

# Personal and Organisational Transformations

through action inquiry



DALMAR FISHER

DAVID ROOKE

BILL TORBERT

## CHAPTER 1

### ACTION INQUIRY

By action inquiry we mean a kind of behaviour that is simultaneously inquiring and productive. It is behaviour that simultaneously learns about the developing situation, accomplishes whatever task appears to have priority, and invites a redefining of the task if necessary.

When truly practised, action inquiry enhances the actor's as well as the organisation's efficiency, effectiveness, and legitimacy:

- By weaving together action and inquiring rather than separating them as does most managerial action, action inquiry can save you time and thus increase efficiency.
- By making explicit and testing the appropriateness of your purposes, strategies, inferences, and outcomes, action inquiry results in the correction of errors, increasing the immediate effectiveness of outcomes.
- By testing and potentially redefining your own strategy, or the strategy of a group or an organisation, action inquiry generates long term effectiveness.
- By making explicit and testing your own and others' purposes and visions, action inquiry develops increasingly shared corporate purposes and visions.
- By redefining when current strategies are shown to contradict the vision, action inquiry increases the legitimacy and integrity of the enterprise to its members and clients. In this way, you also guard against being seduced into illegitimate enterprises, since a good test of legitimacy is whether you can make your vision or purpose explicit to other participants without hurting the chance to achieve it.

This kind of behaviour is not merely a set of technical tools, though we will treat it that way in the next chapter to provide guidelines so you can begin doing some experimenting on your own. Instead, when used effectively, this approach generates a reframing of your entire foundation for, and aim when, working with others. The aims of work move beyond attaining preconceived objectives through unilateral manipulation, to:

- a) increasing your own and others' awareness of a shared mission;
- b) increasing mutuality and internal commitment among the players;
- c) increasing communication about lack of alignment of individual, group and corporate objectives and actions and about lack of validity of assumptions;

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>		i
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>		iii
<b>PART ONE:</b>	<b>THE 'GENE' OF TRANSFORMATION: ACTION INQUIRY BY INDIVIDUAL MANAGERS</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	Action Inquiry <i>Jennifer's Experiment</i> <i>Anthony's Experiment</i>	1
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	Fundamentals of Action Inquiry <i>Widening Our Awareness</i> <i>Personal Systems Inquiry</i> <i>Improving the Quality and Effectiveness of Our Use of Language</i> <i>Framing, Advocating, Illustrating, Inquiring</i> <i>Action Inquiry, Rehearsal, and</i> <i>Personal Development</i>	13
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	Practising Action Inquiry at Work	33
<b>PART TWO:</b>	<b>HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	Frames and Personal Development as Foundations for Developmental Action Inquiry <i>Recognising Frames</i> <i>The Opportunist Frame</i> <i>The Diplomat Frame</i> <i>The Expert Frame</i>	41

*The Achiever Frame*  
*A Summary of Four Frames and A Look Ahead*

<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	Strategists in Action: Managerial and Organisational Learning	57
	<i>The Individualist Frame</i>	
	<i>The Strategist Frame</i>	
	<i>Single-Loop and Double-Loop Learning</i>	
	<i>A Research-Based Look at The Strategist</i>	
	The Exercise of Leadership	
	Relationships with Superiors	
	Action Initiatives: Proposing and Implementing Ideas and Programmes	
	<i>How Strategists Think and Act</i>	

<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	Companionship in Practising Action Inquiry	71
	<i>Analysing Framing, Advocacy, Illustration, and Inquiry</i>	
	<i>Enacting the Four Parts of Speech</i>	
	<i>Experiences in Trying the Chapter 3 Exercises</i>	
	<i>Analysing Developmental Frames</i>	
	<i>Turning to Action Inquiry at the Group and Organisational Scales</i>	

**PART THREE: TRANSFORMING GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS THROUGH ACTION INQUIRY**

<b>CHAPTER 7</b>	Developing Learning Organisations	89
	<i>The Parallelism between Personal and Organisational Development</i>	
	<i>Organising Business Meetings with a Sensitivity to Developmental Process</i>	
<b>CHAPTER 8</b>	Organisational Transformation from Investments to Incorporation to Experiments to Systematic Productivity	99
	<i>Transforming a Computer Software Company</i>	
	<i>From Investments to Incorporation</i>	
	<i>From Incorporation to Experiments</i>	
	<i>From Experiments to Systematic Productivity</i>	

Copyrighted Material

<b>CHAPTER 9</b>	The Next Organisational Transformation- Toward Collaborative Inquiry <i>From Systematic Productivity toward Collaborative Inquiry History of Sun Health Care Internal Action Conclusion</i>	111
<b>CHAPTER 10</b>	The Quintessence of Collaborative Inquiry <i>The President's Proposal for Restructuring The Consultant's Restructuring Proposal Next Steps Shadow Issues The Strategist/Collaborative Inquiry Breakthrough Conclusion</i>	133
<b>PART FOUR:</b>	<b>THE ULTIMATE OBJECTIVES OF ACTION INQUIRY</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 11</b>	The Impact of the CEO's or MD's Stage of Development on Organisational Transformation <i>Studying Organisational Development Efforts Individual and Organisational Developmental Stages Obstacles to Change Single-, Double-, and Triple-Loop Learning Leverage Points for Organisational Development Conclusion</i>	151
<b>CHAPTER 12</b>	Seeking The Good Life <i>Good Money Good Work Good Friends Good Questions Prioritising and Blending the Four Goods</i>	159
<b>CHAPTER 13</b>	The 'Chaotic' Action Awareness of Transformational Leaders <i>A Study of Six Magicians Chaos Theory as Map of Late Stage Action Awareness From Chaos Theory to Chaotic Action Awareness Conclusion</i>	175

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

<b>CHAPTER 14</b>	Creating a Foundational Community of Inquiry <i>Conversations, Triangles and Quartets</i> <i>An Evolving Foundational Community?</i>	191
<b>CHAPTER 15</b>	Liberating Disciplines - the Latest Organisational Stage of Development <i>The Societal Role of Transforming Inquiry</i> <i>Picturing a Self-Critical, Self-Renewing Society</i> <i>The Organisational Design of Transforming Inquiry</i> <i>An Organisational Leadership Serving the Spirit of Inquiry</i>	199
<b>ENDNOTES BY CHAPTER</b>		211

**NOTES ABOUT THE SECOND AND THIRD EDITIONS**

The first edition was published by McGraw Hill in 1995. The second (2000) and third editions (2001) contain some modifications to stage descriptions and the inclusion of two new chapters. Several chapters have also been reworked. Perhaps the most significant change from the first edition is the replacement of the term 'continual quality improvement' to 'developmental action inquiry'. This reflects the centrality of the importance of action inquiry to our understanding of the developmental process in people and organisations.

In addition, we have not interrupted the flow of the chapters with footnotes and references. Instead, the reader will find relevant references to related work in the Chapter by Chapter Endnotes after Chapter 15.

The changes are designed to make the book more accessible and usable. The key messages remain unchanged.

Copyrighted Material

- d) increasing action toward alignment between personal aims and actions and organisational mission and operations.

Thus, action inquiry heightens your awareness of your own purposes and assumptions, of the quality of your conversation moment by moment with the other person or persons with whom you are meeting, and of how your action in the moment relates to group and corporate quality. The power of action inquiry is in its potential for linking personal quality improvement and quality improvement in the immediate conversation with quality improvement longer term in the work group and the wider organisation.

We feel the best way to begin to gain an appreciation of the potential of action inquiry is to see it in operation. We will conclude this chapter with two examples, the first two among many appearing throughout this book. Both represent 'first tries' at action inquiry by evening MBA students taking a course requiring a semester long action inquiry project. In the first, Jennifer, whom we met earlier, takes action that breathes life into the quality improvement programme within her own small department - the programme which had fallen dormant because people "could not understand why management wasn't telling them what to do". In the second, Anthony, a staff member in a consulting firm, employs action inquiry in a way that sparks change across the entire top management of his organisation.

### **Jennifer's Experiment**

Jennifer's department consisted of four women. In addition to herself, Louise and Margaret reported to the department manager, Donna. All four comprised the department's quality team, with Jennifer having been appointed by Donna as its 'team leader'. Jennifer gave her view of the quality project, dubbed the 'We Can Do It' project by her company:

I will admit that I initially felt some resentment since I had no desire to be responsible for this project. Anyway, as team leader I had done a miserable job if you judged my performance by what actually got done, which was nothing. There are many reasons (excuses?) why nothing was accomplished: 1) Louise was out on short term disability, 2) our department is very busy, 3) it is very hard for us all to get together (Donna is out at least one day a week), 4) our department does not work well together at all (there are personality conflicts), 5) it is difficult to think of a process to improve which affects all of us in the department, and 6) I have no managerial responsibility. But it became extremely important to me to do something with this failure. Before I began to study action inquiry, I had just given up, because I didn't know how to handle the conflicts which arose whenever I tried to make progress on the "We Can Do It" project. It was easier to do nothing. I was accustomed to doing individual projects I could have complete control over. But this project would force me to work on a 'team' and to take others' points of view into account.

Jennifer shows a willingness to jump in and try action inquiry in a situation that is not an easy one. She also shows an explicit desire not only to restart the

quality programme, but to break out of her shell and develop her own teamwork capabilities. Thus she links her personal developmental effort to her departmental group's quality improvement effort, which is in turn a part of the total company's effort. She went on to give her views of some further features of the situation she saw as important as well as her goals for her effort at action inquiry:

Although my company has always been managed from the top down, and change has been minimal, things could be starting to change. The fact that the company is trying to formulate alternatives to the current health insurance situation, given the government's attention to national healthcare, shows the company is trying to work with instead of react to the government in this major reform.

I joined the department less than a year ago. Donna, who was also new, told me she had decided to change the way the department operated. She wanted to shift responsibilities around so that the other two members of the department could learn new things. The previous manager had never done this. Thus, not only was there a new member - myself - but everyone in the department ended up with new responsibilities. These facts led me to believe the department is assuming an experimental bent - starting to search for new ways of doing things...

Donna treats each of us very individualistically. There is no real 'team' atmosphere in our department. Although none of our projects require that we work with other people in the department, I believe we would produce higher quality work if we knew what everyone was doing. I usually have no idea what anyone else is working on. I have also felt that Donna 'withholds' or does not share information with the rest of us. My hopes have been that with time this tendency would fade if she were shown an alternative method of managing the department...

I knew this was the situation I wanted to deal with for my action inquiry project. It is a situation that encompasses the organisation, the department, all of my associates, and myself individually. It was a project that would help me with some of my current professional goals:

1. Increased 'visibility' to my supervisor that includes taking initiative to go above and beyond the responsibilities of my job.
2. A better working relationship with both Louise and Margaret.
3. Somehow get Donna to share information she has about our sector of the company with the rest of the department.

We can see that Jennifer began her action inquiry attempt with several foundation pieces in place. First, she viewed her situation as having several nested layers: the organisation's incipient struggle to become less bureaucratic, her department's need for teamwork, her manager's start at trying to build the department's flexibility and versatility juxtaposed with the manager's own tendency to withhold information, and Jennifer's own professional objectives of visibility, upward influence, effectiveness as a team member, and her desire to rescue the quality improvement programme along with her record as its leader. Secondly, she made explicit, written statements of several of her



objectives. Finally, she implicitly assumed that it is worthwhile to try changing patterns of behaviour even though they may be ones that are well established (her manager's and colleagues' reluctance to share information, her own reclusiveness, etc.). Building on these foundation elements, Jennifer began her action inquiry experiment by going to talk with her manager, Donna.

I went into her office and began by saying, "Remember that 'We Can Do It' project?" She kind of laughed and said she did. I went on to explain why I thought it had failed at first, but how I thought it would be a good idea for our department if we got together to meet about it. It would bring us together and get us working on something in a 'team' manner instead of how we usually did our work which is in a very 'individualistic' manner. I said I thought we could learn from each other working in this manner. I was taking a risk at this point because I didn't want to come across as criticising her management style I just wanted to offer an additional way for our department to work. She didn't really show any reaction at this point.

I went on to say I knew Louise would be very resistant to the idea. (She has a serious personality conflict with Margaret, that Donna is aware of.) I asked for her support in this project and to help me out if I came across serious conflict between Louise and Margaret. She assured me she would. I told Donna I planned to go to Louise and Margaret separately and remind them about this project and say I would really like to start it up again. I asked for her advice at this point - did she think it was a good idea? She thought it was. I went on and said I would ask them to think about it for a few days to see if they could come up with any ideas for a 'quality initiative', my thoughts being that if ideas came from them they would be more willing to work on them. I then asked her to do the same thing, except I prefaced this with the fact that I knew she was very busy on some task forces and if she knew of anything our department could help her with, this would be a great opportunity to do so. I felt it was important to frame this part of the conversation in this way. Working on her own is something Donna was and is very used to doing. She thought for a moment and said, "That's a good idea, I'll think about it". I left her office feeling as though I had accomplished some small feats - I got her support, encouragement, and also got her thinking about the possibility of sharing with the rest of the department what she is working on.

In this conversation, Jennifer made conscious use of four specific elements of action inquiry. She *framed* the conversation at the start by referring to the 'We Can Do It' project and her current view of it, making her agenda clear to Donna. She *advocated* by saying what her recommendations were. She *illustrated* by telling how she planned to proceed (e.g. go to Louise and Margaret separately). Finally, she *inquired* by asking Donna for her advice. In the next chapter, we will explain framing, advocating, illustrating, and inquiring in more detail. Suffice it to say at this point that Jennifer's artful use of the technical tools of action inquiry in her conversation with Donna got her effort off to a running start.

Next she went to Louise and then to Margaret. She encountered the resistance she had expected from Louise, who didn't want anything to do with Margaret. Jennifer persisted, however, reminding Louise of their friendship, admitting she had failed with the quality improvement programme up to now, and saying how much she wanted it to be different this time. She continued that this would be a good way to get Donna to share information about what is going on. She found that "this comeback worked, because she is very interested (as we all are) in what is happening in the company outside our department". In response to a request by Jennifer that she think of projects the group could work on, Louise agreed to do so. Then, over the next two days, Jennifer returned to remind Louise to think of things they could suggest at a meeting of the team. Louise came up with the possibility of conducting a survey of field personnel, an idea Jennifer strongly confirmed and suggested that she bring up at the meeting.

Jennifer's meeting with Margaret went smoothly. Jennifer began the conversation with a few friendly pleasantries and then moved rather quickly to the business at hand, an approach she knew from past experience that Margaret found comfortable. Margaret responded with enthusiasm to the idea of reviving the 'We Can Do It' team and agreed to be of help.

When Jennifer convened the first meeting of the team she felt momentary feelings of panic. She recalled how she had never really taken charge in previous meetings and they had not gone well. Things 'just happened' now she took charge, but in a very special way that invited others to take charge as well.

The day of the meeting finally came. This time I took a leadership role and reiterated the fact that I really wanted to do something on this project this time. I stated I was committed to this since senior management endorses the quality movement. I asked if anyone had ideas they wanted to share.

Donna said she had been thinking about a variety of projects, but there was one in particular we would all be able to work on. She said we needed to look at our survey process. We all agreed this was certainly a good project to begin with. I then suggested we could split it up: Louise and I could look at the in-house process costs since Louise had dealt primarily with internal people, while Margaret and I could look at the outside vendor costs, since we were the ones who usually dealt with vendors. I made this suggestion because I knew Louise was not going to work with Margaret on anything. The reasons I suggested I work on both parts were because I was team leader and because this would be a good way to work on my goals of creating more effective working relationships with Louise and Margaret.

I asked if anyone had other ideas. Louise made the suggestion she and I had discussed about conducting a survey of our field people. Both Donna and Margaret agreed this was a good idea. Donna suggested Louise and I make a draft of the survey, since we had never done a questionnaire ourselves, and then she and Louise would look at it and make comments, presenting an opportunity for us to get trained in survey design.

After this was decided, Donna said one of the task forces she was working on would need a monthly newsletter about managed care and other issues dealing with the healthcare question in Washington. She said she would talk to Louise later about her ideas. Margaret asked about the task force, noting that she does a monthly newsletter for the field personnel and wondered how it might be affected. After I followed with some questions of my own about the task force, I think Donna realised we were all interested in these outside-the-department task forces she works on. To end the meeting, I suggested that we meet again when we had made definite progress on our separate projects so we could share with each other. I thanked them all for coming and for their commitment to the project.

I felt great about what had just taken place. By preparing everyone individually a few days before, I think people spent time thinking about what could be done. What I felt most optimistic about was Donna's sharing of information with us. This was really something new.

In the days that followed, Jennifer began working collaboratively with both Louise and Margaret. Good progress was made in both cases. She found working with Louise stressful at times, but she actively inquired into the stress in a way that led to a still more profound learning:

One of the most difficult things to deal with is her unpredictable nature. I can never tell whether she will be willing to do something or not or what sets her off. I have noticed that she tends to have outbursts when she is unsure of herself. This realisation has helped me. I take a few seconds to think about how I will reply to an outburst. At another time, I might have yelled back, or just cut her out of a project and finished it myself. But now, it has also become clear to me that I cannot always be prepared in dealing with her and have to perfect my actions on a moment-by-moment basis.

The project continued to enable Jennifer to fulfil her goals of having more contact with Donna and increasing overall information sharing within the department:

Just keeping her up to date on our progress on each project gave me more opportunities, and I was more candid than I had been before in telling her about problems we were running into. I told her how I appreciated working with each of them because I was finding out what they were working on and learning new things. Donna said she was glad about this. I also told her I was glad she was telling us more about the things she was working on. Again she said that was good.

As an aside, although Louise and Margaret's interaction had not increased, they were both aware of what each other were working on because I had shared that information with them.

Jennifer commented in her written report on her action inquiry project that she saw her efforts as having "only just begun". In writing this she shows an

