

Excerpted from the book:  
**Action Inquiry-The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership**, by Bill Torbert and Associates, 2004, Berrett Koehler.  
 pages 32 to 37.  
 MIS 482 Project 2, Report 1-Action Inquiry Report

### A Disciplined Way to Practice the Four Parts of Speech

Eight years ago, our associates Erica Foldy, Jenny Rudolph, and Steve Taylor formed a voluntary learning team. It meets once a month to practice action inquiry. They have helped other such groups to start as well. In their version, individuals usually present cases about significant interactions they have had (or that they plan to have). Live cases between the members of the group also occur. In fact, Anthony's story, told earlier in the chapter, was an ongoing action inquiry project that he sought the members' help on. The members of another such group sometimes use the immediacy of e-mail to ask for help with specific challenges they are facing that very day at work.

Rudolph, Foldy, and Taylor (2001) have written one of the few careful descriptions of how this process can work on a given occasion. The rest of this chapter presents a much-condensed version of their description. It illustrates a kind of conversation that directly supports personal self-transformation toward greater clarity, using framing, advocating, illustrating, and inquiring. You, too, can potentially create a small group of colleagues, or of outside the office friends, to discuss cases like the ones we invited you to begin writing at the end of Chapter 1.

The point of working through such a case is to help the casewriter (and others) see how she or he is stymied and to avoid similar problems in the future. The grid (see Figure 2.3) provides one overarching frame-

work that guides this work. Using the tools described in the following, we analyze the case and fill in the grid with observations about Dana's implicit assumptions, actions, and results.

In this particular case, Dana is the director at Action on Changing Technology (ACT), a union-based coalition that addresses the occupational health effects of computer technology. When this conversation takes place, Dana has been the director for less than a year. Anne, the other person in the case, predates Dana at the organization by about a year and a half. Anne hadn't wanted the director position. Anne is very smart organizationally and politically, despite her youth. Dana has a lot of respect for her and relies on her heavily, especially when she first takes the director's post.

Anne and Dana had a very good relationship for the first few months after Dana arrived, but at some point it began to get strained. More and more often now, their conversations reach an impasse. In the following example (Figure 2.2), typical of the pattern, Dana and Anne argue about what sites are appropriate targets for their organization's help. Two other staff members, Miriam and Fred, are present, but quiet, during the following exchange. Read Figure 2.2 now.

The group starts by seeking to learn what Dana's desired results are. What does Dana want to get out of this interaction? The right-hand "Thoughts and Feelings" column of the dialogue (Figure 2.2) often provides clues about the casewriter's desired results.

Dana's right-hand column suggests she thinks Anne's nomination of a target site for an educational effort is wrongheaded. She thinks, "That's not a good idea," and "She's missing the point." In the spoken dialogue Dana attempts to set Anne straight, exclaiming, "The enemy is not the director of Phoning Inc." and when Anne retorts that maybe he is Anne's enemy, Dana's rejoinder is, "But that's not strategic." Note that all these comments, both to herself and spoken out loud to Anne, are brief advocacies related to the *content* of what they may do. In effect, they all come from an attention concentrated in the cognitive territory of experience. None of them relates to the *process* of how each is currently speaking; none of them comes from attention to the behavioral territory of experience at the time of the action.

What is the right sort of target, as far as Dana is concerned? We get a hint that it is not a small, progressive organization when Dana attempts to turn aside Anne's suggested target by saying, "They do good stuff, don't they? They only take progressive clients" and "They're a tiny outfit and they're basically on our side." Note that these comments vary

**Figure 2.2** Example Dialogue with Concurrent Inner Monologue

<i>What Dana and Anne Said</i>	<i>Dana's Thoughts and Feelings</i>
Dana: What are some other potential sites?	
Anne: A while ago we talked to some people at Phoning, Inc. Maybe we can check back with them.	That's not a good idea. Why is she suggesting it?
Dana: You mean the telemarketing group in western Mass? They do good stuff, don't they? They only take progressive clients.	
Anne: Well, they don't treat their phoners very well.	She's missing the point.
Dana: They're a tiny outfit and they're basically on our side. Maybe if we had infinite resources, but we don't.	
Anne: I don't see what all that has to do with it. There are workers there working under bad conditions. They could use our help.	Shit, are we going to butt heads again? Her purist politics drives me nuts.
Dana: The enemy is not the director of Phoning, Inc.	
Anne: Maybe he's not your enemy, but maybe he's my enemy!	Why do we get like this? Why does it get so tense? Why do we fall into this pattern over and over?
Dana: But that's not strategic.	

between a rhetorical inquiry (which she answers herself), an illustration ("They're a tiny outfit"), and an advocacy. This whole part of the conversation is framed by Dana's first inquiry about other potential sites.

The learning group notes these patterns and asks Dana if she can clarify why she said these things. She says she wanted to influence the group to identify targets that fit her criteria. Dana could have encouraged all staff members to name potential sites, then framed a subsequent part of the conversation as an attempt to develop shared criteria

for a good site. Instead, she is implicitly trying to enforce her own criteria for a good site.

Dana also seems to be bothered by the conflict between herself and Anne. She thinks to herself, "Shit, are we going to butt heads again?" and "Why do we get like this? Why does it get so tense?" When the group queries Dana about this, she says she wants a harmonious discussion that will help the organization move forward.

By this time in the conversation about Dana's case, the irony of Dana's wanting a harmonious discussion in which only her point of view is allowed to prevail is plain to all, especially Dana. In hindsight, Dana notes that she had another goal in the conversation which was less obvious to her at the time and which seems to have been overridden by her desire to have her viewpoint prevail. That other desired outcome was "to have a real dialogue." "What is a real dialogue?" someone asks. Dana says a real dialogue is one in which Anne and Dana share their views fully, listen to each other, and negotiate actively. In other words, Dana begins to realize that she holds an espoused value of mutuality (real dialogue), but that her operative value in the conversation is one of attempted unilateral control.

When we compare Dana's "desired results" with the ones she got, we get a clear picture of the challenge facing Dana. In this case, the actual results are almost the exact opposite of what Dana hoped for. Instead of having her point of view prevail, she and Anne are deadlocked. Instead of real dialogue, they have dueling assertions. Instead of harmony, they have simmering frustration. How did this happen? If we trace counterclockwise along the grid in Figure 2.3 from Actual Results to Actual Actions to Actual Frames to Desired Frames to Desired Actions, we begin to see the answer.

We try to imagine the Desired Actions as concretely as possible. For example, one way for Dana to publicly reflect on her and Anne's conflict and ask for help is to say:

"I feel in a dilemma here. On the one hand, I really want us to target the organizations I think are right. On the other, when I push my view I think that contributes to a pattern that Anne and I repeat over and over that has stymied us in the past: I say my view, then she says hers, and we don't seem to have much of an impact on each other. I'm not getting my way, she's not getting hers, and we are all just stuck. I think I'm open to influence on what the right strategy is. I believe if we worked together, we might actually come up with a better strategy than the ones Anne and I

Figure 2.3 Case Summary Using a Grid

<i>Dana's Actual Frames</i>	<i>Dana's Actual Actions</i>	<i>Actual Results</i>
1. Anne has purist politics and these are the wrong standards for the organization.	Advocate own point of view but don't inquire about others'	Deadlock: Dana's view does not prevail and there is no real dialogue Frustration
2. If I'm wrong, then my credibility (as the boss) is shot. If I'm wrong, then maybe I shouldn't be the boss.	Keep reasoning hidden	
3. It's my responsibility to handle this tough strategy question (alone).	Appeal to abstract standard of being strategic, about which there is no consensus	
4. If I admit I was mistaken, then I lose face.	.	
<i>Dana's Desired Frames</i>	<i>Dana's Desired Actions</i>	<i>Desired Results</i>
1. I respect Anne and her views.	Dana inquires about Anne's view	Dana's point of view prevails
2. I'm not solely responsible for the strategic direction of the organization.	Dana makes her own reasoning public and inquires about other peoples'	Harmony in the group Real dialogue in the group
3. Real dialogue about strategic direction enhances my credibility.	Dana publicly reflects on her and Anne's conflict and asks for help	
4. I'm willing to experiment to get a better outcome.		

are individually carrying around in our heads. Would others of you be willing to give this a try?"

Note that to say any of this, Dana first has to detach from her advocacies in the cognitive territory of experience and pay a new kind of attention to the behavioral territory of experience. What are the advantages of exercising super-vision and saying something like what's just been posed?

This group approach has three advantages. First, it invites the silent Miriam and Fred into the conversation, empowering them, increasing the overall mutuality within the group, and reducing the likelihood of sheer polarization between Dana and Anne. Second, it describes the deadlock in the current *process*, a whole realm that Dana was not di-

rectly and explicitly aware of during the original conversation. The third advantage of this approach is that it explicitly invites the use of mutual influence to generate a possible double-loop change in strategy for the organization. If Dana and her colleagues (and you!) are able to learn how to attend to the action-flow of meetings as they occur, then she (and they and you) may be able to help others mired in a similar situation.

We now turn to Chapter 3 to address the question of how *personal* and *interpersonal* action inquiry can expand into *organizational* action inquiry.