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Leadership Development, an “Action Inquiry” Approach

Once in awhile, a friend or colleague turns me on to a model or a concept or an idea I’ve never heard of before, I look it up, and I ask myself , Why have I never heard of this before?

Such is the case of a methodology developed by Bill Torbert and Associates, called “Action Inquiry”.¹ Torbert traces his methodology as far back as the Middle Ages, but most of his and his Associates’ work has been done at Boston College in the last 25 years. The methodology includes a feedback model that goes beyond the one we normally use in our leadership development programs and focuses on a process of acting; seeking immediate feedback (on the results of that action); adjustment of the strategy of acting; and , finally, alteration of the vision that directs the strategy and the action. (These loops are called, successively: single-, double-, and triple-loop feedback.)

Another interesting part of this methodology for us has to do with its application to the process of leadership development. Torbert traces this development along a path of “action-logic” which unfolds along our life-paths and invites us to “...notice, name, and transform our action-logics when they may be inhibiting our [growth] together....”

According to the AI model, here are the successive steps through which we pass in our action-logic development:

1. The *Opportunist* views the outside world as one to be understood, tamed, and controlled. Power is important, and grasping control of opportunities and firefighting emergencies is the primary thrust of this stage of development. The thrust for the Optimist is “I win”.
2. The *Diplomat* treats his/her own sensed performance territory as primary and concentrates on gaining *self*-control as a means to act effectively. The key to power, then, is to understand and imitate organizational routines and to focus on the behavior patterns of high-status group members. For the Diplomat, correct and timely action takes place when “I” am “on-time” and “within budget” for completion of programmed tasks. The thrust for the Diplomat is “I look good.”
3. The *Expert* focuses on experience as the primary reality and concentrates on mastering his/her cognitive grasp of one or more disciplines (e.g. accounting , engineering, marketing, etc.) For the Expert, logistical power is key, and timely action occurs when “I” accomplish tasks as quickly and efficiently as possible. The thrust for the Expert is “I’m the one who can get the job done.”

Most people have mastered the above stages, one-by-one, by the time they are 30. But a solid minority, some 40% in Torbert’s studies, move on, or transform to another action-logic, that of the *Achiever*.

4. The *Achiever* concentrates on the interplay among controlling, performing against standard, and accomplishment, making single-loop changes in behavior to reach eventually the planned or desired results. For the Achiever, timely action when "I" successfully juggle the need for immediate wins, observance of agreed-upon deadlines and guidelines, and efficient work – as judged by the marketplace or other constituent authority.

Just as in the Situational Leadership Model, Torbert invites us as readers to diagnose our own (and others') preferred/predominant action-logic – and then challenges us to think and act outside our current box. As in Situational Leadership, we also recognize that we are never altogether locked into one action-logic way of framing or interpreting our realities, although we may have our preferences.

Through this process of introspection, we can appreciate and understand when we can move to the next action-logic stage, i.e. transform ourselves to a more advanced stage. We also can understand when we fall back into a previous stage when we are under stress – when we feel insecure, ill, angry, or exhausted (Or, and here's an interesting insight, when we are visiting our parents in our childhood home....)

Here is more background information about each stage, or step in the AI model:

Usually, according to Torbert's research, most people pass into and through the Opportunist action-logic between about the ages of 6 to 12. Through work and play activities, they are learning to gain control of the outside world of experience. But a certain percentage of people continue to hold on to this perspective long beyond their pre-teen years, and they continue to try to make things and people work by manipulating them – or by making the most self-advantageous exchanges possible. We all know managers who appear to be courteous, but who still view the world as a jungle in which there are only winners and losers; and they always strive to be winners.

The Opportunist action-logic has its bright side, especially in the short-term – it can cut to the chase in an emergency and embark fearlessly on unstructured opportunities and new paths of adventure. But in the longer term, the dark side also tends to show its face: short-term gains at others' expense may add costs later in terms of others' trust. For this reason, the Opportunist's career development opportunities may be severely limited by this action-logic, and he or she may, using our terminology, "derail" in their career. Although it may be true that managers choose to act opportunistically on particular occasions and in emergencies, a person self-bounded into this action-logic sees self as forced to do so on nearly every occasion. Torbert reports studies of managers in different industries who hold to this style long-term amount to less than 5 percent.

The Diplomat action-logic focuses attention on controlling one's social performance and making sure it meets the approval of some (or all) of one's significant reference groups (family, school, workplace, culture, etc.). For the Diplomat, the values of significant others are primary drivers in their decision-making. A thing, or an action has value if it is fashionable, if it sells well, if it influences others, or if high-status people treat it as valuable. The keywords and behaviors – the right moves at the right times -- are "gaining membership", "meeting standards", and "correct protocols".

The Diplomat style has both bright and dark sides: this action-logic can provide reliability, loyalty, and good will that raises morale and functions as organizational glue. But at other times, the implication may be that he/she avoids and smoothes over all

potential conflict and disagreement, in an effort to maintain harmony at all costs. Diplomat managers tend not to seek or accept negative feedback about themselves or their style. They equate negative feedback with loss of face or status within the reference group. To tell them that the feedback is constructive and can help them achieve their goals makes no sense to them – since their principal goal is to maintain face within the group. The danger to an organization or a team being led by a person with a Diplomat action-logic is that all goals may be sacrificed in order to “look good”.

Studies have found that 24 percent of first-line supervisors, 9 percent of junior managers, and less than 5 percent of senior managers tend to cleave to the Diplomat style. This suggests that leadership development programs could be fruitfully aimed at and tailored for lower levels of management.

For the Expert, the guide to action becomes a logic that yields a “right answer”, based upon his/her craft or area of expertise. The Expert doesn’t identify as much with the organization or the group as with others who are masters in the same skillset. Therefore, feedback from others outside their craft is not well tolerated. On the positive side, Experts tend to be hard workers, for the sheer sake of completing an assignment well. They organize and complete projects. They have a kind of authority that proceeds from their own expertise and can lead colleagues to strive for the Expert’s admiration for a job well done. On the shadow side, they may not be good team players since their critical demand for perfection may drive team-members a bit crazy. Their unwillingness to respond to feedback outside their area of expertise (e.g. feedback about customer preferences or time-to-market considerations) can make them seem closed to all other feedback. They may be dogmatic and insist on “my way as the only way”, and they are hard on themselves and others around them.

Finally, Achievers are also passionate about reaching goals. However, the scope is broader, not just in getting things done, but also on how to be effective in one’s wider surroundings, and how to help the organization as a whole to be effective. The Achiever pays more attention to others’ points of view on how to accomplish tasks, particularly when they are different from one’s own. They place more value on teamwork and on agreements reached through consensus. Therefore, the Achiever welcomes personal feedback and seeks mutual benefit in relationships with co-workers. There can be a darker side to the Achiever’s way of handling feedback, however: if the feedback doesn’t fit with his/her scheme of things, or preconceived approach of what is to be accomplished, it will likely be rejected. (An example of this would be when the organization has, or turns toward a different action strategy, such as during a merger or reorganization. This may result in a situation where the Achiever will opt out and move to another organization more to his/her goal orientation.)

Experts and Achievers make up the largest share of managers, some 80 percent. Overall, Experts weigh slightly more heavily in the statistics, at about 45 percent, Achievers at 35 percent. In any given case, under change the Experts may dictate “my way or the highway”, and the Achievers may leave the vehicle and hitch a ride in an organization going a different direction....Or the reverse, where Achievers reset the direction of the organization, and the Experts decide to leave, or are driven out.

My own experience in this latter juxtaposition has been an involvement with two organizations which have gone through the throes of contests between Experts and Achievers. In the first case, I was part of a 20-member “Top-Executive Coaching Team” of a major worldwide banking group, Citigroup. For many years, Citi was run and built by consummate Achievers – and the goal was clear: grow, acquire, absorb, and expand.

The Achiever-in-Chief was Sandy Weill, and the objective was “the deal” – whatever it took to expand was OK, and banks, brokerages, and even an insurance company were brought under the famous “Red Umbrella” that was Citi. In the growth process, thousands of bankers, mainly Experts, were devoured, chewed up, and sometimes spit out: a pair of famous cases was Jamie Dimon (who later returned triumphantly to banking as CEO of JP Morgan Chase) and John Reed, CEO of Citicorp. The CEO after Weill was Chuck Prince, also an Achiever (and a lawyer, not a banker), who slowed down the growth to consolidate (partly at the U.S. government’s orders). But the deal was still king at Citi – one of my coachees, a long-term Citibank Expert, sat down with Prince and discussed his concern about the expansion of sub-prime loans in Citi’s portfolio. He was told not to worry, that Citi’s exposure was “covered”. This was just a year before the house of cards came tumbling down, and Prince was replaced – ultimately by another deal-maker-Achiever who has apparently decided to return the company to banking. But many Expert bankers have left the company, including my coachee and hundreds more. Only time will tell how this works out for Citi...

Another example is the Center for Creative Leadership, with which I have been associated for over 30 years. In its early life, CCL was led mainly by Expert psychologists, who pioneered research and technology in the area of executive development and began the movement of “assessment-for-development” – the use of psychological testing and semi-therapeutic processes in the development of leader-managers. The Center was hugely successful and grew relatively rapidly, especially in the ‘80s as the AfD technology took off and was widely imitated. At the same time, as the organization grew large and needed to be managed as a company, a series of Achievers were brought on board as leaders, from the CEO on down, to instill permanence in the generation of revenue and control of costs. Fortunately, for a long period of time over the ‘90s and ‘00s, the balance and trade-offs between the Experts and the Achievers produced a “Pax Britannica” at CCL, and the organization flourished. This good fortune was aided by the successful long-term market dominance of the Center’s blockbuster executive development program, the Leadership for Development Program (LDP®), which was based on assessment-for-development technology. LDP alone accounted for a large part of the Center’s revenues. Added to widely-quoted research, the result was that the Center earned a reputation as “The King of the Hill” in manager-leader development programs.

But the day was recently at hand for major changes in CCL’s marketplace and in the relationship between its Achievers and Experts. The recession of 2008-2009 produced two effects on CCL, and especially on the LDP. One was a shortage of training funds among clients for what had become a relatively expensive executive program – as much as \$10,000 per participant, counting tuitions, lodging, and travel. Of equal importance, I believe, is the time pressure of the required week’s absence from the participants’ workplaces: the downsizing and lean-sizing of their organizations, and the ever-more-rapid pace of important events requiring (their perception) executive attention, all began to mean that five days (and perhaps two weekends) away from their offices was not a price to be paid. So the Achievers at CCL pulled back, many of the professional Experts left or were forced out; and the Center is now trying to find its way in a changed marketplace without the underpinnings of as deep a bench of psychologists in research and training roles.

Given the above review of the Action Inquiry model, and my observations of its applicability in cases that I know well, my conclusions at this point around the usefulness of the AI model to the pursuit of leadership development work are the following:

1. The Action Inquiry (AI) model is useful as a counterpart to the earlier Situational Leadership model. Where the latter focuses on colleague development as a cue for leader behavior, the former draws our attention to the development of the leader as a person more attuned to his/her own thought and action process with others, as well as within the organizational context. Taken together, the two models provide powerful and research-based approaches to leadership development study.
2. AI suggests a focus on leadership development among lower level leaders (i.e. Opportunists and Diplomats) that is different than that which would be more suitable for higher level leaders, who are more frequently Experts and Achievers. This implies a greater targeting of leadership development techniques than we are commonly accustomed to providing with our clients.
3. AI lends clarity to a dynamic faced by many organizations, at least in my experience, where Experts and Achievers confront each other for the control and direction of the organization. The facilitation of these processes is a possibly fruitful area of contribution for those of us involved in work with group dynamics in these organizations. The marketplace for leadership and teamwork development seems to be shifting from "open-enrollment" programs for participants from different organizations and divergent levels of experience to "closed (contract or custom) programs" for organizations that want custom-designed experiences for their managers and leaders.
4. Lastly, if we exercise our attention and action-logic awareness, as suggested by the AI model, we can evolve even further beyond the four action-logics mentioned above. Torbert and Associates turn to other possible transforming developmental realms in their work, and this would be the topic of another essay in the TEAM International series.

REFERENCES:

¹ Bill Torbert and Associates, *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership*; Berrett- Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco, CA, ©2004.