

Torbert's Action Logics – a leadership perspective

This is a powerful, well researched methodology that has discovered a strong link between individual performance and what David Rooke and William Torbert refer to as "Action Logics" offering a framework for considering leadership styles and outcomes.

For a more detailed explanation you can read papers on the subject by **David Rooke** and **William Torbert**. An outline is provided below.

Conventional Action Logics (Styles 1-4)

People adopting these styles tend to appreciate similarity and stability.

1. Opportunist

Treats the physical outside world of experience as the primary reality and concentrates on gaining control of things there. This action logic views unilateral power as the only effectual type of power and works with a very short time horizon of discretion from hours to days, grasping opportunities and firefighting emergencies. Views timely action as occurring when "I win".

Managerial Style

- Short time horizon
- Focus on concrete things
- Often good in emergencies
- Deceptive
- Manipulative
- Views rules as loss of freedom
- Views luck as central
- Rejects critical feedback
- Externalises blame
- Distrustful
- Stereotypes
- Fragile self-control
- Hostile humour
- Flouts unilateral power, sexuality
- Treats "what I can get away with" as legitimate
- Punishment is "eye for an eye"
- Positive ethic is even trade
- Timely action is seen as "I win"

2. The Diplomat

Treats his or her own sensed performance territory of experience as what really matters and concentrates on gaining self-control in order to act effectively. To do so, he or she imitates organisational routines and the behaviour patterns of high-status group members. This action logic experiences referent power (reciprocal referent power is generated by consent of the "governed" – recognises that if you tell colleagues what to do they may resist, if you ask them, they will use their power to help you provided you reciprocate) and the current norms that such power generates most strongly. Views timely action in terms of when "I am on time for work, for meetings" and in terms of completing routine tasks.

Managerial Style

- Committed to routines
- Observes protocol
- Avoids inner and outer conflict
- Conforms
- Works to group standard
- Seeks membership, status
- Often speaks in favourite phrases, clichés, prefabricated jokes
- Face-saving is essential
- Loyalty to immediate group
- Feels shame if violates norm
- Sin is hurting others
- Punishment is disapproval
- Positive ethic is being nice, co-operative
- Timely action is "I'm on time"

3. The Expert

Treats the strategic territory of experience as the primary reality and concentrates on mastering his or her cognitive grasp of one or more particular disciplines (e.g. accounting, engineering, marketing, etc.). This action logic treats logistical power (the power to reason within a given structure to create a new way of accomplishing a desired result) as the most meaningful. This action logic most happily works in a six-month to one-year time horizon to accomplish particular projects. For the expert, timely action occurs when "I" accomplish tasks as efficiently as possible.

Managerial Style

- Interested in problem-solving
- Seeks causes
- Critical of self/others based on own craft logic
- Wants to stand out, be unique
- Perfectionist
- Chooses efficiency over effectiveness
- Dogmatic
- Accepts feedback only from objective, acknowledged craft masters
- Values decisions based on technical merit
- Humour takes the form of practical jokes
- Sees contingencies, exceptions
- Positive ethic is a sense of obligation to internally consistent moral order
- Timely action is fast, efficient

4. The Achiever

Works within a one - to three-year time horizon, juggling the shorter time horizons creatively, treating the interplay among planning, performing and assessing the outcomes as what is really real. The achiever concentrates on making incremental, single-loop changes in behaviour to eventually reach the planned results. Timely action occurs when "I" successfully juggle the need for occasional immediate wins, observance of agreed-on deadlines, efficient work, and effective outcomes as judged by the market or other constituency.

Managerial Style

- Long-term goals
- Future is vivid, inspiring
- Welcomes behavioural feedback
- Timely action is juggling time demands to attain effective results
- Feels like initiator, not pawn
- Seeks generalisable reasons for action
- Seeks mutuality, not hierarchy, in relationships
- Appreciates complexity
- Feels guilt if does not meet own standards
- Blind to own shadow, to the subjectivity behind objectivity
- Positive ethic is practical day-to-day improvements based on self-chosen (but not self-created) ethical system

Post-Conventional Action Logics

Appreciate differences and participating in ongoing, creative transformation of action logics. They are less and less implicit frames that limit one's choice, and more and more become explicit frames that highlight the multiplicity of action logics, the developing freedom and the responsibility to choose one's action logic on each occasion depending on the requirements of the situation. The principles by which we aspire to live have a stronger influence; the rules of others become less determining and are increasingly felt as a restriction of questionable legitimacy. At the same time the question of whether we or our institutions are acting consistently with espoused principles becomes more motivating and more insistent. Likewise the related question of how to overcome our own incongruities and avoid hypocrisy becomes more urgent. Differences within a person or organisation are no longer covered up or projected onto some external enemy or scapegoat. Instead, they are treated as the raw material for constructing a genuine integrity in action.

5. The Individualist

This is viewed as a transitional action logic between the conventional and post-conventional. The dawning awareness of post-conventional understanding may be a confusing time. The Individualist's dark side includes troubled feelings of something unraveling or needing resolving, along with a sense of paralysis about how to move, because, at this stage we have not yet developed new principles to those of earlier stages. It is also likely to be a time of renewed freshness of each fully tasted new experience, of dramatic new insight into the uniqueness of oneself and others, of forging relationships that reach new levels of intimacy, and of perusing new interests in the world. Excitement alternates with doubt in unfamiliar ways. The individualist is engaged in a journey that re-evaluates all prior life experience and action logics.

The Individualist is a bridge between two worlds. One is the pre-constituted, relatively stable and hierarchical understandings we grow into as children, as we learn how to function as members of a pre-constituted culture. The other is the emergent, relatively fluid and mutual understandings

that highlight the power of responsible adults to lead their children, their subordinates and their peers in transforming change. From the point of view of conventional stage employees, Individualist managers tend to provide less certainty and firm leadership. This is in part because the individualist is aware of the layers upon layers of assumptions and interpretations at work in any situation.

Managerial Style

- Takes a relativistic perspective
- Focuses more on both present and historical context
- Often aware of conflicting emotions
- Experiences time itself as a fluid, changeable medium with piercing, unique moments
- Interested in own and others' unique self-expression
- Seeks independent, creative work
- Attracted by difference and change more than by similarity and stability
- Less inclined to judge or evaluate
- Influenced by listening and finding patterns more than by advocacy
- May become something of a maverick
- Starts to notice own shadow (and own negative impact)
- Possible decision paralysis

6. The Strategist

This is the first general response to the question of how to lead timely and transforming change in a mutual way that invites and even sometimes challenges others to join in the leadership process.

A principle feature of the Strategist action logic is self-awareness in action. It not only intuitively recognises other action logics and itself as action logics, it also intuitively recognises all action as either facilitating or inhibiting ongoing transformational change of personal, familial, corporate, or national action logics. If we are aware of ourselves in action in the present and among others who may be framing the situation based on entirely different action logics, participating in both incremental and transformational change, then the central question becomes: What action is timely now to whom?

The Strategist is fascinated by the possibility of a certain kind of timely action that is recognisable as "on time" in the Diplomat's sense, as efficient in the Expert's sense, and as effective in the Achiever's sense and that can *at the same time* support one's own, or another's, or an organisation's transformation. A key here is that there is a voluntary quality in a system's transformation. Timely action by others can support our own transformation by giving us well-framed double-loop feedback, yet at the same time each of us can only increase our freedom and individuality by choosing to digest that feedback and transform. At the same time, we are more likely to digest that feedback and choose the vulnerable path of transformation if we experience our colleagues acting in ways that open them to possible transformation as well. Hence, the little-known and rarely practised power to transform is a mutual, vulnerable power, disciplined by

careful inquiring attention to the timing of each of the interacting persons, groups, organisations, or regions.

Keenly aware of multiple viewpoints, the Strategist is well equipped to maintain institutional and personal connections with subordinates. He or she will tend to intuitively blend the kind of top and bottom line performance Achievers expect, with the high quality standards the Expert respects (without the unintended effects of fear and competitiveness that an Expert boss tends to generate), and still find time to share family stories with the Diplomat.

The Strategist does not just accept individuality (as the Individualist does), but welcomes evolving individuality in the context of mutual relationship. The Strategist recognises and attunes to developmental processes in others and allows people to make mistakes in the context of their developing greater alertness and capacity for single-, double- and triple-loop correction.

The Strategist is also aware of the limits to autonomy. He/she recognises that emotional interdependence is inevitable, counts friendship as an important treasure. The Strategist has an increasing appreciation of mutuality and the development of explicit mutual visions. Charters and contracts at the outset of relationships and contracting processes become increasingly significant.

Unlike the Achiever, the Strategist is open to the possibility of rethinking and even altering his or her viewpoint and purposes in a situation and helping others do the same. The Strategist consciously seeks and chooses new ways of framing opportunities, dilemmas, and conflicts that accommodate the disparities, paradoxes, and fluidity of multiple points of view.

From the Individualist, the Strategist inherits the ability to acknowledge and deal with inner conflicts, such as conflicting needs and duties. But, whereas the Individualist's relativism can make him or her feel paralysed by such conflicts, the Strategist comes to appreciate the tension of the opposites as paradoxical and seeks resolutions that transform the very differences that initially seem irreconcilable.

Persons operating from the Strategist action logic truly lead, whatever their organisation rank or role. They focus their own and colleagues' attention on whether mission, strategy, operations, and outcome are in conflict with one another and might be aligned more coherently. The Strategist will develop ways to detect disparities between mission and strategy, strategy and operations, and operations and outcome so that ineffective and unethical processes can be corrected.

The Strategist's sensitivity to systemic disparities includes a keen awareness of inequities in race, ethnicity, class, gender, and development among colleagues and subordinates. This perspective is consonant with a global rather than ethnocentric vision and demands that the Strategist make every effort to redress social inequities in ways that promote personal and institutional development, rather than generating Diplomat-like dependence on government aid.

The Strategist's expressions are spontaneous, combining genuineness and intensity. Feelings are expressed vividly and convincingly, including sensual experiences, poignant sorrows, joy, and delight. Expressions often have a light touch, including fantasy, sensitivity, and existential humour. The Strategist and the still-later post-conventional action logics become increasingly sensitive, not just to how the past influences the present, but also to how our current action logics, including our words affect the present and the future.

The person with the Strategist worldview sees purpose in life beyond meeting his or her own needs. Continuing development of self and others is a primary concern. The Strategist also seeks to discover what he or she does uniquely well. This person is involved in a personal quest – a life work – with a sense of vocation. This quest may be focused within the workplace, outside it, or both, for conventional work/family boundaries mean less than the relational principles the Strategist wishes to practice. The question of identity for the Strategist includes the question of her social and spiritual vocation.

The Strategist stage is not without potential shadows and turmoils. The ability to see multiple points of view in conflict, and others acting in ways that reinforce the conflict, can lead to suffering. Awareness of the play of power in general, and the strength of transforming power in particular, can veer in the direction of an obsession. Also, the sense of developing a personal holistic theory of how to generate change, a theory that integrates broad historical and organisational currents with personal practices, can lead to grandiosity and ego-inflation if it is not humbled by some form of spiritual practice of non-attachment.

Characteristics of the Strategist Action Logic

- The Strategist recognises the importance of principle, contract, theory, and judgment (not just rules), customs, and expectations – for making and maintaining good decisions
- High value on timely action inquiry, mutuality, and autonomy
- Attentive to unique market niches, particular historical moments
- Interweaves short-term goal-orientedness with longer-term developmental process-orientedness
- Aware of paradox that what one sees depends on one's action logic
- Creative at conflict resolution
- Enjoys playing a variety of roles
- Witty, existential humour
- Aware of and tempted by the dark side of power

How Strategists Think and Act

Leadership Practice

- Strategists are more likely than Achievers to undertake double-loop learning, designing situations where others can be the origin of causation, where tasks are controlled jointly, and where others may make choices and take risks.

- Strategists make more frequent and more conscientious efforts than Achievers (a) to understand subordinates' frames, inquiring about them rather than dismissing them; (b) to form an integrative awareness of these frames, including discrepant frames; and (c) to use them as a basis for synthesizing new shared understandings.
- Strategists are more likely than Achievers to test the limits of their organisation's and superiors' constraints and to create new spheres of action for their subordinates and for themselves.

Relationships with Superiors

- Both Strategists and Achievers see it as appropriate to influence their superiors' beliefs, goals and actions.
- Strategists, in influencing superiors, are more likely than Achievers to undertake a negotiation among initially diverse frames to create a new shared frame, while Achievers are more likely to assert their own view as superior and beyond question.
- Strategists are more likely than Achievers to identify their perceptions as perceptions, rather than as immutable realities, and to discuss differences in perceptions explicitly with their superiors.
- Strategists, more than Achievers, base their actions on principles rather than rules, even when those principles are at odds with rules established by their superiors.

Action Initiatives

- When their actions are inconsistent with their own principles, Strategists are more likely than achievers to notice the discrepancy and act to reduce it.
- Strategists are more likely than Achievers to view their action processes as unique rather than generalisable and rule-governed.
- Strategists are more likely than Achievers to see that their effectiveness lies in setting a stage – a frame in which their own as well as others' aims can be expressed – rather than rushing into getting their own solutions and processes adopted.
- Achievers gain acceptance for their own goals by using their awareness of others' points of view as a guide. They see implementation as a linear move toward the goal. Strategists, however, use their awareness of others' points of view to question and revise their own goals, as well as to test whether their perspective influences others. They see implementation as an iterative, developmental process involving creation of new shared understandings, leading to repeated reframing of problems.