

# **Who Has the Answers When No One Knows the Questions? Use of Inquiry Leadership to Co-Create a Workplace**

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## **Abstract**

Questions are powerful. They elicit information, and they can co-create bonds and can create shared world-views. However, little work exists on this workplace phenomenon. We propose a model for inquiry leadership that addresses how people use questions to handle organizational changes that cannot be dealt with through normal means. Inquiry leadership proposes that leadership can exist as a communication process (inquiry) rather than as an individual role. This model provides a way of understanding how leadership occurs in organizations where roles and outcomes have become fluid and environments change with increasing frequency. With inquiry leadership, we present a model of how and why workers use questions to create new organizational structures.

## **Introduction**

“Questions are a burden to others; answers a prison for oneself.”  
(Chaffey, 1968)

The masters of The Village – a fictional Orwellian prison for former spies – posted those words to break the inmates' spirits and to drive them apart. We believe the people running the prison grasped a fundamental truth: when someone asks a question, they can get more than just an answer. Questions form bonds, create communities, and change world views. Questions are a natural and common occurrence in all aspects of life. When faced with something new, interesting, or threatening, people naturally and freely ask questions. And when people ask questions and turn to each other for help, they form a bond. Asking questions is a natural part of life. Therefore, questions must have a role at work as well – especially during times of change.

Most advanced economies have gained competitive advantages from worker knowledge and innovation for decades. However, despite the widespread acknowledgement of this situation, most team and leadership theories (such as normative decision process theory, contingency theory of leadership, and charismatic leadership theory) were developed during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s: times when the typical workplace was manufacturing oriented and managers, rather than team members, were thought to understand the workplace best (Miner, 2005a, 2005b). To understand the new workplace realities, we need new theories. These new theories must address workplaces that center more around team interactions than hierarchical relationships and where rapid change and uncertainty are the norm.

We began this research by posing a simple question: how do workers ask questions to cope with an uncertain environment? Our model offers an answer: the development of *inquiry leadership* (IL). The model is a framework that examines (1) how work groups use questions to uncover implicit knowledge among members, (2) how they mutually frame the meaning of a change, (3) how they develop new roles in a relational network, and (4) how they co-create a new understanding of reality that accounts for workplace change.

We will show that inquiry leadership arises from crisis. Workers begin asking questions when a change occurs that has no clear precedent and poses disruptions that managers cannot fully deal with. In such situations, workers have to turn to each other and using questions to make sense of the changes. In asking these questions they create new realities that allow work groups to continue operating (Barthes, 1972; Berger & Luckmann, 2011; Searle, 2010). By acting communally, workers take on the major leadership roles of directing, information dispersal, cultural training, and even emotional bonding needed for workplace rapport (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, in press; Sullivan, 1988).

Inquiry leadership draws heavily from Weick's organizational sense-making (Weick, 1993b, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), and ideas about how workers co-create views of workplace reality (Erbert, 2016; Searle, 2010). IL specifically focuses on how workers use of questions in the sensemaking process, and how such questions draw out and pool knowledge about how to adapt to and handle new situations. In short, workers use questions to elicit implicit knowledge (M. Mayfield, 2010). Jointly, workers' posing questions and giving answers provide a substitute to traditional team leader behaviors (Kerr & Jermier, 1978; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996; Xu, Zhong, & Wang, 2013), and this questioning process is developed and transmitted through a networked process (Eisenberg, Johnson, & Pieterse, 2015; Monge & Contractor, 2001, 2003).

IL also differs from existing leadership and worker interaction theories by moving the role of team leadership from a top-down, directive process to one of asking questions among colleagues. As such, it is different even from models based on informal leadership. It proposes that the leadership function among workers can be driven by a distributed knowledge creation process that results in a guiding *gestalt* – a gestalt process of people asking each other questions until they create a mutually satisfying reality.

We present our development of inquiry leadership based on the following sections. The research questions that guide this investigation begin with the concept of how inquiry operates in work relationships: Do we need another leadership theory? Where do we draw our view of leadership from? How does leadership emerge through questions? Where do we go from here?

### **Do We Need Another Leadership Theory?**

No leadership theory, no theory, can fully encompass reality. Instead, they give us a partial view of reality that we can use instead of the complete view which we will never fully comprehend (Fort, 1975; Kuhn, 1996). Such perspectives answer some questions and ignore others, but become accepted because they serve a purpose for a time (Adams, 2013; Bormann, 1972; Jackson, 2002). As circumstances change, or as new voices arise that call for their own place in a dialogue, new ideas must be crafted to understand new realities.

As recognized by Alvesson and colleagues (2016, p. 140), current leadership understanding is “an inherently ideological activity.” That is, the dominant view of leadership privileges certain leader

methods, activities, and social orders above others (Alvesson, 1987). The dominant view elevates an individual's (leader's) importance while reducing the role of teams and environmental circumstances. It privileges organizationally sanctioned knowledge over emergent ideas. It promotes the appearance of certainty over questioning belief systems. By accepting this dominant view, as pointed out by Alvesson and Kärreman (2016), research reinforces the traditional view of leadership while ignoring emerging models.

We propose a different leadership model. One co-constructed among a group of people rather than resting in a single person; a model rooted in communication acts between people who must elicit knowledge, share understanding, and craft a working world view to function. We readily acknowledge that our theory suffers from the same partial lens of reality as any other leadership theory. We offer a way to examine different aspects of leadership communication: one that investigates the role of workers when dealing with organizational changes and moves the role of leadership to a shared process among peers.

### **So Where Does Our Current View of Leadership Come From?**

The historian Bert A. Spector (2016) asked questions about leadership and our understanding of leadership. Spector concluded that in the past one-hundred and fifty years, much of what we think we know about leadership comes from *ideal types* – what we believe is true rather than what empirical evidence tells us. Much of these ideal types come from Thomas Carlyle and his *great (white) man theory* (Carlyle, 1840). Carlyle proposed that historical advancements came from a great personage (male and implicitly white): through the great leader's commands and through the followers' willingness to obey those orders. While modern thought holds that no single group holds a monopoly on achievement and only on rare occasions can one person claim full responsibility for group success or failure, the influence of Carlyle's ideas can still be seen in such theories as charismatic leadership, transformational leadership, and even servant leadership. Spector points out a common thread exists among most leadership theories: that a single extraordinary person holds the key to elevating the common people who look for leadership. If this situation ever existed, Spector points out, that time is fading – most workplaces now deal with complex realities that preclude a single person having responsibility for fully directing an organization. Spector continues by saying that holding on to our outdated view of leadership creates dangerous fantasies that allow the unscrupulous to perpetuate their own control and organizational inequities.

Of course, Spector is not the only (or even first) person to question standard leadership views. Alvesson and Kärreman describe our current leadership understanding in this way: “the leader stands for agency whereas follower agency, as well as social conditions, do not matter much” and that non-leaders are “reduced to objects or recipients of the leader’s impressive acts” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016, p. 140). In a similar vein, Gemmill and Oakley (1992) argue that our understanding of leadership acts as a social myth (Barthes, 1972; Kuronen & Virtaharju, 2015) that suppresses autonomy and collaboration to create consensus and re-enforce dominant hierarchies.

### **Are There Different Views of Leadership?**

In response to such criticisms and changing workplace realities, researchers have developed new models: models that place all organizational members as co-constructors of leadership (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Kelley, 1992; Shamir, 2007). Other researchers have framed followers as knowledge agents who actively shape their environment: agents who – when they have

access to support, knowledge, and inspiration – have less need for leaders directing their workplace activities (Carsten et al., 2010; Collinson, 2005; Gronn, 2002; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2011; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Thorpe, Gold, & Lawler, 2011).

### **Where Do We Draw Our View of Leadership From?**

We develop our view of leadership from such authors as Fairhurst and Grant who proposed that “. . . leadership [as well as followership] is co-constructed, a product of sociohistorical and collective meaning making, and negotiated on an ongoing basis through a complex interplay among leadership actors, be they designated or emergent leaders, managers, and/or followers” (2010, p. 172). This definition includes a traditional view of the leader as being someone who has been granted legitimate authority or gained it due to influence exerting skills (such as communication), but also includes leadership as a shared and mutually developed phenomenon.

This definition allows for followers to emerge or act as leaders and for the possibility that leadership exists between people – that it resides not in a single person but in a collective that emerges from interactions with others and varies across time. DeRue and Ashford described this leadership view as “reciprocal and mutually reinforcing identities . . . endorsed and reinforced within a broader organizational context, and . . . dynamic over time” (2010, p. 636).

### **How Does Leadership Emerge Through Questions?**

Leadership identities emerge through talk, and the many ways that they emerge has been examined through various discourse studies. For our model, the work of Walker and Aritz (2015) provides useful insights into the role of workplace questions. They documented four discursive leadership styles distinguished by five discourse elements: meaning of questions, links between turns, topic shifts, listening cues, and simultaneous speech occurrence. Subsequent research by these authors and their colleagues (Aritz, Walker, Cardon, & Zhli, 2017), delved more deeply into how leaders used questions and how questions created leaders. They looked at teams without formal leaders and how the leadership role formed in these teams. What they found provides an intriguing insight into the way communication interactions create outcomes that we associate with traditional leadership. The researchers identified three different groups: emergent leaders (people who took on a traditional leadership role), transitory leaders (shared or distributed leadership), and non-leaders (where there was no clear leadership role). The type of questions remained the same in all of the situations, however, the number of questions increased as more people participated in the leadership process.

Also, the questions' roles changed as more people took on leadership responsibilities. As more people assumed responsibility for the leader's role, questions became more flexible and probing. People used questions to ensure understanding, make suggestions, and offer and ask for help. In short, these questions were going beyond simple information requests and being used to create a group dynamic and a shared world-view. These insights provide a major pillar on which we build inquiry leadership – how people use questions to create leadership. In the next section we will explore the specifics of how people use questions to build shared leadership.

### **Are All Questions the Same?**

For inquiry leadership, questions come in two varieties – routine and extraordinary. Each type is driven by different needs, plays a different role in work relationships, and needs to be seen as distinct. Routine

questions (What is the weather outside? Where will the meeting be held? Did you watch the volleyball game last night? Is the copy machine working?) are common and easily asked between co-workers. These questions have an informational role and act more to develop small social bonds between workers. When someone answers a question, they feel more positive about the person who asked the question (Grant, 2013), and questions between co-workers strengthen ties and create a healthier and more cohesive workplace. These questions also allow co-workers to show concern for each other as human beings: questions about a co-worker's family or health, their interests and hobbies, or even about their clothes or jewelry. People usually ask such routine questions about non-threatening life aspects and they act as a social glue – the kinds of questions that are used to create and maintain workplace personal relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Liu & Gao, 2014; Taylor & Altman, 1987).

Routine questions also act as workplace rituals, creating a comfortable structure between people that brings a kind of predictability to the workplace (Weick, 1995). Routine questions also establish informal roles for people – who knows what new lunch place to try, how to make a cranky printer work, or the best time to discuss your travel reimbursement with the boss (Weick, 1993a). These questions also provide needed cohesion for the typical workplace.

Extraordinary questions arise when the standard way of work no longer functions, when workers' view of the world no longer applies, and when workers' relationships are broken and forced to change. The topics of routine and extraordinary questions are similar – What should be done? How can we establish a work relationship? Who has the needed information? However, the purposes of these questions are profoundly different. Extraordinary questions grapple with workplaces that are no longer routine: workplaces facing important environmental disruptions where such questions must be asked and answered to continue operating. Extraordinary questions are about re-creating the workplace; they drive leadership inquiry and move the process of workplace decisions from routine processes to one driven by workers asking each other questions. Examples of such questions might be: How can we improve this policy to avoid this roadblock? Why don't we use a progress reporting system to improve communication for this project? Does anyone know how to automate this process to make it more efficient? Routine questions are about maintaining order, making interactions function more smoothly, and re-enforcing a given workplace hierarchy. Extraordinary questions are about re-creating the workplace.

Routine and extraordinary questions also differ in the risks involved. Asking extraordinary questions means making yourself uncomfortable and vulnerable. When you ask these types of questions, you risk revealing your ignorance and losing face among co-workers (Moore, 2017; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). These questions fundamentally challenge the status quo: a status quo that may no longer work, but one that people in your workplace are accustomed to and may fight to maintain (especially those whose power is threatened by the questions). Raising these questions risks your expulsion from the work group (socially or formally through termination) or marginalization. Asking extraordinary questions can be stressful and tiring; asking question to develop a new world view is even more so. To understand why people engage in such questions, why leadership inquiry emerges and disrupts routine workplace relationships, we must look at forces capable of disrupting a workplace enough to motivate workers to recreate their relationships by asking questions.

### **What Drives Inquiry?**

If posing extraordinary questions is difficult and risky, if engaging in inquiry leadership is an arduous task, then it must be driven by circumstances meriting an unusual response. Inquiry leadership starts

with a disruption: a disruption strong enough to break a workplace routine, a disruption that cannot be ignored, a disruption that creates more problems and discomfort than the pain of asking a question. There must be an environmental shift that causes the processes and world view of workers to no longer adequately function. Along with such a disruption, the formal system for dealing with related changes must also fail – workers must turn to each other to deal with the change. The final ingredient for a successful IL process is a culture that fosters – or at least permits – a free flow of inquiry among workers. This section provides details on these three requirements and presents relevant propositions.

Work routines come from the workers' views of reality. What must they do at work, how they should do it, how should they act with each other, and what rewards will they gain? Teams need this shared view of reality to interact smoothly. Not everyone must have the same world view, but all world views must mesh and coordinate, and the overall gestalt must be appropriate to the work group's task requirements. Without these foundations people and teams will sacrifice their organization's added value to stakeholders. Environmental disruptions – changes in the external environment, in the work itself, or to the work group – can also challenge this shared and coordinated world view

After a disruptive change, people seek to either re-establish or to re-organize their coordinated world-view in an attempt to return stability and routine to their interactions as quickly and easily as possible (Duffy, 1984; Wiener, 1965; Witzany, 2015). The most likely reaction is that group members will seek to ignore the change; they will attempt to continue with existing routines and *not* alter their view. For a time, such denial may work – and may be the solution for minor disruptions – but eventually the failure of old routines and interactions address the new change cannot be denied. At this point, workers may collectively or individually turn to established procedures or to people higher in their organization for guidance on how to deal with the change. If these sources fail, group members may turn to each other for guidance.

There needs to be one note about this early stage of IL – the preliminary stage. When workers seek answers from procedures and leaders, they are also engaging in a questioning process. However, this process differs from our idea of inquiry leadership because the communication acts only one way. Organizational procedures, as static objects, cannot engage in the questioning process. They provide an information resource and may help shape later world view development, but they remain inert. (See Latour's (2005) work on Actor Network Theory for a differing argument.) Leaders, too, cannot engage in the IL process and remain apart from those asking questions. When a leader has an answer about how to deal with a situation the IL process need not begin. However, when leaders lack this information, they may respond with their own questions to the workers. When leaders do this, their relationship to the group changes. By engaging in the inquiry process leaders leave behind their formal role and become one of the actors engaged in creating the seekers of the new workplace reality.

The possibility of role fluidity gives another insight into inquiry leadership. During times of change people can join or leave relational networks and play roles different from their formal ones. Inquiry may become a new source of role identity and the inquiry process becomes the focal unit of change (Contractor, Bonti, Hyatt, O'Keefe, & Jones, 2002). In this manner, Actor-Network Theory provides a useful model of the process (Latour, 2005). Understanding the process of composing an IL network becomes important. Workers' questions can unite them into a single unit seeking understanding and direction through their relationships. Proposition provides a distillation of these ideas about environmental disruption and the IL relationship.

Proposition 1: Some workers unite as a network bound by mutual inquiry after a disruptive environmental change occurs that cannot be dealt with by referencing existing organizational procedures or managerial expertise.

But we have not truly addressed *why* workers engage in this process – what motivates them. Fundamentally, the disruption must create discomfort and stress for people. In workplaces with highly committed workers who identify strongly with the organization, such stress may come from seeing performance fall or the firm's reputation suffer (Cheney, 1983; Elsbach, 1999; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Hubbard, 2016). With high organizational identification, members see workplace harm as personal harm, and this affront can goad workers into a quest to make improvements. When workers have less organizational investment, the drive comes from more personal reasons; workers ask questions to reduce increased work demands, to solve co-ordination problems, or to decrease inter-personal frictions. Some exceptional individuals may be driven by their ability to identify processes that are not optimal and to improve conditions for all. In all cases, questions act as a method to restore personal comfort and may serve as relief from a negative situation. However, questions driven by a desire to improve the situation – from a commitment to continuous improvement, a cause, a company, co-workers, or friends – will not stop. Questions affirm that the world has changed, the routine has been broken, and that answers are hard to find. When questions cannot be answered, they will be passed along between people, and these people will form networks to seek knowledge and solutions.

Through these networks, we expect tacit knowledge to emerge. With new environmental demands, existing knowledge can find new uses. Some members may have encountered similar situations from different settings and know how to cope with the disruption. The bonding process of developing such networks may give co-workers a reason to share knowledge they had previously kept to themselves. The knowledge may be translated into tangible forms (such as through the development of new procedures) or simply better distributed through the network when elicited through questions. Also, people can synergistically combine knowledge held among different workers.

At the same time, the question or problem that draws workers together may not have a tangible answer. It may be that they need to *understand* a new workplace reality, such as when their company is bought by a competitor, faces an ethical scandal, or (on a more personal level) even when two co-workers disagree. These situations all change a work group's shared reality, and the workers need a consensus about what it means. Asking each other questions in these situations, helps workers develop a consensus understanding. While *answers* to mutual questions help craft a new view of reality, *questions* themselves frame the world view.

On the other hand, questions that are independent of answers influence mutual world views in three ways: their sequencing, frequency, and anchoring value. For example, earlier questions shape later questions thereby framing events that will create a new world view (“What do you think Lee and Stacy will do at work now that they are married?” “Do you think they will shut us out from the clients they bring in?”). Question frequency also shapes a world view. Questions asked more often will be seen as more relevant and more useful for dealing with a new situation. Finally, some questions serve as anchors, shaping other questions. As with our earlier example, a first question about Lee and Stacy's work behavior led to the second question about possible work outcomes (the possibility of being shut out from new clients), and further questions about other workplace consequences would likely follow. If the first question had been about more personal issues (“Do you think Lee and Stacy will be ‘loveys doveys’ in the office all the time now that they are married?”), future questions would more likely be directed toward non-work behaviors such as if other co-workers might become romantically involved.

However, when a line of inquiry does not provide workers with a useful, new world view, then new questions will arise, but the new questions will play the same roles as the original questions. In either situation, when workers start sharing a common view of what questions should be asked, group cohesiveness will increase. And work groups are more likely to accept answers that follow from these questions – also increasing cohesion and providing a base for an emerging team culture. Even if work groups do not mutually agree and come together, asking questions by some members can still create change. This step involves building coalitions.

The creation of a shared world-view leads to successful coping when changes occur in the workplace. Initial questions among workers allow a work group to focus on specific situational aspects and create tentative avenues to explore when addressing a situation. When a shared decision about what to address arises, the group can direct efforts toward specific outcomes, and focus questions on them. This process creates efficiency but also poses the possible danger of the team accepting a solution that suffices rather than an optimal one. Other dangers include groupthink (Esser, 1998; Janis, 1972; Turner & Pratkanis, 2014), or targeting solutions that help the team but ignore larger organizational needs – such as when questions focus on ways to avoid new competitive demands (thus reducing the team's work) rather than ways to meet these demands. Proposition 1 provides a summary of our major expectations for this part of inquiry leadership.

Proposition 2: More active and open inquiry leads to successfully solving a given problem by thorough agreement on how to view a situation (social construction of reality).

However, this process can be fragile, and may be stopped early on by the larger organizational culture. When an organization opposes open questions, teams will face extreme difficulty in starting the process. More directly, managers may feel threatened by such worker activities and they may work to stop them. Finally, members of the team can exert negative pressure on the process. If these forces shut down the inquiry process when it first begins, it is unlikely to restart when later opportunities arise. These statements lead to proposition 3.

Proposition 3: Early disruptions to the inquiry process will likely stop the process and create a culture that squelches future inquiry leadership activities.

### **What Processes Happen with Successful Inquiry Leadership?**

Inquiry leadership is grounded in a set of processes that both sustain inquiry relationships between co-workers and result from the inquiry process. These aspects are bound up in a mutual dance that drives the process – either to an increase in questioning or to an end of the questioning process. Understanding the interplay gives us insights into how workers co-operate (or fail to co-operate) in using questions to create a new world view when their old one breaks.

The development of tacit knowledge reservoirs is a major outcome and sign of successful inquiry leadership. By exchanging questions and answers, workers will create *tacit knowledge* reservoirs in the work group itself. These reservoirs will act as a knowledge store against loss of members and a base for new members to draw on, creating group resilience in the process. The drawing out of such knowledge through questioning distributes tacit knowledge throughout the group. This means that even if a person leaves the IL network, that person's knowledge can be recovered by other people. This process also

applies to understanding the IL process itself. Through greater use, the process becomes embedded in the organizational culture.

IL will also improve individual abilities, which, cumulatively, will support the relationships necessary for continued successful inquiry leadership. Specifically, IL is expected to increase worker self-efficacy and job satisfaction. Self-efficacy will improve due to workers' experience and success with IL. The more that someone sees workplace improvements arising from asking questions, they will feel more confident using IL later. This increased self-efficacy, in turn, will prompt someone to employ IL again in the future when faced with new environmental disturbances, and to turn to their work colleagues through existing IL networks, or to create new IL networks. Worker job satisfaction should increase due to lower stress from a better understanding of the environmental shock. Also, job satisfaction can improve due to stronger relational ties at work; ties that help workers feel included and valued.

All of these processes will create an accelerating (positive) feedback loop for IL use among co-workers (Almaney, 1974; Boulding, 1956; J. Mayfield, Mayfield, & Sharbrough, 2015). Successful use of IL will lead to continued use in the future, while a lack of success when using IL will diminish the likelihood of future use. In successful inquiry leadership situations, network members will have personal and relationally embedded experiences that may allow for continued and easier use in the future. These workers will feel more confident in turning to each other to ask questions and know that they are likely to be satisfied if they do so. Also, the network will be increasingly resilient against knowledge loss as the dispersal and mirroring of process methods spread throughout the network. When IL proves unsuccessful, self-efficacy in its use will diminish, job satisfaction will fade, the collective desire to ask questions will wane, and even knowledge of more effective ways to implement IL may disappear from a relational network. Restarting the IL process at this point can be difficult. We will discuss the reasons why IL use may slow down after the next proposition.

**Proposition 4: A successful process will lead to better inquiry leadership in future situations and a failed process will hinder future inquiry leadership in the future.**

Inquiry will start slowly when IL is new to an organization and will terminate quickly once an answer is elicited that satisfies the original problem. If no new disruptions emerge that threaten the system's stability, then it is likely that IL will not take hold as a latent aspect of the organizational culture. However, if frequent disruptions occur within an organization, IL may become a reliable response to address these changes.

Inquiry will start quickly when IL is embedded, and the process will progress rapidly as people become more comfortable about asking questions and probing deeper. Once IL has become part of a work group's culture, many of the early steps in the process can be skipped. Workers will be more open in the questions they ask early in the process and will ask more questions of co-workers. Questions can also flow through a communication network and reach separate work groups. When immediate co-workers cannot answer a question, they may pass the inquiry along to people they know in other work groups. In this way, weak communication ties will play a role in inquiry leadership (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Granovetter, 1973; Haythornthwaite, 2002). However, such transmissions will only occur among people and groups that have adopted the inquiry culture.

In contrast, the IL process will diminish as a problem is solved or less new information is elicited. The process slows as information dwindles, when inquiries no longer elicit new knowledge. This can occur when a problem is solved or a new frame develops for a situation.

Our expectations for how inquiries are used over time are stated in propositions and .

Proposition 5: The amount of inquiry will follow a reverse f-distribution shaped curve when IL is not culturally embedded.

Proposition 6: The amount of inquiry will follow an f-distribution shaped curve when IL is embedded in the culture.

### **What Roles Should Emerge from Inquiry Leadership?**

In asking each other questions, workers will form new roles – roles that are discovered through the IL network and ones that workers seek out. Activities in these roles and what outcomes must be accomplished will reflect a specific IL network, workplace, and environmental disruption. But there are three general roles that should be present in all IL networks. These roles are expert, connector, and leader. Experts are people who hold knowledge relevant to the new tasks or who provide the best understanding of the new situation. These experts may not be the ones asking the most questions. There will also be individuals who emerge as connectors – those able to elicit defining information from others and distribute this information throughout the group. The people in these roles are more likely to remain in them even across environmental shocks. Their inquiries will often be centered around discovering *who* has needed information.

Both the experts and connectors will become vital to communication networks that emerge through the process. Experts may not have many network connections. Their information can be channeled through connectors. Connectors will have to be central to the inquiry networks. Who is an expert or connector may change with environmental shifts, and the emergence of such new roles may create more changes that must be dealt with through an IL process.

Proposition 7: Inquiry networks will emerge with experts and connectors as vital parts of an inquiry network.

While the group will take on more leadership tasks, individuals may also assume leader roles. Experts and connectors are most likely to emerge as leaders. Additionally, individuals who ask the most relevant questions can also emerge as leaders.

Proposition 8: People who are more active in IL processes will emerge as transitory leaders.

Proposition 8a: People who are more active in inquiries will emerge as transitory leaders (formal or informal).

Proposition 8b: People who occupy hubs will emerge as transitory leaders (formal or informal).

### **What Questions Do Workers Ask Each Other?**

While people can ask countless questions, we propose seven categories for the *types* of questions that will be asked. These categories should cover all types of inquiry.

Event framing (in co-creating reality)

Importance determining (to decide how much attention should be paid to an event)

Information seeking (to elicit tacit knowledge or discover explicit knowledge faster)

Relational linkage (to establish roles, inter-relationships, and co-operation)

Emotional linkage (to create empathetic relationships)

Agreement seeking (to achieve an end)

Turn inquiry (conversational or leadership turn-taking)

### **What Boundaries Limit Inquiry Leadership?**

The act of people asking each other questions is universal or nearly so. We can imagine a workplace where the people are forced into silence through thunderous machinery or draconian rules. In most situations, however, questions are a natural part of human interactions: a way for people to explore and bond; share ideas and create new concepts of the workplace. But all phenomena have limits. For inquiry leadership, these boundaries come from opportunities and culture. Workers need the opportunity to communicate and interact in a meaningful way. People located at different places and interacting through technological means seem less likely to engage in IL and the different social mores of electronically mediated communications may make the IL process far different when it does occur. Cultural barriers are likely to prevent workers from developing and participating in IL ties. Such barriers arise when workers expect managers to have all of the answers. These expectations might come from a broader national or organizational culture. But when managers are expected to be the final arbiters of wisdom, then questions will die when a manager does not have an answer. Similarly, managers may actively work to squelch questions. Authoritarian leaders or managers in bureaucratic firms can see questions as threats to their power and position—threats that must be stopped. In a sense, however, these managers have a point. Questions have power. Workers gain this power when they stop seeking answers *from* others and they start seeking answers *with* each other.

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

A knowledge driven workforce lends itself to leadership that arises from the interactions of workers rather than the directions of leaders. Questions provide a major mechanism for uncovering implicit knowledge and co-creating reality. Modern workplaces have become more decentralized – less leader driven. When workplaces face frequent environmental changes, workers can cope by asking each other questions and substituting inquiry leadership for directive leadership. Not all work places foster such inquiry. Those that do will see better results.

With inquiry leadership we have a new lens to look at leadership and team processes. IL focuses on the process of people asking each other questions rather than expecting to be told what to do. As such, it is a good frame for understanding modern workplaces.

Organizations should encourage questions, even fundamental questions about what the organization means among workers. Such questions will provide the future for workplace relations. For

encouragement, a culture of free inquiry must be developed. Also, it is vital to identify inquiry network hubs and support them. In addition, traditional leaders need to be motivated to support the process. They will be asked to give up some of their traditional power. Help them to understand how supporting the process is a new form of power.

So what have we found from *our* questions? We discovered that questions are a powerful, defining part of life and work. We have learned that questions have always played this role, but that this role is becoming more prominent as workplaces become less top-down, more talent dependent, more knowledge driven, and more geographically dispersed. The forces of uncertainty and change that are threatening to fragment workplaces have also given rise to this process of inquiry that can create new and possibly stronger ties between workers. Answers may be elusive, but not the process of asking. In this sentiment, we agree with Arthur C. Clarke (n.d.): “I don't pretend we have all the answers. But the questions are certainly worth thinking about.”

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