Clearing Obstacles in Action Inquiry: An Exercise to Expand a Person's Repertoire of Action

By Elaine Herdman-Barker and Aftab Erfan, in the Sage Handbook of Action Research (Third Edition, 2015).

Among the skills that action researchers need to develop, reflective practice or self-inquiry may well be at the top of the list (Schon, 1983). There are many avenues into reflective practice. In this chapter we introduce an idea and a simple exercise for getting insights into the intended and unintended impacts of our habits of mind, as we attempt to engage productively in the world.

We begin here with the idea that we all bring to our work an internal "action-logic" – that is, a particular way of interpreting the behaviours of others and of ourselves. Our action-logic is a basis for our decision-making, strategy setting, and ways of responding to our environment, particularly when faced with challenges (Rooke and Torbert, 2005). It appears that our action-logic is not stagnant, but rather can advance over time to become progressively more complex given the right circumstances. Naturally, in any group of people we can expect to find some diversity among group members with regards to action-logics. For example, some of us may see the world as simply black and white, and the people we are dealing with as either "good guys" or "bad guys". Others of us may see a complex world, where people (including us) are multidimensional, and their actions have reasons and consequences we can better understand in their larger context. Depending of which action-logic we operate from, we will have very different reactions to what goes on around and within us. Social scientists have developed instruments for estimating a person's internal action-logic based on its outward manifestation. One such instrument, the Global Leadership Profile (GLP), which assigns one of eight characteristic action-logics to each person at a given time, underlies our discussion here.

Our claim in this chapter is that it is helpful to consider one's own and one's colleagues' action-logic (whether formally estimated or not), and to realize that each action-logic has its light and its shadow, its pros and cons, its desired and unintended impacts. In fact, the same tendencies or qualities that give an action-logic its strength may also be its Achilles' heel, particularly if taken to excess. **People with mature, sophisticated ways of engaging in the world are not immune from the unintended impacts of their own otherwise helpful interventions**. We claim that reflecting on and tuning into this paradoxical quality helps us more successfully navigate the often-tumultuous terrain of action research.

We will focus our discussion on one relatively mature, action-logic: what the GLP calls "Redefining" (known elsewhere as Individualist). We do this because, over time and after measuring the action-logics of hundreds of individuals using the GLP, we find that a large portion (around 30%) of senior leaders, high potential candidates and organizational consultants profile at the Redefining action-logic (equivalent to Kegan's notion of post-conventional mind). Assuming that action researchers who operate as leaders, consultants, coaches and community activists may be the types of reflective practitioners most likely to read and use this chapter, we focus our discussion on the qualities of the Redefining action-logic in the hope of resonating

with our readers. But note that a parallel exercise focusing on the light and shadow side of any action-logic can be constructed.

The Redefining Practitioner – An Introduction

The hallmark of Redefining reasoning in action is a realization that there is an accepted (often unconscious) approach in the world; that this approach is inevitably flawed; and that one way of addressing its flaws is to look more carefully at our own and our organization's effects on others and the wider environment (Cross ref philosophical toolbox chapter and grounding pieces). A basic example may be found in the reasoning of corporate sustainability champions, who become conscious that the profit-maximizing paradigm alone is harmful to people and the planet, and that moving towards a "triple bottom line" model can be an effective way of adapting to the complexity of issues at hand (Elkington, 1997; Hart, 2005). Women's rights activists in male-dominated societies, small tech-innovation start-ups among corporate giants, organic farmers swimming against the food industry inertia, collaborative thinkers in a command and control cultures – these, are all examples of the Redefining archetype that might be familiar to you. These are easy Redefining examples to highlight as they capture social movements, so important to action researchers. But for many Redefiners the refocusing is subtler; it is more a matter of waking up to the everyday assumptions underscoring their daily lives and circumstances. Redefiners may wonder, for example, "What does the way I conduct myself within my organization/with my colleagues say about me? Am I being true to myself? Am I really serving the community as they hoped to be served?" **Redefining practitioners stop taking for granted the forms, functions, values and goals of the systems they are within, and begin to redefine them in terms of what feels good in their skin.**

Within the organizational and community development realms Redefiners are often applauded and sought after. Human Resources departments are excited to recruit the visionary leaders or the innovative consultants to come in with their new energy and new paradigm. Redefining leaders can be an invaluable resource for their ability to see the bigger picture and capacity to inspire those trapped by immediate tasks, to lift their heads up and see beyond their everyday round. Through their visioning power they highlight worn-out patterns and processes and, in so doing, create movement towards something new. To boot, they are marketable because they can brand and sell themselves in connection with exciting new models of thought in an age where people are always in search of the next big, fashionable idea.

Box 1: The gift of a Redefining consultant – Erik's Example

Erik is characteristically a Redefiner. His consultancy is rooted in a passionate desire to actively challenge underlying patterns in organizations. Seen as an incontrovertible authority in his field, Erik's art lies in the skill and imagination he uses to confront powerful stakeholders with their convention - bound assumptions around long-term organizational health. He's seen as courageous, often breaking through status boundaries to expose the blind spots of CEO's, apprentices, line managers and Ministers of State alike. This is what clients and colleagues have to say about him:

"Erik sure knows how to erode our confidence that we are doing enough. **He helps us**

to see our shortcomings… He takes a somewhat democratic approach to inquiry… The big and small amongst us face his challenge." (Director of Strategy)

"**Naming the elephant in the room is Erik's specialty**…. At the last off- site [meeting] he questioned whether our actions are neutralizing our group code of ethics…This ignited a pretty hot discussion, a necessary one though." (Head of Research)

But anyone who has been a Redefining force within a group, or known one, would probably know that this can be an isolating and difficult experience. There are dangers to operating at this action-logic. Often relishing one's mental development and progressive thinking can lead to hubris and self-righteousness – a quality that others within a group detect and resent. Applying fashionable language and buzz words (social innovation, complexity science, sustainability, cradle-to-cradle, action inquiry, mindfulness and so on.) can be alienating as often as it can be inspiring. Stridently applying one's mental and psychological rank can create an allergic reaction in others (Mindell, 1995), in the same way that the denial of social rank can be aggravating (e.g. men denying that they benefit from a gender advantage, or white people not understanding why people of colour are complaining when everyone has 'equal opportunity'). While one may want to intentionally agitate others towards an end, regularly alienating people or irritating them to the point of making enemies can be inefficient and un-strategic; an unpopular Redefining leader compels others to stonewall or work against him instead of jointly with him (Cross ref chapter on action science?). Finally, the Redefining practitioner often runs the risk of being trapped within the new vehicle (theory, method, paradigm) he or she has so capably redefined. Without due diligence and constant examination, the fragility and limitations of the approach with which one is associated can go unnoticed and undermine the work.

Box 2: The shadow side of Erik

Erik does not escape the shadow-edge. When overused Erik's Redefining perspective can become stuck. Being so convinced of its efficacy, he can be guilty of *Entrenched* Redefining. A client picks up on these limitations in this comment:

"Erik's good reputation here is fading. He successfully altered the company's stand on issues of sustainability but he is beginning to crowd us out. **He articulates ideas so powerfully and his process for group inquiry is so well formed that, ironically, there is no room for dissenters**…I feel less of a person, less of an Executive if I disagree with him, like I'm an environmental monster or dinosaur " (HR Director*)*

An Exercise For Expanding One's Action Repertoire

This exercise is designed to help individuals – leaders, consultants, coaches and all types of action researchers – identify and inquire into the strengths and the obstacles of some of their leadership tendencies or their habitual ways of being

and acting. It is meant as a guide to explore how these tendencies serve, and how they do not serve, and to generate practical insights for ongoing action.

This is not an exhaustive exercise encompassing all leadership tendencies or even the breadth of the Redefining action-logic. Rather, it is built on typical revelations from consultants and leaders, a large portion of whom profile at the Redefining action-logic. It is intended to stimulate personal and group inquiry, and in our experience it does so powerfully regardless of the action-logic of those who engage in the exercise. The exercise is intended to take place in pairs or within small groups.

Indicate which 3 statements most closely describe your approach to problem resolution.

TICK HERE

1) I hold strong beliefs about what constitutes constructive action ☐

2) I'm particularly alert & sensitive to the feelings and vulnerabilities of others ☐

3) I'm keen to respect the centrality of " good process" in problem resolution & interactions ☐

4) I readily own personal power; I step up and claim my authority ☐

5) I'm at ease in revealing my weaknesses & shortcomings ☐

6) I express fierce resolve on topical issues; such as sustainability, development, diversity, culture change, spirituality, etc. ☐

7) I see myself as an agent of change ☐

8) I believe that constructive interventions are rooted in a theoretical/ideological base; (e.g religious doctrine, action inquiry, sustainability, feminism, psychology, scientific research) ☐

9) I engage without preconceptions of another's motivation; I am without prejudice or bias in my interactions ☐

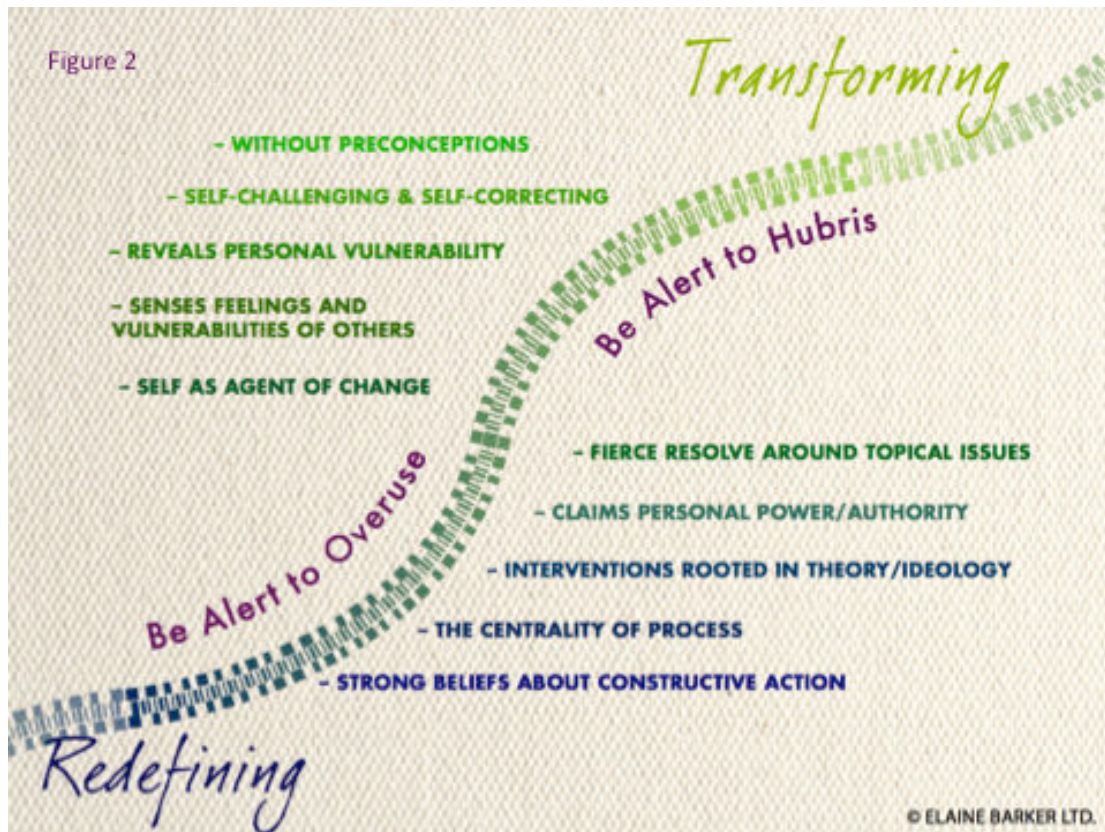10) I regularly challenge and self correct my beliefs, values, ideas and actions ☐

Figure 1

STEP 1 (Rating)
Working individually, read through the statements in Figure 1. Select 3 that most readily apply to you.

STEP 2 (Strengths)
Once you have ticked the boxes get together with a partner (or in small groups). Move through the statements starting at the bottom right of Figure 2 and explain to your partner why you ticked the boxes you did. Then describe how you experience the strength or power of each of your three statements. What is their desired impact on yourself and others? What is their gift? How does reasoning with, and action from, each of these 3 tendencies serve you and/or others?

Figure 2

Transforming

- WITHOUT PRECONCEPTIONS
- SELF-CHALLENGING & SELF-CORRECTING
- REVEALS PERSONAL VULNERABILITY
- SENSES FEELINGS AND VULNERABILITIES OF OTHERS
- SELF AS AGENT OF CHANGE

Be Alert to Hubris

Be Alert to Overuse

- FIERCE RESOLVE AROUND TOPICAL ISSUES
- CLAIMS PERSONAL POWER/AUTHORITY
- INTERVENTIONS ROOTED IN THEORY/IDEOLOGY
- THE CENTRALITY OF PROCESS
- STRONG BELIEFS ABOUT CONSTRUCTIVE ACTION

Redefining

© ELAINE BARKER LTD.

STEP 3 (Obstacles)
Going over the 3 statements you chose, try to think if there is also a flip side: how does this tendency become an obstacle for you or others? What are its unintended impacts on yourself, others or the environment? Is it getting in your way? Describe any pitfalls or shortcomings you become aware of to your partner(s).

STEP 4 (Inquiry)
Listen openly as your partner(s) make observations or raise questions about your remarks. If you are the partner raising questions do so with curiosity but not judgment. You are assisting the person doing the exercise in seeing some of his or her blind spots.

STEP 5 (Case study)
Once you have heard the questions from your partner explore how your tendencies are playing out in real situations. Select 2 or 3 of your partner's questions (do not worry about the rest) that resonated most powerfully or triggered a personal reaction (irritation, relief, confusion, surprise). What is going on in your life that may be elevating the importance of these questions right now? Explore one or two current, recent or ongoing situations with your partner.

Step 6 (Next steps)
Consider what insights you may want to take forward from this exercise. Identify inquiries and actions that will help you to stay alert to the double edge of your power and Redefining tendencies. Some Next Steps to try are:

- Identify take-aways from any step of the process. What aspects of the discussion really landed with you?

- Capture the different perspectives of your partner/group and use those differences to challenge your current viewpoint. Did your partner/groups perspective surprise you? If so, why?
- Write down your story, describing each part of the process from Step 1 through 5. What do you see in your story?
- What practices or actions might you take to forestall becoming entrenched in Redefining?
- What might you do differently do shift the specific situation(s) described in your case study?

An Illustration of How the Exercise Plays Out

Below is an example of how this exercise may play out, using a constructed self-inquiry and peer-dialogue featuring Thomas (Head of Projects) who is currently leading a forum with Erik (Lead Consultant, introduced above) and experiencing difficulties in their relationship. As a result his drive to introduce a much needed inquiry into his organization is drying up. He is joined, in this exercise, by Colette (Managing Partner).

You will see that the tone of Thomas' approach is very different to that of Erik's, even as they both exemplify the Redefining action-logic. This is deliberately chosen on our parts to expose the presence of individuality and personal taste within this and all action-logics. Clearly, this example will look very little like others, as there is no right or wrong way to respond to this exercise. We use this illustration to demonstrate the potential of the exercise, while delving more deeply into the topic of this chapter with practical details.

STEP 1 (Rating): Thomas chooses three statements from the checklist
1) I'm keen to respect the centrality of "good process" in problem resolution and interactions
2) I see myself as a change agent
3) I believe that constructive interventions are rooted in a theoretical/ideological base

STEP 2 (Strengths): Thomas describes the gist of his tendencies

Centrality of "good process". I see process as something to hold onto so that the world doesn't go into totally fragmented chaos. I recognize that people around me have different ideas and perspectives, and the idea that there is one "right" way to do things doesn't hold water any more (even if we've been doing it that way for 20 years.) And yet I still have to make decisions with these people to move forward! Good process saves our ass, because it gives us a way to navigate our differences and come to a decision that has validity. Good process gives a sense of safety, and it safeguards our relationships.

Interventions rooted in theory/ideology. If I were putting it into my own words I would use the word "lens" instead of theory or ideology. I think the main advantage of having a lens is that it gives clarity and coherence to my work and lets me make sense of a diversity of situations in a consistent and reliable way. It allows me to see what others are missing or are unable to name (the elephant in the room). The second advantage is that a lens can potentially be explained to other people so we can get on

the same page. There is something comforting and pleasant about sharing a lens, it makes us feel less alone. This is no small thing, given our human need for connection.

Self as agent of change. As I read the list of statements this was the one that totally popped out at me and picked me before I had a chance to pick it! Change agent has been a central part of my self-identification for a long time. I gravitate to it naturally, like a familiar voice calling my name. The strength I see in self-identifying as a change agent is a kind of moral strength. I think anyone who is alive and alert to the suffering of the world can't find a better moral stance than that of a change agent. Things are a mess. Thinking of myself as change-agent makes me believe that I am a good person on a mission, and it gives me courage to act with strength. My life isn't for nothing. Thank goodness!

STEP 3 (Obstacles): Thomas reflects on unintended impacts of his tendencies

Centrality of process- I probably qualify as a "process junkie". I can be a little addicted to process. I bet I drive other people a little crazy, particularly when I am addicted to a process that is somewhat rigid or when I apply any process in a rigid way. The other, perhaps more troubling downside I am aware of is that I hold onto process as the common ground in the group. But that's sort of bullshit. I mean, what is "good" process? "Good" in whose view? If people have totally different views on content, they may also have totally different views on process.

Interventions rooted in theory/ideology - A very obvious danger is that I tend to take the validity of my lenses for granted after a while. They just seem so natural and comfortable that I forget I am wearing lenses! This is a kind of blindness that sneaks up on me, especially once I am surrounded by a community that also shares my lens. I find it harder to connect with people who don't share my lens and tend to write them off as being less smart or enlightened! I also wonder if others find me a little "religious" or dogmatic, because I can sound like a broken record, always "preaching" my ideologies. Perhaps people tune me out. Or perhaps they joke about me behind my back. Either way, it makes being on the same team and working towards the same goals more difficult.

Self as agent of change – Downsides to that? First: it's pretty easy to be alienating or offensive (especially to people in power) who don't really want change. I often find myself feeling marginalized. Second: it can be depressing to want to change things – especially things actually worth changing, like corporate cultures- cause you can never see progress or results of your work. There are so many factors and everything moves so slow. To compensate, I take on too much and that often I am on the brink of burning out. Third: who am I to say in what direction we need to change? How arrogant of me to think I know! Sometimes I think I am under a spell, seduced by the sexiness of the change agent archetype. Maybe I am just holding onto this idea because it gives my life meaning and excitement.

STEP 4 (Inquiry): Colette reflects back

Having listened to Thomas go through Steps 2 and 3, Colette now inquires further into Thomas' relationship to process, ideology and change agency. She notices and asks about what attracts or repels Thomas, points out areas of over-emphasis or

under-emphasis in the reflection, and generally follows her own curiosity into Thomas' revelations. The intent is to instigate some deeper self-reflection in both parties, to challenge some underlying assumptions and hopefully, steal some surprises.

Centrality of Good Process
- Thomas, does process, in your experience, ever have an unfriendly feel to it?
- Can you identify the attraction, to you, in "rigidly" following process? Does it give you, for example, a sense of personal authority or security?
- What processes are particularly attractive to you? Which one's irritate?
- Can process be gentle and mild?

Interventions rooted in Theory/Ideology
- How do you continue, on a day-to-day basis, to challenge and test the edges of your theories?
- When colleagues have very different worldviews do you readily turn to them and welcome in their different viewpoints?
- I'm curious about the power of your language and insight, you articulate your ideas and emotions so potently. When faced with your eloquence, do others feel empowered to share their theories?

Self as Agent of change
- You rigorously challenge yourself here. It seems that there is strength (and movement) in seeing the hidden beauty, plight and seduction of change agency.
- So how might you work, ever more effectively with this tension?
- What, in your framing of change agency, leads you to exhaustion?
- What tactics or self-reminders would help to guard you from over extension?

Step 5 (Case study): Thomas explores a professional situation

Thomas focuses on the theme of "process" and uses two of the questions, from Colette, to work through a situation he currently finds himself in the middle of; his initiative, with Erik, to set up a forum in the organization.

Thomas- You asked, "what processes are particularly attractive to you and which ones irritate?" and then later on you asked, "can process be gentle and mild?" These two questions are so alive for me... I realize that there is something about the attitude or manner with which I lead a process that can make it gentle and mild. So sometimes I could be following the steps and it could feel stressful and rigid and other times I could be following the same steps but doing it with a relaxed attitude, or a "go-with-the-flow" attitude. So I would say what attracts me is gentleness and what irritates me is aggression, and the gentleness and aggression are largely about the attitude of the person leading a process.

And here is the particular situation I am in right now: I am working with a colleague, convening a group that needs to talk about some pretty uncomfortable things. But there is a question about how do we take them there? There is a tension between my colleague and me: he wants to go fast and I want to go slow, just to put it simply. The difference is in our attitudes. I feel like he wants to push them over the edge. His

process design and his manners say, "be brave, don't think too hard about it, let's just trust and let's just go there". And I'm saying let's really slow it down and ask permission and make it safe. Let's forget about the world that is always about speed and efficiency. Let's "kiss them over the edge" instead of push them!

Colette- Three issues stand out for me here. One: the intention of the person leading the process. Two: the danger that process can become a distraction, meaning we can lose sight of what is happening with people. And lastly, I wonder if we sometimes use process as a safety net, assuming that all of the wisdom is in the process instead of the people in the group?

Thomas – Yeah, I think we definitely use it as a safety net! I mean, that's why processes usually have four steps – as far back as Getting to Yes!- because four steps is all you can remember in the middle of the mess! And we hold onto our four steps like a parachute while we're falling out the sky! But I think you're right that if it comes at the cost of forgetting that we're in relationship and that we're creating a space for something important to happen, then we lose people.

Colette – When you talked about the situation between you and your colleague, I had this image of two people in the triangle and I wondered about the third corner, the group. What is their role in the process? Are they part of it or are you and your colleague holding the process alone?

Thomas –I think you're onto something. The group participants are not really there right now. They are not creating the process with us. Why not? Well, I think in our attempt to create the space we think we need, we're not asking them to be involved! They might have a preference for whether it's fast or slow, and whether it would be better to just jump in or to tiptoe in one little step at a time. We don't know cause we're not asking.

Colette – Are they aware they are in a process? Does it feel tangible to them?

Thomas – Possibly not. They don't know the behind the scene choices we're making as conveners. And I think what I am getting out of this conversation is that if we make the backstage a little more visible, they could actually help us.

Colette – Can you think of a reason why you haven't done this already?

Thomas – Well, I guess mostly because my colleague is moving us so fast through the preparations that we're not taking the time to talk to people. So I want to say that it's his fault! But is it also partially my fault? Let me think… I must say I find it a little scary to include the group in the decision-making, because… maybe if we give people more of a say they will say "stop dilly dallying and let us jump in!" and that proves my preference for slowness to be unhelpful. I'm afraid to ask because what I have been standing up for may turn out to be wrong!

Colette – Aha! They might prefer the "push" instead of the "kiss".

Thomas – Yeah. There is something about my attachment to my way of doing process that's getting in the way. I am entrenched in the "kiss"… Maybe I can let that go a little.

Step 6 (Next step) : Thomas and Colette's take-aways

Thomas and Colette have explored how, in the Redefining frame, we can lose our vantage point in our use of process, becoming stuck in patterns of behavior that no-longer serve our needs or those of our community. At this last step of the exercise, they choose to a) identify take-ways from Step 5 and b) to explore actions that may lift them out of their entrenched position.

(Note: both Thomas and Colette participate in Next Steps. It is our experience that this exercise is of mutual benefit and yields new insights for all the people involved.)

Colette – Some aspects of process are dawning on me. One is how process relates to time: how we use it consciously and unconsciously to speed thing up and slow things down. Second, I realized that there are certain things we work with in our every day lives, processes, interventions and so on that are sort of secret. And somehow that puts a heavy responsibility on our shoulders; where actually by surfacing the secrets we can relieve ourselves of stress.

Thomas – For me there is a very clear take away for the situation with my colleague, which is this: I have to be more assertive in my attempt to slow us down, and I can do this specifically by opening up the planning process, making it less secret and more participatory. At the same time I have to watch my tendency to become entrenched in my ways, and I can do that specifically by opening myself to whatever feedback comes from the group.

Colette –Well, that feels quite complete to me. Those sound like very tangible insights for both of us. Thank you!

Thomas – I found it very helpful, thank you Colette.

Conclusion

Action researchers at every action-logic can be blind to the unintended impacts of their ways of operating in the world. Redefiners, run this risk because so much of their gift is in creating and being champions for appealing, fresh, new ideas and processes. It is easy to get entrenched in these appealing, fresh, new ideas and processes as the example of Thomas illustrates. While the ideas and processes may in fact be very good, entrenchment can get in the way of clear thinking and relating to others in productive ways. It can create unnecessary suffering for oneself and others. Through exercises such as the one we have outlined above, Redefiners (and in fact the Redefining tendencies within each of us regardless of our action-logic) can become conscious of their intended and unintended impacts on others and themselves. Furthermore, they can decide whether they want to change their course of action for greater effectiveness.

Bibliography

Elkington, John. 1997. *Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of the 21st Century Business*, Capstone Publishing: Oxford

Hart, Stuart. 2005. *Capitalism at the Crossroads: The Unlimited Business Opportunities in Solving the World's Most Difficult Problems,* Warton School Publishing

Kegan, Robert. 1994. *In Over Our Heads,* Harvard University Press

Mindell, Arnold. 1995. *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity,* Lao Tse PRess

Rooke, David and Torbert, William R. 2005. "Seven Transformations of Leadership" in *Harvard Business Review*, 83(4): 67-76,133

Schon, Donald.1983. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think In Action*, Basic Books

Bios

Aftab Erfan (PhD) is a scholar-practitioner and an instructor at the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia. She is past winner of the Don Schon Award for Excellence in Learning from Practice (2012). Along with Elaine, she is an Action Inquiry Associate.

Elaine Herdman-Barker is Chair & Partner for Mutual Growth...and the search for the common good at GLA. She specializes in helping executives and consultants to become increasingly aware of their thoughts and behaviors in-action and is a leading authority on the assessment and practice of action-logics. A lecturer and facilitator at DeBaak Management Centrum in The Netherlands, Elaine leads Career Development, Adult Development and Leadership Master classes across Europe, North Africa and America. Her coaching practice is worldwide and reaches across utilities, oil and gas, universities, local and central government, financial services, motor manufacturing, health, pharmaceutical, telecommunication and IT industries.

Keywords