TRIPLE LOOP AWARENESS - EXERCISE

PRACTICING TRIPLE LOOP LEARNING

Part 1: Connecting to a challenge

Think of a leadership challenge that has been preoccupying you and that you would like to see transformed. Prepare yourself to debrief the situation in pairs. Take notes using the below prompts:

- What's the context? What is the situation about?
- Who is involved?
- What is your role in this situation? What have you tried?
- What is your understanding of the challenge? How do you feel about it?
- What is your desired outcome?

Part 2: Familiarizing yourself with triple loop learning

Invite the partner with whom you shared the situation to read the Input and the reflection questions provided, and use them to help you gain insights.

Part 3: Reflecting with others

- How useful was this process of inquiry? Which questions did you find most helpful?
- How can you integrate the triple loop reflections in your everyday leadership?
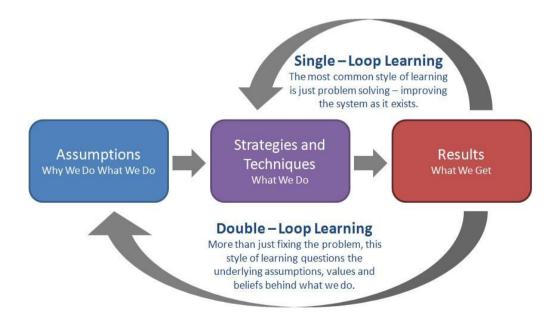
ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

There are no additional exercises for this section

INTRODUCTION

One of the powerful dimensions of *Action Inquiry* (a model of reflective practice by William Torbert - Refer to Exercise 4) is the ongoing exercise of assessing through feedback loops whether or not we are on the way to achieving our goal. A lot of our learning is based on detection and correction of our errors. On the basis of the data we are collecting and our interpretation of the causes for the gap between what we are intending and actually producing, we accordingly make adjustments of our actions (first loop), our strategies/plans (second loop), our intentions/purpose (third loop), or all three. This tool provided by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön in 2002 is focused on helping us deepen our understanding of experiential learning. As with anything that we want to do very well, it requires constant practice to do with proficiency.

FRAMEWORK

Single – Loop Learning
The most common style of learning is just problem solving – improving the system as it exists.

Assumptions
Why We Do What We Do

Strategies and Techniques
What We Do

Results
What We Get

Double – Loop Learning
More than just fixing the problem, this style of learning questions the underlying assumptions, values and beliefs behind what we do.

The practice of Action Inquiry consists of three levels or loops of learning that use performance feedback to identify and diagnose gaps between intentions and outcomes by individuals, teams and organizations. It also provides a simple guide for adapting action in order to achieve desired results. Argyris and Schön's (2002):

- **Single-loop learning** (**DOING**) consists of adapting to changes and challenges by modifying the intensity, rate or manner of behavior used to achieve a goal. Under this "operative" level, the focus is on "are we doing things right?". "Can I shift my behavior to get the results I seek?". When we face a gap between our expected outcomes and actual results, we start considering how the situation could be fixed, and adapt our own behavior accordingly. However, by using single-loop learning, we often bring about small fixes that address only the symptoms of the issue without questioning its root causes.

- In **double-loop learning (KNOWING)**, we intentionally think about the operating assumptions behind our actions. "Can I shift my attitude, mindset, strategy, or the assumptions I'm operating on to achieve my goal?". This deeper and tactical level is undertaken when the single loop changes are not adequate for achieving desired results. By seeking to understand what is really going on and identifying recurrent patterns, we try to address the underlying causes behind our challenges (norms, values, motives,...). Because the double loop of learning and action lead to the reframing and change of what and how action is performed, it is appropriate to describe double loop of learning and adaptation as *transformational*. Learning at this level is enabled by gaining self-awareness and growing in honesty and personal responsibility to change existing rules and capture insights.

- A third and more advanced type of learning is **triple-loop learning (BEING)**. This level is undertaken when both the single and the double loops of adaptation are still not sufficient to deliver the intended results or to achieve a desired goal. In triple loop change, the reflection focuses not on changing our actions or changing the rules, but more on *how we learned our ways of doing and being in the first place*. At this level, we are "learning about learning". This involves re-examining and potentially transforming the purpose, vision, intention, or mission behind our action (whether at the individual, team, or organizational levels). "Can I shift my intention, vision, or surrender an attachment in order to fulfill a new purpose?". Such a depth of change is especially challenging because purpose, vision, and mission are the value based sources of meaning and identity, and so, are not easy to shift or transform without loss. For this reason, triple loop learning and adaptation often requires more attention and greater internal freedom, awareness and agility, and will usually involve a subsequent adjustment of plans and actions.

Saint Ignatius instructs us to clarify at the outset, "what is it that I desire?". This clarity of purpose is a powerful resource for leadership. It touches upon not only our intellectual sense of our goals or intentions, but also the heart and the will (third loop). What great or important achievements are accomplished without effort or sacrifice? For such projects, the mind, the heart, and the will must all be engaged.

Below are a series of reflection questions (by Fr. David McCallum SJ) that guide inquiry at each level of single, double, or triple loop learning.

Reflection Loop #1: Actions, Behaviors, Performance (Doing)

As I assess the gap between my intention and my performance (or between the organizational mission/vision and our collective performance) I attempt to diagnose what adaptation might help close the gap. Some potential lines of inquiry into the single loop changes I might make in how I go about what I am doing:

- Could I achieve my intention by changing the rate, pace, volume, or intensity of what I am doing? Or what my organization is doing?
- Am I following the guidelines, protocols, or instructions correctly?
- Are my tactics aligned with my strategy? Did I miss a step?
- Did I insure that I established the facilitative conditions needed for success (environment, resources, timing, motivation, sense of urgency, etc).
- Can I achieve my intention by enlisting help or other resources that I had not considered previously?
- Do I have the people with the right skills working in the right roles?
- Is there a way I can modify my behavior to bring about better results?
- How might inaction be a better form of action?

Reflection Loop #2: Strategy, Mind Set, Assumptions, Conceptual Frameworks (Knowing)

As I explore the gap between intention and results, there are times when the first loop of reflection and adaptation might not be sufficient. In this second level of inquiry into the double loop, I explore my strategy (explicit and implicit), the assumptions of my underlying strategy, and the adequacy/biases of the conceptual frameworks or mental models I am using to interpret my experience. Here I am inquiring into what I am aiming to accomplish.

- What is my strategy for achieving my goal?
- What are the assumptions that my strategy is based on?
- Are these assumptions based on data? Is the data timely? Is it accurate?
- Is my perspective, assessment, or problem diagnosis in need of more or better information? Are there any key stakeholders missing from the conversation?
- Given the complexity of conditions or relationships that I am facing, am I framing things from a dualistic (either/or) or dialectical (both/and) perspective?
- Are the conceptual frameworks I am employing adequate for interpreting my situation? Might they be filtering reality in a way that is not helpful?
- Do I suspect I might have some blind-spots or hidden biases worth exploring?
  - For instance, might there be a systemic or structural reality that is manifesting "locally", but which must be managed in a comprehensive manner?
  - Am I/Are we working on the basis of tacit norms that need reconsideration?
- Are there covert dynamics at play that require illumination?
  - For example, is there unspoken competition at work?
  - Are there political tensions exerting influence?
  - Might there be defensive routines at play that are subverting my/our intention? Is there an unspoken yet unproductive reality that must be named (an elephant in the room?)

Reflection Loop #3: Intention, Values, & Presence (Being)

At times, even a revision of our strategies and underlying assumptions are not sufficient to bring about the change that we desire. At this point, we inquire into a more subtle dimension of our experience-- the triple loop exploration of our personal (and organizational) intention, values, quality of power and presence.

- Was my goal realistic in the first place?
- What is my (or my organizational) vision for the results I am seeking? Why am I pursuing this vision? Is this vision aligned with my mission, strategy and action?
- When I explore my intention, have I factored in other stakeholder interests in such a way as to respect the importance of mutuality or have is my intention unilateral?
- Is the intention or purpose I am serving founded on the right values and priorities?
- Am I mindful of the sustainability of this intention and long term impacts I might cause?
- Is my purpose linked to what I am passionate about?
- Is my quality of presence charged with the right energy to communicate my intention, my commitment, my desire? Am I exercising the right kind of power or authority to achieve my goal?
- What hidden or unconscious influences (fears/desires) or attachments might be operating?
- Do I sense how I am running into attachments or over-identifications that are holding me or my organization back? Do I have some competing commitments that are undermining my intention? Am I acting with full integrity?
- If I am honest, are there unconscious fears, needs, or desires influencing me? E.G. fear of failure, of looking bad or incompetent; fear of losing control; fear of losing relevance or of being not needed; fear of getting lost in the crowd and not standing out; fear of conflict or loss; fear of my power, or of responsibility?

EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Deepening understanding of action inquiry and increasing participants' likelihood of skillful action by expanding their awareness

2. Introducing feedback loops to help participants adapt their action for greater effectiveness

3. Building capacity to lead from the inside out by practicing single, double and triple loop feedback

TRIPLE LOOP AWARENESS - RESOURCES

GENERAL LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

Title	Author	Publisher	Year	Link
Coaching Inquiry: Three Loops of Learning and Adaptation	David McCallum Sj			
Summary Three Loops of Learning - Field Guide to Consulting and Organizational Development	Authenticity Consulting			Link
How to tackle your toughest decisions	Joseph Badaracco	Harvard Business Review	2016	Link
Triple-loop learning as foundation for profound change, individual cultivation, and radical innovation: Construction processes beyond scientific and rational knowledge.	Markus F. Peschl	Constructivist Foundations 2(2-3), 136–145.	2007	Link

QUOTES

- "The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." Albert Einstein

- "The ability to perceive or think differently is more important than the knowledge gained". David Bohm

- "Insanity is continuing to do the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Albert Einstein

- "If you want to make minor, incremental changes and improvement, work on practices, behaviour or attitude. But if you want to make significant, quantum improvement, work on paradigms… perception, assumption, theory, frame of reference or lens through which you view the world." - Stephen Covey