

Reflecting on "Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling"

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We live in a world that believes our role as professionals is to “fix and tell” rather than “listen and inquire.” This is one of the key premises in the book *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*, by Edgar Schein. Schein, a lifelong student of interpersonal dynamics and a professor of management emeritus at the MIT Sloan School of Management, begins the book by defining what he means by humble inquiry:

“Humble inquiry is the fine art of drawing someone out, of asking questions, to which you do not already know the answers, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person.” (p. 2)

Schein suggests that even though this type of behavior “runs counter to some important aspects of U.S. culture,” he believes that to successfully interact with people with whom we are interdependent, we need to make the shift from mostly “telling” to becoming better at asking (p. 3). He reminds us that “the missing ingredients in most conversation are curiosity and willingness to ask questions to which we do not already know the answers.” (p. 4)

We all know how challenging interpersonal dynamics can be at times; we all need to “save face” and from time to time we expect deferential treatment. Combine those needs with the pace with which the world operates: we see how challenging humble inquiry can be.

Asking Builds Trust and Respect Schein challenges us to do three things (pp. 7–8):

- Do less telling
- Learn to do more asking in the particular form of Humble Inquiry
- Do a better job of listening and acknowledging.

Telling, the author contends, “puts the other person down.” Schein suggests that healthy relationships – whether personal or professional – require that interactions be “equilibrated,” with give-and-take that is based on trust and mutual respect.

Throughout the book, Schein discusses three types of humility. The first, *basic humility*, is “not a choice but a condition.” Although some cultures value and practice humility at greater levels, even in the more outspoken culture of the United States we know that a certain level of humility is expected. The second type of humility is *optional humility*, where we are humble and deferential around people who we believe have accomplished more than we have.

The final type of humility, and the one which Schein spends the most time in the book discussing, is *here-and-now humility*. This type of humility comes into play when we find ourselves dependent on someone else. As a result, at least for the time being, our status is inferior because we know that the other person has something or knows something we need (pp. 11–12). Schein suggests that on occasions like this, humble inquiry can be very useful.

4 Kinds of Inquiry Humble inquiry isn't easy and for most everyone is a learned behavior. Like any skill or habit, it takes lots of practice and lots of intentionality. And, humble inquiry is just one of four types of inquiry identified by Schein (pp. 40–48):

► **Humble Inquiry** (already identified). Questions that can be used when pursuing humble inquire include:

“So...(with an expected look)

“What’s happening?”

“What’s going on?”

“What brings you here?”

“Go on...”

“Can you give me an example?”

► **Diagnostic Inquiry** is used when one is “steering the conversation” based on curiosity about what one is hearing. The difference from humble inquiry is that diagnostic inquiry influences the other person’s “mental process.” An example Schein gives of diagnostic inquiry is based on a personal experience when he was in his front yard and a woman stopped the car and asked him for directions to Massachusetts Avenue. Rather than starting by giving her directions, he asked where she was going. When he learned she was going to downtown Boston, he was able to suggest she remain on the road she was currently on and it would take her right into Boston.

Diagnostic inquiry can cover four domains: (1) Feelings and reactions (“How did you feel about that?”); (2) Causes and motives (“What may have caused this...?”, “Why do you suppose that happened?”); (3) Action-oriented (“What have you tried so far?”, “What are you going to do next?”); and (4) Systemic Questions that build understanding of the entire situation (“How do you think she felt when you did that?”, “What do you think he will do if you follow through on what you said?”).

► **Confrontational Inquiry** is where you “insert your own ideas but in the form of a question,” and where you are “tacitly giving advice.” Questions could include: “Did not that make you angry?” or “Why didn’t you say something to the group?” or “Were the others in the room surprised?” Another might be “Haven't you read the work of (expert)?”

► **Process-Oriented Inquiry** is where the conversational direction is determined by the ongoing dialogue. Schein suggests that this form of inquiry is used when building a relationship and ensuring that the mutual goals associated with the coaching are being met. Questions like: “What is happening here?” or “What should I be asking you right now?” or “Are you upset? Have I upset you?” are utilized when moving into process-oriented inquiry.

How Here–And–Now Humility Works

Returning to Humble Inquiry, this excerpt from Schein's introduction (p. 19) reveals some of its special potential for coaching and partnering:

What we ask, how we ask it, where we ask it, and when we ask it all matter. But the essence of Humble Inquiry goes beyond just overt questioning. The kind of inquiry I am talking about derives from an attitude of interest and curiosity. It implies a desire to build a relationship that will lead to more open communication. It also implies that one makes oneself vulnerable and, thereby, arouses positive helping behavior in the other person. Such an attitude is reflected in a variety of behaviors other than just the specific questions we ask. Sometimes we display through body language and silence a curiosity and level of interest that gets the other person talking even when we have said nothing.

Feelings of Here–and–now Humility are, for the most part, the basis of curiosity and interest. If I feel I have something to learn from you or want to hear from you some of your experiences or feelings because I care for you, or need something from you to accomplish a task, this makes me temporarily dependent and vulnerable. It is precisely my temporary subordination that creates psychological safety for you and, therefore, increases the chances that you will tell me what I need to know and help me get the job done. If you exploit the situation and lie to me or take advantage of me by selling me something I don't need or giving me bad advice, I will learn to avoid you in the future or punish you if I am your boss. If you tell me what I need to know and help me, we have begun to build a positive relationship.

Humble Inquiry: Worth the Effort

“This is great, but it is really, really hard to develop this mindset!” Schein agrees and says one reason is that, in the U.S., “status and prestige are gained by task accomplishment, and once you are above someone else, you are licensed to tell them what to do.” (p. 57). A little bit further in the book, Schein reminds of our “Culture of Tell:”

“We take it for granted that telling is more valued than asking. Asking the right questions is valued, but asking in general is not.”(p. 58)

Take heart, however. Schein reminds us of the mantra we often use in the work of the Alabama Best Practices Center, “go slow to go fast,” when he says, “The learning stage where a relationship is being built requires slowing down and building trust, but once the relationship has been built, work actually gets done much faster.” (p. 102)

An Important Reminder:

“Saying to oneself that one should ask more and tell less does not solve the problem of building a relationship of mutual trust. The underlying attitude of competitive one-upmanship will leak out if it is there. Humble Inquiry starts with that attitude (of humbleness) and then is supported by our choice of questions. The more we remain curious about the other person rather than letting our own expectations and preconceptions creep in, the better our chances of staying in the right questioning mode.” (p. 50)

For those of us who coach adults, humble inquiry is a must. You can see several excerpts [here](#) and [here](#).