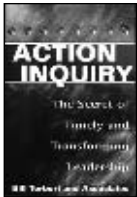




TIMELY LEADERSHIP THROUGH ACTION INQUIRY

BY KALI SAPOSNICK



**Action Inquiry:
The Secret of Timely
and Transforming
Leadership**
by Bill Torbert and
Associates

The number of leadership titles flooding the marketplace these days reflects people's quest to find ways for their organizations to respond effectively to the ever-changing global environment. Book after book attempts to answer the question, What kind of leadership does it take to know that we're taking the right action at the right time as we address some of the difficult challenges facing our organizations today?

In *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership* (Berrett-Koehler, 2004), Bill Torbert and Associates respond to this query through the lens of "action inquiry," a practice rooted in 40 years of research that allows leaders to create organizations that are continually improving their performance and transforming themselves. According to the authors, in action inquiry, "managers and whole organizations simultaneously learn at several levels and modify their actions as a continual process." In other words, they can accomplish tasks while at the same time noticing how a situation is developing and making necessary adjustments in a timely manner.

Unusual Degrees of Awareness

Torbert et al. state, "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." But practicing action inquiry is also more difficult because it requires

"unusual degrees of awareness of the present situation." To be able to notice *in the moment* what is happening around us and quickly act on what we notice, we must learn how to respond to feedback on increasingly sophisticated levels.

Most of us take action based on *single-loop feedback*—evaluating our results and coming to the conclusion that, in order to achieve our goal more efficiently, we have to change our *behaviors*. Some of us can make adjustments based on *double-loop feedback*—realizing that we may need to change our *goals and strategies* to become more effective. Even fewer of us are able to go deeper and respond to *triple-loop feedback*—cultivating a different *quality of ongoing awareness* in order both to improve our actions, performance, strategies, and attention and to test the legitimacy and integrity of our actions. This third level constitutes action inquiry.

According to the authors, triple-loop feedback is the most challenging yet the most rewarding level. In one of many examples the authors provide, the manager of a team that was laying underwater pipeline faced a serious dilemma when a storm approached. Pressured by his boss to meet the project's deadline, he had his staff forge ahead with the work, jeopardizing their safety. Afterward, torn by the knowledge that he had allowed himself to be manipulated, he began to question whether he really was the honest, ethical man he had thought he was. As the manager began a process of self-reflection, he came to understand that it was lack of awareness of the incongruities within himself, such as the desire to please his boss, to perform efficiently and effectively, and to be worthy of his team's respect by making their well-being paramount, that undermined his abil-

ity to act creatively and wisely in the moment. Since then, he has become an expert at learning how to test his assumptions in situations as they are unfolding and change his behavior, strategy, and vision even as he is trying to accomplish a task.

Super-Vision

This manager tapped into what the authors call "super-vision"—"the power to balance goal-oriented action with inquiry about the goal." By doing so, we become "present to ourselves now" and can better notice any incongruities that we may experience in a given situation. This heightened awareness increases our ability to take timely and creative action while enabling us to act with greater integrity, mutuality, and sustainability.

- On a personal level, when we focus our attention differently, we develop integrity by becoming more trustworthy, balanced, and concerned leaders.
- Interpersonally, when we learn to speak more effectively and listen more deeply, we create mutuality in our relationships by seeking feedback about our own assumptions, embracing other points of view, and reaching agreement in our decision-making.
- At the transformational stage, when we organize ourselves in a way that increases clarity and congruity across the domains of mission, strategy, performance, and outcomes, we can generate a deeper sense of sustainability in our organizations and communities.

Clearly, the implications of practicing action inquiry for individuals, organizations, and societies are powerful. Yet transforming ourselves as leaders and helping others do the same so that we can fully and regularly enact the values of integrity, mutuality, and sustainability is a lifelong commitment

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that few of us make. As the authors contend, most of us stop on the developmental continuum in adulthood; we fail to realize that the ability to innovate requires constant, intentional efforts on our part to rethink our strategies and actions, and change them when they're not working for us and the people we care about.

Although there is no step-by-step process by which we can make these efforts, Torbert et al. offer a develop-

mental map of leadership that can serve as a guide by which we can examine and transform any "overall strategy that so thoroughly informs our experience that we cannot see it." They call this type of strategy "action-logic" and describe seven successive and developmental action-logics that are core to our thinking yet usually remain unquestioned during any period of our lives.

With each description of an action-logic, the authors provide case

studies and practices that can increase our ability to manage and lead others in our organizations. By understanding which action-logic we're experiencing at any given time, rather than *wonder* whether our behavior and strategies are effective in achieving our goals, each of us can develop the capacity to *know* whether we need to make changes and what those changes are. ■

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