**HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS INSTITUTE**

# Radical Inquiry

## Description of Radical Inquiry

Radical Inquiry is a process of reflection and exploration that helps you build system-wide clarity and coherence. As you become clearer about the patterns you want, you find ways to engage with others and your environment to set conditions to influence the emergence of those patterns. It's a process of looking deeply into the roots of a system to identify actions that can bring you to best fit.

— Radical Inquiry —

who am I?

what do I want?

what's important?

how do I connect?
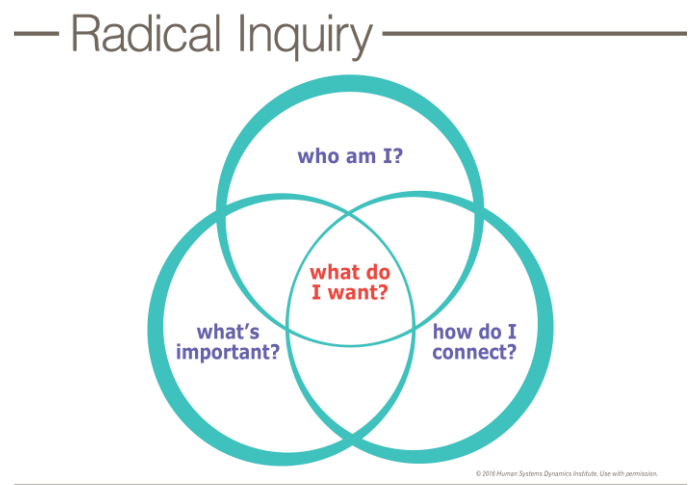
## What?

Radical Inquiry uses Pattern Logic to help you:

► Understand the patterns you want.

► Identify key conditions that can shape those patterns.

► Develop a short list of Simple Rules that can inform decision and action toward those patterns.

Nothing is intractable.

## So What?

Using Radical Inquiry brings a clarity of focus and an intentionality of language to help you align action and decision toward the patterns you see as best fit for you. Whether you complete the Radical Inquiry as a personal growth activity or you work with a group to design a shared Radical Inquiry, you agree on the patterns you want, create awareness about those critical patterns, agree on conditions that can shape those patterns, and commit to taking action that will set those conditions in your day-to-day actions. Radical Inquiry is a way of taking individual and/or group responsibility for performance and productivity.

## Now What?

Use the Radical Inquiry in your next sticky issue to:

► Declare publicly the patterns you want to live out.

► Identify the conditions that have the greatest chances of shaping those patterns.

► Create and follow a short list of simple rules that will shape those conditions in your life.
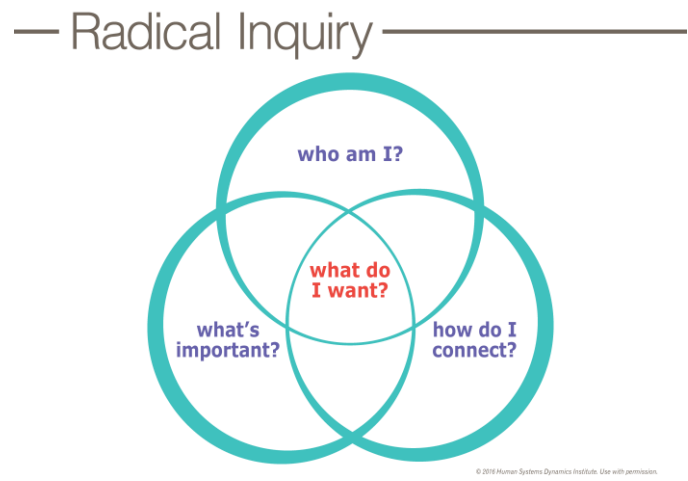
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# Radical Inquiry

## What is the Purpose of Radical Inquiry?

Radical Inquiry is a way to use Pattern Logic**\*** to understand and explore patterns you want, to increase your awareness of conditions that will shape those patterns, and to define a short list of Simple Rules**\*** that can inform decisions and behavior to set those conditions. It is a tool for self-reflection and planning, whether the "self" is you as an individual, a client in a coaching relationship, or a group that wants to build coherence as a team.

The name of the model and method is a key to understanding how it works. It is called "radical" because it aims for the "root" of your behavioral patterns. It is an inquiry because it calls you to stand in inquiry about what is and what is not possible in this time and place. In HSD we define inquiry in a very specific way. You are in inquiry when you:

— Radical Inquiry —

who am I?

what do
I want?

what's
important?

how do I
connect?

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 ► Turn judgment into curiosity.

 ► Turn disagreement into shared exploration.

 ► Turn defensiveness into self-reflection.

 ► Turn assumptions into questions.

You can step into this inquiry as an individual, with another as a couple or pair, or with a group or team. No matter how you engage with the work, it requires that you look at your world without judgment of right or wrong, good or bad, naughty or nice. What it asks is that you look around to see what would be the best fit in your space—at work, at home, in your community. What are the patterns that can sustain you in that space? What patterns indicate health and resilience? Then you move forward into the

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**\*** For more information, see www.hsdinstitute.org.

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exploration, exploring with others, reflecting on your own participation and contribution, and questioning the assumptions that keep you stuck.

A Radical Inquiry is designed to help you shape the world you want—whether it's a family built on healthy relationships, a thriving community, or a first-class workplace.

## So What Can I Do to Engage in Radical Inquiry?

The steps for Radical Inquiry are relatively simple. The challenge emerges as you go deeper into the implications of answering the questions honestly and clearly.

The first step is to name patterns you want to create. Start with the essence or the "sweet spot" of what you want. Refine that description down to a concise word or phrase that has particular meaning to you, and put it in the center of the diagram where all three circles overlap. That sets the tone and direction for the rest of the work. In a business context, that phrase can be as simple as *"Awesome customer service"* or *"Rule the niche."*

Then ask yourself what general, over-arching patterns will you see in your life, when you are functioning in that sweet spot. And in this part of the exercise, remember that patterns are not one-word descriptors like "Trust," "Confidence," or "Honesty." Single word descriptors help you know what's important, but it's hard to use that to inform your actions. At the same time, you cannot name every pattern that will contribute to your being "awesome customer service." Focus on 2-3 sentences that clearly characterize what you want and what it will look like when you get there. For example, if your "sweet spot" is awesome customer service, you might list the following sentences to describe what you want:

▶ Our customers trust our service and our products to serve their needs over the long haul.

▶ Our customers know they are valued and respected by every employee they contact.

▶ Our employees realize that anyone who receives services or products from them is a customer—whether that customer is a purchaser of our services or the fellow employee who works next to him/her inside the company.

Don't worry about wordsmithing here. The point is to capture the essence of the patterns you want to create. If you can agree on them, then the statement is good enough.

The next step is to consider the conditions that will shape those patterns, and what you need to do to create those conditions. A Radical Inquiry is based on three deceptively simple questions, shared by Leslie Patterson and her colleagues at North Stars Writing

**Nothing is intractable.**

Project at University of North Texas. These questions align with the Eoyang **CDE** model**\***
of conditions that influence the speed, path, and direction of emergent patterns. A
**C**ontainer holds the system until the pattern can form. The **D**ifferences inside the
container create the tension that gives form and shape to the pattern. The **E**xchanges
are how that tension is shared across the system.

The following table describes the questions that Patterson and her colleagues named to
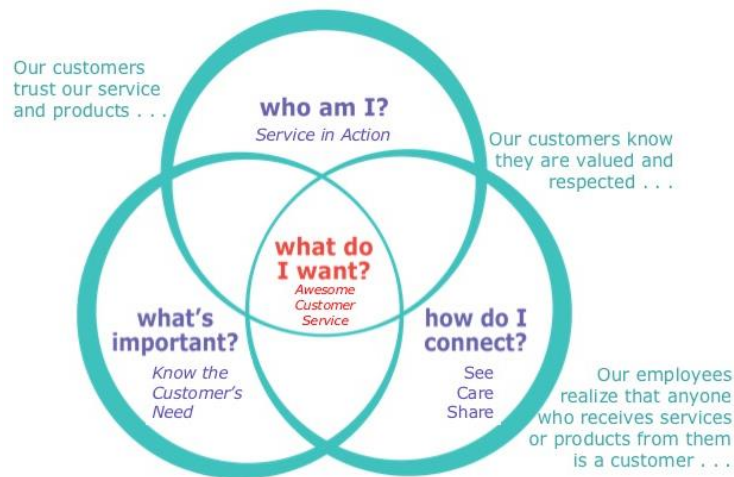help explore shared conditions.

| Know the Conditions... | Explore the Questions... | Understand What You Are Looking For... |
|---|---|---|
| **Container (C)** bounds the system as the patterns emerge. | Who am I? or Who are we together? | This question forces you to consider your necessary stance, if you are going to live out that "sweet spot" you put in the center of your Radical Inquiry. Who do you have to "be" to live out the essence of your most desirable patterns? |
| **Difference (D)** establishes the potential for change | What's important around here? | When you identify what is important, then you can begin to focus on those differences that matter in your quest to achieve the essence of your most desirable patterns. You can look at the difference in degree (more or less of what is important) or difference in kind (one idea or focus is more important than another). |
| **Exchanges (E)** allow for sharing resources, energy, and information across the system. | How do we connect? | Consider the patterns you want to create to define how you will engage with your world. How will you explore, communicate, and connect to others to move toward the essence of who you want to be? |

In the customer service example, you may say that the **C**ontainer that binds us together
is that we are committed to being "Service in Action." The **D**ifferences that matter in
your system could be about how you "Know and Recognize Customer Need." Finally, the
**E**xchanges you would create enable you to see what people need and provide it. This
could be captured in a phrase such as "See, Care, Share."

Your radical inquiry would look like this:

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**Our customers trust our service and products . . .**

**who am I?**
*Service in Action*

**Our customers know they are valued and respected . . .**

**what do I want?**
*Awesome Customer Service*

**what's important?**
*Know the Customer's Need*

**how do I connect?**
See
Care
Share

**Our employees realize that anyone who receives services or products from them is a customer . . .**

## Now What Can the Radical Inquiry Offer You?

When your sticky issue results from a lack of connection, a Radical Inquiry will help you establish a path toward greater coherence. Because of the increased coherence across your system, you will notice that you are better able to respond to stressors in consistent ways that make sense. At the same time, increased coherence will enable your system to respond to opportunities in a more quick and flexible way.

In the example about customer service, consider the benefits that can result when the whole system is focused on improving all customer service.

► Your customers are more likely to remain loyal when times are difficult.

► Your employees are more likely to be engaged with each other and the work they do when they are treated with the same respect they give customers.

► Employees and customers alike are better able to rely on how they will be treated, wherever they access the system, because they see this as a systemic pattern.

In a highly competitive and changing market, patterns of this sort can help you build resilience and sustainability.

So when your sticky issue calls for increased coherence and responsiveness, take these steps:

► Declare publicly the patterns you want to live out.

► Identify the conditions that have the greatest chances of shaping those patterns.

► Create and follow a short list of simple rules that will shape those conditions in your life.

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