



# Bringing Inquiry-Based Solutions to Organizations: Transforming Obstacles into Opportunities

A Pilot Study

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## Introduction

Everyday life in the office has been significantly disrupted in the last decade: As markets shrink, companies merge, Millennial and Gen-Z generations enter the workforce, it is no longer “business as usual” for most companies. Disruptors in traditional industries such as hospitality, transportation, technology, and manufacturing, have sent a clear and consistent signal: *what’s expected is not what should be expected.*

Because of this shift, some experts agree that it is increasingly important for leaders in many different industries to reconsider their roles. Their ability to re-examine traditional power-centered approaches to leadership may, in fact, be more important than the technical expertise and knowledge needed for their job. How do they approach their role and peers in their working community? Are they engaged, receptive, transparent, clear, driven, humble, and effective? Are they receptive to feedback? Can they transform important obstacles into clear and actionable opportunities? Can they have difficult conversations with their peers, employees, and clients while remaining open, creative, and connected?

The Innerland Institute<sup>1</sup> in Vancouver, Canada, is offering a powerful leadership development technology called *Inquiry-Based Coaching*<sup>™</sup>. IBC<sup>™</sup> is designed to help companies build and sustain high impact leadership teams while addressing the current demands of our time. This paper will discuss the results of a pilot study that followed 20 participants throughout one year of practicing this methodology.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.innerland.com>



## Literature Review

Following a review of the literature related to *Leadership Development* this paper's authors found value first in Daniel Goleman's seminal work concerning *Emotional Intelligence* (2013)<sup>2</sup>. In his work, Goleman ascertained that emotional intelligence skills were twice as important as other competencies in leadership. Emotional intelligence is comprised of 12 competencies: empathy, positive outlook, self-control, coach and mentor, achievement orientation, influence, conflict management, teamwork and inspirational leadership, organizational awareness, emotional self control, adaptability and positive outlook. Research into these competencies has opened a new realm in leadership development in recent years.

Another critical paradigm to consider in discussions of leadership skills is *Third Space Thinking* (2016)<sup>3</sup>. The concept was developed by researchers at the Annenberg School of Business at USC, who spent four years interviewing global business leaders. The study results identified five attributes of successful leadership that are in short supply in today's workplace: adaptability, cultural competence, empathy, intellectual curiosity, and 360-degree thinking. According to these researchers, these traits constitute a Third Space of exploration that is of great importance considering recent leadership trends.

Other research has yielded similar, critical traits to develop in leadership. For example in, Marcel Roble (2012)<sup>4</sup> outlined 10 high-yield leadership skills as integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic. The emphasis in these skills also invites us to find ways to develop and sustain them in leadership teams.

*The common thread between these sets of leadership skills is the identification of a key ability: to develop self awareness and engagement with one's inner and outer landscape. To achieve this connection, one must*

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<sup>2</sup> Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence

By: Daniel Goleman, HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PRESS / 2013 / PAPERBACK

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.inc.com/ernest-wilson/5-attributes-successful-leadership-for-future-jobs.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1080569912460400>



exhibit mental flexibility—by questioning current assumptions and acknowledging one’s position as being part of the cause of (or solution to) problems in their environment.

## **Leadership Acceleration, Optimization, and Retention.**

Positive attitudes are attributes to look for in new hires but generally not considered “teachable skills.” Companies invest time and energy into screening for these qualities in job candidates, yet often only undertake training for their employees when damage to morale has already occurred. This is a shortsighted approach for many reasons: firstly, workplace culture is one of the best predictors of bottom line success. Secondly, new leadership trends are emphasizing workplace culture as a crucial area of attention, generated in part by generational differences in the workforce. Millennial and Gen-Z’s are more likely to stay at a job if they experience their work as meaningful, if they have positive peer interactions, and if they feel seen by, and connected to their managers. If companies want to accelerate, optimize and retain these essential players in their workforce, they must re-examine and develop their attitudes about leadership. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the rapid pace and stress of the contemporary work experience often erodes the values that are most important to employees, such as enthusiasm, receptivity, flexibility, respect, openness, responsibility, and others. Employee burnout can sour even the most dynamic leaders, by challenging their openness, receptivity, and engagement—impacting their ability to serve the organizations they lead.

## **Inquiry-Based Coaching™**

In this paper, the authors wish to prompt thinking beyond the identification of a prescribed set of leadership skills outlined in the concepts of Emotional Intelligence, Third Space Thinking, and Roble’s work. We suggest that leaders and teams *inherently* possess invaluable qualities and resources that can be tailored to support each individual, organization, and situation. Actualizing these qualities can only be accomplished, however, if teams and leaders have the proper tools to acquire and engender these qualities. At the



Innerland Institute in Vancouver, Canada, we have developed a novel methodology, called **Inquiry-Based Coaching™** (IBC), that will allow companies to identify, access, and harness inherent leadership qualities in their employees.

IBC was inspired by the new framework presented by the American Philosophical Practitioners Association<sup>5</sup> in New York for philosophical practice and counseling. The ultimate aim of IBC is to help individuals, leaders, teams, and organizations identify and transform obstacles into clear, grounded and actionable opportunities.

IBC posits that humans are deeply and inherently resourceful, and that presence, creativity, innovation, respect, drive, compassion, and openness are latent qualities of the human condition that can be revealed and utilized. The theory behind IBC posits that when people come to work in challenging states of minds—when they feel contrived, manipulative, defensive, apprehensive, anxious or confused they can still access these positive qualities. It is not that they don't *possess* them, but that they are inhibited by survivalist, reactive, and preconceived models of perception that erode their fundamental ability to connect with others.

Thus, IBC purports that the cultivation of positive outcomes *cannot be achieved through teaching, advising, counselling, exalting, or directing attitudinal skills from the exterior, but rather by addressing and eventually dissolving the perceptual obstacles and reactive assumptions that obscure our innate skills*. IBC can, therefore, be used to identify, challenge, and transform the perceptual assumptions that create obstacles and erode our inherent non-reactive intelligence.

Through training in IBC, leaders can take stock of their situations, make an inventory of the underlying issues and obstacles that are causing the problems they are facing, and explore these using a powerful technology. *Through a targeted system of reflective questioning, we aim to dissolve what impedes leaders' passion, connection, and success*. Through this process, employees emerge with a new, productive, highly innovative, and creative mindset that

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.appa.edu/>



is not rooted in willpower or artificial drive, but rather in a sense of clarity of purpose, awareness, and understanding. The IBC technique seeks to dramatically improve a practitioner's ability to resolve issues. Practitioners are encouraged to perceive obstacles as an opportunity for growth—as invitations to improve, rather than sources of conflict or unhealthy competition.

## **Case Study**

S.i. Systems is the largest Canadian IT staffing firm, with revenues exceeding \$400M, and year over year growth of close to 7%. It has a strong, pervasive winning culture, and consistent, precise processes that deliver quality placements to clients. Over the last six years, it has invested in internal and external learning and development throughout all levels of the organization, with measurable results as core concepts that were internalized and applied in practice on a consistent basis.

S.i. Systems was looking for a lever that would improve their leadership acceleration and effectiveness results. These were their questions:

*How can we take our team to the next level?*

1. How can we continue to enhance the performance of high-functioning members of our leadership team? Specifically, how can we transition leadership pipeline candidates into newly promoted Managing Directors in a more effective way? What tools or skills will help them with the complexities of their role, the decisions they have to make, and the conversations they need to have?
2. How can we reduce turnover of entry level recruiter roles to allow for more promotion into account executive roles?
3. What would it take to achieve 150 placements in a month?
4. What tools or methodologies can enhance the performance of that leadership team on a consistent and predictable basis?



5. How can we increase profitability and continue to retain and engage “A” players?

6. Could Inquiry-Based Coaching be used to achieve some or all of these goals?

Pre-program performance:

- 2500 -2700 current contractors at any given time
- Biggest single month to date was 138 placements
- Number of Account Executives for FY 2017 started at 44: This was where it was for the past number of years; by program start it was at 55.

S.i. Systems was aiming for:

- Over 3000 current contractors at any given time
- 150 placements as a new monthly record
- 66 Account Executives in place by end of FY 2017

## **Methodology**

**Training in IBC.** A sub-group of 20 top business development leaders and senior managers were chosen by the administration, including the president of the company to participate in a one-year IBC training program.

**Phase 1** of the training comprised of the group attending a two-day intensive seminar where they were introduced to the IBC process. They were shown not only how to engage in the IBC process but how to assist colleagues in the practice of IBC. For the next 20 weeks, leaders had individual, bi-weekly coaching sessions with a trainer. Every second week they paired up with their peers and practiced IBC together. This course was then concluded with an additional two-day seminar, which further deepened their practice.

**Phase 2** of the training involved another 20 weeks of individual, bi-weekly coaching sessions with a trainer. Every second week, participants again paired up with their peers and practiced IBC together. This process was then concluded with an additional two-day seminar that reflected the culmination of the one-year training program.



At the end of the training period, each participant rated their improvement in 15 traits, categorized in 4 domains: Engagement, Adaptability, Collegiality and Integrity (tables 1 and 2). The researchers also asked each participant how this trait improvement affected: 1) their leadership capacity and 2) their bottom line.

### **Category 1: Engagement**

**Enthusiast:** You tend to look forward to difficult situations and see the bright side of things.

**Courageous/Measured Risk Taking:** You are willing to move forward trusting in yourself and your team members without giving into fear.

**Committed:** You fully invest yourself in your work and in the organization.

**Clear:** You are able to clearly say either “yes” or “no” when necessary.

### **Category 2: Adaptability**

**Flexible/Creative:** You consider and welcome other worthwhile options instead of generally following what you are familiar with.

**Open:** You admit and understand your own areas of opportunity and potential growth.

### **Category 3: Collegiality**

**Trusting:** You sincerely support your team as colleagues that are clear and reliable to interact with.

**Receptive:** You tend to listen to others before making decisions.

**Appreciative/Open:** When you interact with your teammates you tend to naturally recognize their work and dedication.

**Respectful:** You allow and support others in sustaining and sharing their own truth.

**Patient:** You listen deeply to what is shared by others, taking time to ensure that you understand the point, even if you are not supportive of it.

**Receptive:** You feel comfortable when receiving feedback from peers, superiors or clients.

### **Category 4: Integrity**

**Present:** You have the ability to deeply connect with what is actually happening in the moment.

**Equitable/Company Oriented:** In conflict situations you focus on the best outcome for all parties involved.

**Responsible:** You fully own your actions, thoughts and emotions.



## Results:

One year after the initiation of the IBC beta group, the following results were achieved

- 77% overall improvement in leadership qualities from two cohorts after one year of training and practice (see quantitative analysis below)
- One month with 150 placements - Oct 2017 (Mar 145; May 143)
- Next month 157 placements - Nov 2017
- Four months with 3000+ current contractors (2017 June, Oct, Nov, 2018 Jan)
- Beginning of Feb 2018: 8+9+10+30sk +19=76 AEs

### 1) Quantitative Analysis

Leadership Trait	Groups 1 & 2:	Category
Enthusiast	87.01	
Clear	55.45	<b>Engagement</b>
Committed	30.21	<b>57.55%</b>
Flexible	82.12	
Courageous	83.85	<b>Adaptability</b>
Open	113.75	<b>93.24%</b>
Appreciative	61.95	
Receptive	82.88	
Patient	63.41	
Respectful	74.30	<b>Collegiality</b>
Trusting	56.39	<b>67.79%</b>
Present	136.18	
Responsible	66.02	<b>Integrity</b>
Equitable	82.05	<b>94.75%</b>
<b>Overall Improvement</b>	<b>76.83%</b>	

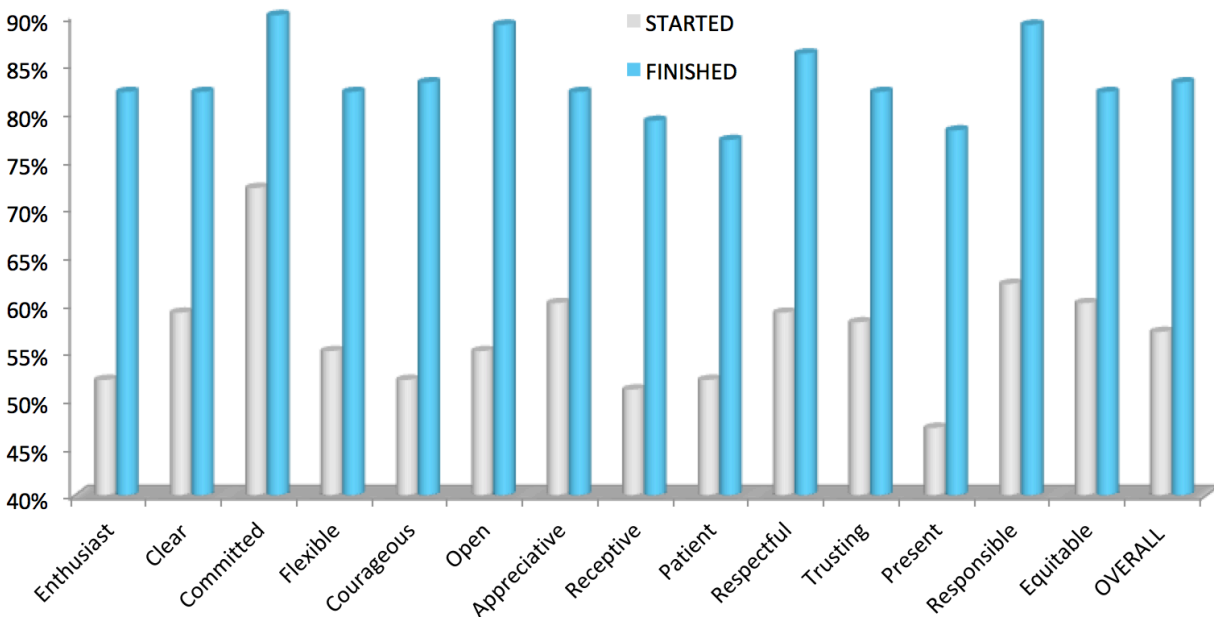
**Participants reported an average improvement of 76.8% in positive leadership traits over the training period.**

The study results suggested that overall improvements were considerable in *all* areas. Results in each of the general categories increased in the following





percentages: **95%** for **Integrity**, **93%** for **Adaptability**, **68%** for **Collegiality** and **58%** for **Engagement**. The most improved leadership trait was the quality of **Presence** (being available to what is presented to you in the moment)—where an average **136%** improvement was reported. The quality of **Openness** (admitting and owning personal areas of opportunity and growth) showed an improvement of **114%**. **Enthusiasm** (looking forward to difficult situations and seeing the opportunities in them) came in at **87%**. **Courageous** (moving forward trusting in yourself and your team members without giving into fear) came in at **84%**. **Receptive**, (you listen to others before making decisions) came in at **83%**.



Individual markers after one year of training

## 2) Qualitative Analysis: Leadership Capacity

Participants also reported the qualities they had noticed for themselves. These self-reported results were grouped as follows:

1. Productivity: Improved time management skills.
2. Teamwork: Feeling connected with, and authentic around, team members.



3. Confidence: Having more courage to present ideas; Experiencing improved decisiveness around client interaction; Experiencing less fear about giving negative feedback.
4. Obstacle perception: Experiencing less stress and an improved capacity to identify and solve problems, which resulted in improved personal relationships.

### **Examples of Participant Results:**

- “Less time wasted on worrying/limiting thoughts, therefore more productivity and output with less stress.”
- “I am much more connected with my direct report. This has become a much more meaningful, authentic and transparent relationship.”
- “I am more sure of myself and less afraid of failure.”
- “I am less fearful of obstacles and problems now that I have a way of dealing with them.”
- “After I have done IBC about a client, I show up with much more clarity and notice I am more confident and effective in meetings.”

### **3) Qualitative Feedback:**

#### **Economic Benefits**

Significantly, participants reported specific examples of how IBC training shaped their bottom line. These comments can be summarized as follows:

1. They were able to identify and kindly let go of employees who were not keeping the mission of the company.
2. They achieved greater productivity by increasing the focus on real issues.
3. They reported overall employee happiness at work, increased engagement, and commitment to the company as a result of this training.
4. They gained an improved capacity to mentor and to bring team members from B level to A level players.



## **Feedback from the President of the Company**

*“Our managers are in the circumstance that they will always be asked to do the job of getting their results, and they will always have insufficient resources. In this program we saw a big increase in team engagement from the attendees. The accountability of the leadership team to meet their goal has increased. There are less excuses, more real dialogue around commitments met and missed. We have stronger conversations with each other on expectations. We don’t believe we are fragile anymore.*

*Three of the 10 people in the first group found their authentic purpose during the program, and switched their role in the company or left the company to pursue their true passion. In each case it was good. The rest of us are here, still in the company pursuing our true passion. Business is up too. The program was highly valued by its members as 100% of participants volunteered to continue training after the program.”*

## **Discussion**

IBC posits that people are openly intelligent by nature. When they show up to work with a negative mindset (exhibiting, for example, impatience or closed mindedness), they are out of alignment with their emergent intelligence. The theories behind IBC reveal that this is caused by a projective, reactive—and therefore counter-productive—assumption about their situation. IBC

encourages practitioners to isolate this negative mindset using inquiry-based practices and to question their obstacles in order to transform them into opportunities.

Through this process, an IBC practitioner is able to identify challenges in their landscape and question their validity so that triggering negative thoughts no longer play on their mind affecting the outcome of their performance. This frees the practitioner to think more creatively and intelligently. Thus, IBC as a practice can cultivate a deeper understanding of self-as-leader and encourage the development of several critical skills that can be applied to future leadership obstacle scenarios.



**Example:** Carol, a senior account executive, notices her own defensiveness during her yearly review. Inwardly, she disengages from the process as her boss outlines potential areas of improvement in her work. In IBC practice, Carol is encouraged to recognize the moment she becomes disengaged from her employer and to isolate the assumption that preceded this change in mindset. Her assumption might be, “He doesn’t value my work,” or “He is attacking me.” Carol would then bring an IBC mindset to question this perceptual obstacle. Through this process, Carol would be able to see that she has confused honest feedback with an attack on her work. The practice of IBC would encourage her to recognize instances where she takes things personally, and demonstrate how limiting this is to her professional growth. Beyond IBC, Carol could understand this perceived criticism in its proper context and make the suggested changes to her work naturally and emergently, without defense or anger. Moreover in subsequent reviews, she would be able to tap into her natural openness and look for feedback in order to help her improve. Through the practice of IBC, Carol, would learn to view feedback as a positive opportunity for growth.

**Example:** Tom, an account executive, is frustrated with the sales associate at his largest client. He believes that she is treating him disrespectfully, and is withholding not only timely payments but common courtesy. Tom notices that the night prior to their meetings he feels panicked and preoccupied. Both his team and his family observe him shutting down from stress. He has trouble sleeping because he is anticipating how the meeting will go. Through IBC practice, Tom would learn to notice the moment his mind shifts into

stress. He would be coached to write down the problematic assumptions that come up for him, such as “she will not keep up her agreements,” or “she will make me look bad in front of my manager.” Through the practice of IBC, Tom would learn to question and address these assumptions. In this process, Tom is able to see where he is failing in keeping up with his self-commitments, and where he is making himself look incompetent in front of his manager. Through IBC, Tom can access calm instead of being driven into a “fight or flight” mode. He becomes able to show up to his position with a more open, respectful and intelligent mindset, ready to approach the situation as a professional, no matter how the client treats him. He is able to be nimble and creative during the meeting to address issues, and has the capacity to turn



his debilitating assumptions into opportunities to move beyond these assumptions and engage in a transformative course of action.

## **Conclusion**

The ability to transform leadership obstacles into clear and actionable opportunities is the most critical skill needed in the current business landscape. Our research has demonstrated that Inquiry-Based Coaching™ is a powerful tool that can enable leaders to mine inherent leadership skills, such as openness, connection, clarity, understanding, and effectiveness. Further research is recommended, as it could greatly improve our knowledge of the broader significance of IBC for companies and employees in differing demographics.

## **Contact Information**

To learn more about the Innerland Institute and Inquiry-Based Coaching™ please visit [www.innerland.com](http://www.innerland.com)

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