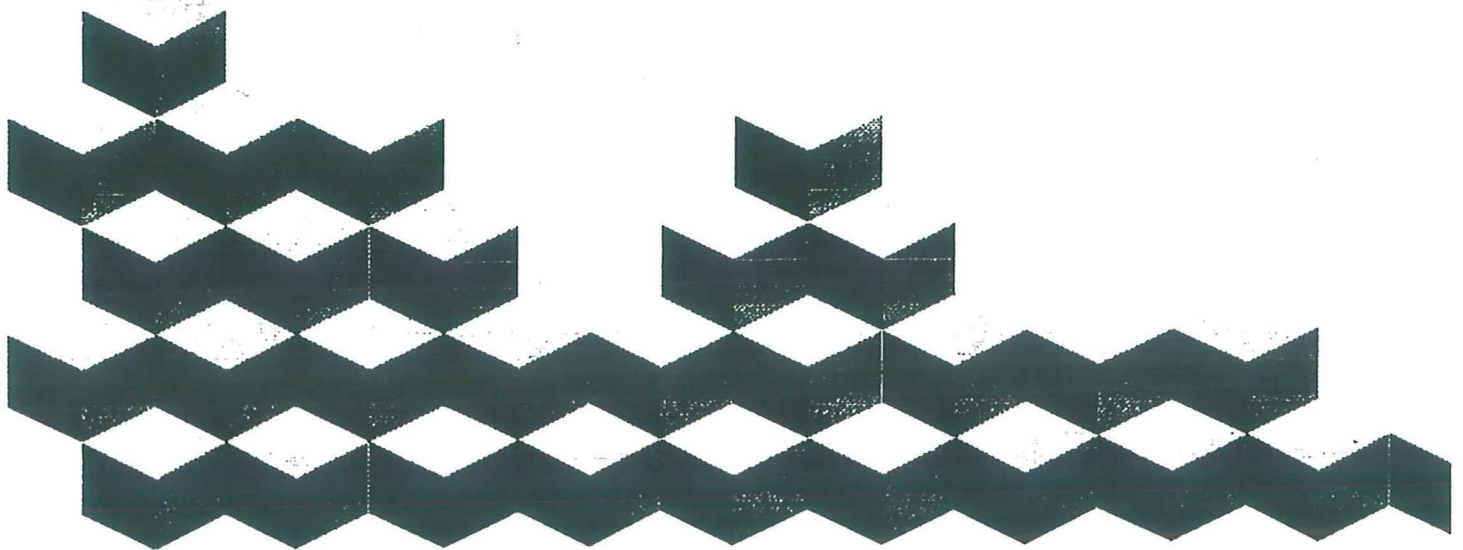


Pillsbury Neighborhood Services Action Research Process:

**An Introduction for New
Employees**



The purpose of this document is to give new employees at Pillsbury Neighborhood Services a brief introduction to the Pillsbury Neighborhood Services Action Research Process. More complete information about this process is available in the Guidebook for Action Research at Pillsbury Neighborhood Services and through periodic training sessions offered by and for PNS staff.

Evaluation at PNS

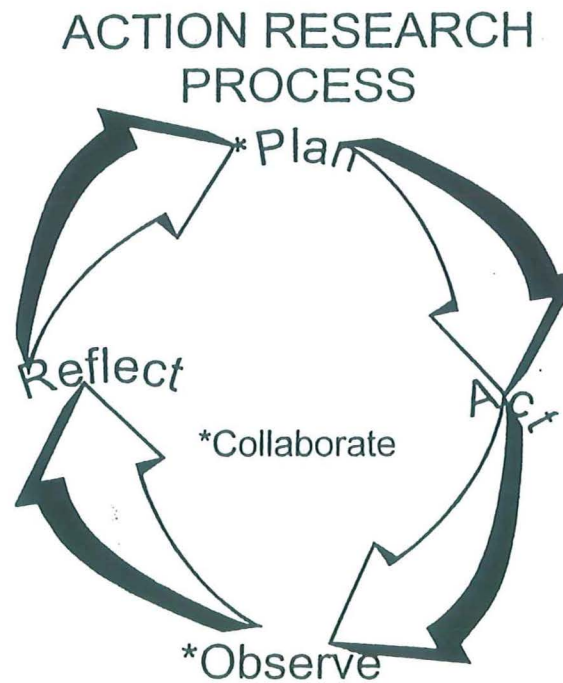
The Pillsbury Neighborhood Services Action Research Process represents a new way of evaluating the services provided by PNS. In the past, evaluation at PNS has been driven by funder requirements. The type of information collected under this type of system is usually determined by funder needs and there is no systematic attempt to use the information internally for program improvement. Unlike this traditional model of evaluation, in the PNS Action Research Process it's your concerns about the program and your ability to use the evaluation information that drive the process. The table below shows a comparison of traditional evaluation and PNS Action Research.

| CATE-GORY | "Traditional" External Evaluation | PNS Action Research |
|-----------|--|---|
| WHO | An external evaluator An outsider | PNS staff members themselves Insiders and community members |
| WHAT | Program evaluation ("determining merit and worth," making judgments) | Action research (systematic self-inquiry process to improve functioning) |
| WHERE | On-site data collection Off-site analysis and writing | On site (in situ) |
| WHEN | Periodically, typically when required by a funding source | Ongoing, as a part of practice |
| WHY | Monitoring Accountability Program improvement | Program understanding Program improvement Data creation for funders |

The PNS Action Research Process is based on the concept of "action research," a type of systematic inquiry that formalizes the intuitive process people use when they work together to do things better:

- Planning something;
- Collecting information to study what happens when the plan is put into place;
- Revising the plan as needed; and
- Then trying it again.

The form of action research adopted by PNS is collaborative because people work together during the process.



The PNS Model for Action Research

The PNS Action Research Process includes processes for doing action research at multiple levels within the organization:

On an individual level, action research is a tool that you can use to assist you with your day to day work and long range planning at PNS. You are an important component of the PNS Action Research Process. You make your decisions concerning the outcomes and results you want to achieve and the results of your actions contribute to the effectiveness of your center or program that in turn contribute to the effectiveness of PNS as an agency.

At the center level, action research reflects a way of "doing business." It helps staff determine if and how their programs make a difference in the lives of their clients. An individual, team or center can use the four-step action research process as a way of examining the effect of their actions, gathering information, and using the information for decision making.

At the agency level, action research addresses issues that affect more than one center. For example, the issue may be important for two centers or it may be an agency-wide issue. Another way that action research at the agency level differs from action research at the center level is that the process includes people from different parts of the agency. This group comes together to carry out all steps of the action research process.

How Action Research Works for You

An example may help you understand how action research can help you be more effective in your work. Imagine that your program illustrates the long-term vision of the united Way called "strengthening families." One way you contribute to realizing this vision is by providing parenting workshop to neighborhood residents. You can use action research to facilitate the implementation of the workshop.

Plan: Your work with a small group of people to plan the workshops. Take notes at your meetings; keep track of your progress by writing it down.

Act: Conduct the workshop. You include a survey to be given to participants immediately after the workshop as part of your evaluation. (Other ways to collect information from

participants include interviews and/or focus groups conducted either immediately after or several weeks after the workshop, pre-and post-tests, and observational techniques.)

Observe: You and others come together to review the workshop activities and the survey results. The answers people give you on the survey provide the opportunity for observation and reflection. Questions to be considered include: What worked well? What do we need to improve? Did we learn anything about effective ways to strengthen families?

Reflect: You then use this process to make decisions about future workshops. You benefit from the knowledge you gained and can then start a second action research cycle. Keeping a file of all the information you gather will help you summarize what you learned.

Action Research and Accountability Issues

Funders often specify broad, long term outcomes instead of the more immediate and context-specific concerns familiar to program staff so a crucial step in planning for action research is to establish a link between the immediate actions of a program and the long term outcomes of interest to funders. One useful process for establishing this linkage is to specify a program's "**theory of action**" (Patton, 1986).

Expressing a program's theory of action is a straightforward process of describing the relationship between a program's activities and its results. Patton (1986) defines a theory of action as "a means-ends hierarchical chain of objectives." As shown in the example, a theory of action consists of **a sequence of actions leading to a desired result**. Once the theory of action for a program has been developed, you can use this structure to develop action research processes related to the long term outcomes in which the funder is more interested. **Action research can occur at any point in the chain of events** that make up a theory of action. It is up to you to decide where information is most needed. For example, you may focus an action research project on action 3, "conduct outreach to recruit parents to participate in workshops." The specific issues addressed by the action research process would be determined by the kinds of information you need to accomplish this intermediate program objective. You may, for example, decide to try out a variety of outreach strategies and observe the effectiveness of each. These observations can then be used to reflect on how the outreach process could be strengthened in the future.

Theory of Action for a Single Program

United Way Vision: Strengthening Families

Result #1: A greater proportion of individuals and families will live in households free of abuse and neglect where all members, through shared power and responsibility, resolve conflict without violence.

Action Steps:

- Action 5 Increase parents' level of knowledge and skills on how to resolve conflict without violence.
- Action 4 Provide workshops to parents.
- Action 3 Conduct outreach to recruit parents to participate in workshops.
- Action 2 Develop content of workshops.
- Action 1 Hire staff to develop and conduct workshops.

Remember -- It starts with you.

References

Patton, M.Q. (1986). *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

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