussing the potential risks or pitfalls, as well as the help and support we would need along the way.

This co-imagining process produced seven posters: (1) the nightmares and the dreams, (2) the ideal situation one year from now, (3) the milestones along the way, (4) the first things we need to do along the path, (5) our motivation, (6) the risks or pitfalls and (7) the help and support needed. Looking at all of that, we posed the following questions to the participants: What draws you in? What resonates with you? Where do you want to start? The participants focused on three themes, which gave us three working groups to start creating change until the next workshop. Overall, this process was highly participatory. This, we suggest, generates internal motivation, which in turn boosts behavioral intention (Berge *et al.*, 2022). Thus, with this co-imagining process, we again strengthened the participants' sense of agency along with their competence (what do I think is worthwhile), autonomy (what do I want to work on) and relatedness (who do I want to work with). The groups were asked to create a quick three-step plan of how they would start working together, and they were to meet one to two times before the next workshop.

Phase 4: empowering co-creation

I love the emergence aspect of this workshop and the facilitators' ability to 'hold it.' (Participant feedback)

The final workshop was held on August 29. In this workshop, we wanted to touch on the journey up to that point and pave the way for the future. First, we looked back at the beginning – at the individual. We re-vocalized our objective of giving the participants agency and asked them to reflect upon their current beliefs about their own agency, as well as what led them to think so. This gave the participants a chance to reflect on their personal growth during the program. Second, we wanted to spend time on the group projects that started during the second workshop. To highlight agency, competence, autonomy and relatedness, we used success narratives. We asked each group to contemplate five questions:

Q1. What are we changing? (aspiration).

- Q2. How do we do it, and what have we already done? (approaches and actions).
- Q3. In which areas have we made progress? (impact so far).
- Q4. What do we want to achieve during, for example, the next six months? (next goal).
- Q5. What did we discover? (team motto).

As the task was to build a successful narrative, interactive writing formed a major part of completion. Writing plays a central role in organizations, as texts are habitually used for institutional purposes (Nissi and Lehtinen, 2022). Through this task, we engaged the participants in writing-in-interaction (Mondada and Svinhufvud, 2016), a multimodal social practice emphasizing text production rather than the finished result. In writing down their success narratives, we gave the groups a chance to engage in dialogue with each other, revel in their joint success and share their success with the other groups. Writing-in-interaction also highlights accountability in terms of the publicity of the text; each participant is responsible for what the group writes (Nissi and Lehtinen, 2022). This, we believe, increases agency and motivation to adhere to what the success narrative says. This is connected to the necessity of reflection (Roan and Rooney, 2006): The participants' assessment and reassessment of their personal values and objectives allows them to clarify their viewpoint in terms of their own professional practice, particularly when faced with alternate or opposing views.

To conclude our journey together, we wanted to return to the individual. We engaged the participants in a directed reflection exercise that helped them identify and operationalize their inner strengths. We were also trying to embed a sense of being informal workplace trainers (see Poell *et al.*, 2006) into the participants, enabling the continuation of the work we had started together. This is in accordance with the idea that facilitating learning can be separated from a traditional management role (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002). With that in mind, we finally agreed to meet once more in spring 2024 to celebrate the success to come.

Phase n: reflection

At the end of the third workshop, we asked the participants to give us feedback. The participants evaluated the pilot program extremely positively (Appendixes 1 and 2 Figure A1 and Figure A2 in Supplementary material). They remarked on how a revived sense of togetherness gave them hope and the strength to change. Participation also gave them a sense of belonging and of being part of a movement. Many communicated a sense of a ripple effect, starting from the participants and spreading in the community. On an individual level, the participants noted a change in their thinking about self-compassion and self-recovery at work. This feedback shows our success in creating agency and self-determination among the participants. The participants clearly felt included in the meaning-making process, and the notion of creating a ripple effect highlighted their experience of becoming change agents in the wider community. In addition, the participants reflected on their newfound joint competence, which gave them the authority to work autonomously on their own group projects. Many also reflected upon experienced closeness with the other participants, signaling relatedness. Furthermore, the participants reported increased wellbeing and motivation, as suggested by self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Nevertheless, the participants also gave us feedback on things to change in possible future programs. The participants particularly criticized the tempo: some found it too rapid, others not rapid enough. Reflecting on this point, the timing of the pilot program was not optimal. In the academic community, timing the program to coincide with the academic year would likely have better suited the participants. Particularly, the summer break between

Workshops 2 and 3 meant that the timing of Workshop 3 was extremely quick. This is something that facilitators can take into account based on the participating organizations.

The participants also wished for better co-operation between the workshops and more mixing of the working groups. This is in connection with the wish for more guidance and interim checks for the individual and group tasks completed between the workshops. While mixing the working groups during planning and execution would defeat the purpose of each pursuing its own objective, facilitators could pay more attention to how the groups communicate with each other between workshops and include group discussions on other themes in the final workshop to ensure mixing. In this pilot program, the facilitators tried to incorporate interim checks via emails asking how the groups were doing and how the facilitators could help them progress, but these emails rarely received responses. Thus, facilitators may want to plan formal interim checks in future programs.

Reflecting on the facilitation of this project, we believe that successful facilitators in this type of workplace training program will need coaching skills. Facilitators will also likely need a skillset in implementing training programs, as due to the nature of the process, its contents are not predetermined. To facilitate the workplace training program, we adopted what [Gregory and Romm \(2001\)](#) called a critical facilitation style. According to them, what separates critical facilitation from more traditional facilitation is its more involved nature in being actively engaged in discourse. Critical facilitation also includes involving the participants in bringing forth their personal experiences, values and comprehension sincerely, but without the necessity of reaching a group consensus. Similar thoughts are presented by [James and Arroba \(2005\)](#), who suggest that the initial role of the facilitators is to provide input and enable discussions. As the program evolves from the first to the final phase, the role of the facilitators changes toward observing the dynamics of the situation and taking part in the discussions by encouraging exploration and reflection. Thus, the facilitators aim at enabling sensemaking rather than engaging in providing feedback.

In the program we developed, it was also essential that the vision emerge from the ground up. Thus, it fits bottom-up development projects particularly well. Nevertheless, the program can be highly successful when a managerial mandate is used as a starting point if the training program seeks to engage employees in meaning-making. Essentially, this type of program is participatory, necessitating open dialogue and employee activation. For example, we suggest that this type of training program can be highly useful in strategy work, where employees can be invited to find the path toward a set objective. This is in stark contrast to trainings where a vision is introduced and employee opinions are asked, but those opinions have no influence over the vision or its implementation. The difference boils down to ownership and agency (employees having a real impact) versus cynicism (employees viewing participation as a gimmick, with no real impact).

Discussion and conclusion

Creating a framework for designing workplace training programs

This paper has tackled the dilemma of moving from words to action in workplace training programs. We have emphasized the necessity of engaging the participants in the training program proactively to create agency and self-efficacy, and thereby improve training outcomes both for the individual and for the organization. We have given a detailed, rich description of our pilot program to help academics and practitioners alike analyze and use our findings. Our main contribution lies in establishing a design tool for workplace training programs aimed at active participant engagement ([Figure 1](#) – Supplement 5 in Supplementary material presents the framework as applied to our pilot workplace training program). To help practitioners in adopting our methodology, we have compiled a glossary with bibliographical references

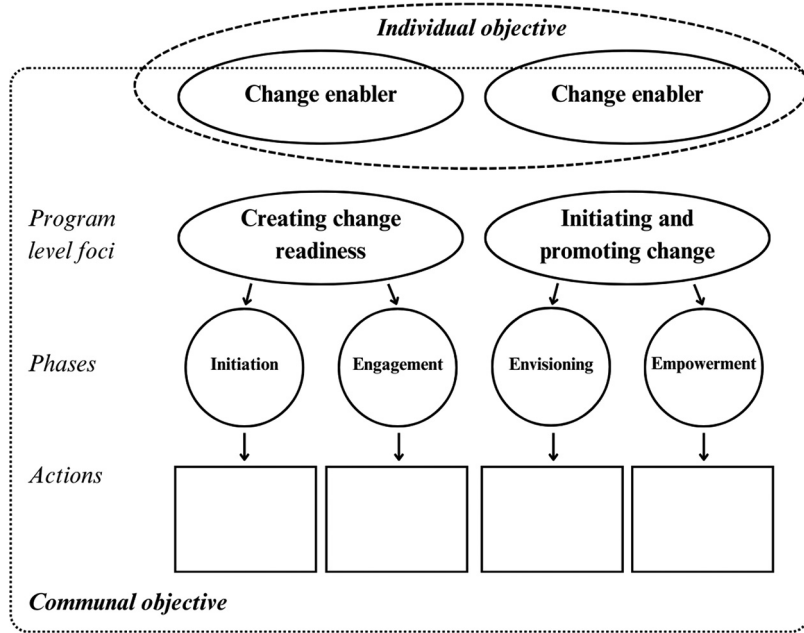


Figure 1.
A framework for
designing and
analyzing
participatory
workplace training
programs

Source: Authors' own work

(Supplement 6 in Supplementary material) as an additional planning resource. We encourage facilitators and trainers to use the glossary in finding and fine-tuning the practices that best suit their unique training contexts.

We suggest that to become personally relevant and therefore engage the participants, the program needs an underlying individual objective that enables the change or learning. In addition to individual-level objectives, each workplace training program requires a communal objective. The individual-level objectives are infused into the program-level foci, which we suggest should be divided into two spheres: creating change readiness (i.e. letting go of the status quo, enabling new learning) and initiating and promoting change (i.e. changing the status quo, enacting and cementing the learning). While we suggest that at least two foci are often needed, as readiness is crucial, it is possible that in some situations, a single focus on the change or learning itself could be enough. Similarly, it is possible that, in some situations, more than two would be needed. We leave this to the facilitators to decide on based on the context of their training programs, although we would suggest that the maximum number achievable in one program (provided it is constrained by time) should be four.

The program-level foci are further divided into the phases of the training, each containing actions that support the objectives. We suggest that each program-level focus will likely require more than one type of phase and action set, but again, the exact number will vary. In essence, we suggest that the phases should focus on initiating the program in a manner that creates readiness, engaging the participants to create a sense of ownership, envisioning the objectives together with the participants to create agency and empowering the participants to carry out the objectives. While we have described our tools above, we

encourage all trainers and facilitators to choose the tactics they have found useful in other settings based on the specific objectives of each training program. Our pilot program is extensive, but we suggest that facilitators and organizations can use these tools also separately. We encourage practitioners to use the framework as inspiration also for narrower workplace training programs, as the elements we present are highly adaptable, and the techniques we propose are functional in other types of programs.

In using this framework for planning and evaluating workplace training programs, we encourage facilitators to consider also the role of facilitation as well as the role of the participant in each phase. It is likely that the role of the facilitator will be more formal in the initial phases, but will turn into a supporting role toward the end phases. Similarly, as the participants' agency increases, their role becomes more active throughout the program. In our pilot program, the first two phases were more facilitator-led, whereas, in the last two phases, the facilitators took on background roles, acting as discussants and organizers, but not content creators. This, we suggest, eases the transfer of responsibility to the participants and helps create ownership of the training. Overall, when planning a workplace training program, we suggest that an equal ability to participate is essential for the community of interest. Creating juxtapositions or divisions in the workplace is likely detrimental to the objectives of any training program. Thus, when planning a training program for a workplace, it is essential to engage a representative of the community of interest in the discussion around who will be invited to join and who will not. Wherever possible, we suggest that an open invitation to all employees will work best.

Finally, we encourage facilitators to engage in active reflection throughout the planning and implementation process. For example, [Eneau and Bertrand \(2019\)](#) draw on Habermas's concept of "mutual understanding" in guiding reflective action toward increasing individuals' authority over their own actions in the training context. This viewpoint suggests that employees are themselves responsible for creating the environment in which such authority can emerge. Thus, along with reflecting upon one's own actions, thoughts and ideas, we encourage facilitators to reflect on how this process of knowledge production is simultaneously ongoing for the training participants.

Contribution to literature and practice

We started this research with an emphasis on moving from words to action, seeking to effectuate change rather than merely diagnosing what was amiss in the community of interest. We created a coherent picture of our pilot training program to highlight the necessity of longevity and immersion in the training program instead of customary isolated training events. In our pilot program, we also put effort into the premeeting and postmeeting spheres, signaling the need to prepare the participants and follow up on how the training objectives are turned into actions. Our pilot training program emphasized facilitating the implementation of the training objectives and also seeking to encourage the achievement of those objectives after the official conclusion of the training. In our pilot program, we placed great emphasis on understanding trainee–work environment dynamics to facilitate this process.

Overall, this paper thus tackles much of the existing criticism of workplace training programs and shows alternative paths for practitioners and researchers alike. While beyond the scope of this paper, based on previous research (e.g. [Akosile and Ekemen, 2022](#); [Battaglio et al., 2022](#); [Gomez-Baya and Lucia-Casademunt, 2018](#); [Hood and Patton, 2022](#); [Nie et al., 2015](#); [Waqas et al., 2019](#)) we also suggest that this type of workplace training program will likely have positive organizational outcomes. These outcomes will likely include increased job satisfaction and decreased burnout – which in turn implies long-term financial benefits.

Limitations

While the benefits of action research in bridging theory and practice are well documented, no project is without limitations. By nature, the strongly participatory research setting poses a question of rigor. To convince the reader of our scientific practice throughout this process, we have aimed at a rich, thick description of both the research process and the justification of our methodological choices. While we have attempted to avoid the ideological underpinnings of action research and instead follow the practical guidance of earlier research, we acknowledge that during this process, we experienced a strong feeling of “this is how workplace training *should* be done.” We wish to bring this notion forward to show the reader that we are aware of our bias and, through careful reporting, have aimed at convincing the reader based on the merits of our arguments rather than on our ideological position. Finally, as an ongoing cycle, it is difficult to pinpoint when action research ends – or should end. In this paper, we chose the end date that felt natural: the final workshop of the workplace training program. This enabled us to write up the research in a timely manner and evaluate the success of the program to date, as detailed above. However, we have already planned a follow-up meeting with the participants one year from when we started. This highlights our wish for the cycle of action research to continue in the community without our active facilitation.

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Figure A1.
Participant
impressions of the
program

Source: Authors' own work

Appendix 2



Source: Authors' own work

Figure A2. Participant evaluations of the program

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

Corresponding author

Riikka Harikkala-Laihininen can be contacted at: riikka.harikkala-laihininen@utu.fi