



Inquiry as a Way of Life

by Royce Holladay

“Adaptive Capacity” is a phrase that’s becoming more popular in the press, with broad variation in specificity and depth of explanation. In HSD Institute, we include it as a part of our tagline: *Building adaptive capacity to deal with turbulent change*. In our work, adaptive capacity describes a repertoire of skills and insights that use models and methods based in Human Systems Dynamics (HSD).

HSD builds adaptive capacity as it invites us to step into:

- Questions rather than answers
- Iterative cycles of action to shift patterns
- Function and explanation, rather than description
- Action rather than talk
- Emergent change rather than imposed change
- Local action that shifts system-wide patterns

In essence HSD invites us to step into and stand in inquiry. Not just as a way of working with our clients and not just as a way of professional learning. Engaging the world through a lens of HSD is to engage the world from a stance of inquiry at work, at home, in politics, in service . . . as a way of life.

It’s about questions, and it’s more than that. 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. To build praxis in HSD, we believe you have to stand in inquiry. Over the years, we have worked to define what we mean by “standing in inquiry” and have identified four behaviors we believe contribute to that stance.

Ask questions you can’t answer.

We find answers have a pretty short shelf-life. By the time you get to the next question, the answer you formulated earlier may or may not still 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 that surrounds us. We engage with others and use personal reflection to explore the ways people live and work together. We ask about what 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.

Be comfortable with ambiguity and 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 now. You have to get comfortable with being and experiencing silence when all around you are clamoring for your response and your words. It's in the silence of listening that we can discern the deep responses to our questions. Finally, we sometimes have to be comfortable when we cannot come to closure on some issue or question, knowing that the next instant may change the world and create new challenges in that space. We have found that sometimes the best closure you are going to get is your next question.

Remain open to and actively seek new learning

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 us to "look" at what we don't see as well as what we 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

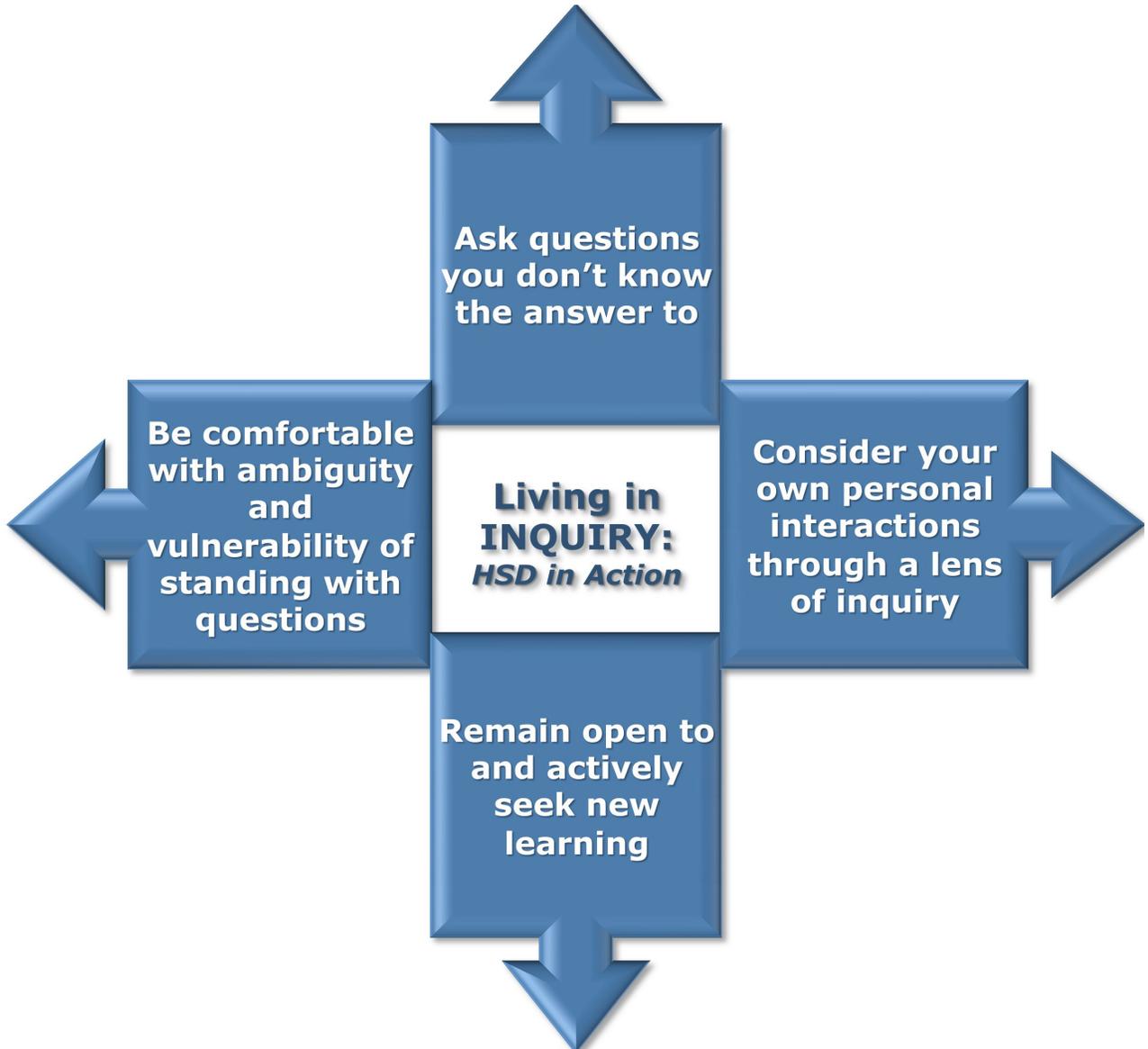
Consider your own personal interactions through a lens of inquiry

- Turn judgment to curiosity
- Turn disagreement to mutual exploration
- Turn defensiveness to self-reflection
- Question your assumptions, and your questions

Living in inquiry does not mean you don't have expertise or that you don't have things to teach or feedback to share. Even as you teach or share feedback, you are learning. Instruction is based on constant questioning about needs and perspectives of students. Feedback is given, based on questioning what is helpful and needed. Every engagement is based in questions about finding what works best at that moment.

In HSD Institute, we support each other to move toward this stance. Some of us struggle more than others, but we are committed to living lives of curiosity, looking for new insights that come from asking questions rather than giving answers. We also recognize this in not an exhaustive list of "instructions." We invite you to join us; step into your next moment with questions, rather than answers—and help us learn with you.

INQUIRY



Inquiry leads not only to answers, but also to more questions. . . And questions lead to inquiry. . .

--Leslie Patterson