REFLECTIONS ON 21st CENTURY LEADERSHIP

AN INVESTIGATION INTO ACTION INQUIRY AS A DISCIPLINED LEADERSHIP PRACTICE AND ITS EFFECTS ON INDIVIDUAL, TEAM AND ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This management project investigates action inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice and its effects on individual, team and organisational transformation. Action inquiry is a practice that aims to help leaders realize different ways of knowing, learning, interacting and arranging their organisations to promote greater effectiveness, integrity, mutuality and sustainability whereby complexities of 21st century operating environments can be more viably met.

The present research employs an action research method whereby the researcher triangulates between the accounts of five individuals from a range of organisations who have begun to practice action inquiry and the accounts of four individuals who practice action inquiry as part of their consulting practice including Bill Torbert, the key writer, consultant and exponent of action inquiry with the aim of addressing the following problems: (a) the need for a new paradigm of leadership tools and skills for the 21st century in light of current financial, ecological, social and political complexities; (b) the necessity for additional research into action inquiry, which is known only to a small community of practitioners; (c) the difficulty in understanding the complex requirements of action inquiry; and, (d) the challenges of integrating action inquiry in a conventional business world.

The research results have the following implications: that action inquiry offers a powerful approach to leadership and can increase a leader’s ability to manage 21st century complexity; that leaders can increase their leadership skills and the performance of their senior management teams through a practice of action inquiry; and, that action inquiry may only be suitable at present in special organisations or situations owing to the radical shift from Western epistemology and ontology implicit in the approach, which makes it difficult for most people to practice on a continual basis.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Ken Starkey, Jackie Keeley, John Rowan and Hugh Evans for their support and guidance over the course of this management project.

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"There is hardly a week that passes when I don’t ask the unanswerable question: what am I now convinced of that will turn out to be ridiculous? And yet one can’t forever stand on the shore; at some point, filled with indecision, scepticism, reservation and doubt, you either jump in or concede that life is forever elsewhere.” - Arthur Miller

(quoted in The Guardian, 2000)
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, I attended a gathering in London to discuss the work of Ken Wilber, a philosopher who has integrated key insights of the world’s great knowledge and wisdom traditions to form a comprehensive map of individual, cultural, and social/systemic growth, development and evolution (Wilber, 1995).

As the discussion moved onto the subject of the relevance of Wilber’s work to leadership, one member offered the insight that there are perhaps around 20,000 leaders in the world - senior figures and people of influence in politics, religion and multi-national businesses - that could be considered to significantly shape the global agenda through their actions. Furthermore, he added that amidst an ever more interconnected and burgeoning global populace facing unprecedented challenges, uncertainty and complexity arising from social division, economic crisis, environmental degradation and a rapid pace of change it would appear that our collective well-being and future could to a large extent depend on the quality of leadership enacted by these individuals within their particular sphere of influence. Finally, he ventured that a crucial element of this leadership would be a transformation in the selfhood of these leaders to higher stages of psycho-spiritual development where wisdom, compassion, holistic thinking, authenticity and a different relationship to power were part of their being-in-the-world.

Today, ten years later it would seem that the problems percolating a decade ago are all the more stark, with our leaders failing to find ways to deal with 21st century complexity and uncertainty. Furthermore, despite many books on the future of leadership which often quote Einstein’s famous dictum, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them”, it is rare to find research and information as to how such a change in mind might be actualized or mentors that might be able to facilitate such development.

As I wanted to explore the question of what might constitute 21st century leadership development for my MBA management project, I contacted a consultancy (Harthill Consulting) that facilitates leadership development at both the individual, team and
organisational level using an approach called “Action Inquiry” which is a “way of learning anew, in the vividness of each moment, how best to act now” (Torbert et al., 2004, p.2).

After a series of engaging conversations with a Director of the consultancy and research of the literature on action inquiry it became clear that it not only offered a power approach to leadership transformation but also resonated deeply with the various inquiries I had been making over the preceding ten years with regards to individual and collective transformation at both a theoretical level through work such as that of Ken Wilber and at a practical level through a personal practice of psycho-spiritual inquiry.

As such, the current research was born and investigated the effects of action inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice and its effects on individual, team and organisational transformation through the accounts of leaders in a range of organisations who have begun a journey of transformation through the practice of action inquiry and the accounts of individuals who apply action inquiry as part of their consulting practice, including Bill Torbert, the key writer, consultant and exponent of action inquiry.

**Statement of Problem**

As a result of the ever more complex and turbulent operating environments organisations now face, characterized by rapid change and challenges to traditional ways of thinking in light of economic crisis, ecological degradation, complex social and political systems and globalization (Senge, 2008; Scharmer, 2009; Assadourian et al., 2010), leaders need new ways to manage this complexity.

Current thought tends to underscore the fact that the current operating system that the majority of leaders and organisations (and in particular businesses) act from today - which includes: an exclusive focus on short-term profit maximization (Collins & Lazier, 1992, pp. 67-69); survival of the fittest competition (Collins, 2001); hierarchical organization structures (Eisler, 2007, pp. 182-183); unilateral control/dominating leadership styles (Eisler, 2002; Kofman, 2001); indifference to human values (Toms, 1997); inability to look at the shadow side of business (Senge et al., 2005, p. 229); and, fear and mistrust (Secretan, 2006) - is incapable of adapting and responding to today’s rapidly changing
operating contexts, as “the environment which made them necessary no longer exists” (Bergson, cited in Hames 2007, p. 3).

Furthermore, to meet this paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962), writers and commentators place importance on the transformation of the interior condition of leaders from conventional ways of seeing the world to more sophisticated, elegant and dynamic ways of being such as a capacity for systems thinking (Capra, 1993), dialectical thinking (Laske, 2010), heightened emotional intelligence (Goleman et al., 2002), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and presencing emerging futures (Senge et al., 2005; Scharmer, 2009; Torbert et al., 2004) as well as a relational leadership that ignites continual and mutual learning, psychological development and leadership in all quarters of an organisation so that individuals and teams can break free of both self-imposed and organisationally created limits to release a greater spectrum of human possibilities that can foster the actualization of agile and resilient organisations able to meet the demands of 21st century complexity. (Adams, 2005; Bennis & Biederman, 2009; Covey, 1989; de Geus, 2002; Goleman et al., 2002; Kofman, 2006; Jaworski, 1996; Joiner & Josephs, 2007; Porras et al., 2007; Rooke & Torbert, 2005; Ray & Myers, 1989; Renesch, 2002; Senge et al., 2005; Torbert et al., 2004).

Yet, what is less clear is how such leadership and organisational capacities are developed. As I will contend, Torbert’s “Action Inquiry” offers one of the most inclusive orientations; not only presenting a comprehensive developmental theory but also a guide to practice and research in action to engender such transformation in individuals, teams and organisations (Torbert et al., 2004). In brief, Torbert’s approach centres around the notion that in western society we separate action (what we do) from inquiry (questioning and reflection) and that in order to generate more effective learning and real transformation leaders need to conduct inquiry in the very moment of action (Fisher, Rooke & Torbert, 2003). Moreover, that this action inquiry needs to occur at three levels: at a subjective/first-person/individual level (to actively recalibrate incongruities between an individual’s own intuitive sense of purpose, thoughts, behaviours and effects in the world to generate increasing effectiveness and integrity); at an intersubjective/second-person/group/team level through more aware speaking, listening and inquiring with others.
(to generate greater mutuality, commitment, honest and trust with others); and, at an objective/organisational/third-person level (in order to generate sustainability, encourage wider pools of integrity and mutuality and align congruity across the domains of mission, strategy, performance and outcomes) (Torbert et al., 2004, pp. 7-8).

However, action inquiry also represents one of the most challenging approaches to learning and change: it requires unusual degrees of awareness and “is the hardest thing in the world to do on a continuing basis”; represents a significant challenge to existing political and social structures; and, is almost unheard of and difficult to understand (Torbert, 2004, p. 18).

Therefore, by investigating the practice of action inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice the problems addressed by the current study are the following:

1) The need for a new paradigm of leadership tools and skills for the 21st century in light of current financial, ecological, social and political complexities;

2) The necessity for additional research into action inquiry, which is known only to a small community of practitioners;

3) The difficulty in understanding the complex requirements of action inquiry; and,

4) The challenges of integrating action inquiry in a conventional business world.

**Purpose Statement and Significance of Study**

In addition to addressing the problems detailed above, by employing an action research method (Marshall & Reason 1994, cited in Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.11-12) the purpose of this management project was to speak to three audiences:

1) Me – as I near the end of my MBA in Corporate Social, an intention of the research was to build on my own personal experiences of transformation and explore how I might integrate such experiences into a leadership role in business.
2) Us – by engaging and interviewing leaders and consultants who practice action inquiry, an intention of the research was to provide them with a space for reflection which could contribute to their future leadership and consulting practice

3) Them – by generating generalizable ideas and outcomes with respect to the effects of action inquiry on individual, team and organisational transformation, an intention of the research was to contribute to the field of 21st century leadership.

As such, this project can make a significant contribution to the future practice of action inquiry and 21st century leadership.

Research Questions

The primary questions of this research are:

1) What effect does action inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice have on individual, team and organisational transformation?

2) What implications does action inquiry have for the future practice of leadership?

Secondary questions included the following:

3) Why does action inquiry work?

4) What psychological and social structures does the practice of action inquiry push up against and how do leaders navigate these inner and outer obstacles?

5) Is action inquiry well-founded in bringing out the necessary change in 21st century leadership?

Overview of Subsequent Chapters

The following literature review (Chapter 2) provides a summary of the literature and research that exists with respect to action inquiry and provides a theoretical background to the study through which the accounts of practitioners of action inquiry can be contextualized. Chapter 3 introduces and explains the action research method I applied to conduct the research. It also details the selection criteria, the data collection process and
the methods of verification. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the qualitative data that emerged in interviews. It details and analyzes the common themes that emerged from leaders’ accounts and as a result of these themes having been raised in subsequent interviews with consultants and Bill Torbert, a synthesis of the two sets of accounts. These themes and syntheses are categorized with respect to the effects of action inquiry on leaders’ (1) individual transformation; (2) interactive effectiveness and outcomes in their organisations; (3) their team’s transformation; and, (4) their organisation’s transformation. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the implications of the research findings for the future practice of leadership. Chapter 6 offers a summary of the research findings, reflections with respect to the viability and value of action inquiry as a 21st century leadership practice and concludes with an evaluation of the efficacy of the research findings and the implications for further research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The problems addressed by this research are (a) the need for a new paradigm of leadership tools and skills for the 21st century in light of the current financial, ecological, social and political complexities; (b) the necessity for additional research into action inquiry which is known only to a small community of practitioners; (c) the difficulty in understanding the complex requirements of action inquiry; and, (d) the challenges of integrating action inquiry in a conventional business world.

By employing an action research design, the current study explored the first-, second- and third-person forms of action inquiry that leaders and specialist action inquiry consultants are using to generate transformation in individuals, teams and organisation. Action inquiry is defined “as a simultaneous way of conducting action and inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice that increases the wider effectiveness of our actions” (Torbert et al., 2004, p. 1).

Action Inquiry

In order to create learning organisations (Senge, 1990) and knowledge creating companies (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) able to meet the challenges of our times, Torbert’s action inquiry proposes the need for individuals, teams and organisations to conduct interweaving first-person, second-person and third-person research/inquiry (studying “oneself”, studying “ourselves”, studying “them”) in their daily practice via recurring cycles of moment-to-moment action-reflection to generate opportunities for single-, double- and triple-loop learning/feedback (Torbert et al., 2008, p. 2). This form of experiential/empirical triangulation aims to increase the capacity of the acting system (individual, team and organisation) to experience and be in productive and mutually emancipatory dialogue with difference, diversity, and incongruity in each event so that valid, timely, practical and effective learning and action can occur in the present (Torbert & Taylor, 2008, p. 1) that both “resonates with and departs from the past and as it resonates with and potentiates the future” (Torbert, 2001, p. 251).
As such, action inquiry signals a radical shift from traditional Western epistemology and ontology dominated by a modernist empirical positivist mental construction of reality which separates subject and object, is “dominated by crude notions of economic progress” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a, xxiii) and focuses of the world ‘out-there’ to “an awareness and inquiry into the present relationships between the ‘in-here’ subjective world, the ‘among-us’ interactional world and the ‘out-there’ world we take as reality” (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 3) in service of helping “individuals, teams and organisations become more capable of self-transformation and thus more creative, more aware, more just and more sustainable” (Torbert et al., 2004, p. 1).

**First-person Action Inquiry (I/Me)**

In the context that an individual’s attention rarely registers a great deal of what occurs (Torbert et. al 2004, p. 22), that the “dominant technical-rational mode of thought that characterizes the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is based on a separation of mind and body that implies a separation of action and inquiry” (Torbert & Taylor, 2008, p. 2) and that:

> ...what we call normal is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjections and other forms of destructive action on experience... (Laing, 1976, p. 25-7, cited in Reason and Bradbury, 2001b, p. 11)

leaders are encouraged to take an inquiring approach to their own lives “to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting” (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 11). This dimension of inquiry aims to enable leaders to critically explore the gaps in their own purposes, framings, behaviours and effects in the world and as an outcome of this inquiry to formulate their own enhanced theory of action and quality of being-in-the-world (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 18).

Reason & Torbert (2001, p. 11) delineate two directionalities of this first-person inquiry; “upstream” to the source of one’s attention and “downstream” in the critical examination of one’s day to day behaviour.
“Upstream” inquiry is seen to help individuals become aware of the place from which they act and aims to clarify the purposes of inquiry for both oneself and others (ibid). Reason & Marshall (1987, cited in Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 11) suggest that individuals should develop awareness of:

1) the existential life issues they bring to a situation;
2) the issues and opportunities offered to them by their gender, race, class, employment status and age;
3) unresolved psychodynamic residue such as grief, anger and fear that may cloud the integrity of their inquiry (Heron, 1988, cited in Reason and Torbert, 2001, p. 11); and,
4) the archetypal patterns that manifest in their work (Hillman, 1975, also in Reason and Torbert, 2001, p. 11).

Reason & Torbert (2001, p. 11) describe various approaches for this type of inquiry which include autobiographical writing, martial arts, psychotherapy, artwork, sensory awareness and mindfulness practices to develop presence in action. They posit such exploration as akin to “critical subjectivity”, described as:

a state of consciousness different from either the naive subjectivity of “primary process” awareness and the attempted objectivity of egoic “secondary process” awareness. Critical subjectivity means that we do not suppress our primary subjective experience, that we accept our knowing is from a perspective; it also means that we are aware of that perspective, and of its bias, and we articulate it in our communications. Critical subjectivity involves a self reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing and thus is very close to what Bateson (1972) describes as Learning III (Reason, 1994, p.327, cited in Reason and Torbert, 2001, p.11).

“Downstream” inquiry refers to the ability of individuals to bring the qualities of mindfulness and self-awareness to their wider actions in the world so they can ascertain whether they are achieving their intended outcomes (single-loop feedback); whether their
actions are congruent with their strategy or adopted theory (double-loop feedback); and whether the outcomes are congruent with their ultimate purpose (triple-loop feedback) (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.11). Although this reflection can take place “off-line” at a later point from action through endeavours such as journal writing, the explicit aim of action inquiry is to develop the capacity for awareness “on-line” in the very moment of acting so that actions become more timely and effective (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 11; Reason & McArdle, 2006, p.133; Torbert & Taylor, 2008, p. 2).

Torbert (1991, p. 219; 2004, p.22; 2008, p.2) articulates this practice as seeking to foster a present moment awareness that spans four territories of experience phenomenologically available to anyone (see Table 1 below) with ensuing real-time learning that arises from triple-loop feedback that facilitating a recalibration of incongruities between an individual’s effects in the outside world and their own sensed performance, strategies and attention (see Figure 1 overleaf).

**Table 1: Four Territories of Experience**
(Adapted from Torbert & Associates, 2004, p.22; Torbert and Taylor, 2008, p.2)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Territory Type</th>
<th>Territory Description</th>
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<td>First territory</td>
<td><em>Outside Events/World:</em> results, assessments, observed behavioural consequences, environmental effects – focused attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second territory</td>
<td><em>Own sensed performance:</em> behaviour, skills, pattern of activity, deeds as sensed in the process of enactment- sensual awareness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third territory</td>
<td><em>Action-Logics/realm of thought:</em> strategies, schemas, ploys, game plans, typical modes of reflecting on experience- witnessing awareness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth territory</td>
<td><em>Intentional attention:</em> presencing awareness, noumenal vision, intuition, aims.</td>
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However, this quality of self-reflection and moment-to-moment awareness is a huge undertaking for any leader or individual, representing a radical re-visioning of the conventional Western mindset that assumes a given self-world (Torbert, 1999, p.192). In addition, this process of beginning to know oneself more deeply, confronting existential issues and developing the capacity to consciously act, “in a way that simultaneously inquires into the current awareness-mind-body-situation interaction” (Trungpa, 1970, cited in Torbert and Taylor, 2008: p. 1) is well documented in the literature on psycho-spiritual development as being quite painful, challenging to one’s self-identity, destabilizing, haphazard and at times dangerous (Almaas, 2004; Grof, 2006; Rowan, 2005; Wilber, 1986).

Therefore, although research that refers to individuals’ first-person inquiry has been presented in the Handbook of Action Research (2001) and specific examples in a work capacity (Torbert, 1991; Fisher, Rooke & Torbert, 2003; Torbert et al., 2004), further research is needed to ascertain how such practices are meeting a face-paced capitalist society still dominated by a dualistic western mindset.

**Second-person Action Inquiry (WE/US)**

Second-person action inquiry begins when leaders engage with others in a face-to-face group or team context to inquire into issues of mutual concern or to enhance their own
first-person inquiries (Torbert & Reason, 2001, p.12). A useful analogy for this type of inquiry is that of cross-pollination where leaders can not only test and receive feedback on the visions and insights that have arisen from their first-person inquiries with others but also to take insights gleaned from the group interaction back into their own first-person developmental inquiries.

Furthermore, as listening to oneself is seen as crucial to learning in first-person inquiry, speaking-and-listening-to-others is seen as quintessential to learning in second-person inquiry (Heron, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Senge et al. 1999, cited in Torbert, 2001, p. 253). Torbert (2001, p. 254) outlines four parts of speech (see Table 2 below), analogous to the four territories of experience that leaders should not only be aware of in themselves but evoke in other participants to move from an exploitative/manipulative mode of interaction towards a mutually transforming and constructive action inquiry.

**Table 2: Four Parts of Speech** (Source: Torbert, 2004, p.28)

<table>
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<th>Framing</th>
<th>Declaring or amending a possible shared sense of vision/intent/mission for the occasion. Often leaders assume others know and share the same objective as others without putting it out for examination</th>
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<td>Advocating</td>
<td>Setting a goal, recommending a strategy and telling others how they feel about what is occurring.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illustrating</td>
<td>Offering a concrete, visual picture/story based on observed performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiring</td>
<td>Inviting any contribution or feedback from others about their response to one’s feedback and associated conduct</td>
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Such a process is seen as having the potential to gradually transform conversations and meetings from habitual repetitive rituals that are unresponsive to intersubjective realities to transformational dialogues between the known and unknown (Torbert, 2001, p. 254).

In addition, the learning generated by real-time action inquiry in this regard can either confirm the efficacy of a leader’s proposed action or generate slight changes in performance (single-loop feedback), a change in topic, timing or strategy (double-loop
feedback) or a change in the framing assumptions of the occasion (triple-loop feedback) (ibid) (see Figure 2 below).

**Figure 2: Enactment and single-, double-, and triple-loop learning across the four parts of speech** (Adapted from Torbert, 1999)

Second-person action inquiry is not limited solely to an organisational group or team but can be enacted through “mini communities of inquiry” with friends, family or simply others facing similar issues to oneself (Torbert, 1999, p.189). Indeed, in the fullest articulation of this type of inquiry, is Heron and Reason’s “Co-operative Inquiry” described as:

a way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests to yourself: in order to (1) understand your world, make sense of you life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things; and (2) learn how to act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better (Heron and Reason, 2001, p.179).

A central tenet of this inquiry is of democratic collaborative learning where participants are both co-researchers and co-subjects (ibid) who share in the process of knowledge discovery through cycles of action and reflection in a crucible of mutual support and challenge (Reason, 1999, p. 7). Reason (1999, p. 2) provides several examples of these types of groups, including:
1. One looking at how black women and non-black women co-create a working culture in British organisations that honours the diversity of their capacities and is effective;
2. One looking at the experience of young managers in patriarchal organisations; and,
3. One looking at whether men needed to explore issues of gender in the workplace

Although such inquiry, whether practiced by leaders in their organisations or externally, has been documented in the *Handbook of Action Research* (2001), by Fisher, Rooke, Torbert, (2003) and Reason & Torbert, (2001) such activity is still rare. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the vulnerability and challenge to normal ways of interacting that this approach to learning and generating constructive mutuality engenders is, “an upsetting business...and it is likely that [people] will uncover things they have been avoiding looking at and aspects of their lives with which they are uncomfortable” (Reason, 1999, p. 5). Therefore, more research is needed to ascertain how such practices are affecting leaders in their organisational lives in absence of a change in their cultural embedding.

**Third-person Action Inquiry (IT/ THEM)**

Third-person action inquiry aims to awaken the qualities of first- and second-person action inquiry in the wider organisation or community to include both those who are present in time and space and those who cannot be present or may never meet (such as in a multinational corporation) (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.15).

The explicit aim of this type of inquiry is sustainability, where leaders, by encouraging a wider scope of people to “create their own knowing-in-action in collaboration with others” (ibid) as part of the organisational design, not only receive feedback, albeit in a decentralized way, which can aid increased “clarity and congruity across the domains of mission, strategy, performance and outcomes” with reference to the organization’s being-in-the-world (Torbert et al. 2004, p.59) but in addition, contribute to the creation of an organisation that can act as a vehicle for individuals’ self-actualization (Torbert, 1991), that can more readily serve third parties futures (Torbert, 1999, p. 191) and that can be more capable of learning and adaption by being in perpetual accord with both its inner and outer environments (Torbert et al., 2004, p. 40).
This interpenetrating nature of such first-, second- and third-person action inquiry and the manifestation of the four territories of experience in these domains with the same opportunities for single, double and triple-loop feedback/learning (detailed in Figure 3 below) allows leaders and organisations to move towards acting in a more objectively timely manner where they are:

...‘listening for the music’ (Torbert, 1998) of real-time psycho/social relations among [their] own first-person voices, the second-person voices of persons with whom [they] are interacting, and the third-person voices represented in the norms and structures of larger social aggregates (Torbert, 1999, p. 190).

**Figure 3: Interpenetrating first-, second- and third-person inquiry and single, double and triple-loop feedback** (Source: Torbert & Chandler, 2003, p. 8)

However, Torbert (1999, p.196) points out that this practice is so difficult that it requires many gradual transformations of an individuals and organisations worldview and ways of acting before such capacities are realized. Torbert (2000a, 2000b, cited in Torbert et al., 2008) uses developmental theory to map this evolution at the personal, team,
organizational and institutional scales which will be now be reviewed in the following section.

**Developmental Action Inquiry**

Based on research with business leaders and in partnership with Suzanne Cook-Greuter, Dal Fisher, David Rooke, Torbert (1987) developed the Leadership Development Framework (LDF) to measure and identify the scale and stages of psychological development that leaders exhibit. Each developmental stage is termed an ‘action-logic’ with each higher action-logic transcending and including a particular way of sense-making that goes before and symbolizes an increase in the capacity of an individual to learn and improve performance of both self and others (Hartwell & Torbert, p. 193). The LDF has the following stages:

1) **Opportunist:** characterized as manipulative, imbued with hostile humour, focused on the short term, flouts power and punishes with an “eye for an eye” ethic. Treats the outside world as the primary reality and concentrates on gaining control of things there. Good in an emergency and sales positions. In a sample of 4,130 professional adults and managers 5% profiled at this action-logic.

2) **Diplomat:** characterized as avoiding conflict, works to group standard, speaks in clichés and platitudes, face-saving essential and is concerned with fitting into the norm. Treats his own sense performance as what matters. 12% profiled at this action-logic.

3) **Expert:** characterized as interested in problem solving, seeks causes, feedback from other objective craft masters, not good team players. Treats strategic territory of experience as main reality and seeks to master his cognitive grasps of one or more disciplines. 38% profiled at this action-logic.

4) **Achiever:** characterized as focused on longer-term goals, appreciating complexity, seeks mutuality not hierarchy in relations, are good team leaders. Treats interplay
among planning, performing and assessing the outcomes as what is real. Concerned with making incremental single-loop changes in behaviour to amend planned results. 30% profiled at this action-logic.

5) Individualist: characterized by taking a relativistic perspective, combines professional and personal goals well, open to double-loop feedback, interested in own and others unique self-expression, less apt to judge, influences by listening and finding patterns and starts to notice own shadow. 10% profiled at this action-logic.

6) Strategist: characterized by capacity for self-awareness, places high value on action inquiry, mutuality and autonomy, aware of paradox, witty existential humour, relationally focused, attentive to unique market niches and capable of double-loop feedback. 4% profiled at this action-logic.

7) Alchemist: characterized by constantly exercising own awareness seeking single-, double- and triple-loop feedback on interplay of intuition, thought, action and effects on outside world, disintegration of ego identity, participates in the work of historical/spiritual transformation. Treats time and events as symbolic not linear. 1% profile at this level.

(Adapted and sourced from Hartwell & Torbert, 1999, p.193; Rooke & Torbert, 1998; Torbert et al., 2004)

Torbert et al. (2004) propose various modes of action inquiry practice to facilitate growth through these action-logics that range from “off-line reflection” methodologies at earlier stages to those closer to “on-line reflection” at latter stages as a capacity for reflection in the moment is developed.

Importantly, in the context of creating learning organisations, a longitudinal study of ten organisations who were supported in organisational transformation by action inquiry consultants for an average of 4.2 years, found that the action-logic of the CEO and his or
her senior advisors (as well as that of the consultant) appeared to be a critical variable in successful organisational transformation and achievement of indicators of business success (Rooke & Torbert, 1998).

In particular, the study found that those leaders and consultants measuring at later (post-conventional) action-logics (strategist and alchemist), who have the capacity for double- and triple-loop learning/feedback, were more likely to be able to support individual, team and organisational transformation (ibid; Rooke, 1997).

Analogous to the stages of individual development, Torbert (1987) outlines a series of developmental organisational stages, that organisations may move through as the capacity for learning in mutuality and a future orientation increase. Although not the particular focus of this research, it is noteworthy that Torbert (1987) outlines nine stages of organisational development from conception to collaborative inquiry to liberating disciplines at which point an organisation is fully practicing interweaving first-, second-, and third-person action inquiry and generating continual triple-loop feedback where individuals:

...develop an increasing powerful and continual awareness in real time of the multivocal chaotic interplay of our own an other system’s action logics. And we give more attractive and effectual voice to the ongoing alchemical social process of promoting timely, creative, liberating action. We can each thereby contribute to the ever-unfinished transformation of dominative, hierarchical, transformation-resistant social structures through the enactment of mutually liberating, transformational, partnership social structures for action and inquiry. (Hartwell & Torbert, 1999, p. 193)

Of interest to this research, owing to the fledgling practice of action inquiry that the organisations presently studied have practiced, is how accepting those at lower action-logics (conventional ways of meaning making) are of the notion of a hierarchy of development as well as deeper modes of self and mutual reflection.
Action Inquiry and the Emergent Future

Senge and Scharmer (2001, p. 246) argue that while most organisational learning has been concerned with reflective processes, the challenges organisations now face in order to compete in a new operating paradigm require the capacity to learn by creatively manifesting new reality, “not yet embodied in manifest reality”.

Torbert & Chandler (2003, p. 5) posit that such a capacity can be enacted through action inquiry on oneself and with others in the present moment across the four territories of experience to allow, “numerous possibilities to arise in our minds...rather than having our choices shaped by personal habits, familiar patterns of thought or institutional patterns from the past”. They present an example of leaders discussing future scenarios, whereby the objective is not to predict what will come true, but to generate explorative dialogue that influences participants first-person perspectives, their second-person relations with other leaders in the organisation and out of which a new future orientated third-person mission can evolve (ibid, p. 8).

Interweaving First-, Second- and Third-person Action Inquiry and the 27 Flavours of Action Research

To clarify the various ways in which first-person subjective action inquiry, second-person intersubjective action inquiry and third-person objective action inquiry interweave, Torbert & Chandler (2004) articulate 27 different flavours of action research based on multiples of a “voice” dimension, a “temporal” dimension and a “practice” dimension. In other words first-, second- and/or third-person research voice, studying first-, second-, or third-person practice, in the past, present, or future, [3x3x3] (ibid) (see Figure 4 overleaf).

They also posit that engaging in more of the 27 types of research in a given situation increases the likelihood of discovering what is true and hence the likelihood of more effective action (ibid, p. 5). Furthermore, in their study of organisations that managed to enact successful organisational transformations, Rooke and Torbert (1998) tentatively found that transformation would be more likely the more flavours CEO’s and consultants incorporated.
It is beyond the scope of this research to look at this aspect of action inquiry in detail but some of the multiples pertinent to this study are:

- First-person action inquiry/research on first-person practice: e.g. leaders taking and inquiry approach to their own lives through journaling, meditation and mindfulness;
- Second-person action inquiry/research into first-person practice: e.g. leaders/senior teams inquiring with others in their own lives;
- Second-person action inquiry/research into second-person practice: e.g. leaders inquiring with others into issues of mutual concern; and,
- Second-person action inquiry/research into third-person practice: e.g. leaders inquiring with others into issues pertaining to the wider system.
Torbert (2004, p. 41) presents the four types of power commonly used in leadership practice: unilateral; referent and logistical; visionary; and, transforming and argues that most leaders tend to focus on one type of power as essential when tensions between the styles develop. He cites examples such as “the Fire-fighter” – who is constantly battling, “the Bureaucrat” – who is trapped in routine and resistant to change and the “Farsight” – a great strategic planner who cannot get others to cooperate with him (ibid). In contrast, he sees effective and timely leadership as interweaving all four forms of power and shows how these correspond to the four territories of organisational experience and four time spans of leadership (see Table 3 overleaf).

Torbert argues that excessive focus on one form of power generates incongruities and lopsidedness amongst the four territories of organisational experience and thus reduces organisational effectiveness and sustainability over time (ibid). In contrast, he suggests that through a continual practice of action inquiry across the all four territories of experience, leaders can begin to “juggle and balance” all forms of power to not only maintain effectiveness in addressing conventional short term issues but also increase congruency between these activities and longer term endeavours such as personal and organisational transformations “necessary to be become triple-loop learning systems” (ibid).

However, noting that the current average CEO tenure is 6.1 years (Kneale, Forbes, 2009), more research is needed to ascertain how likely the actualization of such interweaving uses of power are given the life-long nature of the developmental action inquiry process at a personal level and the decades long process of organisational transformation.
Table 3: Action Inquiry and Four Types of Power
(Adapted from Torbert et al., 2004, p. 40-42)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Territories of Experience</th>
<th>Leadership Action</th>
<th>Type of Power</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessing</td>
<td>Responding in a timely way to emergencies and opportunities that can arise at any moment</td>
<td>Unilateral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing</td>
<td>Accomplishing role defined responsibilities typically taking from one week to three months</td>
<td>Referent and Logistical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategizing</td>
<td>Defining and implementing a major strategic initiative requiring co-ordination with assessing, performing and strategizing. Typically requires 3-5 years</td>
<td>Visionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visioning/Mission</td>
<td>Clarifying organisational mission and fostering continual improvement of the alignment among vision, mission, strategy, operations and outcomes. May take 7-21 years to encourage all members to practice action inquiry</td>
<td>Transforming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Action Inquiry Case Studies

Research into the effects of action inquiry in organisational context is limited. Torbert (1991) described in The Power of Balance how as Dean at the Boston College (BC) School of Management he gradually introduced the practice of action inquiry into the MBA programme, which resulted in the progression of the programme from below the 100 top ranked schools to among the top 25 nationally in the US. Rooke & Torbert’s (1998) longitudinal study of ten organisations showed how a CEO’s and senior leader’s action-logic and the practice of action inquiry of are critical variables in the capacity of an organisation to undergo meaningful transformation. Torbert et al., (2004) describe the
successful transformation of Sun Health Care and Trillium Asset Management through the practice of action inquiry.

Action inquiry is also part of a broader family of action-based approaches to learning, living inquiry and meaningful change called ‘action research’ which includes action learning (Revans, 1980), action science (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985), work-based learning (Raelin, 2000), organizational change and work research (Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996; Greenwood & Levin, 1998), co-operative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2001), appreciative inquiry (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001), learning history (Roth & Kleiner, 1998) whole systems inquiry (Bunker & Alban, 1997) and political participative action research (PAR) (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991) amongst others.

Whilst there is considerable difference in lineage, philosophical and psychological assumptions and political commitment (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a, p. xxiv) amidst this action research family and even controversy as to what can actually be considered action research and its usefulness as a term (Heller, 2004; Pedler, 2008) this general orientation to research has been described as:

> a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes...it seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities (Reason & Bradbury, 2001b, p. 1)

Examples of inquiries amidst these approaches are presented in the *Handbook of Action Research* (2001), yet despite 70 years since Kurt Lewin began to experiment with action research as a tool for learning and social change and its impressive records of successes (Pasmore, 2001, p.46) the compendium of approaches that make up the action research genus have failed to gain traction. Pasmore (2001, p.46) notes that:

> More often that not, we continue to witness change driven from the top down, by the few with the power to control the many, without regard to the potential
benefits of greater involvement by those who must implement the new way of operating. We continue to see failed efforts to improve organizational performance or community well-being followed not by efforts to involve people in learning in what went wrong but instead by replacing leaders with others who repeat the same process over and over again.

Specific to this research, as action inquiry represents one of the most challenging approaches to learning and change: it requires unusual degrees of awareness and “is the hardest thing in the world to do on a continuing basis”; significantly challenges existing political and social structures; and, is almost unheard of and difficult to understand (Torbert, 2004, p. 18), more research is needed into its praxis and effects on organisations and also whether is it well-founded for bringing about the expected results or not.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

Based on Torbert’s (2004) action inquiry framework that delineates three main dimensions of inquiry for transforming leadership, the present research addressed the following main questions:

1) What effect does action inquiry, as a disciplined leadership practice have on individual, team and organisational transformation?
2) What implications does action inquiry have for the future practice of leadership?

Secondary questions included the following:

3) Why does action inquiry work?
4) What psychological and social structures does the practice of action inquiry push up against and how do leaders navigate these inner and outer obstacles?
5) Is action inquiry well-founded in bringing out the necessary change in 21st century leadership?

Action Research Method

The conclusion of the previous chapter was that despite some research performed in the area of action inquiry and its effects on individual, team and organisational transformation, much more is needed not only to contribute to demystifying what is a complex and difficult process to understand but also to further explore how such a process, which signals a radical shift in Western ontology and epistemology, is meeting an organisational world still dominated by conventional mindset and what the implications are for the future practice of leadership in an ever-more complex world.

To achieve this contribution to the existing research and literature (Hartwell & Torbert, 1999; the Handbook of Action Research, 2001; Rooke, 1997; Rooke & Torbert, 1998; Torbert et al., 2004) an action research method was employed. This took the form of gathering qualitative data by triangulating between my own experiences, reflections and insights.
with respect to the key research questions, the experiences of participating leaders who apply action inquiry in their organisations and those of individuals who apply action inquiry as part of their consulting practice including Bill Torbert. Such triangulation enabled iterative cycles of action and reflection whereby data and issues that emerged in interviews with leaders was brought into future questioning with consultants and Bill Torbert so that key themes relating to the practice of action inquiry could be synthesized.

By using this method, the research speaks to three audiences: me, us and them; dynamics which Marshall & Reason (1994, cited in Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.11-12) posit as emblematic of “all good research”:

**Me**

For the last 10 years I have taken an inquiring approach to my own life through a daily meditation practice, experiential training in Buddhist psychotherapy, Aikido and most recently a practice of psycho-spiritual inquiry called the Diamond Logos Approach.

Alongside these forms of first-person inquiry I worked in a variety of roles, as an English teacher in several countries, as a marketeer and as a senior investment portfolio manager but eventually found that the values and vision that these organisations operated from were becoming increasingly incongruent with what was emerging from my own first-person inquiries: a sense that organisations, as arenas where people spend so much of their lives and that have such an impact on society, have a responsibility to not only foster the well-being and development of their employees but also a responsibility to exist more in accord with their communities and environment.

I examined this point of inquiry with others through Ken Wilber’s Integral Institute which provides research, education and events that foster intentional, cultural and social self-awareness to help global leaders from all arenas improve the human condition and have undertaken an MBA in Corporate Social Responsibility to further enhance my inquiry as to how leaders might facilitate the development of their organisations from solely economic enterprises to living systems that contribute to the flourishing of people and the communities and ecosystems of which they are part.
As such, the current research deeply speaks to me as the accounts of and interaction with leaders and consultants who are actualizing a more integrative and human approach to organisational life, respond directly to my future being-in-the-world (Marshall & Reason, 1994, cited in Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.11).

**Us**

By enabling leaders and consultants who are practicing action inquiry to reflect on their experiences, the research responds to the concerns of their praxis of action inquiry (which has been identified as difficult to practice, understand and actualize in conventional organisation settings) and is as such timely and relevant (Marshall and Reason, 1994, cited in Reason and Torbert, 2001, p. 12). It is noteworthy, that by triangulating between both leaders and consultants experiences of action inquiry a wealth of insights were gleaned as to the praxis of action inquiry in consulting. However, although it was beyond the scope of this research to fully include this particular element, to aid the future consulting praxis of action inquiry, consultant participants will be engaging in a group inquiry with the researcher to explore the issues raised. This may be written-up in a subsequent document.

**Them**

The research aimed to generate increasingly valid third-person data “compatible with but fundamentally different from empirical positivism” (Hartwell & Torbert, 1999) by interweaving my own subjective experience of the research (first-person research) in collaboration with second-persons (second-person research) through cycles of action and reflection (ibid).

In addition, both the third-person data collected from leaders’ first-person accounts of their experiences of first-, second- and third-person action inquiry and first-person accounts of consultants who apply action inquiry were quoted at length (with light editing) in the Data Analysis and Synthesis chapter and specifically relating to leaders applying action inquiry, in fuller case studies in Appendix A. The purpose of this is to enable *rhizomatic validity* which is raised “when a text presents multiple voices defining the
situation differently” and *ironic validity* “which is raised by inviting further interpretation by readers” (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 17).

Furthermore the research provides generalizable ideas and outcomes for a third-person (them) audience (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 10) which will be published on the website of the consultancy participating in this research (Harthill Consulting).

**The Role of the Researcher**

Owing to the fact that the main instrument in qualitative research is the researcher (Mertens, 2005, p. 247) not to mention the intrinsically inseparable nature of researcher and researched that an action inquiry method postulates (Reason & Torbert, 2001) there are a number of ways I have affected and been affected by the research: the first is that as a result of my own practice of inquiry and deeply vested interest in the proposed research, I have undoubtedly affected the nature of information that was gleaned from participants although care was taken, through the process of journaling and self-reflection, so that personal assumptions, beliefs and biases that would negatively effect the study were consciously explored and understood; second, is that through my previous experience of inquiry in face-to-face settings with others, I was able to hold an empathic space for participants to explore their experience of action inquiry in a reflective manner; and third, was that through the process of reflecting after each interaction I developed further questions to put to future participants which meant that not only was I not alienated from the research but also that they were “involved in the final interpretation of what the research outcome meant” (Rowan, 2001, p. 119). Although I have documented these first-person inquiries, they have not been included in the project owing to restrictions in length.

**Selection Criteria and Research Preparation**

Nine participants were chosen in association with Harthill Consulting from a pool of leaders and consultants who practice action inquiry. Despite the short time available to gather participants for the study the following variance and viable selection was achieved:
1. Five individuals who have practiced action inquiry at an individual level for between 2 and 10 years and have sought to engender an action inquiry approach in their organisations between 15 months and 3 years. These individuals represent different sectors: telecommunications, education, corporate social responsibility consultancy and public welfare, as well as a variety of senior leadership positions: two of the participants are CEO’s, one is a Pro-Vice master at a leading university; one runs his own business and one is a Head of Leadership and Development.

2. Four individuals who have used action inquiry as a consulting intervention for between 2 and 30 years. Two are Directors’ at Harthill Consulting, One is an Associate at Harthill Consulting and one is Bill Torbert, the key founder, writer, researcher and consultant in action inquiry.

3. The age range is between 35 and 70 years.

4. Men and women are evenly represented (4 men and 5 women).

All participants were supportive of the research and signed a consent form prior to the actual interview that assured them of confidentiality by detailing how any references to their specific organisation or real name would be kept anonymous throughout the process and in the final document (see Appendix B for leaders and Appendix C for consultants). Leaders were also furnished with a brief overview of the project, questions that may be asked and themes I was looking to explore (see Appendix D).

Data Collection

The qualitative data was collected in the following way:

*Live Interviews and Researcher Insight*: Each participant was interviewed for approximately 90 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and held in a spirit of open-ended inquiry. Insights from interviews with leaders who practice action inquiry in their organisations were used as part of the inquiry for action inquiry consultants and Bill Torbert, the final interviewee. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher.
The interviews were conducted between 4\textsuperscript{th} July and 4\textsuperscript{th} August 2010. However, it would have been preferable for a greater space between each interview (three interviews were conducted in different locations in the UK in one day) so that a greater quality of presence could have been achieved for the interviews that could have fostered the emergence of deeper insights.

**Data Analysis**

The data in this research underwent the following analysis:

*Data Sequencing, Data Analysis and Synthesis* – With respect to the leaders who practice action inquiry, each interview was transcribed and brought together to form a coherent story of each participant’s experience of first-, second- and third-person action inquiry. This enabled the variance in each individual’s, their team’s and organisation’s practice of action inquiry to take the form of “mini-case studies” that helped honour complexity and context specific nature of each member’s story (presented in Appendix A). As Gummesson (2008, p.39) with reference to the case study method that it is:

> Especially effective in approaching phenomena that are ambiguous, fuzzy, even chaotic; dynamic process rather than static and deterministic ones, and includes a large number of variables and relationships.

The common themes emanating from these “mini-case studies” were then elucidated through a process of intuitive coding and formed the material for the interviews with consultants and Bill Torbert. Each of these was then transcribed and intuitively coded and used to facilitate a synthesis of the research findings.

**Methods of Verification**

Although it would have been preferable to have research participants verify the transcripts of the interviews as well as the data contained in their “mini-case studies”, owing to the short space of time for completion of the project and the participants incredibly busy lives, this has not been possible. However, to somewhat compensate for this lack, a member check (Mertens, 2005, p.255) was applied during the interviews, where I provided feedback...
to participants as to what had been said and asked for clarification to ensure their views and experiences were being accurately reflected.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced and explained the action research method applied in this management project. It also detailed the selection criteria, the data collected process and the methods of verification including the inclusion of “mini-case studies” of the leaders researched in Appendix A to enable both rhizomatic and ironic validity.

The following chapter contains a thorough analysis and synthesis of the research findings. As detailed in previously the key issues identified were (a) the need for a new paradigm of leadership tools and skills for the 21st century in light of the current financial, ecological, social and political complexities; (b) the necessity for additional research into action inquiry which is known only to a small community of practitioners; (c) the difficulty in understanding the complex requirements of action inquiry; and, (d) the challenges of integrating action inquiry in a conventional business world.
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

The preceding chapter established the ground for the data analysis and synthesis presented in this chapter by introducing the action research method, the selection process, the research preparation, the data collection process and the modes of verification.

The current chapter provides an analysis of the common themes that emerged from the accounts of leaders researched and synthesizes the issues raised with the subsequent views gathered from the collaborative interviews with consultants and Bill Torbert.

These themes and syntheses are categorized with respect to the effects of action inquiry on research participants’ (1) individual transformation; (2) interactive effectiveness and outcomes in their organisations; (3) their team’s transformation; and, (4) their organisation’s transformation. (The reader is also referred to the “mini-case” studies in Appendix A for fuller account of leaders experiences of action inquiry through which they are invited to make their own interpretations).

To provide context a brief profile of each leader is detailed below Table 4 and continued overleaf:

Table 4: Leader Profiles

| Paul | Paul is Head of Leadership and Talent Development at a large telecommunications company in the UK. He has 15 years experience in leadership and personal and organisational transformation. In searching for a more sustainable approach to change and transformation, Paul came across action inquiry eight years ago and has been “slowly developing his practice and expertise in it ever since”. Paul, in association with Harthill Consulting, began to introduce action inquiry to his organisation in early 2009 to enable “organisational transformation to take its next iteration”. He currently uses the approach with twenty people at senior management level through to managing director level. This intervention was undertaken in response to a series of failed external consulting interventions that came with a “single loop approach” and consultants who “make their money by making it not |
**Paul (Cont.)**

sustainable” and the need to help executives that were dealing with “great levels of complexity and ambiguity” who had found their “path to success to date was no longer getting the results they wanted”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zara</th>
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<tr>
<td>Zara is currently a Pro-Vice-Master of Student Experience and Director of External Relations at a leading UK university where she manages 65 people. She has been taking an inquiring approach to her own life for around ten years to support her in her role as a young woman in a variety of senior leadership positions. This inquiry has taken form through one-to-one mentoring with a Harthill Consulting specialist, personal practices as well as through a “Senior Women of the Move” group where Harthill gather a group of successful women, managers and business leaders to explore themes that emerge in the lives of women of influence. In addition, Zara has also attended an action learning group aimed at providing feedback in mutuality on each others leadership skills as well as being part of a tri-annual Leadership Foundation For Higher Education Top Management Programme action learning group, inquiring in collaboration with other leaders from a range of universities, into how to improve the quality of leadership in higher education. Zara also encourages and supports managers in her department to take an inquiring approach to their own lives and inquire with others.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesley</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lesley is Chief Executive of a county probation trust whose work involves managing around 2,000 offenders with her staff, to protect the public and reduce offending. She takes an inquiring approach to her own life and has engaged with action inquiry at a personal level since becoming Chief Executive in 2001. At a group level, she takes part in a Chief Executive national learning circle that meets three times a year that inquires into both personal, organisational and systemic issues. Lesley is now using action inquiry and the Leadership Development Framework (LDF) to facilitate the probation trust’s first organisation change programme alongside Harthill Consulting.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

| Clive | Clive is CEO of a company that provides sustainable energy and environmental services throughout the UK. He has 60 members of staff. He sought the assistance of Harthill Consulting and engaged with action inquiry five years ago when the company was going through a management buyout to provide them “with some tools in terms of coaching and personal development” which would allow them “to move into the roles of company directors”. In particular, the senior executives and the Chairperson “were taken through the Leadership Development Framework (LDF), were then given some one-on-one coaching” and then “the LDF was introduced” into their “recruitment processes”.

| Peter | Peter is a specialist in Corporate Social Responsibility and runs his own consulting firm that helps organisations and individuals focus on their core values and communicate these to the world. His focus is on Media CSR as well as clients in software, utilities, the law and property. In particular, Peter brings his training at the University in Bath in an MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice to this role, which was heavily based around an action inquiry approach to learning. Prior to this role Peter spent 25 years in broadcasting at a major national radio station as a presenter, managing director, HR director and communication director.

In parallel with his CSR consultancy, Peter is a trustee of a range of community organisations aimed at promoting sustainability and social entrepreneurship.

**Research Participants’ Individual Transformation**

*Common theme: At an individual level, all research participants have enhanced their leadership practice by taking an action inquiry approach to their own lives (first-person action inquiry) undertaken both personally (first-person action inquiry on first-person practice) and with the support of different groups (second-person action inquiry on first-person practice).*

All leaders reported being faced with either complex organisational situations that could not be resolved through conventional ways of action or personal obstacles that prevented them achieving their desired goals. In other words, they were subject to gaps between
their own purposes, framings, behaviours and effects in the world (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.18) as detailed in Table 5 below:

Table 5: Situations faced by leaders prior to taking an action inquiry approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Situations faced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>“none of the change programmes I had worked on had been sustainable”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>“it was my first time in a senior role and I felt out of my depth with these much more senior academics”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesley</td>
<td>“I inherited a difficult situation...we were one of the worst performing probation trusts in achieving its targets...I became really interested in what leadership is and how I could develop my leadership skills”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clive</td>
<td>“I needed help to move individuals into the role of company directors”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>“the problem for me in broadcasting was that I was ‘never in the moment”’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By engaging in a variety of first person action inquiry methodologies, including for some, first-person action inquiry amidst second-person groups, over periods ranging from five to eighteen years, all research participants have managed to close gaps between their own purposes, framings, behaviours and effects in the world (Reason and Torbert, 2001, p.18).

Table 6 (below and continued overleaf) details the forms of first-person inquiry that each participant has undertaken (Practices) and show the effects with respect to the various dynamics of first-person action inquiry as outlined in the literature review (Effects):

Table 6: Effects of action inquiry on leader’s individual transformation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Paul   | First-person action inquiry on first-person practice:  

  - *Upstream* meditation, mindfulness practice and journaling  
  - *Downstream* journaling  

| These practices have helped Paul become:  

1) More aware of the place from which he acts, clarified the purposes of his inquiry (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.11) and attuned him to an enhanced theory of action and quality of being-in-the-world (ibid, p. 18): “I have changed from being a go-getter achiever...I am no longer just a management consultant out to go get stuff...it is no longer just about me; it is about me, us and the wider society”; |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul (Cont.)</td>
<td>Other&lt;br&gt;“getting out into nature” to “reconnect and “re-energize”</td>
<td>2) More aware of his psychodynamic issues (Heron, 1998 cited in Reason &amp; Torbert, 2001, p.11): “it has been important in identifying my own patterns, the helpful ones and the destructive ones I have...it has helped give me perspective”. (Fourth/third territory of experience) (Torbert et al., 2004, p.22). Other benefits: has helped keep him “sane”, “remain resilient”, “remove blindness” and get to a place where he is “so resourceful”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>First-person action inquiry on first-person practice:&lt;br&gt;<strong>Upstream</strong>&lt;br&gt;meditation, journaling free-fall writing and one-to-one mentoring&lt;br&gt;<strong>Downstream</strong>&lt;br&gt;as above&lt;br&gt;Second-person action inquiry on first-person practice:&lt;br&gt;3 action inquiry groups Leadership Training group; Senior Women on the Move group; and, Leadership Foundation For Higher Education Top Management group</td>
<td>These practices have helped Zara become:&lt;br&gt;1) More aware of the archetypal patterns that manifest in her work (Hillman, 1975 cited in Reason and Torbert, 2001, p.11): for Zara reowning the “Queen archetype” has helped her effectiveness in engaging with others through “not being too noisy, feeling you have to talk all the time, rather assuming your power and authority, and then just occasionally saying something’ (Fourth/Third territory of experience);&lt;br&gt;2) More aware of the issues and opportunities offered to her by her age gender and employment status (Reason and Marshall, 1987 cited in Reason and Torbert, 2001, p.11): she explored “what it is to be a young woman in management” and “gender issues” to help her operate “politically” and “to find her voice” (Fourth/Third territory of experience);&lt;br&gt;3) More able “step outside that frantic activity and get insight” where there is “power to release something, an idea or thought, that hadn’t been allowed to come to the surface” (Fourth territory, presencing awareness);&lt;br&gt;4) More capable of different ways of thinking: “I’m now able to get to a different level of thought” (Fourth/Third territory of experience);&lt;br&gt;5) More aware of her own sensed performance: “not rushing on to my bit of the agenda saying ‘this is what I want to happen’” (Second territory of experience);&lt;br&gt;6) More able to achieve “better outcomes” by “not being wedded to an outcome” (First territory of experience). Other benefits: “inspired capacity to inspire and motivate” staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Lesley | First-person action inquiry on first-person practice:  
*Upstream* meditation, silent meditation retreats, psychotherapy, counselling, personality profiling, one-to-one mentoring  
*Downstream* as above  
Second-person action inquiry on first-person practice:  
Chief Exec National Learning Circle | These practice have helped Lesley become:  
1) More aware of whether she is achieving her intended outcomes (single-loop feedback), whether they are congruent with her strategy (double loop feedback) and whether they are congruent with her ultimate purpose (triple-loop feedback) (Reason and Torbert, 2001, p.11): “the things that frustrate me most about the organisation...I now examine myself and my role in that and if people are doing things out there I have to inquire, ‘are they reflecting me or am I reflecting the organization?’ and amend the messages I am giving out”;  
2) More able to bring the qualities of mindfulness and self-awareness into her wider actions in the world (Reason and Torbert, 2001, p. 11): she now “sits back and goes into something with an open mind and lets things emerge from that space” where “a solution emerges” which “wouldn’t have been what you would have done the first time round” (Fourth territory of experience, presencing awareness);  
3) More able to “make sense of what is going on” and more capable of relationally valid action (Torbert, 1976): she now understands how she “reacts to people in situations” and is able enact more “compassion...without having to think about fixed points and rights and wrong”. |
| Clive | First-person action inquiry on first-person practice:  
*Upstream* one-to-one coaching, martial arts  
*Downstream* mindfulness whilst exposed to different cultures and mindfulness in action. | These practices have helped Clive become:  
1) More capable of “critical subjectivity” where he can accept his knowing is from a perspective and be aware of that perspective (Reason, 1994, cited in Reason and Torbert, 2001, p. 327): “living somewhere else on a long-term basis you see you’re not part of something, you’re an outsider, therefore your position in these other ways of approaching reality creates quite a stark change to how one views oneself and one’s place in the world” which has helped his ability to “influence with integrity especially in a workplace that is multi-cultural” (Fourth/third territory);  
2) More capable of triple-loop feedback (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 11) where when bringing a new employee on-board or faced with below par employee performance he is able to “quickly reflect” and brings awareness to his intention (fourth territory) his strategy (third territory) how he needs to perform (second territory) and the outcomes he wishes to gain for his organisation’s effectiveness (first territory of experience) (Torbert et al., 2004, p. 22). |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>First-person action inquiry on first-person practice</td>
<td>These practices have helped Peter become:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{Upstream} reflection and continual questioning</td>
<td>1) More capable of bringing awareness and mindfulness to his actions in the world (Reason and Torbert, 2001, p. 11) such as: “being more in the moment” which has enabled him to “not reach definite conclusions but remain in what the Buddhist call the ‘still point’ so that you’re open to what is coming towards you” (presencing awareness);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{Downstream} as above</td>
<td>2) More capable of relationally valid action (Torbert, 1976: “reflection allows you to feel it and have it come from your heart in a way that is does not if it just comes from the head”);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second-person action inquiry on first-person practice:</td>
<td>3) Relating to Peter’s being-in-the-world such practices have engendered a shift from a “fact-based” career to a career exhibiting a deeper concern with society and sustainability which could be seen as a recalibration between his ultimate purpose (triple-loop feedback) his strategy (double-loop feedback) and his outcomes in the world (single loop feedback) (Reason and Torbert, 2001, p.11).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Action Inquiry Group on Bath MSc</td>
<td>Other benefits: open to “synchronicity” and “other things happening” and being able to ask “interesting questions”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By taking an inquiring approach to their own lives and becoming more conscious of their effects in the outside world while acting (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 11) it is clear that the research participants have enhanced their “being-in-the-world” (ibid) actualizing enhanced “sense-making”, ability to “deal with complexity”, capacity to “be in the moment”, openness “to other things happening, increased “resilience” and capacity to lead others.

In addition, they have limited forms of destructive action on experience (Laing, 1976, pp. 25-7 cited in Reason and Bradbury) such as “destructive patterns”, disowned archetypes (“the Queen”), the fear of being “quite young” in a senior role and “never being in the moment”. Indeed, all research participants cited their practice of first-person action inquiry as being a critical variable in their personal success and career progression with many attributing some of their organisation’s or departmental successes, of which most have become a leader in their field, as originating from their taking an inquiring approach to
their lives to improve their practice of leadership and ability to deal with challenging situations.

Furthermore, the characteristics articulated in research participants’ accounts of the effects of their first-person action inquiries appear to resonate with the latter stage post-conventional action-logics as delineated by Torbert et al. (2004) such as the individualist and strategist stages: these leaders are more open to double-loop feedback, are able to combine professional and personal goals, are less apt to judge, are influenced by listening and finding patterns, are more capable of leading others, are starting to notice their own shadow and have increased their capacity for self awareness. These capacities could be seen as significantly enabled by their practice of first-person action inquiry.

However, although research participants seemed to touch on some of the four territories of experience and had undoubtedly at times been able to generate triple-loop feedback/learning it appeared that these instances were more often than not generated by “off-line” inquiry with subsequent informed action rather than “on-line” in the very moment of acting inquiry where any one of the territories could be refined in real-time (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 11; Reason & McArdle, 2006, p. 133; Torbert & Taylor, 2008, p. 2).

Such an “on-line” capacity would be emblematic of the Alchemist action-logic and seemingly requisite in generating effective and timely actions; yet even through “off-line” inquiry and subsequent action, research participants were still able to generate actions that were more effective than before. This raised the question as to why action inquiry works even if it is not a purist action inquiry in the moment? To this question, Bill Torbert responded that:

...action inquiry works even if it is not a purist moment-to-moment awareness because it is what we are doing anyway. We are all acting and inquiring though we are not very often aware of ourselves doing so. When we get fired from the job we decide we had better inquire, “What went wrong?” – It would have been better if we had started the inquiry earlier probably.
So the question is how good we are at doing it? As developmental theory tell us, most of us try to avoid this kind of explicit inquiry into the effects of our actions for quite a while; we try to make do with cultural norms that we’ve learned, one of which is in company we don’t tend to inquire into what’s going on. So, it takes special experiences and special initiatives to learn the pure forms of action inquiry. In the end, what we’re trying to do is act in a timely fashion and that’s the most difficult things anyone could possibly learn and one could never learn it for moments in the future – one has to be attuned and doing research and inquiry in those moments in order to see whether what one is doing is actually addressing the deepest issues in an effective way. It works a little bit anyway and it works better the closer and closer we get to really asking ‘what is timely?’ but that’s a very difficult inquiry which we only learn gradually over our lifetime, if at all.

Other consultants interviewed also echoed this view revealing that the practice of action inquiry is a “life-long process” of continued deepening and refinement, moreover, that it requires careful attunement to a client’s/leader’s level of development in order to engage them in an appropriate level of action inquiry to facilitate their process of being more conscious of their actions in the world (see Table 7 overleaf).

Finally, Torbert et al. (2004, p. 18) indicate that people tend to accept their current action-logic as their very identity and “to accept double-loop feedback can feel equivalent to losing our identity” which people tend to resist unless they “feel a deeper spiritual presence” that allows them to “experience the actual exchange among the four territories of experience”. Indeed, research participants reported the effects of double-loop feedback, where their normal ways of being were challenged as, “scary”, “destabilizing”, “like a near death experience” and for one participant making her “cry for around a fortnight”. It would seem that some of the spiritual practices such as “meditation” that some of the participants engaged in may have helped them integrate the insights of their action inquiries and their ability to more fully embrace the four territories of experience.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consultant</th>
<th>Views</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Julia (Director at Harthill Consulting) | “you start where the person is and honour that...so what the Leadership development framework gives us is a way of understanding where a person’s meaning making might be...some people are not seeking to transform and that must be held lightly and with integrity because transformations are difficult and take time and are not everyone’s cup of tea”  
“an awful lot of people primarily inhabit their head and that’s a huge systemic global issue that we give primacy to...So I try to get people more grounded in their body and get in touch with something that is more humble and has a different kind of wisdom in it and that is very hard”  
“for all of us, living a life of inquiry is hugely demanding” |
| Dianne (Director at Harthill Consulting) | “I think there are a lot of post-conventional people who don’t pursue the discipline of inquiry and unless they actually learn the skill of inquiry, they don’t actually see systems or what’s happening in the room or in the moment. I feel a lot of people talk about inquiry but I do not think they really know what it means. It’s a really difficult thing to do”  
“so I teach people how to journal and get them to journal”  
“so I think we’re about gradually developing leaders who are wise and realistic” |
| Caroline (Associate at Harthill Consulting) | “so I find myself at the moment slowing the whole process right down so people are able to get under the skin of inquiry and understand why it might be important”  
“I think it is a tall order to expect people to do it in the moment because often people can’t remember. So I think there is a discipline under action inquiry – that if people are committed to developing skill in action inquiry, they have to be committed to some kind of writing” |

Table 7: Consultants’ views on the difficulties of action inquiry
Research Participants’ Interactive Effectiveness and Organisational Outcomes

Common Theme: At an interactive level, most research participants leadership practice has been enhanced by more aware speaking-and-listening-to-others (second-person action inquiry). Through such second-person action inquiry, leaders have not only enhanced their own first-person development (second-person action inquiry on first-person practice) but also increased their effectiveness in conversations and meetings and in inquiry with external groups (second-person action inquiry into third-person practice) through which they have gained insights into the future sustainability of their organisations.

As alluded to in the previous section and in more detail in the “mini-case studies” (Appendix A), leaders enhanced their own first person inquiries by speaking, listening and inquiring with others whether in one-to-one coaching or psychotherapy or in second-person action inquiry groups through which they have been able to receive feedback and formulate their own enhanced theory of action and quality of being-in-the-world (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.18).

In addition, it is clear that speaking-and-listening-to-others in second-person action inquiry groups that begin to interweave issues of first-, second- and third-person practice has helped these leaders engage in conversations and meetings that depart from habitual repetitive rituals that are unresponsive to intersubjective realities to dialogues that are more insightful and effective that bridge both the known and unknown (Torbert, 2001, p.254) that have not only their enhanced being-in-the-world (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.18) but also fostered feedback/learning that they could incorporate into leading their organisation’s future plans for sustainability (Torbert et al, 2004, p. 7).

Table 8 overleaf shows some of the benefits these leaders have realized by practicing various forms of second-person action inquiry:
### Table 8: Benefits realised by leaders through second person action inquiry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>“talking to much”</td>
<td>Second-person action inquiry into first- and second-person practice in</td>
<td>From this learning, Zara was able to enact a transformational dialogue between the known and unknown (Torbert, 2001, p. 254) with IPOS MORI into a series of issues for the university relating to rankings. Rather than as usual “taking control” and “saying “right you lot need to understand”, Zara “listened”, read the dynamic of the situation and waited for the “Aha...here’s the right moment” and then explained how the issue of the change in rankings “really matter to the university”. The effect was that she was able to “change the dynamic of the meeting...and change their attitude quite dramatically”.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“confrontational conversation”</td>
<td>“Senior Women on the Move” into “women in leadership archetypes” and</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women in management</td>
<td>exploration of the “Queen” archetype: about “not being too noisy...rather assuming your power and then occasionally saying something”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zara (Cont.)</td>
<td>21st Century Education</td>
<td>Second-person action inquiry into second- and third-person practice in</td>
<td>Through speaking, listening and inquiring with others where there is “huge diversity”, Lesley has been able to bring the insights to bear on how she leads and organises her organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>group of 21 people from diverse backgrounds, inquiring at a “global</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>level”, “national level” and “institutional level” and “individual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>level” into “how to improve the quality of leadership in higher education”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesley</td>
<td>“management of the organisation”</td>
<td>Second-person action inquiry into second- and third-person practice with</td>
<td>Through speaking, listening and inquiring with others where there is “huge diversity”, Lesley has been able to bring the insights to bear on how she leads and organises her organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>a range of Chief Execs. They inquire into issues such as “problems</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>with their senior teams” and “how we would like [our] organisation to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>look like”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additionally, it could be inferred that leaders’ proclivity to engage in deeper questions and mutual inquiry relating to the sustainability of their organisations may hinge on their capacity to absorb paradigm shifting ways of thinking about the role of their particular organisation, which may be more readily facilitated by their taking an inquiring approach to their own lives and developing more elegant ways of sense-making and integrity of being as posited by Torbert’s (2004) later action-logics. For example, Peter’s account of facilitating a second-person action inquiry (into third-person practice) group of fifteen managing partners from top legal firms in an inquiry into what they could do as legal firms in terms of CSR, hit an obstacle for most participants as the questioning got deeper and deeper. In the first cycle of action and reflection, Peter asked them, “What do you think you can do?” and received answers “like reducing carbon and cycling to work etc. etc.”. For the second cycle Peter asked them, “What can you do as a legal firm that no one else can do?” and received answers like “pro-bono work” and “advising people like charities”. For the third cycle Peter led them to inquire into, “When giving advice what can you do in the paying situation to answer the CSR 2.0 question?” to which one member responded, “Why don’t we give advice that works better over the long-term?”. However, Peter described the effect of this depth of inquiry as “creating a storm of protest with many partners saying ‘we can’t do that!’” and that it was the “right time for that individual but not the other partners”.


Transformation in Research Participants’ Teams

Common Theme: At a team level, the leadership practice of research participants’ senior management teams has been enhanced through second-person action inquiry groups where they have been able to examine their first-person realities, understand team dysfunction, realize a change in strategy and achieve better outcomes (double-loop feedback/learning) and generate greater mutuality.

With the help of “skilled facilitators” from Harthill Consulting, research participants aimed to increase effectiveness in their senior management teams through second-person action inquiry groups pertaining to individual leadership development, team cohesion as well as issues of concern to their organisations. Specifically, research participants highlighted the following team issues detailed in Table 9 below:

Table 9: Team issues faced prior to intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Team Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Paul   | “so lots of intellectually bright people with high IQ levels but at the emotional intelligence level quite variable and their intuitive intelligence quite variable too – there was a dysfunctional element there”  
“low level skills in questioning and inquiry”  
“going off in separate directions”  
Lack of sustainable transfer of interpersonal “skills” so that teams can inquire and “transform processes themselves” |
| Zara   | Lack of “capacity for introspection...self-knowledge...and vulnerability”  
The need for the team to “work in a completely integrated way” in teams that are “pitching to different stakeholders” |
| Lesley | The need for teams to move “into postconventional thinking because the sort of problems we will be facing in the future are ever more complex and you simply can’t...you are not going to get there if you can’t use more sophisticated approaches”  
“blame culture” |
Through a practice of second-person action inquiry, research participants reported the following beneficial effects in their senior management teams, detailed in Table 10 below and overleaf:

**Table 10: Effects of second person action inquiry in teams**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Team Practices</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>1) Second-person action inquiry workshops into “how to create vulnerability based on trust in teams?” using the four player model (mover, follower, opposer and bystander: Kantor &amp; Lehr, 1974), analogous to the four parts of speech (Torbert, 2004, p.28), in a team facing dysfunction and lack of mutuality.</td>
<td>“electric” enabled “them to make sense of why the dynamic in their team was stuck” and they “had a way of framing it and getting the energy going”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>2) Second-person action inquiry into third-person practice, groups made up of “software engineers”, “[telecommunications company] folk” and a team from “a key Indian supplier” as well as mini in house communities of inquiry, inquiring into an issue of mutual concern (Torbert &amp; Reason, 2001, p.12): “How to make systems thinking work?”.</td>
<td>Even though in their early stages these groups have delivered “outstanding” results and are helping execs “recreate another view/perspective on the world”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>1) Senior Management Team engaged in “leadership training” and second-person “action inquiry sets”.</td>
<td>“self-reflective” team members, more “honesty and openness”, ability to “work through” personal differences and a “greater sense of mutuality” where team members can more readily “integrate” complex marketing issues.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“multi-award winning” department.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Team Practice</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesley</td>
<td>1) Second-person action inquiry/speaking-and-listening-to-others (Torbert, 2001, p. 253): an Assistant Chief sits down with all the middle managers...looks at it [offender reoffending] to ascertain what learning points can be drawn out. Then there is a discussion” for “further learning”</td>
<td>“allowed real issues to surface”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Change in strategy (double-loop learning) which has helped the probation trust enter the “top four” in the rankings in terms of performance.

To provide greater clarity as to how “skilled facilitators” begin to develop transformation in senior management teams, I asked Caroline, an Associate Consultant at Harthill whose area of expertise is helping senior teams “think together” to develop and deliver enhanced performance, how she works with senior teams? She responded that she explains “action inquiry as three levels: about the me, the us and the them...which is quite simple for people to grasp”. She then draws a “VENN” diagram (see Figure 5 below) with “three circles...so the ME, the US, the THEM” and explains that the “space in the middle is happening simultaneously so when your are in your excellent leadership, living in that moment, you are inquiring into the ME, the US and the THEM”.

**Figure 5: Three Levels of Action Inquiry**

![Three Levels of Action Inquiry Diagram](image)

X =Place of Excellent Leadership
She also described how she likes to “mix the groups up with lots of people we know are in conflict and have very different views to go for maximum difference where they are really going to rub up against each other...to create news, variety, creativity and opportunity that arises from difference itself”.

Caroline gave three examples of how she helps senior teams to inquire through second-person action inquiry. The first related to a team where there was initially “a lot of resistance” with participants asking questions such as “Why should I be looking at myself? What relevance does that have?” Caroline described the inquiry as follows:

...they were incredibly bright people. Ambitious, successful, young, apprentice type characters. One of them came in with her leadership challenge (there were six in the group) and in true apprentice style, she had the whole thing mapped out, “This is how it’s going to be. This is how I’m going to do it”...talk, talk, talk. As this happened all I did was to pay attention to my responses to the experience and how I was receiving this person. The only thing that came to mind was “might it be helpful if you stop talking for a minute so that we call all process?” So I got the group to sit for a few minutes in silence (and two minutes of silence in a group like this is something, deeply heavenly spiritual). Then I turned back to this person and said, “My question is...I am really curious about where your energy comes from? However, I don’t want you to tell me the answer, I would like to invite you to be still and silent and discover for yourself”. Well, in a minute, she was in floods of tears and she keeps telling me now, even after four months, that she did not know what happened to her but something shifted that she could not put words to.

The second related to how she gets teams to practice both first- and second-person action inquiry:

...so in the first-person I get them to focus on a shortcoming in themselves, for example, “I am an impatient leader”. So then, we create an experiment around not being an impatient leader... “Why don’t you do impatience a bit more? (that’s paradoxical intention)...see what happens when you play with that a bit” and we commit to that. Then in the second-person, I use the four-player
tool and get them to sit in a meeting and tick off the pattern going on in the group. Then next week we can talk about what they have tried.

The third related to getting how she gets teams to inquire together into their first-person realities by getting “very corporate people” to “bring a piece of writing about something in their recent past life which had informed their meaning making”. Caroline reflected that with one team she was “absolutely gobsmacked at what they brought back and discussed in the next meeting” and that the team “loved” the work.

As such, it is clear that speaking, listening and inquiring with others (second-person action inquiry) has helped these leaders generate feedback that has enhanced their being-in-the-word (their first-person or me) (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.18); understand dysfunctional team “dynamics”, generate “a greater sense of mutuality”, realize a change in strategy (double loop feedback/learning) and thus achieve better outcomes (their second-person or us); and, gain deeper insights for their organisation’s future effectiveness as in the example Paul gave of third-persons inquiring into “how to make systems thinking work?” (their third-person or them).

With reference to team transformation and second-person action inquiry groups, a crucial point raised by Caroline was that “to have any profound transformative effect you are going to need a very skilled facilitator”. Indeed, Caroline has “twenty years of experience working with groups” from previous work as a clinical psychologist and family therapist and she believes that the “deepest” transformative work “happens in groups”. Furthermore, she felt that in corporate settings where “the world therapy is totally taboo”, she sees her works to transform individuals and teams as “the accumulation of light touches”.

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Transformation in Research Participants’ Organisations

Common Theme: At an organisational level, the qualities of first- and second-person action inquiry have not permeated the organisations researched (third-person action inquiry) owing to challenges in changing conventional mindsets, dominator/patriarchal hierarchies, employee capability and larger systemic restrictions.

As discussed in the previous sections, research participants and their senior management teams have begun to gain beneficial leadership outcomes from interweaving different forms of action inquiry in both their individual practice and that of their teams. However, engendering the qualities of first- and second-person action inquiry across their organisations, through which real capacity to learn and meet complex operating environments and ultimately realize a more sustainable acting system (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 15) where members at Board level through to lower management positions create “their own knowing-in-action in collaboration with others” to enhance their organisation’s being-in-the-world (Torbert et al. 2004, p. 59) and more readily serve third parties futures (Torbert, 1999, p. 191) has proved more difficult.

Although it is important to note that the organisations examined in this research, through the accounts of leaders in their organisations, have only been engaging in action inquiry either on a small scale relative to the whole organisational size and/or for a relatively short period of time (15 months to three years), interesting insights as to difficulties for the future practice of action inquiry in organisations were reported.

Table 11 overleaf details the various difficulties each leader faced and the key themes:
Table 11: Difficulties reported by leaders trying to implement action inquiry in their organisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Difficulties</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>“you’ve got to get over and appreciate the life-time nature of it…and the nature of corporate performance tends to be quarter by quarter”</td>
<td>Long term practice requirements of action inquiry does not fit with short term market structure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“people are quick to blame if it doesn’t work quickly”</td>
<td>Difficult to change organisational culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The “Plan and Build Team” took until “month six before they got their first question out…part of the difficulty is ‘it’s not instant folks’, its going to take time”</td>
<td>Life term practice requirements</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“organisations want data to prove the effects of action inquiry and you can’t do it”</td>
<td>Difficult to quantify the effects in the short term and lack of examples of organisations who have gone through such transformation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>With reference to the Leadership Development framework, “when they see a scale and see the post-conventional up here…and many of our leaders are conventional…it is almost an affront to people”</td>
<td>Reluctance to accept the Leadership Development framework and a developmental perspective</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“it would make action inquiry’s path much easier if you had the CEO who said to his HR Director ‘this stuff is great, for the longer term I’d like to see us set up practice where people regularly inquire into their own work, the team’s work and the work of this organisation”</td>
<td>Lack of appreciation of action inquiry at the highest levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It “triggered the immune system of the business”</td>
<td>Difficulty in overcoming measurement based culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zara</strong></td>
<td>Chief “runs the organisation like a benign dictator and does not get the need for development”. She cannot have “straight conversations with him” and it is “one man’s vision of how things should be”</td>
<td>Lack of appreciation of action inquiry at the highest levels</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Action inquiry “not reflected across the whole organisation. I think the culture of this department is quite different from the culture of the institution”</td>
<td>Difficult to change organisational culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lesley</strong></td>
<td>With reference to the Leadership Development Framework, “quite a lot of anxiety about those coming lower down in the profile” with some who “rubbished it”</td>
<td>Reluctance to accept the Leadership Development framework at a developmental perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Future systemic changes where her “subsequent replacement will be on a three year contract basis” which will “limit the organisational change programme” and be “much more focused on achievement and measurements”</td>
<td>Systemic, short term structures will restrict leaders ability to enact long term transformational change programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clive</strong></td>
<td>“getting people to accept it, is a leap of faith..”</td>
<td>Difficult to get people to understand why action inquiry is important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“where in team building exercises people inquired into their developmental levels, it jarred. People did not like it. They always want to be a couple of steps higher...ran into opposition and immediately turned people off and was therefore difficult to get in”</td>
<td>Reluctance to accept the Leadership Development framework and a developmental perspective</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“it was limited as people in the organisation did not have the skill or capabilities to work in that way”</td>
<td>Lack of personal capacity to inquire</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“when your success is measured by profit and staff retention, why change?...it is difficult to take the time and effort to practice in a faced paced business world so driven by external events”</td>
<td>Difficult to change organisational culture and people amidst profit and short term orientations</td>
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In response to the themes as detailed in Table 11, Bill Torbert and consultants at Harthill Consulting expressed the following views about organisational transformation through action inquiry:

**Organisational transformations through action inquiry are rare, difficult and often encumbered by current conventional mindsets and market structures. They are perhaps better actualized in small companies and with stewardship at CEO or Board Level by individuals at higher action-logics or in structures that are able to support human development.**

Bill Torbert reflected that “most examples in the action inquiry books are of real transformations happening in small companies” and that he could not “claim to know how to change a Fortune 500 company”. Furthermore, he revealed that he had only witnessed deep transformation “in very special moments in relatively special organisations”. He gave an example of such an organisation, Trillium Asset Management, where he served on the Board and had consulted to that had “relatively deeply taken action inquiry into their DNA”.¹ Trillium Asset Management:

...for a long time was a sort of spoiled brat employee business. The employees were part of the business but didn’t take high levels of responsibility – they were more like teenagers complaining that things weren’t working quite the way they wanted and they actually had more power than employees typically had... it came down to a raw honesty about what was going on, a careful confrontation around the issues and a commitment to a real change which made a very big difference in the next years of the organisation.

Such honesty and inquiry was enacted throughout the organisation under the stewardship of then CEO, Joan Bravaira, who managed to run “the organisation since 1982 without a loss every quarter”. However, after “she tragically died” her successors “weren’t able to keep the organisations together”. As such, Bill Torbert felt that although through the

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¹ Trillium Asset Management, as the first socially responsible investment advisor has been questioning the primacy of capitalist short-term-ism and as a worker-owned enterprise it has been based on a different political structure than stock-market-shareholder-capitalism
practice of action inquiry “people are actually better at leading themselves that they might have been before”:

...there is a quality that an individual leader may have in an organisation and even though the organisation may get permeated by that spirit during that persons time there, it may not have taken root enough in anyone else, or in the whole situation, to really survive the death of a late action-logic leader. It is one of the great paradoxes of development that it takes even more sophisticated leadership to lead in a non-unilateral way.

Responding to the notion that some individuals and organisations do not appreciate the need to change, he reflected:

...my principle teacher Chris Argyris, who was both a researcher, consultant and teacher was very clear about the need to give up jobs in certain instances and gave some very good stories about how he got organisations to change by not working with them...and by explaining to them why he did not believe they were ready to really work seriously in a transformation sense, he got them to think differently about it for the first time.

In addition, responding to the notion that capitalist market structures do not provide for fertile ground for action inquiry, he suggested:

Almost all of the global way of life right now is based on the notion that we can know things and that knowledge is power and the typical inquiry is just at the front end of that knowledge and all the early developmental action-logics are ones that take their own structure for granted and don’t inquire into it and this is part of how humans are wired for evolution...we grow up through a series of answers...and until, instead of being something you throw away after you have gotten your answer, your answers become better and better at containing the next question within, deep inquiry will not happen...and that rarely happens as capital markets and contractual organisations are all meant to limit liability, limit commitment and limit the degree of inquiry that you really need to do...markets are great a single-loop inquiry but they are no better than any other human structure at double- or triple-loop inquiry.
Julia (Director at Harthill Consulting) offered a further perspective on how difficult it is for action inquiry to gain traction amidst Boards that are unable to appreciate its value and are subservient to short-termist markets structures.

Julia worked with a particular leader through a series of senior roles and promotions in different organisations both coaching her individually working with her teams. One senior role this leader had was at a large insurance company where through action inquiry, Julia and Harthill Consulting helped her:

...fulfil her visions of how she wanted the part of the organisation she was responsible for to be working. So she began to facilitate organisational change where the insurance company was one first to be supportive towards eco-cars, offering better premiums; one of the first to look at whether you might provide different kinds of premiums for women drivers. She was always looking for what could be done that meant her vision of insurance, which was being something that supports people rather than drains their resources, was actualized, which is a very different perspective on insurance that a lot of people would hold. That was always the kind of thing she was looking for, for her and for her team and organisation.

Subsequently, this leader got a “Chief Executive Role at another UK Insurer”, at which time she had “transformed from an ‘Expert’ to a ‘Strategist’” action-logic, where she:

...really went for a real vision of an organisation that shifted the whole way insurance was looked at. So the organisation-wide process was given the name “Love the Customer” and her whole orientation was about what you did to provide insurance and instil processes and services that come from that place of “Love the Customer” rather than “what we can screw out of the customer”.

However, the vision fell down as the other Board members, who were “achievers did not like it”. The “wider Group was about making money and they didn’t trust that her vision would hold and make money even though there were times when she was able to show it was doing exactly that – they didn’t trust it as a bigger strategy.” As such, this leader felt she had to move on.
Julia highlighted this dynamic as a real issue for action inquiry gaining traction in the corporate market place as “its really hard to shift that fundamental, capitalist mindset”.

Reflecting on the difficulties of the requirements of data regarding action inquiry for senior figures in organisations, Caroline (Associate at Harthill Consulting) stated that:

The difficulty is, is that there is this insistence on measurement in organisations. I do not even think the commissioning clients want to ask for it because most of them have got that they are entering a new territory, but they have to because they have people above them saying, “How do you know this will be successful?”

With reference to the issues of peoples’ capacity in organisations to engage with action inquiry, Caroline highlighted the fact that:

The trouble is, the people that begin to think about the world and their role in it more deeply, often choose not to be in organisations. A lot of people are very wedded to just making money, to security and to the values and norms we have all created together.

Drawing on these insights and those of research participants, it is clear that whilst leaders have broached action inquiry with others into systemic issues (second-person action inquiry into third-person practice), the form of third-person action inquiry whereby the qualities of different forms of action inquiry are more reflected across the organisation is difficult to achieve.

Indeed, it would appear that research participants of the present study could be considered mavericks in their organisations who have developed their own practice of action inquiry over many years and have therefore been able to see its applicability and benefits in helping others be capable of more dynamics ways of being, knowing, interacting and learning about the systems in which they find themselves to meet complex challenges.

However, at whatever level these leaders find themselves in their organisations, deeply embedded western epistemology, ontology and short-termist values that permeate society and hence the market structures and cultural embedding of those above them and below
them, make it very difficult to actualize significant organisational changes. As in the example from Julia (Director at Harthill Consulting), the Chief Executive of a large insurance firm had to move on as her values and vision did not fit with the large social aggregates and several of the research participants indicated that they felt “frustrated” with the inability to shift the ways in which their organisations operate and as a result of the incongruity between their transformation and that of the organisation, felt a call to move on.

Caroline (Associate at Harthill Consulting) echoed this difficulty, where she finds people in her groups “are becoming more and more developed but have to go back into contexts where this work isn’t the norm” and Julia (Director at Harthill Consulting) who is now inquiring into “how do we [Harthill Consulting] spread the impact of action inquiry as a practice that means that people are able to really support themselves and be with others in ways that mean they are manifesting themselves and their purposes in the world really well?”. Furthermore, Bill Torbert revealed that at present he has:

...sort of retired from that work because I believe that the only structures that are potentially strong enough to deeply support human development and more timely action are friendships. So now I’m interested in supporting people in developmental friendships because I think that is, those are the more likely vehicles for double and triple-loop learning than contract-based organisations.

**Issues relating to the Leadership Development Framework (LDF)**

Bill Torbert’s response to the lack of acceptance of the LDF in organisations was that it is a “definite difficulty” and a “reason not to use it throughout the organisation in the first instance” but rather “with the senior management who really have responsibility for the organisations as whole”. He added:

They do of course hate it even more if they come out low but...they way I have done it, is to be able to work with them very closely, be in meetings with them, be able to demonstrated it to them via 360 degree type data that they are having the kind of impact the LDF predicts. So to worry about it from the point of view of whether it is low of high is immaterial – the issue is to see if they can
change the impact they are having and if they want to change to impact they are having?

Offering another perspective, Caroline (Associate at Harthill Consulting) described how she likes to explain it as follows:

- It is more really more like a tightly enfolded flower and you know, sometimes a flower opens some of its petals and some parts are quite closed...its not a linear progression but it is sometimes understood as so.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter has presented an analysis of the data that emerged from the interviews with leaders and synthesized the data and issues that emerged with insights from consultants and Bill Torbert. The key findings were that action inquiry has increased leaders’ capacity to deal with complexity and their interactive effectiveness as well as helped unearth dysfunctional dynamics, inspire leadership and inquiring qualities in their teams and increased their ability to solve their own problems more skilfully. However, the findings also revealed that there are numerous difficulties in applying action inquiry throughout organisations. The following chapter discusses the implications of these findings for the future practice of leadership.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF IMPLICATIONS

The foregoing chapter presented an analysis of the common themes that emerged from leaders’ accounts of the effects of action inquiry on their individual, team’s and organisation’s transformation. It also synthesized these accounts with the views offered by consultants and Bill Torbert. The current chapter discusses the implications of the research findings for future practice of leadership.

**Action Inquiry and the implications for the future practice of leadership**

*First-person action inquiry can in part address some of the limitations that prevent leaders from effectively managing complexity*

It would appear that in order to meet situations that are ever more complex and generate both heightened effectiveness and integrity in action, 21st Century leaders would benefit from beginning to become more conscious of themselves in action.

A key first step in this process could be initiated by taking an inquiring approach to their own lives (first-person action inquiry). This inquiry could be undertaken both personally through methodologies such as journaling and awareness practices as well as through first-person inquiry in second-person group contexts, both of which could increase opportunities for single-, double- and triple-loop feedback through which leaders could gradually amend incongruities in their own purposes, framings, behaviours and effects in the world (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 18). Furthermore, although the ultimate goal would appear to be able to have the capacity for “on-line” moment-to-moment awareness, it would seem that “off-line” reflection also significantly contributes to a greater awareness of actions where leaders can be both a participant in and noticer of what is going on in their individual process and hence generate more authenticity and effectiveness in actions.

It is noteworthy that disciplined first-person action inquiry may not be for every leader as it goes against cultural norms and requires a certain courage to appreciate that there are ways of knowing other than that which is given.
A practice of second-person action inquiry can address the inherent limitations of unilateral modes of interaction and open wider fields of conversation through which more mutuality transforming and constructive engagements can be enacted:

It would appear that by honouring and engaging in second-person realities (Us/We) with more awareness (second-person action inquiry) leaders could move from exploitative or manipulative modes of interaction towards mutuality transforming and constructive engagements (Torbert, 2001, p. 254). Indeed, if leaders are locked solely in unilateral control ways of interacting they are unlikely, as interactive beings, to be able to receive valuable feedback, whether single-, double- or triple-loop, from a variety of encounters such as those that would relate to their own being-in-the-word (second-person action inquiry on first-person practice) or those that would relate to their organisation’s future sustainability (second-person action inquiry on third-person practice) or even gain the chance for a human sense of mutuality so valued by research participants. As such, it is also therefore unlikely that they will be able to generate effective, insightful and mutual learning requisite to become more resilient in ever more complex operating environments.

Furthermore, in order for leaders to have the capacity to engage in deep inquiry with others it would be crucial that they actively take an inquiring approach to their own lives or that that element is inclusive in their group interactions.

By promoting a practice of action inquiry at a senior team level leaders can increase their organisation’s ability to manage complexity

It would appear that leaders could ameliorate dysfunction and promote greater effectiveness and mutuality in their senior management teams by bringing in a “skilled facilitator” to uncover person dynamics, team dynamics and systemic dynamics through second person action inquiry groups to move participants from selfish, exploitative and manipulative modes of interaction to mutually transformative action inquiry (Torbert, 2001, p. 254). Through such practice, leaders would also be creating greater leadership capacities in their senior management teams that could contribute to the wider effectiveness of their actions (Torbert et al., 2004, p.1).
**Action inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice may be best actualized in special organisations and under special conditions**

It would seem that action inquiry can work at both the individual and team scales to increase effectiveness in dealing with complexity, presenting a new paradigm in terms of the ways in which leaders conceive of themselves, develop their capacities, interact and envisage the role of their organisations in the wider world.

However, leaders embarking on a journey of action inquiry as means to develop more sophisticated and dynamics ways of being-in-the-world may have difficulties in enabling such qualities in their organisations (especially large organisations) simply because the social and market structures at present do not support or appreciate different ways of being, knowing, interacting through which more sustainable and mutual visions might emerge.

Furthermore, leaders enacting their own first-person and second-person inquiries may also find themselves outgrowing their organisations and seeking environments more suitable or amenable to epistemological and ontological transformation. As Caroline (Associate at Harthill Consulting) ruminated with respect to her ideal 21st century leader:

> They would be able to chair meetings in an incredibly sophisticated presencing kind of way and also be able to take the decision to organise their organisation in ways that are more innovative, creative and life-enhancing. But there is something about organisations that drive out those sorts of alchemical ways of leading....

As such, it could be asserted that the new paradigm of leadership as delineated by action inquiry and as shown in this research to have had beneficial effects of individual and team transformation even at relatively early stages of implementation, where deeper issues and questions are revealed and deeper learning generated which would appear to begin respond to the needs of complex and uncertain operating environments, may be best actualized throughout organisations in the following ways:
1) Either through commitment at the highest levels of organisations (i.e. at Group, Board and CEO level) where such leaders exhibit the qualities of post-conventional thinking, have the assurance of long-term tenures and have the power, capacity and vision to not only honour economic imperatives but also to organise their organisations in ways that will promote mutually transforming leadership and learning to generate sustainability that can reverberate through the organisation. Indeed, Bill Torbert cited Warren Buffet as an archetype leader in this regard:

...his leadership style has changed radically over his lifetime and repeatedly, even though people tend to see him as so consistent in the first twenty-five years of his career as a sheer investor who basically worked alone. And now, he is the largest employer in the world with 275,000 employees in companies and although he doesn’t actually direct them, he has a mutual relationship with each of the leaders, which is all based on a covenantal relationship between them and he has created an alternative capitalism based on longer-term values and so forth rather that short-range investing values. So maybe a tag-line here would be – we need more leaders to become like Warren Buffet.

2) Or in smaller organisations or sustainable industries not so encumbered by the shackles of the capitalist agenda and contractual shareholder priority. Indeed, as Caroline (Associate at Harthill Consulting) asserted:

...we mustn’t get blinded by these huge beasts or corporations and be blinded by the fact their are lots of small organisation that we don’t see because of the shadow of business where there are small groupings of people who are running their businesses in just the ways we’re talking about and maybe that is the ecology.

And Julia:

...some organisations would not go near us with a barge pole and you could say they’re the very organisations we should be trying to work with but I am
not sure that transformation comes by trying to push water uphill...finding places where you’ve already got some elements to work with, for example in industries where there is a sustainability agenda, may make it easier to make a significant impact on sustainable organisational transformation.

3) And, with assistance of consultants at higher stage action-logics who are able to serve as guides to leaders and skilfully facilitate the development of those members at lower action-logics. Of course, this implies a departure from short-term consulting relationships that work by not making interventions sustainable to longer-term relationships that aim to transfer the skills of action inquiry so the organisation can learn and observe itself in action.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter has discussed the implications of the data analysis and synthesis for the future practice of leadership. It has offered the following insights: that action inquiry can help leaders and their senior management teams deal with complexity and that it may be best implemented in special organisations and in special situations. The following chapter offers a summary of the research findings, reflections with respect to the viability and value of action inquiry as a 21st century leadership practice and concludes with an evaluation of the efficacy of the research findings and the implications for further research.
CHAPTER 6: REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

It is incontrovertible that leaders can become more effective in their actions by practicing action inquiry. Who wouldn’t benefit from becoming more aware of their actions? Who wouldn’t benefit from becoming more aware of the unconscious patterns that drive their interactions? Who wouldn’t benefit from the ability to continually learn anew in the vividness of the moment with others and discover different ways of knowing? Similarly, which leader’s senior management team wouldn’t gain from being more aware of its dysfunctional underpinnings that affect its ability to work through problems and the fostering of more dynamic leadership skills?

Indeed, as the results of this study have shown a disciplined practice of action inquiry can deliver impressive outcomes. At an individual level, a practice of first-person action inquiry can enable a reduction in the incongruities between a leader’s purpose, thoughts, behaviours and effects in the world to facilitate an increase both in both personal effectiveness and integrity (Torbert et al., 2004, p.7). In particular, such a practice can in part address some of the limitations that prevent leaders from effectively managing complexity by revealing “destructive patterns”, engendering new ways of “sense-making” and a deeper capacity to learn and make decisions by being more “in the moment”. Furthermore, many leaders cited their career progression, departmental or organisational success as arising from their taking an action inquiry approach.

At an interactive level, a practice of second-person action inquiry can address the inherent limitations of unilateral modes of interaction and open wider fields of conversation through which more mutuality transforming and constructive engagements can be enacted (Torbert, 2001, p. 254). In particular, such a practice can help leaders become more capable of operating in complex environments in a number of ways: it can increase the capacity for beneficial and mutually suitable outcomes in conversations and meetings; through second-person action inquiry into third-person/organisational practice, deeper learning can emerge which can help leaders gain insights into ways in which their organisations can become more sustainable; and, through second-person action inquiry
into first-person practice, leaders can also deepen their own first-person practice and being-in-the-world.

Finally, the results have shown that at a team level, by promoting a practice of action inquiry in senior management teams, leaders can increase their organisation’s ability to manage complexity. In particular, as a team practice action inquiry can not only help reveal dysfunctional dynamics such as selfishness, lack of learning or failure to address what is really going but also provide a way of “working through” these limitations to promote greater effectiveness (such as a change in strategy) and constructive mutuality in action (Torbert, 2001, p. 254). In addition, it can also serve to promote greater leadership qualities senior management teams.

However, a key problem that this research aimed to address is the need for a new paradigm of leadership tools and skills for the 21st century in light of current financial, ecological, social and political complexities. Furthermore, is action inquiry a suitable approach?

As I began my research for this study, I came across the following quote from the former Czech president and playwright, Václav Havel:

> I think there are good reasons for suggesting that the modern age has ended. Today, many things indicate that we are going through a transitional period, when it seems that something is on the way out and something else is being painfully being born. It is as if something were crumbling, decaying, and exhausting itself - while something else, still indistinct, were rising from the rubble” (1994, cited in Scharmer, 2009, p. 1).

Yet, if the fabric of modernity is crumbling, decaying and exhausting itself, what might this indistinct emergent paradigm be?

In its purist forms action inquiry posits a possible germination. Through interweaving triple-loop learning/awareness across the domains first-person person phenomenology, second-person fields of dialogue and third-person organisational patterns and structures, solutions that are more sustainable and life-enhancing can be engendered.
At such a level, we are asking the deepest questions of ourselves, in our interactions and our organisations: Who am I? What is my deepest purpose? What do I really know? Who are we? How do we know what we know? How can we best work together? What is the purpose of our organisation as a living system and how can we organise it in ways that best serve our employees, our customers, our communities and the environment?

Furthermore, by way of this depth of process we are suspending answering these questions with knowledge from the past and are remaining in a not-knowing as a new state of knowledge, that is full of curiosity, passionate about learning anew and in love with discovery. Then, if answer does come we are enacting it and refining its actualization moment by moment.

However, is it likely that such depth of action inquiry where real transformation at the individual, group, organisational or institutional scales can occur and through which the deepest issues that give rise to the complex problems we now face can be ameliorated?

Indeed, Peter (CSR consultant) reflected that he has:

never succeeded or felt brave enough to get anybody doing the triple-loop
where you are asking, “Why are you doing this? What is the belief system that underlies what you’re doing”?

Correspondingly, for Caroline (Associate at Harthill Consulting):

I don’t think any organisation would commission that depth of inquiry your advocating.

In addition, as described in the study in Julia’s (Director at Harthill Consulting) example of a CEO trying to actualize a re-visioning of the way in which her insurance company offered its services which emerged from deep inquiry; the Board recoiled, it didn’t fit the capitalist agenda.

As such, although we have learnt that in fact that were all acting and inquiring and “the question is, how good are we at it?” (Torbert, interview), and that in the absence of epistemological transformation, gradual transformations through “off-line” inquiry
methodologies we can gradually build to a greater capacity for the purer forms of action inquiry; how many people, even at an “off-line” level, are willing to begin to look at themselves more deeply? In a fast paced society, how many people are willing to devote the time, life-long commitment and regular discipline for such inquiry? In organisations, how many senior teams, as in Paul’s example, are going to have the space to wait six months for their first profound question amidst the implorations of a shareholder capitalism where quarterly economic results and dividends are of the highest priority and will such a system support such gradual transformations which may take decades and may be subject to regressions and the chaos of development along the way?

Indeed, this study has shown that even the levels of sophistication and development that the leaders researched have attained, which in terms of the potential path of development could be considered formative, have been hard-won: on average these leaders have developed their capacities through nearly a decade of disciplined practice, have undergone painful challenges to their identity and have committed to a life-long practice of inquiry and development. In addition, these leaders have found themselves outgrowing their organisations either where others have failed to share in their visions or where it has been incredibly difficult to get their organisation as a whole to practice third-person action inquiry, which could be considered a critical fulcrum for truly sustainable actions.

Similarly at a macro level, would our 20,000 leaders who significantly shape the global agenda begin a life-long practice of action inquiry to increase effectiveness and integrity in their actions, to enact mutually constructive engagements and to empower people to create their own inquiries and solutions to issues pertinent to them amidst political and business expediency and challenge the very ground the stand on? As in the recent global financial crisis, rather than seek out new ways of being, knowing and interacting at the individual, organisational and systemic level, by and large, we have re-inflated the capitalist mindset through such measures as quantitative easing and given further longevity to the short-termist, self-interested and unsustainable ways of operating that have caused the problem in the first place.
As such, we may need a new paradigm of leadership skills and tools for the 21st century such as action inquiry, but perhaps collectively we are not ready and have not yet sufficiently exhausted old ways of operating whereby a new paradigm can be birthed. As Bill Torbert reflected:

I think what’s been gradually becoming clear to me over the last 10-15 years of working with these different disciplines is noticing how I’m moving away from organisations and toward peer communities and really feeling instead of asking the question how do we broadcast these ideas to the broad middle-market at Achiever, Expert and Diplomat action-logics...that the marketing ought to go out to the Strategist and Alchemists – they’re the people who are more interesting in inquiry to being with, are a little more detached from the economic paradigm altogether as dominant...and are the ones most likely to realise that their time is, in fact, in their control.

Therefore, until the next and arguably bigger economic crisis where change will be unavoidable, the enactment of action inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice may find its most fertile ground with special leaders who have the power to enact more mutual and sustainable visions, in smaller organisations and those that already have a sustainable agenda more able to support transformation without the encumbrance of current market ideology or simply in “mini-communities of inquiry” as in Bill Torbert’s presentation of friendships of inquiry as more viable crucibles for transformation. Indeed, such vehicles may provide viable sites for Havel’s yet indistinct arisings “from the rubble”.

**Delimitations, Limitations, Effects of the Action Research Design and Implications for Further Research**

A practical delimitation of this research is the fact that although individuals participating in the research have engaged with action inquiry at a personal level for significant periods of time, the practice of action inquiry throughout their organisations was either limited or was in a fledgling stage. In addition, the organisations studied in the research represent a very small sample of those that practice action inquiry and is therefore less that one would
wish to optimally rely on for validity. However, by employing an action research design, whereby the data and issues that emerged from their interviews with regards to action inquiry were brought into subsequent questioning with consultants who had greater experience of action inquiry, the effect of this delimitation was somewhat ameliorated.

One of the limitations of the current research is that owing to the short time allocated to complete this project as well as the busy lives of research participants, they were unable to review to accounts they provided although in interviews effort was made to ensure their position was being accurately reflected. In addition, the study does not represent a longitudinal study of the effects of action inquiry on individual, team and organisational transformation which would have provided more validity and a better exemplum of action research.

As two of the organisations in this study, the telecommunications company and the probation trust, are continuing with a programme of organisational change through action inquiry, longitudinal research into the effects of action inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice on individual, team and organisational transformation would be valuable. Especially, in the case of the telecommunications company. In Rooke and Torbert’s (1998) four year study of organisational transformation through action inquiry, none of the organisations represented Fortune 500 companies. In contrast, the telecommunications company researched in this study could be considered akin to a Fortune 500 company, and a longitudinal study could contribute to the findings of both Rooke and Torbert’s (1998) and the current study by providing valuable insights into how large organisations might change amidst the current capitalist mindset.

Of course, the overriding implications of this study for further research, is that we all begin to conduct our own research in action in the midst of our daily lives, on ourselves, with others and with respect the wider world through which more effective outcomes can be realized. As Arthur Miller wrote:

> There is hardly a week that passes when I don’t ask the unanswerable question: what am I now convinced of that will turn out to be ridiculous? And
yet one can’t forever stand on the shore; at some point, filled with indecision, scepticism, reservation and doubt, you either jump in or concede that life is forever elsewhere.
Paul is Head of Leadership and Talent Development at a large telecommunications company in the UK. He has 15 years experience in leadership and personal and organisational transformation. Schooled in many of the classic change and transformation methodologies at a range of prominent consulting houses, he found that none of these methodologies fostered sustainable transformation as, “...once you took the consultants out it all fell apart and business went back to some other pattern”.

In searching for a more sustainable approach to change and transformation, Paul came across action inquiry eight years ago and has been “slowly developing his practice and expertise in it ever since”.

A cornerstone of Paul’s practice is taking an inquiring approach to his own life (first-person action inquiry) which he most prominently undertakes through a discipline of “daily journaling” as well as “traditional meditative practices...from Eastern traditions” such as “mindfulness” and “getting out into nature” to “reconnect” and “re-energise”. Paul describes the effects of his personal practice as helping him:

make sense of all that was going on as I inquired on three different levels [me, us and them] and it has helped give me perspective and keep me sane as well as when you write it down, you’re able to let is go as well.

see more clearly the system at work, so rather than being caught in your own individual actions or those of the immediate people around you, you’re able to see the patterns over time and that’s been really important for me. It has been important in identifying my own patterns...the helpful ones and the destructive ones I have, and also in seeing those patterns as part of the teams I’m in, as part of the HR function I’m in and part of being in [telecommunications company] and of being in society. It helps you to see all that and begin to start to see all those things. For me it is a way of removing blindness that I would have, if I didn’t have this practice. It gives you the opportunity to see more clearly and help you remain resilient and keep on.
change from being a go-getter achiever to realizing there are many roles to play: one of them is earning money and the other is a member of a family and society and I’ve changed as a result, I’m not longer just a management consultant out to go get stuff. Therefore, it is not longer just about me; it is about me, us and the wider society

Paul, in association with Harthill Consulting, began to introduce action inquiry to his organisation in early 2009 to enable “organisational transformation to take its next iteration”. He currently uses the approach with twenty people at senior management level through to managing director level. This intervention was undertaken in response to a series of failed external consulting interventions that came with a “single-loop approach” and consultants who “make their money by making it not sustainable” and the need to help executives that were dealing with “great levels of complexity and ambiguity”, who had found their “path to success to date was no longer getting the results they wanted” and had come to “a place of crisis where their winning formula was broken”.

Paul described several instances of action inquiry at the team level (second-person action inquiry) and their effects. One example of second-person action inquiry referred to a president and his reports who are responsible for upgrading the broadband network in the UK to superfast broadband and were facing serious “team dynamic issues”:

so lots of intellectually bright people with high IQ levels off the scale (we hire a lot of people like that) but at the emotional intelligence level quite variable and their intuitive intelligence very variable too – there was a dysfunctional element there.

In particular, with reference to rolling out a specific superfast broadband innovation that is a big part of the organisation’s future:

the person who was developing the proposition for [the innovative technology] was different to the person who was rolling out our service in that area and the two were going off in separate directions, doing very different things and you couldn’t actually join the two up; you would want the service proposition and the actual service to be the same. It got down to both were standing their
ground. It was a breakdown in their ability to ask the right questions and to inquire and they both had very low-level skills in questioning and inquiry.

Owing to this breakdown, the president who had read “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team” (Lencioni, 2002), wanted to explore one element of the five dysfunctions - “How to create vulnerability based trust in teams?” - so, Paul, alongside consultants at Harthill Consulting, built a team action inquiry into how they did vulnerability trust in their team, where they “introduced the four player model” (an approach to team learning whereby effective conversations, balance and higher performance can be created by honouring the unspoken needs of the team and the situation. The approach requires four roles to be enacted: the mover – someone to initiate ideas and give direction; the follower – someone to complete what is said and support what is happening; the opposer - someone to challenge what is said to facilitate correction; and, the bystander- someone to listen and provide perspective to what is happening (Kantor & Lehr, 1974). The mover and opposer are forms of advocacy and the follower and bystander forms of inquiry and correlate to Torbert’s (2001) “Four parts of speech”: framing, advocating, illustrating and inquiry). Paul described the effect of this action inquiry at a team level as:

electric...the board loved the work we did, they hadn’t seen anything quite like it and it really helped them make sense of why the dynamic in their team was stuck and suddenly they had a way of framing it and getting the energy going.

As part of a long-term development process to help the team become more “skilled in dealing with issues” and “develop those questioning and inquiry skills”, the team will continue to meet in a series of action inquiry workshops.

Another example Paul provided was of second-person action inquiry into third-person practice. Five years ago, in an area that was experiencing “the lowest network reliability in the UK”, the hundred engineers working in the area were given “expert support to organise themselves on a systems thinking basis...and much more responsibility for how they delivered their work”. So “rather than give them four jobs a day, we said you won’t have a target, you do what’s needed to get it right for the customer”. Paul described the results as:
amazing...employee engagement rose 30%, sickness absence when down 80%...it had the highest stability for network stability, cost per line went down...the engineers loved it...they actually repaired the network in the way it was supposed to be repaired so we got a higher resilience in the telephone and broadband network and guess what? Customer complaints went down.

Nevertheless, despite these results Paul mentioned that they “couldn’t bring it into the wider organisation because we triggered the immune system of the business”:

what we found was the purpose in the rest of [the telecommunications company] was make your numbers, make your budget, make your targets, whereas the purpose for these engineers was to do what is right by the customer. So when we measured them against the classic [telecommunications company] measures, it didn’t work. So it gives incredible stuff but doesn’t fit the old model; one had 130,000 people organised in one way, the other had 100 people organisation in the other – so which do you think won?

However now, Paul, in association Harthill Consulting, is reintroducing this systems approach in “two pilots running in projects in key products” where “this time we’re using action inquiry in a couple of ways at multiple levels”. The first is with a “team of software engineers”, some “[telecommunications company] folk” and a team from a “key Indian supplier”. Here, they are using action inquiry to inquire into “how to make systems thinking work for them?” and to “learn lessons about we can make this more applicable in [telecommunications company]. Secondly, they have started a community of practice where:

...we are using principles of sense making in order to make this community work. So if the community is significant for you and you want to be part of it you can join. It’s not who you are or what your position is...What we want to develop in them over time is action inquiry in order to make systems thinking stick...so they’ve got a skill and expertise in it when they’ve got a big business problem to solve.
Even at this early experimental stage with action inquiry, “at a team level and organisational community level”, Paul described the results that are coming in as “astounding” and hopes that leaders will say, “well it's been a few years in the making but action inquiry really helped me become the leader I am and helped this Business Unit to perform.”

Pointing out the overall benefits of action inquiry, Paul said:

People tend to refer to this magic that goes on, but it’s not really magic, it’s that you’re inquiring at three levels and it allows people to see the wider organisational system and the elements of it and so when on the leadership development framework they talk about the alchemist or magician, you know why they call it that? Because when you work in those sorts of ways, people at other ends of the development scale may well think it was alchemy or magic, whereas really it’s a depth of appreciation and practice that allows these small moments of wonder to be seen throughout your work and that is what I’ve seen in the last 17 months at [telecommunications company].

He added that in times of crisis when executives are no longer getting the results they want:

That’s when action inquiry becomes so important because they can begin to recreate another view/perspective on the world through this technique and approach...the first time you do it...its so scary, I was a little scared, and the execs I’ve worked with also find it destabilizing but once you’ve been through one, you say “bring it on!” and then it just becomes normal and you get used to this is how life works.

Pointing out the difficulties he sees in applying action of action inquiry in a corporate setting, Paul mentioned the fact that:

action inquiry holds a lot of potential but you have to get over and appreciate the lifetime nature of it...and the nature of corporate performance tends to be quarter by quarter...
Specifically, he described a team level (second-person inquiry) inquiry with their “Plan and Build Team” into “what is their profound question?” which “they struggled with” and it took until “month six before they got their first question out because they went through quite a few loops of inquiry before they got there and that was very frustrating for them”.

In addition, he mentioned that “organisations want data to prove effects of action inquiry and you can’t do it, it’s not a cause and effect relationship” and when a new practice such as action inquiry is introduced, like their failed attempts at six sigma and TQM, people are “quick to blame if it doesn’t work quickly”.

With reference to the Leadership Development Framework, he described some difficulties:

...I use it very sparingly because if you use it in a conventional way, it is almost an affront to people. So if you go to a senior executive, and many of our leaders are conventional in their mindset, when they see a scale and see the post-conventional mindset up here and they see well I am down here, they go, “I’m a CEO, and I am transformation!” So you need to use it with real care and not as a broad-brush assessment tool but as a way into developmental conversations with people at the start their journey.

Zara

Zara is currently a Pro-Vice-Master of Student Experience and Director of External Relations at a leading UK university where she manages sixty-five people. She has been taking an inquiring approach to her own life (first-person action inquiry) for around ten years to support her in her role as a young woman in a variety of senior leadership positions. This inquiry has taken form through one-to-one mentoring with a Harthill Consulting specialist as well as through “Senior Women of the Move” groups (second-person action inquiry) where Harthill Consulting gather a group of successful women, managers and business leaders to explore themes that emerge in the lives of women of influence.

In addition, Zara has also attended a second-person action learning group aimed at providing feedback in mutuality on each others leadership skills (second-person action inquiry into first-person practice) as well as being part of a tri-annual Leadership
Foundation For Higher Education Top Management Programme action learning group, inquiring in collaboration with other leaders from a range of universities, into how to improve the quality of leadership in higher education (second-person action inquiry into third-person practice). Zara also encourages and supports managers in her department to take an inquiring approach to their own lives (first-person action inquiry) and inquire with others (second-person action inquiry).

Zara’s first experience of reflective learning came in a Leadership Training Programme as part of her “first senior role at an organisation” when she was “quite young”. During this programme they split into “action learning sets of around 5-6 people” where they “did various leadership exercises and received feedback ‘this is what I value about you but these are your development points’”. Feeling “out of her depth” amongst “much more senior academics”, Zara received feedback that she had to “stop saying ‘I’m young, I’m inexperienced’...either you can do it or you can’t do it...I think you can but want you to do it or get out”. Zara described how this feedback made her “cry for around a fortnight” as she had “never been part of anything so powerfully personal, it had always been about objectives in the job”. After this “emotional opening”, she realized “there’s work for me to do here about what it is to be a relatively young woman in senior management” and began to work one-to-one with a Harthill Consulting specialist and joined a “Senior Women on the Move” action inquiry group.

In the one-to-one setting (first-person action inquiry), Zara explored “gender issues”, “issues about being from a professional background in an academic context”, “learning how to operate politically”, “learning how to find” her “voice”, “learning how not to be intimidated into not speaking”, “learning about” her “leadership style”, and “herself” more generally, which she found “hugely valuable”. She felt “if it doesn’t get to the core of your being, it’s not doing its job”.

In addition, with encouragement from her mentor, Zara took up “journaling”, “free-fall writing” and “meditation” to “create space rather than filling every moment of your day with frantic activity” and “develop the ability for that kind of quick reflection in the moment where you step outside that frantic activity and get insight” (first-person action
inquiry). She described the effects of these practices as helping her get “to a different level of thought” and giving her the “power to release something, an idea or thought, that hadn’t been allowed to come to the surface”.

In the group setting, Zara described how they explored “women in leadership archetypes”. For Zara, a powerful archetype was “The Queen”, “which is about not being too noisy, feeling you have to talk all the time, rather assuming your power and authority, and then just occasionally saying something”. “Talking too much” was an issue for Zara and this inquiry helped her realize:

...in certain situations, you are the expert here, you know what you are talking about, you do not need to be noisy, you do not need to be loud and you can wait for the right moment. Then you can say just the right thing at the right time.

Indeed, Zara described the results of all these inquiries as helping her to move her practice of leadership beyond “this is what I want to happen” to “listening” and “getting better outcomes” by “not being wedded to an outcome”:

...if you pay attention, if you are actually in the moment and listening to what’s happening you can make a difference because you are reading the dynamic and you spot the moment where a moment of influence can happen...

Specifically, Zara described a serious situation where the university had fallen out of the rankings for “overall student experience” where they had been “top for five years” owing to changes in assessment criteria that they had been unaware of. This was “really important” as it was a key marketing tool for the university. Therefore, in a meeting with IPSOS MORI “to change the way data is collected”, rather than “at the beginning of the meeting saying ‘right you need to understand...this is how its going to be and you lot need to listen’ which would have got a hostile reaction”, Zara waited for the “Aha...here’s the right moment” and then explained how the issue of the change in rankings “really mattered” to the university. The result was that she:
changed the dynamic of the meeting...and by the end of the meeting we had
managed to change their attitude quite dramatically...and for me that was a
good example of not taking control...the moment I entered the conversation
was pivotal and had I been true to form, I might have gone in and started in a
much more confrontational way...so it made such a difference.

Zara also described her experience in the Leadership For Higher Education Top
Management Programme (second-person action inquiry into first-, second- and third-
person practice) where she meets three times a year with 21 people from across the sector
comprising of “Scottish, Welsh and English individuals” with a focus on “gender balance”,
“ethnicity balance” and “a mix between academic and professional people”. The aim of the
group is to inquire into “how to improve the quality of leadership in higher education?”
Here:

    each person will hold the space and then each member of the group will ask
    questions of that person and then that person has to stop talking. Then people
    will provide feedback on what they have just heard which is often quite
    challenging; often people will see your situation quite differently from the way
    you see it...

Zara talked about how they explored each others “life history” so they could know the
“whole person” and how, over the course of each event, they developed more “trust”.

Broadening out the inquiry, Zara described how the group inquire at a global level, visiting
other countries such as the United Arab Emirates “to look at the way they organise their
higher education” and gain insight into the fact that “higher education doesn’t have to look
the way it does in the UK” and that “there are all sort of ways across the world.” In
addition, they inquire at a national level into “what’s happening in terms of funding and
politics?”, at an institutional level into “what does your institutional leadership team look
like?” and then at a personal level into “how do you operate and how can we benefit you?”

Furthermore, Zara, has engendered these qualities of reflective learning in mutuality across
her department:
...we are quite a sophisticated group of people now and many of them have done leadership training, lots of residential programmes and action inquiry sets. They are self-reflective...there is a lot of honesty and openness and actually the thing I have most appreciated is that they have not always got along but have found ways to work through it.

Indeed, Zara believes that this mutuality is essential in their marketing success, as if the messages they put out to:

a journalist, a prospective student, a member of our alumni, a funder, a government agency are not completely consistent, we’re dead in the water...our reputation and brand is undermined...that sense of mutuality is important professionally and in terms of professional output and the way that integration happens....so all those teams who are pitching to different stakeholders have to ensure that everything we do is integrated.

Under Zara’s leadership the department has become “a multi-ward winning” with a key award being the “Times Higher Education Award for Department of the Year 2009”. In addition, they are asked to do “lots of work as consultants” and “talk everywhere”.

Zara, cited her success as “absolutely coming out of the work [action inquiry]”, helping her move from a “timid and intimidated person” to a “much more effective leader” and a “growth trajectory I would not been on without this sort of work” which has made a “profound difference” to who she is. Moreover, it has increased her capacity “to inspire and motivate people” and “mentor and coach” her staff “in self-reflective processes to encourage them to do self-inquiry, which has been a crucial part of their journeys”.

However, Zara did describe that the inquiring culture she has developed in her department is “quite different from the culture of the institution” and after 5 years in her position she is frustrated by the head of the organisation “who runs the organisation like a benign dictator and doesn’t get the need for development”. She finds she cannot have “straight conversations with him” which is “extremely painful” and believes the organisation is suffering through his “intellectual chess playing” and “one man’s vision of how things should be”. Indeed, she is now thinking, “what should I do next?”.
Lesley

Lesley is Chief Executive of a county probation trust whose work involves managing around 2,000 offenders with her staff, to protect the public and reduce offending. She takes an inquiring approach to her own life and has engaged with action inquiry at a personal and group level since becoming a Chief in 2001 and is now using it to facilitate the probation trust’s first organisation change programme alongside Future Consultants.

On becoming a Chief, Lesley “inherited a difficult situation”, “became really interested in what leadership is” and began to realize that in the position:

...it was far more about who you were... people look to you and how you are as a person far more than how you act in the role.

For Lesley, this insight was “when the personal journey kicked in”. As part of her practice (first-person action inquiry), she goes on an “8 day silent meditation retreat every year”, has engaged in “counselling and psychotherapy”, sought out greater self-understanding through personality profiling such as “the enneagram” and “the Leadership Development Framework”(LDF)” and has spent time in one-to-one coaching with a Harthill Consulting mentor.

Lesley feels that these practices have helped her “make sense of what is going on” and increased her understanding of how she “reacts to people in situations” where she can now enact more “compassion...without having to think about fixed points and right and wrong”. In addition, she is more able to “let go and let things recreate themselves instead of always being in control”. Such a capacity has helped Lesley deal with “very complex problems”; whereas formally, when faced with a problem “when you are really up against it” she used to “work out what was right and wrong”, she now “suspends that”, “sits back and goes into something with an open mind and lets things emerge from that space” where a “solution emerges” which “wouldn’t have been what you would have done the first time round”. Indeed, for Lesley now “inquiring has almost become second nature” and is “very helpful”.

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To aid her own development, Lesley also takes part in a Chief Executive national learning circle that meets three times a year (second person action inquiry into first-, second- and third-person practice). She described being a Chief Executive as “quite a lonely place” where “you can’t explore too much on a personal level in the organisation” and feels that the learning circle has provided them “the freedom and space” to explore their issues which they all find “immensely valuable”. Lesley described the inquiry they undertake as follows:

... we congregate on a Thursday night and have an exchange where we share intelligence; we share and talk about the uncertainty in politics. Then the following day we tend to discuss what leadership issues we are facing and want to explore and then we go into the individual issues that are brought. What is always amazing...is how synchronized these discussions tend to be. Certain themes tend to come up, although the issues are slightly different.

It is very often presenting around problems with the team, the senior management team for example, so it is generally about part of the organization or management of the organization, but it is also about “this is how we would like things to be, this is what we would like the organization to look like and operate”. We then inquire into how we deal with the uncertainty in the world and how do we manage the expectations in the world, which can be very difficult in our sector, and then explore what our own role is in all of that...those three layers come together at those learning sets and they emerge in their own right rather than “What’s the agenda?” and there is huge diversity among the organizations and ourselves ...

Lesley cited this form of action inquiry as helping her “make sense” of “the things that frustrate” her the most “about the organisation [probation trust]” whereby she can “examine” herself and her “role in it” and bring greater understanding “if people are doing things out there” as to whether “they are reflecting” her or she is “reflecting the organisation” and thus amend the “messages” she is giving out.

As part of a three year organisational change programme which is in its “fairly early days” and characterized by “restructuring and downsizing”, Lesley, in association with Harthill
Consulting, is aiming to “develop leadership skills in the organisation” through action inquiry with specific emphasis on using the Leadership Development Framework. She described how “consultants meet with small groups centered around their teams to explore what their action-logic looks like in reality” as well as “lunch time discussion groups for anyone who wants to develop their thinking in a broader way than just in the teams...to encourage their own self-exploration”. In addition, her senior management team “are all being mentored regarding their performance”. To date the middle managers, senior management team and the Board have all been assessed using the Leadership Development Framework (LDF) with “middle managers tending to be achievers”, “senior managers tending to be individualists and experts” and “all the Board are achievers”.

Lesley explained how the framework has helped her articulate to these managers, who owing to their conventional mindset “are very talented at analysing data” but “can’t bear it when we can’t just get a simple solution to make it right” and tend to “go in firing on all cylinders”, the importance of:

...developing our strategist skills, as we need to be moving into post-conventional thinking because the sorts of problems we will be facing in the future are evermore complex and you simply can’t...you are not going to get there if you can’t use more sophisticated approaches.

In this way she is “working really hard with the senior management team” to:

...help them understand the complexity of problems, when it is appropriate to make a decision and when you need to sit back and understand things better before you make a decision.

In particular, she described two examples whereby post-convention thinking is starting to permeate the organisation and the positive results gained through double loop learning. Both examples referred to the performance targets that the probation trust is subject to where “when they brought out the league tables [the probation trust] was 41 out of 42, one of the worst performing probation trusts”.

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The first example related to the fact that the probation trust is “required to have a supervision programme in place ten days after a court order is made or somebody is released from prison”. Lesley stated that this was easy:

...if an order is made but not so easy when it’s about a release from prison as sometimes the release date is given quite late on and it requires finding a probation officer in the midst of everything else and relied on the probation officer in the midst of everything else remembering to change the date in the system.

Lacking inquiry skills, the typical response of senior managers was to “blame the probation officer”. However, with a new “deep inquiry” approach Lesley was able to encourage her managers to look at the wider system issue and change strategy where they have now put the date entry “as the responsibility of the admin staff” which “now works like clockwork”.

The second example further explored the fact that “when anything goes wrong they [in the public sector] immediately launch a review which is about trying to establish whose fault it is”. Lesley stated that this “blame culture” had created “a lot of suspicion around inquiries”. In particular, when anyone under their supervision commits a “serious further offence there is an inquiry and somebody looks at the records and interviews the probation officer, does a tick box thing and sends it off nationally”. Lesley described that for probation officers

...there is a lot of concern around it and if one of your offenders commits a serious offence there is a real sense of failure not to mention the quite draconian approach.

To address this issue Lesley stated that now:

...an Assistant Chief sits down with all the middle managers and once it [the review] is complete, looks at it to ascertain what learning points can be drawn out. Then there is a discussion about whether it was just specific to the case or if there is something that needs to be done in the organisation.
She added that this “feedback loop” has helped to “break down the sense of being afraid to make mistakes, of trying to be perfect, and has therefore allowed real issues to surface”. Because of such thinking, the probation trust is “now in the top four” in the rankings.

Lesley hopes that her leaders will now also be “aware of the unintended consequences of their decisions...so when a problem emerges, like the current cuts, rather than say this is how we’re going to save money, they look at the strategy from different angles and other things that might happen that could create problems in the medium and long term”.

In general, Lesley stated she is “seeing a bit of movement in the organisation” and is “delighted that everyone is starting to do their little bit of action inquiry” but has also had some difficulties with implementing the LDF where their was “quite of lot of anxiety about coming lower down in the profile...which wasn’t easy for everybody” with some people also “struggling to see its relevance” and those who “rubbished it”. In addition, although “prior to her departure” she aims to have the “organisation in shape so that it does inquiry and double loop thinking so that it is routine and is the culture for the future”, she is concerned under a new “Offender Management Act as of 1st April 2010” that after her tenure her “subsequent replacement will be on a three year contract basis” which will “limit the organisational change programme” and be “much more focused on achievements and measurements”.

**Clive**

Clive is CEO of a company that provides sustainable energy and environmental services throughout the UK. He has 60 members of staff. He sought the assistance of Harthill Consulting five years ago when the company was going through a management buyout to provide them “with some tools in terms of coaching and personal development” which would allow them “to move into the roles of company directors”. In particular, the senior executives and the Chairperson “were taken through the Leadership Development Framework (LDF), were then given some one-on-one coaching” and then “the LDF was introduced” into their “recruitment processes”.


Clive found the one-to-one coaching “helpful” through which he was able to “get a second perspective/independent view of the situation” and “build more of an inquiring approach in himself”. He now uses the “ISAO framework a lot [intention (visioning), strategy (strategizing), actions (performing), outcomes (assessing)]” but does not “always reflect back on the outcomes”. He provided two examples of this first/third person action inquiry. The first referred to when he is “looking to get somebody on board”:

...so I am faced with a conversation to try get this person in the company, so I have to inquire, what my intention is, why I am trying to get that person on board and is that the right intention? Then I have to identify the right strategy for doing that.

The second example referred to when he is confronted “with the dilemma of someone who I think is underperforming in a role”:

...then I have to inquire from the organisational perspective or even the client perspective, what is it that we need? Well we need an organisation that actually inquires with the client in order to understand their issues. In order for that to happen, we need to get the right people and the right system in place. So the actions that I need to assess the chap against – the qualities, the skills and mindset – are those that are needed in order to develop that. So I then map out a series of actions to assess the chap against, the outcome of which is that if he is not suitable for the business, then he has to leave.

Clive also mentioned that he uses these “loops of inquiry” when faced with “complex business issues” to be able to “think from a number of perspectives” as well as in “meetings with clients” as a “good way to quickly reflect”. Overall, he felt the approach had “made a difference”.

Although Clive’s work dominates his life at present, he has “studied several martial arts” such as awareness-based “Tai Chi” as well as “lived overseas” which has aided his ability to inquire (first-person action inquiry). In particular, he described how living overseas has “influenced” him:
...when you’re not on holiday but living somewhere else on a long-term basis you see you’re not part of something, you’re an outsider, therefore your position in these other ways of approaching reality creates quite a stark change to how one views oneself and one’s place in the world. You are confronted...and a sign of development is your capacity to take more perspectives. In particular, when you engage in the workplace and you have to get something done, your ability to take different perspectives greatly affects your ability to influence with integrity, especially in a workplace that is multi-cultural. So that has helped me greatly as well as the training in some of the Chinese martial arts systems.

Indeed, Clive believes these aspects of inquiry have facilitated his development to “a latter action-logic” and got him interested in “systems, natural systems, and human systems such as socio-economic, technical and political”.

However, Clive revealed how “difficult it was in introducing it [action inquiry and the LDF] into the organisation” which led to the Chairperson “who had an academic background in complexity theory and consulting having doubts about its effectiveness” in their “setting”; that “it was not really the right tool for the job and the issue”:

...one of the issues with the action inquiry approach is that it is quite difficult to describe it and so getting people to accept it, is a leap of faith. When you say “I can’t really describe it, you have to experience it” they go, “What? Are you joking?” As well, being LDF driven where in team building exercises people inquired into their developmental levels, it jarred. People did not like it. They always want to be a couple of step higher and then it is suggested that this is because they are not adopting an inquiring approach.

Clive mentioned that these elements meant that the approach “ran into opposition and immediately turned people off and was therefore difficult to get in”. He added that when he attempted to create wider action inquiry across the organisation, “it was limited as people in the organisation didn’t have the skill or capabilities to work in that way” and felt that it:
... it tends to work better with people that are at a latter action-logic...it's about who you engage with in inquiry and when things haven’t moved forward we’ve had to look at who we are doing the inquiry with because in reality when you look at the limitations, and those limitations develop for a myriad of reasons, not all individuals are created equal or have the same capabilities. Also when your success is measured by profit and staff retention, why change? It needs an external shock so you have to reflect on things and how you can do things differently.

He also added that:

...with the inquiry approach you can get an outcome you do not want. It could be inertia, stagnation. If these networks of people come together and cannot decide then inertia and stagnation can take over and you get an outcome you did not intend. It may be down to the skills of the practitioners and like any mental of physical exercise it takes discipline and practice, but it is difficult to take the time and effort to practice in a fast-paced business world so driven by external events.

**Peter**

Peter is a specialist in Corporate Social Responsibility and runs his own consulting firm that helps organisations and individuals focus on their core values and communicate these to the world. His focus is on Media CSR as well as clients in software, utilities, the law and property. In particular, Peter brings his training at the University in Bath in an MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice to this role, which was heavily based around an action inquiry approach to learning. Prior to this role Peter spent 25 years in broadcasting at a major national radio station as a presenter, managing director, HR director and communication director.

In parallel with his CSR consultancy Peter is a trustee of a range of community organisations aimed at promoting sustainability and social entrepreneurship.
Peter described his career as a broadcaster as “fact-based” where what “mattered was the accretion of facts and the more facts you had the better off you were”. In addition, he revealed that

...the problem for me in broadcasting was that I was never in the moment. I ended up with two compartments in my brain; one would be listening while I was on the air, the other was thinking what I would have to do next. So I was always in that minutia – How can I fill this minute? How can I fill that second? I was not honouring the moment as I was always thinking about something else.

For Peter a key turning point in this way of being, that “transformed” his process, were the action inquiry groups he participated in on his MSc at the University of Bath. Here, he was introduced to “a continual process of open questioning and not-knowing” where tutors always asked, “what’s the question here?”. In addition, in the action inquiry groups he was placed in, they experimented with “different ways of meaning making” and asked each other “the most piercing questions” such as “what does that mean at its deepest level?”.

Through this practice of inquiry Peter felt he developed an ability to “open the lid of the box” that enabled him to “not reach definite conclusions but remain in what the Buddhists call the ‘still point’ so that you’re open to what is coming towards you”. He reported the effects of this training as helping him to be “more in the moment”, “open to interesting things that might happen when you are reflecting such as synchronicity” and that,

...if you are reflecting on it, you have come to your own conclusion. It seems to me that things that I have reflected on, they embed far more deeply and become intuitive in a way that things that have been imposed as an action on a flip chart do not; you think, “I can intellectually understand what’s going on, I can accept the arguments, but I don’t feel it”. So I think the reflection allows you to feel it and have it come from your heart in a way that it does not if it just comes from the head.

After the course, Peter felt that some of the big questions such as “What is a company for?” and “How does the consumption-based economy impact on sustainability?” were not
surfacing in the corporate world and decided to open his own consultancy business to help leaders and organisations “tell their own CSR story”.

Peter gave two examples of how he does this through second person action inquiry into third person practice. The first example referred to an action inquiry Peter facilitated with a group of fifteen managing partners from leading legal firms. Here, Peter was helping them to inquire into what they could do as legal firms in terms of CSR. In the first cycle of action and reflection, Peter asked them, “What do you think you can do?” and received the answers, “like reducing carbon and cycling to work etc. etc.” For the second cycle Peter asked them, “What can you do as a legal firm that no one else can do?” and received answers like, “pro-bono work” and “advising people like charities”. For the third cycle Peter got them to inquire into, “When giving advice what can you do in the paying situation to answer the CSR 2.0 question?” Here one member said, “Why don’t we give advice that works better over the long-term?” However, Peter described the effect of this depth of inquiry as “creating a storm of protest with many partners saying ‘We can’t do that!’” and that it was the “right time for that individual but not the other partners”.

The second example referred to an action inquiry with major media companies that included senior figures from TV stations, newspapers and magazines. The first cycle of inquiry revolved around “How do you use less paper? How can your sales reps drive around using less fuel? Etc.” Moving on from these questions, “which frankly were things any organisation could do”, Peter got them to inquire about “a key area in terms of sustainability in the media, which are the thoughts that it leaves in the minds of its listeners, viewers and readers”. Again although some were “prepared to engage, others were simply not willing”.

Articulating these processes Peter stated that:

...my objective in doing an intervention is to get people out of the single loop - just going around and around doing the same thing again and again – to triggering double loop feedback where they think about it more strategically, more long-term.
However, Peter felt that he has

...never succeeded or felt brave enough to get anybody doing the triple loop
where you are asking, “Why are you doing this? What is the belief system that
underlies what you’re doing?”

For Peter, “that is really scary stuff for corporates and there’s a right time and right place
for that sort of thing”.

With respect to leadership, he felt that “if you fully espouse action inquiry, you have to
fully espouse the freedom for any answer to come up and most leaders aren’t prepared to
be that liberal”. Furthermore, for Peter, “people at the strategist level do begin to ask
deeper questions” but “the problem is that as you come up through a corporate career
that gets knocked out of you”.

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APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM AND CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT (LEADERS)

NAME:

ORGANISATION:

You are invited to participate in a MBA management project that seeks to investigate Action Inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice and its implications for individual, team and organisational transformation.

Your contribution consists of a single semi-structured interview of approximately 90 minutes, the results of which will flow into the overall research evaluation of the proposed study. The interview will occur at a comfortable and preferred location. There will be no other requirements for your time in the current study. The interview will be conducted face-to-face; however, should insurmountable difficulties arise it will be performed over the phone or via video telephony.

The interview will be audio recorded and used only in relation to this project. To protect your privacy, your name will remain anonymous at all times and all information received from you will be kept confidential. All written data will be kept secure and stored in a locked filing cabinet. All digital data (audio recordings) will be stored in a safe, password-protected place. The principal investigator, Oliver Jacobs, will transcribe the interview which will be processed and coded anonymously. In the final project document, your identity and organisation will be disguised to eliminate any possibility of detection of the source. Furthermore, all the information will be used in relation to this research and the publication of this management project only.

By answering the questions in the interview, you will be contributing to a clearer understanding of Action Inquiry and its implications for leadership and organisational transformation. Furthermore, you may benefit in the following ways:

1. You could get a better understanding about the ways in which Action Inquiry has contributed to your own individual, team and organisational development.
2. You might gain insights into how your practice of Action Inquiry can deepen through the reflective nature of the interview.
3. You may have a constructive learning experience.

Your participation in the research is voluntary. By agreeing to be interviewed, you attest that no pressure has been applied to encourage your participation. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me on 07801 285 845 or through email at okdjacobs@gmail.com. The supervisor of this project is Professor Kenneth Starkey, who can be contacted at Kenneth.Starkey@nottingham.ac.uk, or on 0115 951 5260. The Director of Nottingham University’s Research Ethics Committee is Professor Alistair Bruce, who can be contacted on Alistair.Bruce@nottingham.ac.uk, or on 0115 846 6614.

As a potential participant in this research, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty of prejudice. The project will be made available to you upon completion.

**Confidentiality Agreement**

I attest that I have read and understood this form and had any questions about this research answered to my satisfaction. My participation in this research is voluntary and no pressure has been applied to encourage my participation. My signature indicates my willingness to be a participant in this research.

_________________________  _____________
Participant’s Signature        Date

_________________________  _____________
Researcher’s Signature        Date
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM AND CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT
(CONSULTANTS)

NAME:

ORGANISATION:

You are invited to participate in a MBA management project that seeks to investigate Action Inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice and its implications for individual, team and organisational transformation.

Your contribution consists of a single semi-structured interview of approximately 90 minutes, the results of which will flow into the overall research evaluation of the proposed study. The interview will occur at a comfortable and preferred location. There will be no other requirements for your time in the current study. The interview will be conducted face-to-face; however, should insurmountable difficulties arise it will be performed over the phone or via video telephony.

The interview will be audio recorded and used only in relation to this project. To protect your privacy, your name will remain anonymous at all times and all information received from you will be kept confidential. All written data will be kept secure and stored in a locked filing cabinet. All digital data (audio recordings) will be stored in a safe, password-protected place. The principal investigator, Oliver Jacobs, will transcribe the interview which will be processed and coded anonymously. In the final project document, your identity and organisation will be disguised to eliminate any possibility of detection of the source. Furthermore, all the information will be used in relation to this research and the publication of this management project only.

By answering the questions in the interview, you will be contributing to a clearer understanding of Action Inquiry and its implications for leadership and organisational transformation. Furthermore, you may benefit in the following ways:

1. You could get a better understanding about the ways in which Action Inquiry has contributed to the individuals, teams and organisations you have worked with.
2. You might gain insights into how your practice of Action Inquiry can deepen through the reflective nature of the interview.
3. You may have a constructive learning experience.
Your participation in the research is voluntary. By agreeing to be interviewed, you attest that no pressure has been applied to encourage your participation. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me on 07801 285 845 or through email at lixo1@nottingham.ac.uk. The supervisor of this project is Professor Kenneth Starkey, who can be contacted at Kenneth.Starkey@nottingham.ac.uk, or on 0115 951 5260. The Director of Nottingham University’s Research Ethics Committee is Professor Alistair Bruce, who can be contacted on Alistair.Bruce@nottingham.ac.uk, or on 0115 846 6614.

As a potential participant in this research, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty of prejudice. The project will be made available to you upon completion.

Confidentiality Agreement

I attest that I have read and understood this form and had any questions about this research answered to my satisfaction. My participation in this research is voluntary and no pressure has been applied to encourage my participation. My signature indicates my willingness to be a participant in this research.

_________________________    _______________________
Participant’s Signature                  Date

_________________________    _______________________
Researcher’s Signature                  Date
There are four main topics I am interested in and would like to explore with you as a co-researcher with respect to Action Inquiry: your stories of Action Inquiry in your personal, team and organisational activities, your experience of the process across these territories and the practical results that have emerged in your professional and personal life. Many writers in the field of Action Inquiry comment that not only is Action Inquiry difficult to write about or understand but also to practice. However, with the benefits it potentially offers for organisations facing an ever more turbulent business environment, I am hopeful that this study with your help can provide further illumination with respect to Action Inquiry.

INTRODUCTION AND REQUESTING DEFINITIONS

1. What was the context or circumstances that led you to engage with Action Inquiry? Were there any significant life or work issues that prompted you to seek out an alternative leadership practice?

2. What is your understanding of Action Inquiry as a leadership practice? In your view what does Action Inquiry offer/enable/do? What struck you most about Action Inquiry? What was most surprising? What moved you? How does Action Inquiry differ from other management consultancy interventions you have used in the past?

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION (1st person Inquiry/practice)

3. How do you cultivate the capacity for sustaining an inquiring approach to your life? What practices do you engage in? How do you keep it alive? How long have you engaged in these practices?

4. What benefits have emerged as a result of taking an inquiring approach to your own life? In what ways have you changed? What capabilities have been developed? What do you experience that you did not experience previously?

5. How has your leadership ability been impacted? How do you know that?
6. How has your environment been impacted by taking an inquiring approach to your own life (co-workers, other leaders, stakeholders, whole organisation)? How can you tell?

TEAM TRANSFORMATION (2\textsuperscript{nd} person Inquiry/practice)

7. Could you describe a specific situation in which you have applied Action Inquiry in a face-to-face team context? (Strategy formulation/Significant Issues)
8. How did this process affect the team’s performance and capability? What kind of learning did it generate? What new behaviours did it facilitate?
9. What obstacles in terms of group dynamics did this process push up against?
10. How did your role as a leader change in this process? How did this affect your own 1\textsuperscript{st} person Inquiry?

ORGANISATION TRANSFORMATION (3\textsuperscript{rd} Person inquiry/practice)

11. How have you awakened the qualities of your 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} person endeavours in the wider organisation context?
12. What effect has this had on the organisations capacity to:
   - adapt, respond and learn in a rapidly changing environment?
   - act in a sustainable manner?
   - be creative?
13. Can you delineate any other practical results that have emerged?
14. How has the practice of Action Inquiry changed the power relations in your organisations? In what ways has this been beneficial?

VALIDITY CHECK

At the end of the interview I will briefly summarize the main points and open the space for a further collaborative inquiry to check my notes accurately reflect the position of the participant and if on reflection there is anything further to add.
REFERENCES


