



HUMAN SYSTEMS  
DYNAMICS INSTITUTE

## Inquiry

### Definition of Inquiry

Inquiry is about questions. It is approaching every interaction, every situation, every opportunity with questions about what can be learned in this moment, in this situation, with this person. In the emergent, unpredictable world of complex systems, inquiry is the only way you can move forward.

### Inquiry

- ▶ turn judgment into curiosity
- ▶ turn disagreement into shared exploration
- ▶ turn defensiveness into self-reflection
- ▶ turn assumptions into questions

### What?

Standing in inquiry enables you to gather information you need to see, understand, and influence patterns of interaction and decision making that shape your world. When your world cannot be predicted or controlled, answers have a short shelf life, but good questions help you find options for action to move toward resilience and sustainability.

### So What?

You gather information from your environment to make decisions and take action in your world. Standing in inquiry enables you to see clearly and remain open to the reality around you. In HSD, stand in inquiry when we:

- ▶ Turn judgment into curiosity
- ▶ Turn disagreement into shared exploration
- ▶ Turn defensiveness into self-reflection
- ▶ Turn assumptions into questions

Nothing is intractable.

## Now What?

When you stand in inquiry, you exhibit patterns of behavior that help you see, understand, and influence your world. When you stand in inquiry you:

- ▶ Ask questions you can't answer
  - ▷ Seek to understand people you disagree with
  - ▷ Explore "What if..." questions to understand possible consequences to an action
- ▶ Find comfort with ambiguity
  - ▷ Invite people into conversations where you look for answers together
  - ▷ Ask others what they see and listen deeply to their insights
- ▶ Remain open to and actively seek new learning
  - ▷ Ask others to teach you what they know
  - ▷ Identify skills you don't have and find a teacher who will help you learn
- ▶ Consider your own personal interactions through a lens of inquiry
  - ▷ Ask colleagues to share perceptions of your impact on them
  - ▷ Open yourself to learning from others about what they need

In times of complex, unpredictable change, questions like these show you a way forward. Use the Rules of Inquiry to create your future out of chaos.

Nothing is intractable.



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### What is the Purpose of Inquiry?<sup>1</sup>

Succeeding in complex environments requires adaptive capacity, and adaptive capacity requires that you step into and stand in **inquiry**. Inquiry is most powerful when it is not just a way of working with clients and not just a path toward professional learning. Engaging the world through a lens of inquiry is to engage with curiosity to be your best at work, at home, in politics, in service. Inquiry becomes a way of life.

Using inquiry to build adaptive capacity is not just about asking questions. It is approaching every interaction, every situation, every opportunity with questions about what can be learned in this moment . . . in this situation . . . from this person.

### So What Does Inquiry Mean to You?

To stand in inquiry means that you are open to the world around you—the images and experiences that shape your life, new perspectives and different ideas you learn from those around you; and the possibilities your imagination can open to you.

Standing in inquiry means that you consider your world through a lens that allows you to:

- Turn judgment into curiosity
- Turn disagreement into shared exploration
- Turn defensiveness into self-reflection
- Turn assumptions into questions

#### ***Turn judgment into curiosity***

Judgment is neither naughty nor nice—it just is. Judgment allows you to discern what you like and don't like, what is safe and what is not, which path will more likely take you to your destination. Judgment helps you avoid what is dangerous and stay safe.

Other times judgments limit what you can see, shaping a landscape of decision making

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<sup>1</sup> Eoyang, G. and Holladay, R. 2013. Adaptive Action: Leveraging Uncertainty in Your Organization. Stanford University Press. pp 120-121.

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and action that is too narrow to support and sustain learning and adaptation. Patterns of bias and prejudice are cultural examples of judgment that focus on differences that restrict, rather than encourage, growth.

You can recognize judgment that is not helpful when you find yourself:

- ▶ Taking a position, without questioning it
- ▶ Ignoring multiple possibilities beyond those you believe in right now
- ▶ Discounting others' input and perspective without listening to what they say

When you recognize these types of behaviors in yourself, the best thing to do is to stop, take a deep breath, and ask yourself some questions.

- ▶ What if that were not so?
- ▶ What else might be possible if. . . ?
- ▶ What is this person really saying?
- ▶ Else?

### ***Turn disagreement into shared exploration***

Patterns of disagreement emerge whenever you encounter difference. "Things are not as I believe they should be." "Others don't see things as I think they should." "This should not be happening." Patterns that emerge from a brush with difference can range from mild cognitive dissonance to argument to conflict to skirmish to all-out violence and war.

In complex systems, difference is not destructive, it is the energy behind all change. The greater the difference, the greater the energy for change, the greater the potential for larger and more impactful patterns.

When you engage across those differences to understand what they are, you can dissipate the energy that drives the disagreement by turning it to shared and mutual interest. You listen more deeply; you look for points of convergence; you turn your judgment into curiosity. The next time you find that the differences that divide create energy that gets you stuck, then find questions that can move you to exploration.

- ▶ What would it be like if we . . .?
- ▶ What is it that makes this so "awful" for each of us?
- ▶ What nugget of shared benefit can we find?
- ▶ Else?

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### ***Turn defensiveness into self-reflection***

When you feel threatened, your first response is generally to lash out at those who represent the danger you feel. It doesn't matter whether the perceived threat is physical, emotional, or cognitive. When the threat comes, your first reaction is to get it and all it represents as far away as possible. What might happen, if, at that moment, you stopped and reflected on why you feel as you do?

When you feel threatened, you may need to move to a place where you are safe from harm. At the same time, what feels threatening may come from your own perceptions of the situation or the people in it. The fear you feel may very well be about your own sense of safety or status or competence, for instance, and the only way to "move away" from that sense of danger is to reflect on what that fear represents to you.

When you can separate the real threat or danger from your own perceptions and personal fears, you are better able to step beyond the flight-or-fight response and engage across that difference. The next time you feel such a threat, stop yourself and ask:

- ▶ What about this feels familiar?
- ▶ What am I afraid of losing, and how can I step beyond that and see the other person's perspective?
- ▶ What am I telling myself about what just happened, and what might be an alternative explanation?
- ▶ How would others describe what just happened?
- ▶ Else?

### ***Turn assumptions into questions***

Your assumptions provide the foundations for how you see and understand your world. They shape your perspectives and give you a conceptual place to stand. From that space, you step into decisions, choices, and actions that shape your life.

Your assumptions are based in your experiences and in the lessons you have learned through the course of your life. Your cultural background, your family or community values, experiences of joy or pain, and your sense of self inform your assumptions about the world. Sometimes your assumptions are built on fact and reality; sometimes your assumptions are not. They may be based on misinformation or lack of information or misinterpretation of the information you have.

**Nothing is intractable.**

When you are stuck and don't know what to do, it may be because some underlying assumption prevents you from seeing the situation clearly. Your assumptions can limit your ability to find new options for effective and meaningful action. When that happens, take a moment to consider how the assumptions you hold constrain your perspectives and opportunities:

- ▶ What do I believe about this situation and how are my beliefs holding me in this pattern?
- ▶ What other ways might I think about this pattern to shift my current experience?
- ▶ What assumptions do other people hold that might inform my decisions differently?
- ▶ Else?

Living in inquiry does not mean you give up your own current expertise and knowledge. You recognize that what you see and learn today builds on the past and generates a broader future of greater capacity. Every engagement is based in questions that help you find what works best at that moment, beyond the judgments, disagreements, defensiveness, and assumptions that hold you hostage.

## **Now What Can You Do to Use Inquiry in Your Life?**

Over the years, at HSD Institute, we have used the four rules of inquiry to define what we mean by "standing in inquiry." We also identified four behaviors we believe contribute to that stance.

### ***Ask questions you can't answer.***

*We find that answers have a pretty short shelf-life. By the time you get to the next question, the answer you formulated earlier may not continue to hold true.* --Glenda Eoyang

*Life is a process of working out what's not working for you and disentangling yourself from it and trying then not to walk into the same thing again. Watching your patterns and correcting them if you can.* --Siobhan Fahey

So what do you ask questions about? In HSD we ask questions that help us understand the patterns of decision making and behavior that make up the landscape around us. We engage with others and use personal reflection to explore the ways people live and work together. We ask all kinds of questions about others' experiences and how they see the world. Standing in inquiry is to be incurably curious, exploring what makes the world and the people in it act as they do.

**Nothing is intractable.**

## **Be comfortable with ambiguity and the vulnerability of standing with questions.**

*In all affairs, it's a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.*

--Bertrand Russell

*A story is told as much by silence as by speech.*      --Susan Griffin

In a world where leaders, consultants, educators, parents—people who have any authority—are supposed to have The Answer, it's difficult to step into a space of questions, rather than answers. Standing in inquiry means that you question your own personal assumptions and perspectives, constantly seeking greater clarity and insights to understand what's before you at this moment. You get comfortable with experiencing silence when everyone around you is clamoring for your response and your words. It's in the silence of listening that you can discern the deep responses to your questions.

Ultimately you must sometimes be comfortable when you cannot find closure to some issue or question—you may never get an answer. You learn to be comfortable with knowing that the next instant may change the world and create new questions and responses.

## **Remain open to and actively seek new learning.**

*Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.*

--Mahatma Gandhi

*Remember to focus on what you can actually "see" and pay attention to what is missing. What are the patterns outside your "frame" . . . what is the context?*

--Leslie Patterson

Inquiry calls you to “look” at what you don’t see as well as what you do see—to look beyond what shows up first and to ask questions beyond the first responses. Read between the lines; listen at the interspaces; understand the context. It is not something to be done only at specific times or places. Inquiry is not a destination where people go. Inquiry is seeking new learning in each moment-by-moment shift and day-to-day engagement. When you feel stuck and frustrated, ask yourself what you might learn from the situation. You might be surprised at what you find.

## **Consider your own interactions through a lens of inquiry.**

Humans are social beings who live and work in interdependent relationships with those around them. And yet, you never know for certain the impact you have on others. What cues do you watch for? What adjustments do you make in your own behavior? How can you gain a clearer perspective about how people perceive their interactions with you?

Nothing is intractable.

Reflection is a valuable tool, and sometimes the word conjures images of a person sitting alone in the evening with a journal, contemplating the day's actions and learning. You also know that reflection can happen in an instant. The moment you see a response from another human, you engage in adaptive action. You assess meaning and adjust your reactions to increase the effectiveness of your interactions. You observe body tension and body language, voice tone and speed of someone's speech, and you listen for tiny clues in the words they say. As you make these observations, use the rules of inquiry to modulate your responses.

- ▶ Are you curious or are you judging?
- ▶ Are you in disagreement or are you looking for shared explorations?
- ▶ Are you feeling defensive or are you open to a different perspective?
- ▶ Are you listening for your own, and the other person's, assumptions to understand more accurately what's being said?

In HSD Institute and in the broader network of friends, colleagues, and clients, we support each other to move toward this stance. We all struggle to stay there, but we are committed to living lives of curiosity, looking for new insights that come from asking questions rather than giving answers. We recognize that this is the path to building the adaptive capacity we need to live, work, and thrive in today's complex landscape. We invite you to join us on this journey.

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