

excerpt from

Action Inquiry

by Bill Torbert and Associates

INTRODUCTION

The Promise and the Power of Action Inquiry

Do you practice action inquiry? Most people understand what “action” and “inquiry” mean when used in sentences by themselves. Put together, as “action inquiry,” new and potent ways to develop performance and learning emerge. Do you put action and inquiry together in your life?

Action inquiry is a way of simultaneously conducting action and inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice that increases the wider effectiveness of our actions. Such action helps individuals, teams, organizations, and still larger institutions become more capable of self-transformation and thus more creative, more aware, more just, and more sustainable. In principle, no matter how much or little positional power you have, anyone in any family or organization can become more effectively and transformingly powerful by practicing action inquiry.

Action inquiry is a lifelong process of transformational learning that individuals, teams, and whole organizations can undertake if they wish to become:

- Increasingly capable of making future visions come true
- Increasingly alert to the dangers and opportunities of the present moment
- Increasingly capable of performing in effective and transformational ways

Action inquiry becomes a moment-to-moment way of living whereby we attune ourselves through inquiry to acting in an increasingly timely and wise fashion for the overall development of the families, teams, and organizations in which we participate.

Surprisingly, action inquiry is a virtually unknown process, perhaps because learning how to practice it from moment-to-moment is no easy trick. For action inquiry is not a set of prescriptions for behavior that, when followed, invariably manipulate situations as we initially wish and yield the success we dreamed of. Action inquiry is not a process that can be followed in an imitative, mechanical way, learning a few ideas and imagining that parroting them back to others occasionally means we are doing action inquiry. Action inquiry is a way of learning anew, in the vividness of each moment, how best to act now. The source of both its difficulty and potential is that action inquiry requires making ourselves, not just others, vulnerable to inquiry and to transformation.

Why We Authors Try to Expand Our Practice of Action Inquiry

Why do people want to learn action inquiry? Let’s hear a few specific responses to this question from some of the associate authors of this book.

One writes:

I was introduced to action inquiry during my first year as director of a university science laboratory. This was not only my first managerial position, but also my first job. I was responsible for managing undergraduate laboratories for more than 300 enrolled students each semester. My teaching team consisted of inexperienced graduate students and part-time faculty who were either teaching only for the extra income, or just needed to leave their house to keep their and their family's sanity. Although I only had limited access to information and little power (not being a tenured faculty member), I had many administrative responsibilities that required my getting support from the department chair and faculty. A perfect scenario for failure!

Action inquiry helped me analyze my situation and question many of my beginning assumptions. It helped me see people's different perspectives and utilize this knowledge to develop creative approaches that incorporated those differences. I gained access to my leadership qualities and developed them through practice. After three years, I had developed with others a new curriculum for the laboratories and had negotiated more than \$200,000 for new equipment. Even more important, I was able to bring all the teaching assistants together in working toward our common goal of providing a quality education for our students. The department recognized my contribution by promoting me to a teaching faculty position during my second year.

Another associate writes:

It happens that I began my study and practice of action inquiry shortly after I got married. In the simplest terms, I have to say action inquiry saved my marriage. Even though my skills were still very limited, the ability to look at my own actions and see how I was part of the problem and my occasional ability to practice emotional jiu-jitsu made the difference between allowing our relationship to grow from the problems we had and letting those problems tear our relationship apart.

One of our most senior associates writes, with characteristic humility: I am a member of an action inquiry study group. My fellow members are helping me to intervene more often in the group. One result of this is I am feeling increasingly good about myself. Another is that in day-to-day conversations I am struggling, often with success, to combine my assertions with inquiry, inquiry into the other person's experience, inquiry into what my feelings are and where they are coming from, and inquiry into how to express these things. I'm improving and this excites me because it implies that learning really is lifelong.

One of the associates who is a mother tells this story about a bedtime moment:

The youngest, a whirling dervish of a character, dances around the bedroom while I attempt to read to her older sister who loves a good yarn and rightly feels that her time should allow for quiet absorption into the story. Moments later my eldest is biting her nails, an activity I find particularly annoying when I am reading to her. I get cross with her and we end up in a small fight with her sobbing with frustration and indignation. I am able to see what has happened—my exasperation with the youngest dancing around has been taken out, unfairly, on the eldest. I apologize and also explain what I see has happened. My eldest is able to move on quickly to be cuddled and consoled . . . she is not always in the habit of doing so since injustice cuts deep for her. The youngest has overheard and quiets her exuberance, allowing some space for the story reading. They both sleep easily and would not have done so had this situation escalated.

Still another associate writes, as if about the previous scene:

The ability to notice with immediacy what is going on in me has been, I would honestly say, the most important ingredient in the progress of my personal development. Over the years, this capacity has grown exponentially. Fifteen years ago, it could take me weeks to figure out what had been going on inside me during a troubling encounter. Now, I am aware as I experience moments unfolding. Besides enabling me to revel in the discoveries and sheer experience of what “is,” it equips me to be proactively more appropriate and effective in any social situation. It sounds as though it must take a lot of time and energy to be paying attention to so much all the time, but that’s not the case at all. At its simplest, action inquiry is just a natural part of conscious living.

How hard is it to learn “conscious living”? How hard is it to interweave action and inquiry in each moment? Conscious living requires that we carefully attend from the inside-out to the experiences we have, hoping to learn from them and modify our actions and even our way of thinking as a result. But to live consciously requires us to overturn some orthodoxies. Let’s remember that both modern university-based empirical science (so-called pure research conducted from the ivory tower of academia) and modern organizational and political practice (Machiavellian “*real politik*” practiced in the messy real world) have historically separated inquiry from action.

How Action Inquiry Differs from Our Modern Views of Political Action and Scientific Inquiry

Modern political/organizational practice and modern scientific inquiry work primarily from the outside-in, whereas action inquiry works primarily from the inside-out. Modern politics presumes that power is the ability to make another do as we wish from the outside-in (indeed, most of us think of this as the very definition of power). Likewise, modern scientific theory and method presumes that what happens is caused from the outside-in—that the hammer head hitting the nail is what causes the nail, whether it

wants to or not, to enter the wood. (Indeed, this sounds like plain common sense, doesn't it?) Modern science also presumes that we can best learn what causes what by having external investigators (objective, disinterested, professional scientists) study people from the outside-in.

We see the results played out in the news every day. Corporate or international actions based on unilateral power and devoid of inquiry result in corporate scandals and wars that, in retrospect, appear unjust. And inquiry devoid of action robs us of opportunities that occur unexpectedly and require a timely response, or else they disappear. Yet separating inquiry from action is today the norm both in the university and in the nonacademic world. The reason you may not have heard of or intentionally tried to practice action inquiry is that it is a new kind of scientific inquiry and a new kind of political/organizational action that has been exercised before only rarely, for moments.

By contrast, action inquiry works primarily from the inside-out (although it recognizes the presence and influence of outside-in perspectives as well). Action inquiry begins because we (any one of us, or any family, or organization) experience some sort of gap between what we wish to do and what we are able to do. The awareness of this gap can lead to the development of a clear intent to accomplish something beyond our own current capacity. In such a case, the very intent to act includes two elements: (1) the intent to do the inquiry necessary to learn how to do this new thing and (2) the inquiry necessary to learn whether we really have accomplished it. So, action inquiry begins with inner experiences of gaps and intents. Intending to build a bookshelf leads to the strategy of nailing boards together. You choose a hammer as a tactical instrument and your capacity for assessment determines whether your arm has swung so that the hammer has hit the nail at the right angle to cause the nail to enter the wood. Yes, the hammer hitting the nail is the most immediate and visible cause of the nail entering the wood, but the hammer cannot even move, let alone cause anything constructive, on its own.

If our intent is clear and strong, we will wish to learn the truth as soon as possible about whether our strategies, tactics (e.g., our use of the hammer), and outcomes are accomplishing the intent or not. If our intent has not been accomplished, the sooner we learn this, the sooner we may correct the course of action in order to move closer to our intent. From this point of view, a method that can correct error in the midst of ongoing action is qualitatively more useful to us, more beneficial for others, and more powerful in a scientific sense than methods that *alternate* action and inquiry. Action inquiry *interweaves* research and practice in the present.

Indeed, action inquiry asks each of us to recognize how every action we take is, in fact, also an inquiry. The reverse is also true: every inquiry we make is also, simultaneously, an action that influences the response given. In this sense, all action and all inquiry is action inquiry. (For example, we don't know what response we'll get, even when we remind one of our children of a family rule in a tone that we hope brooks no dissent. The subsequent response of our child is in part a commentary on the efficacy of our action, as well as representing an inquiry about what we are going to do next.)

But, although we are constantly engaged in implicit and unintentional action inquiry, we almost never realize or remember in the course of the routines and the interruptions of our days that we may *intentionally* engage in action inquiry. Moreover, few of us are familiar with or practiced in specific strategies and tactics that are likely to increase the efficacy, the transforming power, and the timeliness of our action inquiries. Indeed, the fundamental secret of timely action inquiry is to be awake enough in present time to engage in action inquiry intentionally. As Thoreau once quipped, “I’ve never known a man who was quite awake.” And we find little guidance—whether we look to the world of business practice or the world of academic scholarship—for awakening to and developing intentional, effective, transforming, timely action inquiry in the midst of everyday life. This book begins the lifelong and (from a civilizational point of view) centuries-long process of addressing this gap.

The Three Primary Aims of Action Inquiry

On a subjective, personal level, the value-explicit aims of action inquiry are to generate effectiveness and *integrity* in ourselves. Integrity is generated, not by unvarying behavior, nor by espousing the same principles consistently, but rather through a more and more dynamic and continual inquiry into the gaps in ourselves. Such gaps may appear between the results we intended and the results our performance generates, or between our planned performance and our actual performance, or between our original intentions and our low state of awareness (not quite awake) at the moment of action, causing us to miss an opportunity.

In relationships with family, friends, colleagues, customers, or strangers, the value-explicit aim of action inquiry is to generate a critical and constructive *mutuality*. Power differences and the unilateral use of power by either party reduce the likelihood of trust and honest communication. Mutuality is generated through two dynamics. The first dynamic is an increasingly open inquiry into the play of power between parties, with mutuality as a goal (though often, as in the case of a parent and a small child, a presently felt mutuality can be wrapped within layers of assumed dependence, so that full mutuality may be a generation or more in the making). The second dynamic that generates mutuality, once we recognize the present play of power between us, is more and more creative actions to develop shared visions and strategies, increasingly collaborative ways of conversing, and jointly determined ways of learning the worth of what is created together. If you look back to the short descriptions some of our coauthors have offered about how action inquiry is alive in our lives, we think you will see concerns for effectiveness, for integrity, and for mutuality closely interwoven with one another.

On the still larger scale of organization, society, and the environment, the value-explicit aim of action inquiry is to generate *sustainability*. To be sustainable, organizing structures (e.g., laws, policies, networks, etc.) must encourage effectiveness, integrity, and mutuality, and must also be capable of continuing transformation toward greater social justice and greater harmony with the natural environment, as we will argue and illustrate in the body of the book.

Initially, integrity, mutuality, and sustainability may come across to you as high-sounding ideals with little relationship to the gritty actual power reality of our everyday worlds. This perception exists because we ordinarily understand and experience power in a conventional or cynical way as the ability to get what the power possessor unilaterally wants, without inquiry and irrespective of the overall justice of the outcome. Action inquiry represents an approach to powerful action that is fundamentally different from modern political/organizational action because it treats mutually transforming power—a kind of power that few people today recognize or exercise—as more powerful than unilateral power. Traditional forms of power, such as force, diplomacy, expertise, or positional authority, that are commonly used unilaterally to influence external behavior may generate immediate acquiescence, conformity, dependence, or resistance. But, by themselves, no matter in what combination, they will not generate transformation. Action inquiry blends different proportions of all these types of power in particular situations, but always in subordination to a rare kind of mutual power that makes both the person acting and the people and organizations he or she is relating to vulnerable to transformation. The promise of action inquiry is a new kind of power—*transforming power*—which, paradoxically, emanates from a willingness to be vulnerable to transformation oneself. You will find many illustrations of this kind of power at work in everyday organizational situations in the body of this book.

Summary and Preview

We have introduced action inquiry as something new. Action inquiry is new in two senses at once. It is new in historical terms in that it brings the modern scientific concerns for *inquiry* that generates valid theory and data together with the modern managerial concern to control and coordinate organizing *actions*. And action inquiry is new in personal terms in that it creates a new and different future in our personal daily lives each time we awaken and intentionally practice it rather than acting unconsciously, habitually, and without inquiry.

To provide an initial sense of the defining qualities of action inquiry, we have proposed that:

1. Every action and every inquiry is implicitly action inquiry.
2. Action inquiry interweaves research and practice in the present.
3. We almost never realize or remember in the course of the routines and the interruptions of our days that we may intentionally engage in action inquiry.
4. Action inquiry seeks to interweave subjective, intersubjective, and objective data—subjective data about our own intent for the future, intersubjective data about what is going on at present from the divergent points of view of different participants, and objective data about what has actually been produced with what quality in the past.
5. The special power of action inquiry—transforming power—comes from a combination of dedication to our intent or shared vision; alertness to gaps among vision, strategy, performance, and outcomes in ourselves and others; and a willingness to play a leading role with others in organizational or social transformations, which includes being vulnerable to transformation ourselves. Practicing action inquiry can give you an enormous competitive advantage over those

not practicing it. Indeed, our experience with the thousands of managers we have worked with is that practicing action inquiry, at first, seems very risky to them but then leads to organizational promotions more rapidly than they can initially imagine. (This unexpected outcome tends to occur first because we *overestimate* the risks of new behavior and *underestimate* the risks of our ongoing habitual behavior and, second, because visible, voluntary, noncompetitive, gap-filling leadership initiatives are relatively rare in organizations today.) But action inquiry does not actually generate so much a competitive advantage as a mutual, collaborative advantage. Action inquiry becomes even more rewarding as you develop the perspective and skill to encourage others to exercise it as well. The full promise and power of action inquiry blossoms when it is a collaborative engagement that enriches your life in many more ways (in terms of greater mutuality, trust, friendship, and sense of service and shared meaning) than exercising action inquiry competitively will.

This book offers a fresh approach to helping friends, colleagues, work teams, and organizations learn even as they are involved in the cut and thrust of daily action. We offer action inquiry as a highly usable process whereby managers and whole organizations simultaneously learn at several levels and modify their actions as a continual process. This process not only allows us to correct errors before they have negative consequences for business outcomes and trust, but can also be experienced as pleasurable and energizing as a critical mass of colleagues join in, creating a positive climate for ongoing learning.

Our intent in writing this book is to support you to begin or continue your own action inquiry journey. We illustrate the inquiry-in-action process with many more examples, some humble and momentary, some so strategic and artistic and sustained that they have transformed whole lives, whole companies, whole industries, or whole countries. Further, through exercises for Chapters 1, 2, and 3 presented in the Interlude chapter, we invite you to enter into the inquiry-in-action process. We begin with a focus on the individual manager, then expand it outward to teams and organizations, and, finally, to society and human living in general. Welcome to this action inquiry!

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