

ACTION LOGIC

Understanding action logic helps leaders & teams develop greater self-awareness, adaptability, & effectiveness. Leaders who recognise their dominant action logic can identify strengths, limitations, & opportunities for growth, allowing them to make more conscious decisions & improve their leadership style.

For teams, action logic fosters better collaboration by highlighting how individuals interpret challenges, communicate, & respond to conflict. When teams include leaders at more advanced action logics—such as Achievers, Individualists, & Strategists—they become more innovative, resilient, & capable of navigating complex organisational change.



Organisations that support leaders in evolving their action logic benefit from stronger decision-making, increased employee engagement, & improved long-term performance. By moving beyond rigid or reactive leadership styles, teams can create more inclusive, high-performing cultures that drive both business success & meaningful transformation.

Action Logic for Teams

Action logic is useful for team coaches and teams because it provides a framework to understand how individuals and groups perceive situations, make decisions, and respond to challenges, allowing coaches to tailor their approach to better support team dynamics and facilitate effective collaboration by identifying potential roadblocks based on different action logic levels within the team.

Key benefits of using action logic in team coaching:

- *Understanding individual behaviours:*
 - By recognizing which action logic level a team member operates from (e.g., "Expert," "Achiever," "Strategist"), coaches can better understand their motivations, communication styles, and potential areas of conflict.
- *Addressing team dynamics:*
 - Identifying different action logic levels within a team can highlight potential misalignments and areas where individuals might not be fully aligned with the team's goals, allowing coaches to address these proactively.
- *Facilitating development:*
 - Coaches can use action logic to guide individuals towards more advanced levels of thinking and decision-making, encouraging them to move beyond their comfort zone and embrace more complex challenges.
- *Targeted interventions:*
 - By understanding the underlying action logic, coaches can tailor their interventions and coaching strategies to better support each team member's needs and development.
- *Improving communication:*
 - Awareness of different action logic levels can help team members better understand each other's perspectives and communication styles, leading to more productive collaboration.

Important points about action logic:

- *Developmental stages:*
 - Action logic is often presented as a spectrum with different levels, ranging from more basic (e.g., "Opportunist") to more complex (e.g., "Alchemist").
- *Action inquiry:*
 - To leverage action logic effectively, coaches often use "action inquiry," a process that encourages reflection on one's own actions and how they might be influenced by their action logic.

Most developmental psychologists acknowledge that what sets leaders apart is not merely their leadership philosophy, personality, or managerial approach. Instead, it's their intrinsic "action logic" - the way they perceive their environment and react when their authority or security is put to the test. Yet, few leaders take the opportunity to examine their own action logic, and even fewer consider the potential for shifting it.

They should, because those who embark on a path of self-awareness and growth can reshape not only their personal leadership effectiveness but also the direction of their organisations. At BECKETT MCINROY, drawing on the influential research of William Torbert and our work with EY, Citi, Qatar Financial Centre, DHL, Kempinski Hotels, LEGO Group, Saudi Aramco, and Bahrain Economic Development Board, we have seen this transformation in action.

Our experience confirms that leaders who make the effort to explore and develop their action logic significantly strengthen their leadership impact and ability to drive meaningful change. However, the first step is understanding which action logic currently defines one's leadership approach.

The Seven Action Logics

Torbert's research is anchored in a sentence-completion tool known as the Leadership Development Profile, which invites participants to finish 36 open-ended statements such as:

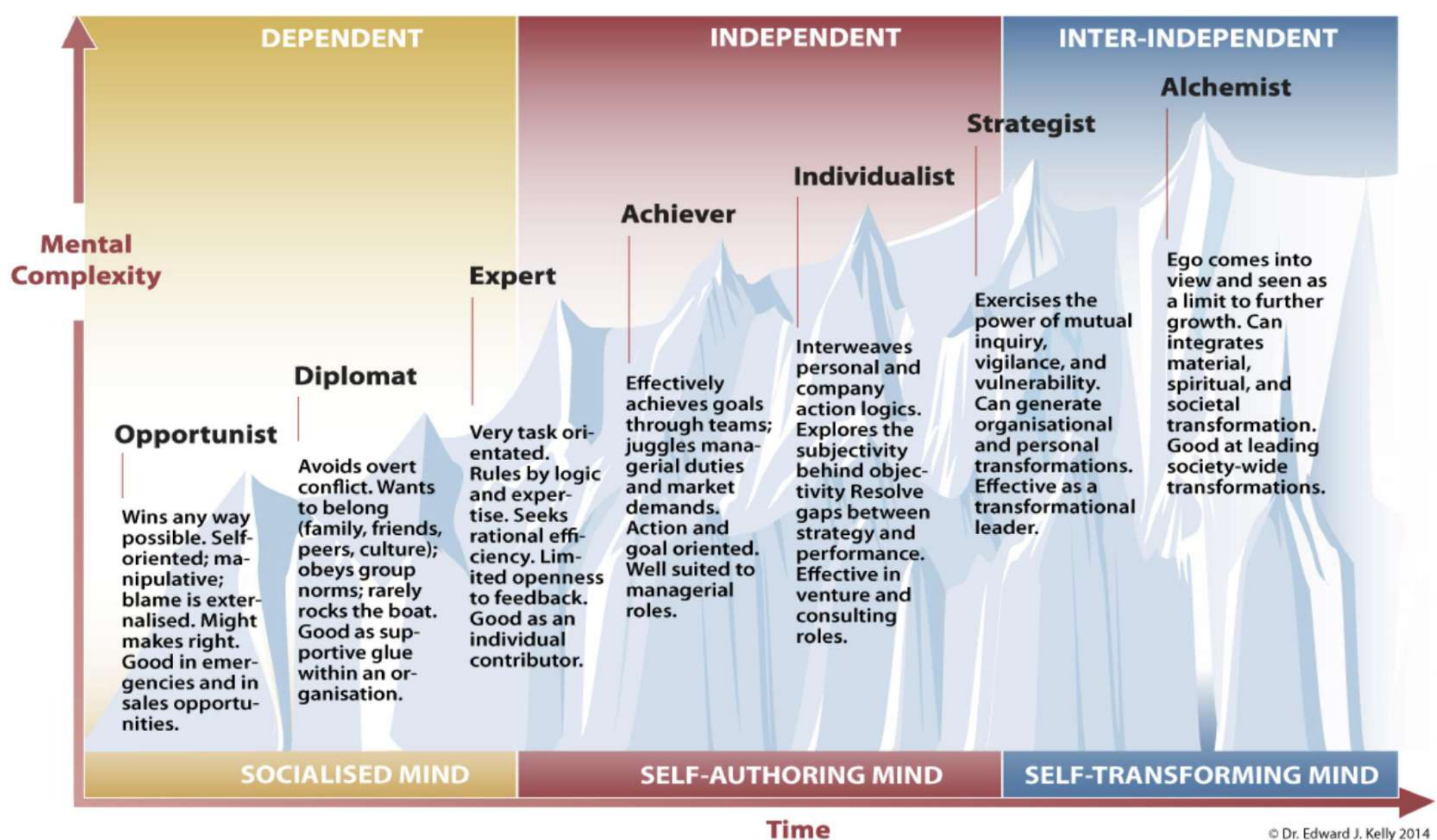
- *"A great leader..."*
 - *"... enforces discipline."*
 - *"... recognises the importance of achieving strong team performance."*
 - *"... balances multiple demands and owns their decisions."*

By analysing these responses, trained evaluators construct a developmental profile, identifying the dominant action logic shaping the leader's mindset. The seven action logics—Opportunist, Diplomat, Expert, Achiever, Individualist, Strategist, and Alchemist—represent different stages of leadership development. As leaders evolve, their action logic can shift, and revisiting the Leadership Development Profile over time helps track this progress.

There are distinct patterns linking action logic to organisational effectiveness. Leaders who function primarily within the Opportunist, Diplomat, or Expert categories - comprising 55% of our dataset—tend to be less capable of implementing large-scale change. Achievers, who make up 30% of leaders, demonstrate stronger execution skills and performance capabilities. The most transformative leaders—Individualists, Strategists, and Alchemists—represent only 15% of the total, yet they consistently showcase the ability to innovate and lead successful organisational transformations.

For organisations committed to sustainable success, investing in leadership development that encourages action logic progression is not just advantageous—it is crucial.

Adult Development: The Three Major Transformations



Adult development theory and empirical research (e.g. Kegan, 1982 and In Over Our Heads, 1994; Torbert, 1976, 1987, and Action Inquiry, 2004) shows that people operate at different places along a continuum of action-logics. These action-logics describe typical patterns in the way we act and interpret the actions of others. It is possible for a person to develop along this continuum from the Impulsive and Opportunist action-logics to the Alchemical and Ironic action-logics, although only a small percentage of the population actually do so.

To understand how leaders fall into distinct categories and how this links to organisational performance, the work of Torbert, along with BECKETT MCINROY's application of these insights, has explored each leadership style in turn, starting with those that are least productive and least adaptable.

The Opportunist

One of the more reassuring discoveries from the work of Torbert was that only 5% of leaders demonstrated traits of mistrust, egocentrism, and manipulateness. These individuals are identified as Opportunists, reflecting their focus on personal gain and their tendency to view both people and situations as resources to exploit. Their approach to leadership is largely dictated by their perception of control—how they react depends on whether they believe they can influence the outcome. They often view colleagues as either obstacles or competitors.

Opportunists justify their behaviours as necessary in a highly competitive world. They reject feedback, externalise blame, and respond aggressively to perceived threats. A clear example of this mindset can be seen in the early leadership style of Larry Ellison, CEO of Oracle, who once described his management approach as “intellectual intimidation and rhetorical bullying.” Reflecting on his past, he admitted that he “just didn’t know any better.”

Few Opportunists remain in leadership positions long-term unless they develop beyond this action logic. Their constant firefighting, self-promotion, and tendency to ignore rules make them difficult to work with over extended periods. It was found that companies fostering a culture of opportunism often experience short-term gains but suffer from long-term instability, as seen in the case of Enron, where high-risk, rule-breaking behaviours led to eventual collapse.

The Diplomat

Diplomats interpret the world in a more accommodating manner than Opportunists, but their leadership style can be equally limiting in senior positions. This action logic focuses on loyalty, maintaining group harmony, and avoiding conflict. Rather than seeking to control people or situations, Diplomats prioritise controlling their own behaviour to align with group expectations.

In junior roles, Diplomats add value by fostering cooperation and ensuring team members feel heard.

The work of Torbert found that most Diplomats operate at the lower to mid-levels of management, in roles such as frontline supervisors, customer service managers, and healthcare practitioners. In a study of 497 managers across industries, it was found that 80% of Diplomats held junior positions, while 80% of Strategists were in senior leadership roles. This suggests that those who develop beyond the Diplomat logic have a higher likelihood of promotion.

However, in executive roles, Diplomats' reluctance to engage in conflict becomes a significant liability. They struggle with giving constructive feedback, avoid making tough decisions, and hesitate to challenge established norms. Research found that one Diplomat leader, who became an interim CEO following his predecessor's sudden passing, initially excelled in ceremonial aspects of the role. However, he avoided addressing internal resistance to change, dodging meetings and travelling during critical discussions. His leadership team eventually resigned in frustration, and instead of addressing the crisis, he publicly praised their contributions and appointed a new team. The organisation, suffering mounting losses, ultimately demoted him back to a vice president role.

The Expert

The largest category of leaders identified in the work of Torbert is the Expert, accounting for 38% of professionals. Unlike Opportunists, who seek to control their surroundings, and Diplomats, who focus on self-regulation, Experts attempt to gain control by mastering knowledge and applying precise logic.

Experts excel as individual contributors because of their dedication to continuous improvement, efficiency, and accuracy. However, as leaders, they can struggle with collaboration and delegation, believing that their expertise makes their perspective the only valid one. It was found that when employees describe a “my-way-or-the-highway” manager, they are often referring to someone operating from the Expert action logic.

Many technical professionals—such as accountants, engineers, and analysts—demonstrate this mindset. Emotional intelligence is frequently undervalued. Organisations that fail to develop Experts beyond this stage often experience bottlenecks in leadership effectiveness. Experts who are promoted into managerial roles without cultivating collaboration and strategic thinking skills tend to stifle innovation and struggle to align cross-functional teams.

The Achiever

Among leaders assessed through the work of Torbert, 30% were classified as Achievers. These individuals strike a balance between delivering results and fostering a positive team environment. They embrace ambiguity, welcome feedback, and recognise that resolving conflicts requires sensitivity and influence. Achievers excel in leading large-scale projects and implementing strategies effectively over one- to three-year periods.

It was found that Achievers experience significantly lower staff turnover, delegate more effectively, and lead teams that outperform those managed by Experts. A study of ophthalmologists in private practice revealed that those who profiled as Achievers had higher practice revenues, lower attrition rates, and a more engaged workforce than their Expert counterparts.

However, Achievers often clash with Experts. While Achievers prioritise efficiency and results, Experts focus on technical perfection. In one case at Hewlett-Packard, a lab manager—an Achiever—insisted on shipping a product with only eight core features rather than delaying release for additional refinements. An Expert engineer scoffed, “Philistine!” Such conflicts, while sometimes tense, often drive innovation and adaptability in high-performing teams.

The Individualist

It was found that 10% of leaders operate from the Individualist action logic. These leaders recognise that all action logics, including their own, are constructed perspectives rather than absolute truths. This awareness enables them to communicate effectively across different leadership styles and challenge organisational assumptions.

Individualists often challenge company norms and may be seen as disruptive. For example, one Individualist leader successfully built an offshore shared services function far ahead of schedule and under budget. However, her unconventional methods and tendency to bypass bureaucratic processes made her a controversial figure within the company. Despite her successes, senior leadership struggled to integrate her into the established structure.

The Strategist and Beyond

Strategists, identified in only 4% of leaders, go beyond questioning norms to actively transform organisational culture. The work of Torbert found that Strategists excel at navigating complex social and organisational dynamics, leading sustainable, large-scale change.

It was found that in a study of CEOs across industries, those identified as Strategists were significantly more successful in driving organisational transformation. Over four years, companies led by Strategists experienced increased profitability, improved market positioning, and enhanced reputation, whereas those led by Achievers or Experts struggled to maintain long-term impact.

At the highest level, Alchemists—just 1% of leaders—demonstrate the ability to reinvent both themselves and their organisations in historically significant ways. They operate simultaneously at multiple levels, balancing short-term needs with long-term vision.

Leadership Evolution

One of the most significant findings from the work of Torbert is that leaders can evolve through different action logics with the right interventions. It was found that structured coaching, reflective practice, and peer learning all contribute to this transformation. Leaders can shift from Experts to Achievers, from Achievers to Individualists, and beyond.

For organisations committed to sustainable transformation, recognising and developing leadership action logics is not just an academic exercise—it is a strategic necessity. Teach coaches can support leaders and the whole team in navigating this journey, ensuring they cultivate the agility, awareness, and impact needed to drive meaningful change.

During this period of transformation, which spanned just over two years, the team evolved into an Individualist group with emerging Strategist tendencies. The CEO, who initially profiled as an Achiever/Individualist, had now progressed to a Strategist, while most other team members demonstrated at least one stage of development. This shift had a profound effect on both the team's and the organisation's culture: previously siloed, the team began embracing and integrating diverse perspectives. Employee surveys indicated a noticeable rise in engagement across the organisation. Externally, the company was increasingly perceived as a forward-thinking industry leader, enabling it to attract top-tier talent. By the third year, both revenue and profitability had significantly outpaced industry competitors.

The path to leadership transformation is rarely straightforward. While some individuals experience only minor shifts in their thinking over time, others undergo significant personal growth. Though genetics play an undeniable role, human nature is not static. Those committed to self-awareness and personal development can steadily evolve into more impactful, transformational leaders. While only a few may reach the Alchemist level, many have both the capacity and ambition to develop into Individualists and Strategists. Organisations that support their leaders in reflecting on and advancing their action logics stand to gain immense long-term benefits.

The Value of Action Logic for Leaders, Teams & Organisations

For Leaders

Understanding action logic is a powerful tool for leadership development. It helps leaders recognise how they interpret situations, make decisions, and respond to challenges. Leaders who actively develop their action logic move from reactive, short-term thinking to a more strategic and transformational approach. This shift enhances their ability to manage complexity, drive innovation, and lead with greater self-awareness and impact.

More advanced action logics, such as Achiever, Individualist, and Strategist, enable leaders to navigate ambiguity, foster collaboration, and create meaningful change. Leaders who engage in this developmental process not only improve their own effectiveness but also inspire those around them, creating a culture of continuous learning and adaptability.

For Teams

Teams function more effectively when members understand their own and each other's action logics. Awareness of different perspectives allows for better communication, reduced conflict, and stronger decision-making. Teams with leaders who have developed beyond the Expert or Diplomat levels tend to be more agile, creative, and aligned with organisational goals.

Strategist-led teams, in particular, embrace diverse viewpoints, challenge assumptions productively, and co-create innovative solutions. This type of leadership fosters psychological safety, where individuals feel empowered to contribute ideas and take calculated risks, ultimately driving higher engagement and performance.

For Organisations

Organisations that integrate action logic awareness into leadership development, executive coaching, and team dynamics benefit from sustained transformation. Companies led by Strategists and Alchemists consistently outperform those stuck at earlier action logics, as they are more adept at long-term planning, stakeholder engagement, and systemic change.

By helping leaders evolve through structured development programmes, coaching, and reflective practice, organisations cultivate a leadership pipeline capable of navigating complexity and uncertainty. This investment results in stronger business outcomes, a more engaged workforce, and an adaptive culture that thrives in an ever-changing landscape.

Action Logic	Characteristics	Strengths	% of research sample profiling at this action logic
Opportunist	<i>Wins any way possible.</i> Self-oriented; manipulative; “might makes right.”	Good in emergencies and in sales opportunities.	5%
Diplomat	<i>Avoids overt conflict.</i> Wants to belong; obeys group norms; rarely rocks the boat.	Good as supportive glue within an office; helps bring people together.	12%
Expert	<i>Rules by logic and expertise.</i> Seeks rational efficiency.	Good as an individual contributor.	38%
Achiever	<i>Meets strategic goals.</i> Effectively achieves goals through teams; juggles managerial duties and market demands.	Well suited to managerial roles; action and goal oriented.	30%
Individualist	<i>Interweaves competing personal and company action logics.</i> Creates unique structures to resolve gaps between strategy and performance.	Effective in venture and consulting roles.	10%
Strategist	<i>Generates organizational and personal transformations.</i> Exercises the power of mutual inquiry, vigilance, and vulnerability for both the short and long term.	Effective as a transformational leader.	4%
Alchemist	<i>Generates social transformations.</i> Integrates material, spiritual, and societal transformation.	Good at leading society-wide transformations.	1%

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Where do you operate?

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