Second generation approaches to work-family interventions focus not on policies but on deeper level changes in organizational cultures. The goal is to change the way that work is accomplished – its design and its norms and expectations – so that employees are better able to align their employment with their personal lives. It is a way, also, of making the workplace more gender equitable. The method used is called *Collaborative Interactive Action Research* (CIAR).

Changes in work practices geared to better aligning work and personal life are particularly difficult to accomplish because they are linked to two sets of gendered organizational assumptions: one about the ideal worker and the other about ideal work. Organizational norms about ideal workers are implicitly linked to stereotypical notions of professional masculinity such as strength, assertiveness and a life situation that includes someone else taking care of family and other personal issues. Assumptions about ideal work practices are linked to a set of beliefs about the use of time and space, the role of managerial oversight, and evaluation measures that are also anchored in traditional notions of masculinity. Less obvious but critically important, is that these gendered images also have an unexpectedly negative impact on work effectiveness. CIAR explicitly links equity and effectiveness – two objectives long thought to be adversarial – and promotes a Dual Agenda. It challenges deeply embedded assumptions about ideal work and the ideal worker, and does so in actionable ways.

Though *Collaboration* is part of most action research, CIAR is somewhat different because it rests on a mode of *Interaction* that is self-consciously based on mutuality and fluid expertise. Mutuality brings two types of expertise together – the researchers’ on gender
dynamics and the organization’s work practices and systems – to create new, actionable knowledge. The process is explicitly fluid and two directional. This type of Collaborative Interaction requires typical skills of action research, but enacting them presents special problems because these skills are themselves gendered, associated with the feminine, domestic sphere of life. Enacting them can engage strong, even disproportionate resistance. Exploring, rather than attempting to overcome this resistance provides additional data about the gender dynamics at play and work practices to examine.

The Action part starts at the point of entry into an organizational site. Whether entry takes the form of a survey, interviews or focus groups, its primary goal is to connect – explicitly and from the beginning – the goals of equity for people’s work-family concerns with effectiveness issues in the business. Therefore, initial interviews probe the details of work as well as family and try to elicit new, shared understanding of how these are connected and not necessarily adversarial. The interviewer is not passive in this process but actively engages the interviewee to surface and challenge assumptions. The goal is to bring together the two domains of equity and effectiveness at the level of everyday work practice. These mini-interventions prepare the work group for a larger experimental intervention, which is designed collaboratively. The design must address both sides of the Dual Agenda and include outcomes to be evaluated.

Finally, the Research part is the one aspect that is not collaborative, hence different from other types of action research. In CIAR, the researchers alone analyze the data. It is their expertise. Looking at data to identify taken-for-granted assumptions that unexpectedly have negative consequences for equity and effectiveness requires an understanding of gender dynamics not usually available in the organization, though it is a goal of the process to introduce
this understanding. Feedback is perhaps the key intervention: it provides a new narrative about work practices and opens up the possibility of change.

Take the example of the finance department of a large manufacturing site. One assumption identified there was “Time is Cheap” – i.e. when problems arose the most common resource deployed was time, ignoring the costs of that practice for both equity and effectiveness. This led to a culture of overdoing work. When senior managers requested information, junior analysts would develop a full blown analysis before going home that night complete with graphs, charts or even supporting Powerpoints. The problem was that this level of analysis and the immediacy of a reply were rarely required. Often a simple back-of-the-envelope analysis was all that was needed. Analysts, however, were reluctant to ask about the technical or time parameters of the task because they did not want to raise questions about their commitment or competence. Instead they took it as an opportunity to shine; to show senior managers they were willing to go the extra mile. These norms had Dual Agenda consequences. Overdoing led to unnecessary long hours and unpredictability in schedule, particularly problematic for personal life. But it also had significant effectiveness implications. Wasting time on unnecessary analysis meant other tasks were ignored or under-analyzed leading to productivity and efficiency issues. The team was asked to come up with a simple, actionable step to change this informal norm. They quickly devised a one-page form that asked senior managers to describe the parameters of each request and when the data were needed. The form took the onus off individuals to ask clarifying questions and encouraged managers to think more seriously about requests and the cost/benefits of what were often casual inquiries. As one senior manager noted, “I had no idea folks were staying till all hours to get these things done. I usually don’t read them until the end of the
week.” In retrospect, it seems an obvious solution. But without surfacing the assumption about
time these inefficient practices would not have been identified or been able to be changed.

In summary, CIAR is a mode of action research particularly well suited to work-family
interventions. It is geared to identify gendered assumptions that not only hurt equity issues
related to personal life but also detract from effectiveness. Importantly, it offers organizations an
opportunity to rethink previously unquestioned work practices and develop concrete, work-based
changes that are systemic and structural, creating workplaces that are good for people and good
for work.
Further Reading


