



## FIRST-, SECOND-, AND THIRD-PERSON RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

BY JORDI TRULLEN AND BILL TORBERT

**F**or many of us, the quest to become more effective in our work and our relationships is an ongoing process. Sometimes without even realizing it, we engage in inquiry to learn more about ourselves, our interactions with others, and larger questions that concern us, such as social, political, and economic issues. By being intentional about the ways in which we engage in such an inquiry and becoming “action researchers” of our own experience, we can go beyond our deeply ingrained defense mechanisms to create new possibilities for action. The first-, second-, and third-person research framework introduced below—the theoretical underpinnings of which are described in Torbert (2000) and Chandler and Torbert (2003)—is intended to help us integrate research and practice in ourselves, our teams, and our organizations.

### First-Person Research

Reason and Torbert (2001) describe first-person research as encompassing those “skills and methods [that] address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act awaredly and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting.” As such, first-person research is research that we do by ourselves on ourselves.

The first step is to study ourselves by “dividing or stretching” our attention in a variety of ways to increase our awareness of the present moment. In a conversation, for example, instead of concentrating on our thoughts, we may also observe the nonverbal cues that indicate how others are responding, listen to how we are speaking, and recognize the attributions and mental models that are guiding us. By

doing so, we can assess the effects of our actions and make choices about how to act in the future.

A variety of practices can build our capacity for focusing on the present moment, such as meditating, praying, painting, keeping a journal, and

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writing autobiographical material. The key in these practices is to reflect critically on issues that make us vulnerable and reconsider the ways in which we live our lives. The long-term result is increased creativity and a wider range of alternatives for action.

Another good way of practicing first-person research is to explore how we might improve our effectiveness in dealing with others in the workplace. At Boston College, MBA students in the Leadership Workshop and executives in the Leadership for Change program engage in first-person research practices at work, write about the experience in journals, and draw lessons from their findings. These might include simple things such as trying to speak up more in meetings or taking five-minute walks through the office while paying attention to features and people that don’t usually attract attention. Over several weeks, such small experiments may begin to reveal new opportunities for action.

### Second-Person Research

Second-person research involves creating communities of inquiry with others in which we are willing to explore the possible incongruities between what we say and what we do (or, put more formally, between our mission, strategy, performance, and outcomes). It occurs when we inquire with others in a face-to-face group about our shared mission, our norms, and the quality of our individual performances on behalf of the team’s mandate. Simply put, second-person research includes conversations in which participants share an intention to learn about themselves, the others present, and the team culture, as well as to delve into how to generate mutual transformation, if it is warranted. This process takes place in a supportive, self-disclosing, and open way.

The U.S. Army’s after-action review process, action inquiry groups, and a theatrical company in rehearsal are examples of this kind of research. In these groups, participants seek to learn from each other, become skillful in giving and receiving feedback, and become increasingly flexible in experimenting with new behavior from moment to moment. In action inquiry groups, participants commit to publicly testing their assumptions and to slowing down their thinking process and making it explicit so that they do not readily jump to ineffective conclusions when relating with others. Participants help each other in reducing their defensiveness and increasing the mutuality of their relationships.

### Third-Person Research

In third-person research, people come together to create an organization that provides the necessary conditions for

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people to engage in first- and second-person research. In these organizations, processes, procedures, and assessment mechanisms incorporate incentives for people to exercise critical thinking and institute change, thus opening the system to evaluation and restructuring. A good example of third-person research/practice is the idea of enacting *learning organizations* that are open to practicing inquiry, learning from mistakes, questioning their assumptions, and reducing defensiveness.

Some organizational development efforts, such as Open Space or Appreciative Inquiry initiatives, are both second- and third-person research/practices. They are second-person in that they provide tools for organizational members to learn about their mutual hopes and fears. They are third-person in that they aim at generating new ideas that redefine the whole organization and the way people work together.

The Society for Organizational Learning Greenhouse, held at Boston

College in January 2004 for some 160 practitioners, consultants, and researchers, was a form of third-person research/practice. The organizers used questionnaires to solicit daily feedback in an effort to test the event's ongoing efficacy. Participants took part in various forms of first-person research through practices such as yoga, tai chi, and silent meditation. They participated in several second-person research projects, including an ongoing consortium on sustainability in which participants engage together in action research projects directed toward changing their companies' practices.

The event also explored the continual interweaving of first-, second-, and third-person action inquiry to achieve personal integrity, interpersonal mutuality, organizational profitability, societal equity, and environmental sustainability. Some half dozen new action research projects grew out of the conference itself. A keynote address by Joan Bavaria, founding president and CEO of Trillium Asset Management, on

socially responsible investing showed how combining first-, second-, and third-person research and action in her work has led to an ongoing transformation in the field of investing as a whole. ■

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### For Further Reading

Chandler, D. and W. Torbert. "Transforming Inquiry and Action: By Interweaving 27 Flavors of Action Research", *Journal of Action Inquiry*. 1, 2 (2003).

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