

The Practice of Action Inquiry

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The Transformations card deck can introduce participants to developmental leadership action-logics on a single occasion, and participants and facilitators can also choose to engage in *action inquiry* that supports their development through the different action-logics over their entire life.

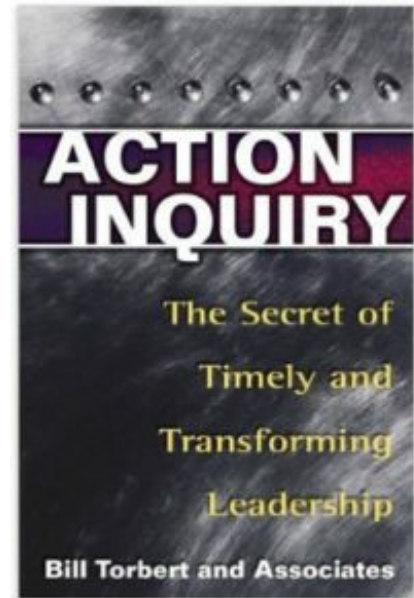
Do you practice “action inquiry”?

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, as we speak with others in the midst of our organizational or family settings. Such self-aware interaction 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, anyone in any family, religious, or romantic situation can practice action inquiry. (Dozens of examples of action inquiry can be found in Torbert & Associates, 2004, *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership*)

Action inquiry is not a set of prescriptions for behavior, which, when followed, invariably yield success. Indeed, 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 means that is doing action inquiry. Action inquiry is a way of learning anew, in the aliveness 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.***

In fact, learning the process of action inquiry is a life-long process. This is why we formally call this theory, this practice, and this research method ***Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry***. We learn action inquiry through a series of developmental transformations of our character, only a few of which most persons engage, in collaboration with significant others. The Transformations card deck



Action Inquiry, Torbert & Associates

contains a number of cards which represent characteristics of each of the following developmental action-logics, which may represent our center-of-gravity at a given time in our lives.

Beginning in childhood, we can successively gain some mastery of the outside world (the **Opportunist** action-logic); then some mastery of our own behavior, usually in the early teens, taming it to meet the norms of our preferred groups (the **Diplomat** action-logic); next, in our late teens, especially if we go to college, we develop some mastery of the world of thought (e.g. an academic or professional discipline)(the **Expert** action-logic); and a substantial minority of adults develop the capacity to coordinate plans, actions, and outcomes, interweaving those three territories of experience through a responsiveness to single-loop feedback, which tells us whether our current actions are achieving our goals, or whether we need to try differently (the **Achiever** action-logic).

Only a very small percentage of adults today engage three later developmental action-logics, but it is only at these three action-logics (**Redefining**, **Transforming**, and **Alchemical**) that leaders become capable of ongoing and organizationally-transforming action inquiry. At the **Redefining** action-logic, we become aware that our own and others' perspectives on the world (e.g. our action-logic or our way of understanding our religion) are just that – perspectives, influenced by the particular culture and class of our upbringing; and that we can inquire into our own and others' current perspectives and potentially generate new ones. At the **Transforming** action-logic, we come to experience personal and social life as developmental, inviting us to discover what actions are timely in the current circumstances, and realizing that all positive transformational change occurs through the exercise of mutual power, whereby the double-loop feedback that changes 'forms' (that trans-forms) may apply to *ourselves* in this instance, not just to the other. Only at the **Transforming** action-logic do we become capable of reliably catalysing and supporting organizational development (this theoretical claim has been strongly supported by empirical findings).

Finally, in the movement toward the **Alchemical** action-logic, we increasingly often become aware that our attention is rarely differentiated from and inclusive of the other three territories of experience (thought, behavior, and the outside world); therefore we are rarely aware of how harmonious (congruent) or inharmonious (incongruent) our purposes, plans, actions, and outcomes currently are. Triple-loop feedback awakens us to the simultaneous presence of all four territories of experience in the present, permitting us to exercise action inquiry more continually.

The Research Upon Which Collaborative Developmental Action Research (CDAI) Is Based

Before we offer a slightly longer summary of each of these developmental action-logics (see next post) that serve as stations along a path of spiritual and practical development toward a capacity for increasingly continual action inquiry, let us say just a few words about the quality of research upon which this theory and practice are based. CDAI was born in Torbert's 1972 book *Learning from Experience: Toward Consciousness* and

further developed in his 1976 book *Creating a Community of Inquiry*, his 1987 book *Managing the Corporate Dream*, his 1991 book *The Power of Balance: Transforming Self, Society, and Scientific Inquiry*, his 1995 book (with Dal Fisher) *Personal and Organizational Transformations*, his 2004 book (with associates) *Action Inquiry*, and his 2016 book (with Hilary Bradbury) *Eros/Power: Love in the Spirit of Inquiry*. All of Torbert's research interweaves quantitative, qualitative, and action methodologies, and is written up in first-, second-, and third-person voices.

In particular, the third-person psychometric measure of persons' developmental action-ologies – the Global Leadership Profile (the GLP, progressively evolved from Loevinger's Washington University Sentence Completion Test [WUSCT] since 1980) has undergone the widest range of validity and reliability testing of any measure we know. The tests of the GLP run the gamut from conventional reliability tests and internal validity tests, to use of the measure in laboratory and field experiments, and in predicting the outcomes of studies using non-obtrusive measures, interview analyses, behaviour-scoring schemes, and analyses of organizational case studies. In many cases, the variance in the GLP accounted for more than half of the variance in the dependent variables beyond the .01 level of significance – very unusual for social science studies. The best and most recent methodological reviews of CDAI and the GLP are found in the 'Concluding Scientific Postscript' of Torbert, 2004, in the 2013 *Integral Review* refereed article "Listening into the Dark" and in the 2016 paper "Brief Comparison of Five Developmental Measures," which can found in the Resources section of www.actioninquiryleadership.com).

In 1972, when Torbert's first book in this area was published, there was no field of adult development. Since then, Ken Wilber's *The Atman Project*, 1980, and later books; Bob Kegan's *The Evolving Self*, 1982, and later books; and Susanne Cook-Greuter's *Postautonomous Ego Development*, 1999, among many others, have helped to define the field. What remains distinctive about the contribution of CDAI is that its methods are applied to the researchers themselves as well as other participants, that its methods are applied in action settings, and that its methods generate not only single-loop feedback, but also double- and triple-loop feedback. Put differently, CDAI offers dynamic, transformational action research methods that theorize, document, and catalyze not only individual, adult development, but also organizational development, and scientific paradigm change. In the past twenty years, PhD dissertations by Hilary Bradbury, Aftab Erfan, Erica Foldy, Ed Kelly, Valerie Livesay, David McCallum SJ, Cara Miller, Aliko Nicolaides, Robin Postel, Shakiyla Smith, and Karen Yeyinman have all used elements of CDAI theory, practice, and method (and several of these dissertations can found in the Resources section of www.actioninquiryleadership.com). Also, these authors and others are responsible for some 15 chapters in 2015 *Handbook of Action Research*.