



ACTION INQUIRY

**The Secret of
Timely and
Transforming
Leadership**

Bill Torbert and Associates

An Excerpt From

***Action Inquiry:
The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership***

by Bill Torbert and Associates
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: The Promise and the Power of Action Inquiry	1

PART ONE

Learning Action Inquiry Leadership Skills

1	Fundamentals of Action Inquiry	13
2	Action Inquiry as a Manner of Speaking	24
3	Action Inquiry as a Way of Organizing	38

INTERLUDE

Action Inquiry: The Idea and the Experience	55
---	----

PART TWO

Transforming Leadership

4	The <i>Opportunist</i> and the <i>Diplomat</i> : Action-logics you probably resort to, but don't want to be circumscribed by	65
5	The <i>Expert</i> and the <i>Achiever</i> : The most common managerial action-logics	78
6	The <i>Individualist</i> Action-Logic: Bridge to transforming leadership	91
7	The <i>Strategist</i> Action-Logic: Developing transforming power	104

PART THREE
Transforming Organizations

8	Transforming Meetings, Teams, and Organizations	121
9	Facilitating Organizational Transformations	133
10	The <i>Social Network</i> Organization and Transformation Toward <i>Collaborative Inquiry</i>	148
11	The Quintessence of <i>Collaborative Inquiry</i>	162

PART FOUR
**The Ultimate Spiritual and Societal
Intent of Action Inquiry**

12	The Fresh Action Awareness of <i>Alchemists</i>	177
13	Creating <i>Foundational Communities of Inquiry</i>	194

Appendix:	Concluding Scientific Postscript on Methods of Inquiry	209
Bibliography		229
Index		237

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 transformationally 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

2 Introduction

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

4 Introduction

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 (Machiavelian “*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.¹

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 ex-

1. In this regard, we refer our more research-oriented colleagues to the Appendix. There we discuss some ancient roots of action inquiry and several other strands of the exploration toward an action inquiry that integrates subjective, intersubjective, and objective inquiry. We also review the objective measures and studies that underlie our discussion of action inquiry throughout the body of the book. We have left such scholarly discussions for the Appendix because the body of this book is addressed to all of us citizens as beginners in the personal and organizational practices of action inquiry—whether we are men or women, junior or senior, managers or researchers.

periences 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 in-

quiry 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!

PART ONE

Learning Action Inquiry Leadership Skills

ONE

Fundamentals of Action Inquiry

By “action inquiry,” we mean a kind of behavior that is simultaneously productive and self-assessing. Action inquiry is behavior that does several things at once. It listens into the developing situation. It accomplishes whatever tasks appear to have priority. And it invites a revisioning of the task (and of our own action!) if necessary. Action inquiry is always a timely discipline to exercise because its purpose is always in part to discover, whether coldly and precisely or warmly and stumblingly, what action is timely.

These sentences are easy enough to read and to write, and they make action inquiry seem obviously worthwhile. When don’t you want to act in a timely fashion? Yet action inquiry is also the hardest thing in the world to do on a continuing basis (at least so it feels to some of us who’ve been working and playing with it for three or four decades). The difficulty arises partly because of the unusual degrees of awareness of the present situation that high quality action inquiry requires. The difficulty arises partly because of the many different and potentially conflicting political pressures and standards of timeliness that may be at play in a given situation. And the difficulty arises partly because of how hard it is to develop a taste for making ourselves vulnerable to change at the very moment when we are also trying to get something done.

A small example of action inquiry may seem ridiculously simple. Here is a company president speaking by phone to her special assistant:

“I’m assuming you are handling the Jones contract. Let me know if you need assistance.”

The president makes her assumption explicit and advocates that the special assistant seek her support, if necessary, to assure the job gets

done. The assistant may say, “What? I’ve never heard of the Jones contract.” Or, “I thought Paul was taking care of that.” Or whatever the truth is, if it is incongruent with the president’s explicitly stated assumption and offer of assistance. Many of the day-to-day frustrations of work life can be avoided by such brief assumption-testing action inquiries.

But even such obvious types of checking and inquiry as this president displays are rare in business, professional, and familial conversations. Consider the recent simulated operating room study of medical residents receiving training on how to avoid errors (Rudolph 2003). This study shows that in over 4,000 comments by the lead physician during simulated operating crises, only three combined some direction about what to attend to with an inquiry about what the assistant was learning. This small number occurred in spite of the fact that half of these young doctors were trained in a specific method for inquiring in the midst of action only minutes before the simulation. Yet their much more deeply internalized need to appear independent, competent, and knowledgeable interfered with showing the vulnerability necessary to learn the data that can prevent error (as a number of them acknowledged in postscenario interviews).

A shift in awareness is needed, a shift to a kind of awareness that shows us the opportunity to make a comment like the president’s. This kind of awareness transcends the sort of implicit self-image that prevents medical residents from seeking colleagues’ help in the operating room and instead attends responsively to the real need both the patient and we have for help. What is this awareness? How can we gain access to it in a timely way?

The Underwater Pipeline Project Manager

For some clues, let’s listen in as Steve Thompson, a highly competent and well-paid manager, reconstructs a confrontation with his boss, Ron Cedrick. Steve’s team is laying underwater pipeline when a storm begins to blow around their North Sea platform.

British National Oil Company had contracted with Ron Cedrick to construct and install its “single anchor leg mooring system” that can fill oil tankers at sea, eliminating the need for hundreds of miles of pipeline from

the offshore oil fields. The initial underwater construction had been completed in a picturesque and protected Norwegian fjord. But we were now saturation diving for 8- to 12-hour periods from aboard a 600-foot derrick ship in the February North Sea, which can be unpredictably violent.

The most critical part of this dangerous procedure is the launch and recovery of the six-man bell through the “interface”—the wave-affected first 25 feet below the ocean surface. Rough seas have separated more than one diving bell from its winch. When this happens, there is little hope of returning the divers alive.

It was my first job as project manager, so it was of particular importance to me that the crew was doing an outstanding job and Cedrick was extremely pleased with our performance. Famously aloof, Cedrick wore a shiny gold metal hard hat. And, no matter how difficult, his projects always came in ahead of schedule.

The bell had just gone into the water for an anticipated 12-hour run when the wind changed direction and was coming at us from the same direction as the moderate swell, just as it does before it really blows. I alerted the shift supervisor to keep an eye on the weather and went up to the bridge for a look at the most recent forecast and facsimile, which confirmed my suspicions.

Just then, Cedrick came up to me, “I personally appreciate the fine job you and your boys are doing and I know it’ll continue. I know the weather’s getting up a bit, but we have to complete the flowline connection today to stay ahead, so we need to keep that bell in the water as long as we can before we let a little ole weather shut us down. I’ve seen the respect those boys have for you and I know they’ll do what you ask.”

“Yes, sir” I responded confidently. What was going on inside me at that moment sounded different, though. The moment I reviewed the weather on the bridge, I became tense with fear. I was afraid I wouldn’t have the strength of character to shut down the operation in the face of my overwhelming desire to succeed objectively and in Cedrick’s eyes. I was also afraid I would have to deceive my people into thinking that pushing our operating limits was justified.

The outcome was all too predictable. I kept the bell in the water too long. The weather blew a gale. The recovery of the bell through 20-foot seas was perilous. I compromised the safety of the divers and set a poor precedent for the permissible operating parameters. I received no satisfaction from the major bonus Cedrick gave me for “pulling it off”—we did complete the flowline connection. Inside me, the awareness that I had

manipulated and jeopardized the safety of my fellow workers galled my illusion that I was an honest, ethical man.

After the emergency was over and the mission successfully accomplished, Steve Thompson could simply have congratulated himself for getting the job done in the face of significant obstacles and for winning the praise of his superior. Instead, his awareness was alert and vulnerable in a way that revealed a serious weakness of character to him that few have the strength of character to face. He became aware of a serious incongruity between his espoused or proclaimed values and his actual actions.

We were led into the Steve Thompson story by two questions about the kind of awareness associated with action inquiry. What is this kind of awareness that transcends all our implicit self-images that cramp awareness and prevent us from acting with integrity, mutuality, justice, and inquiry? And how can this kind of awareness be accessed in a timely way even in an emergency?

The case itself shows us no positive answer to these two questions. Steve did not display such awareness during his encounter with Cedrick, nor in the action-packed hours that followed. He got the job done and the divers out safely, despite the turmoil and danger. The story illustrates a type of awareness in action that puts action first and inquiry later, or not at all. Steve has a well-honed awareness of how to adjust himself and his team behaviorally from minute to minute to changing conditions. In engineering and social systems theory, we call that a high reliability capacity for digesting and learning from *single-loop feedback* (information that tells me whether or not my last move advanced me toward the goal). Reliable single-loop learning is critical for reaching goals efficiently and effectively, and Steve obviously demonstrated this quality of awareness in this case.

By the end of his experience, Steve also demonstrates a second quality of awareness that is much more difficult to describe. It seems something like an awareness that transcends one's self-image, since he sees his "illusion" about himself "destroyed." But it is not yet an empowering awareness that allows him in the midst of the turmoil to see a leadership initiative that generates greater legitimacy as well as efficiency and effectiveness.

Let us review more closely what happens in Steve Thompson's experience. At a certain specific moment, he becomes aware that there is a significant disharmony among several of the personal forces that moti-

vate him. There's his desire to please his boss, innocent and constructive enough in itself, you might ordinarily think. Then there's his desire to perform efficiently and effectively, ordinarily considered the *most* constructive of inclinations in a work setting. Thirdly, there's his desire to deserve his team's respect by holding their well-being uppermost. Finally, there's his self-image as an honest, ethical man.

These four good chunks of Steve's soul find themselves in a new and stormy juxtaposition to one another during the outer storm in the North Sea. He reports his inner experience as "tense with fear" and "galling." He describes the outcome as the "destruction" of his "illusion" that he is honest and ethical.

But just a minute—what is really going on here? Is that self-image really an illusion? Isn't Steve's story to himself at the time and when he later writes it up the very essence of honesty? Isn't the whole reflective process that he chooses to engage in afterwards the very essence of ethical inquiry? How else may we develop true, ethical integrity except by the compassionate, unsparing observation of our lack of integrity?

By receiving feedback and reflecting on what he wrote, Steve gradually realized that yes, of course, he possessed a real, and a real strong, ethical concern. Indeed, this concern was motivating his entire self-criticism. He came to realize that two subtle qualities pushed him out of shape at the time of the storm, one by its presence and one by its absence. The quality whose presence pushed him out of shape was Cedrick's clever use of multiple types of power (his legitimate and potentially unilateral power as a superior; his authority and fame as an expert in his craft; and the sheer seductive, man-to-man power of his down-home-Texas-macho talk about "a little ole weather"). At the time of the storm, Steve could feel the effect of Cedrick's use of power on himself, and he could feel the implicit illegitimacy of the pressure. At the same time, however, he could not name what was happening to him, nor imagine a way to defang it. This happens to a lot of us, if not all of us: When certain types of power are directed toward us, we become stunned or hypnotized, unable to articulate to ourselves what is happening to us, and unable to take creative action in response.

The quality whose absence pushed Thompson out of shape was a kind of attention or vision that can impartially observe both the storm going on outside us and the storm going on within, which we can call super-vision.

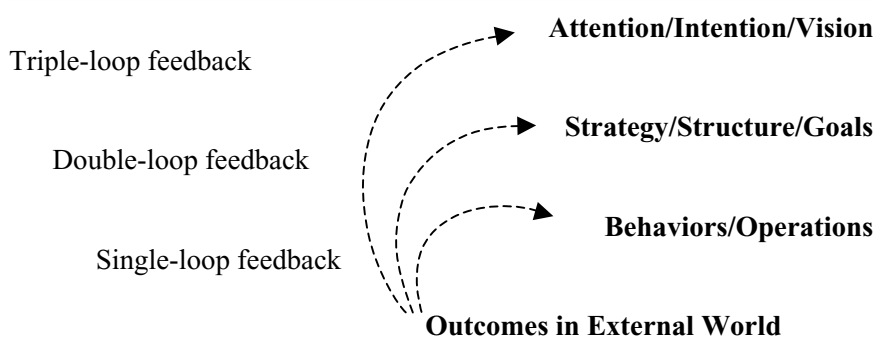
Single-, Double-, and Triple-Loop Awareness

Systems theory offers a framework for naming and understanding supervision (Deutsch 1966; Torbert 1973). In systems theory terms, during his crisis with Cedrick and the weather in the North Sea, Steve successfully dealt with single-loop feedback. He adjusted his behavior throughout the storm in such a way that the men below were recovered safely. But he also experienced a jolt of *double-loop feedback* that he couldn't fully digest. He knew vaguely that this feedback required him to transform his structure or strategy, not just amend his behavior. We might say he needed to clarify that when the goals of efficiency, effectiveness, and legitimacy clash in a situation, legitimacy usually deserves to come first, effectiveness second, and efficiency third (because in the longer run, efficiency is only sustainable if it leads to effectiveness and effectiveness is only sustainable if it leads to legitimacy). We might also say that Steve needed to learn that when the existing authority structure (Cedrick, in this case) uses power in a way that threatens the legitimacy of the enterprise, a counterinitiative based on a kind of transforming power that enhances mutuality is called for.

But the very notion of transforming power that enhances mutuality is unfamiliar to most people, so it is not surprising that it was unfamiliar to Steve. Moreover, most of us treat our current structure, strategy, or action-logic as our very identity. To accept double-loop feedback can feel equivalent to losing our very identity. We will tend to resist that, unless and until we feel a still deeper spiritual presence within us that allows us to continue to feel ourselves as ourselves even as we try different roles, or masks, or strategies. This deeper spiritual presence or super-vision is not based on a self-image, but rather on experiencing the actual exchange occurring among the four territories of our experience—our attention, our strategies, our actions, and our outcomes. In systems theory, this is called *triple-loop feedback* because, as shown in Figure 1.1, it highlights the present relationship between our effects in the outside world and (1) our action, (2) our strategy, and (3) our attention itself. Triple-loop feedback makes us present to ourselves now. (When Thoreau said he'd never met a man who was quite awake, we think he meant he'd never met a man continually present to himself in this way.)

By role-playing alternative actions he might have taken in a training setting, Steve gradually realized that he needed to listen into, but not identify with, many other aspects of the situation of which he'd been im-

Figure 1.1 Single-, Double-, and Triple-Loop Feedback
Within a Given Person's Awareness



PLICITLY aware at the time. At first, he thought the only alternative was to have disagreed with Cedrick in a direct confrontation instead of saying “Yes, sir.” But he hadn’t been completely confident that he would have to bring the team up early at that point, even though the weather report was worrisome. So why risk confronting the boss then?

A simple third alternative, which he next enacted, would have been to respond to Cedrick exactly as he did at the time, but then bring the bell out of the water earlier. In reflection, he realized that, to respond to the real situation in a timely fashion, his awareness at the time would have to have been able to embrace several disharmonious systems of energy—the actual external weather system, the team diving system, Cedric’s psychological system, and his own psychological system. For example, his awareness would have to have been able to embrace Cedrick’s very real compliment about how well the men thought of Thompson (not just its manipulative context) and to remember and feel clearly *at that time* his own usual sense of himself—that others’ respect for him was based on his professional good judgment, not on being a daredevil or a servile, easily manipulated conformist. In other words, to respond to Cedrick exactly as he did at the time, but then bring the bell out of the water earlier, he would have had to feel as he was beginning to feel during the role play—that his power and Cedrick’s power could mutually balance and enhance one another, like the balance of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the U.S. government.

This power to balance goal-oriented action with inquiry about the goal, in such a way as to also balance the influence of different participants, was illustrated even more explicitly in the third role play that

Steve simultaneously invented and produced as he tried to exercise in-the-moment super-vision. “I’m not sure how much is at stake for you or the company in completing this ahead of schedule,” he began tentatively, inquiringly. When the person playing Cedrick in the role play did not answer during a brief pause, Steve continued, “We certainly can leave her down a while, but I’m not sure we’ll be able to finish. The boys know I’ll push them, but they also know I won’t endanger lives. Do you want to stay up here with me to monitor the situation, or do you want me to continue on my own judgment?” Here, Thompson invites Cedrick to legitimize his “ahead of schedule” goals, counterposes it against the good of the divers (another legitimate reality in the situation), and invites Cedrick to have as much influence as he wishes on the unfolding situation, while clarifying Steve’s own priorities (including his lack of competitive desire to seize power from Cedrick).

What Steve began to appreciate through these role plays was that he could actively cultivate, not just single-loop learning of new actions to achieve someone else’s goals, nor just double-loop learning of new strategies and new goals to fulfill an intuitive vision. Now he found himself engaging in triple-loop learning that intentionally cultivates ongoing super-vision. Super-vision is the quality of awareness that briefly witnessed the disharmony in Steve’s soul during the original situation. Flashes of super-vision occur in us so briefly that we often fail to name, digest, or remember them. Had Steve originally been able to tolerate observing the disharmony in his soul and in the wider situation further at the time of the emergency—had he continued exercising super-vision instead of mentally judging himself as irredeemably unethical—that heightened awareness might have made it possible for him to act differently at the time.

Where did these after-the-action awareness experiments during his role plays actually lead Steve? Within months of writing about the incident and doing the role plays, his colleagues were describing him as “a changed man.” He was no longer merely a technical ace, in the image of Cedrick, who pushed himself and everyone else to the limit on particular jobs. Steve was now seen, not only as highly energetic and reliable within the boundaries of his assigned authority, but also as a broad-visioned, trustworthy, balanced, and concerned leader on a wider scale. As he emerged from the executive program in which he’d done the writing and the role plays just described, Steve received an offer to join the top management and board of the company, leapfrogging Cedrick, and more than doubling his previous salary.

That is not all. His learning did not promote only his self-interest. Three years later, Steve became president of a competing company. In his new role, he immediately saw an opportunity for corporate action inquiry. His new company had recently lost a major client. Rather than assuming that this was an unalterable event and perhaps feeling superior to his predecessor (certain that he, Steve, would never let a big one get away like that), Steve personally called the CEO of the erstwhile client and learned specifically how his own company had failed (that is, he sought single-loop feedback). He then engaged members of his company in restructuring the systems and relationships responsible for poor performance (that is, he engaged his own company in double-loop learning). Next, he offered the erstwhile-client a new contract that bound Thompson's company to an unusual proportion of the financial responsibility for any failure in timely performance (thus creating a condition that encouraged ongoing triple-loop awareness within his own company while seeking to meet the contract). This time his company met its obligations and regained a significant customer.

Here we see some evidence that Steve went beyond castigating himself to cultivating a more sinuous, just-in-time awareness that generated the exercise of vulnerable, mutuality-enhancing, transforming power under real-time pressures that improved the fortunes of both his company and a client's.

Improving the Quality of Our Awareness by Including Four Territories of Experience

The question is how can you, the reader, as an individual manager (and you do manage at least your own time and actions), go beyond merely passively appreciating the increased effectiveness, legitimacy, and personal sense of integrity that Steve Thompson gradually gained through his writing and role playing exercises? How can you yourself become more aware of, and less constrained by, your own implicit and often untested assumptions about situations you find yourself in?

The first step is to begin to recognize how limited our ordinary attention and awareness is. The second step is to begin exercising our awareness in new ways in the midst of challenging situations.

A good way to begin recognizing the limits of our ordinary attention is to take a moment right now to reflect. We urge you to start a journal, if you do not already have one, for exercises like this one. Think about

significant incidents during your lifetime, with another person or with a group, that have had unsatisfactory outcomes. Make a list of a half dozen of these incidents. You will want to include current ongoing issues that you may have at work, or at home with your family or friends, or with some sports team, or church, or other activity you participate in. New insights into any of these issues can be put to work right away since the situation is current. Recurrent difficulties with a particular person with whom you will continue to interact are particularly fruitful to examine closely. (Even though the difficulties are all his or her fault [of course!], still, if you can learn how to act to avoid or overcome them, you will be happier.) Long-ago incidents that you still wonder about, or feel hurt by, are also good candidates for your “unsatisfying incidents” list.

We really encourage you to list several such incidents in your journal. We will be inviting you to journal for yourself repeatedly in the coming chapters. Indeed, Chapter 2 will offer a methodology for studying one or more of these incidents more closely.

Now let’s look at how you can experience the limits of your ordinary attention by beginning to stretch it in new ways, gradually creating the capacity for super-vision. First, we rarely exercise our attention to span the four “territories of experience” that we’ve been discussing in Steve Thompson’s story and that are shown in Table 1-1. As a result, our attention simply does not register a great deal of what occurs. Reading this book, for example, you are likely to become oblivious for periods of time to sounds and other events in your environment, oblivious, too, to your own body position and breathing, oblivious even to the fact that this book is a physical object with size, weight, and texture as distinct from the cognitive meaning of the words and sentences you are reading. Being reminded of these facts now may momentarily jolt you into a

Table 1-1 Four Territories of Experience

<i>First territory</i>	<i>Outside events:</i> results, assessments, observed behavioral consequences, environmental effects
<i>Second territory</i>	<i>Own sensed performance:</i> behavior, skills, pattern of activity, deeds, as sensed in the process of enactment
<i>Third territory</i>	<i>Action-logics:</i> strategies, schemas, ploys, game plans, typical modes of reflecting on experience
<i>Fourth territory</i>	<i>Intentional attention:</i> presencing awareness, vision, intuition, aims

widened awareness of several territories at once. Can your attention include a sense of the book as object (first territory), a sense of your breathing (second territory), and a sense of the meaning of the sentences (third territory) as you continue to read?

Typically, during our lifetime, our earliest years after we learn language are engaged in learning how to deal directly with the first territory of experience—the outside world—by learning how to run and play games relatively skillfully, putting the basketball through the hoop or the thread through the hole of the needle, rather than the point of the needle into our hand. Next, with our teenage friends and sometimes our parents as sounding boards, we focus more on the second territory of experience—our own performance itself. We learn how to play roles in conventional, preexisting social games relatively skillfully. We may become the listening conflict-reconciler in a torn family, or perhaps advance our own status by trumping lower status members of our peer group. By college age or in our early twenties, many of us turn our primary attention to providing new value by developing creative or problem-solving capabilities in some cognitive field—the third territory of experience—be it music-making or accounting, software development or medicine.

But few of us today go on to the profound field of adult learning wherein we seek to directly engage the fourth territory of experience—our attention itself, our super-vision—with its capacity for intentional movement among the other three territories of experience and across more than one at a time. Have you maintained the sense of the book as object and of your breathing as you read this entire paragraph?

This chapter, and this book as a whole, is an invitation into an executive world of persons such as we and you who increasingly wish to act and to attend inquiringly from moment to moment. At the end of this section, after Chapter 3, you will find a summary of each of the first three chapters and relevant attention exercises to help you transform the idea of action inquiry into the practice and experience of action inquiry. For now, though, we invite you to explore in Chapter 2 how your own personal action inquiry can expand into your conversations on the job and among your friends. Then in Chapter 3, we will introduce the unique power of organization-wide action inquiry.

this material has been excerpted from

***Action Inquiry:
The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership***

by Bill Torbert and Associates
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers
Copyright © 2010, All Rights Reserved.
For more information, or to purchase the book,
please visit our website
www.bkconnection.com