

An Excerpt From

Humble Inquiry
The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling

by Edgar H. Schein
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND BETTER ORGANIZATIONS

EDGAR H. SCHEIN

HUMBLE INQUIRY



THE GENTLE
ART OF ASKING
INSTEAD
OF TELLING

More Praise for *Humble Inquiry*

“An invaluable guide for a consultant trying to understand and untangle system and interpersonal knots. Written with a beguiling simplicity and clarity, it is laden with wisdom and practicality.”

—**Irvin Yalom, MD, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry, Stanford University**

“The lessons contained in this deceptively simple book reach beyond the author’s experience gained from a lifetime of consultation to organizations of all sizes and shapes. It provides life lessons for us all. If, as a result of reading this book, you begin to practice the art of humble asking, you will have taken an important step toward living wisely.”

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“This book seriously challenges leaders to re-examine the emphasis on task orientation and ‘telling’ subordinates how best to do their jobs. *Humble Inquiry* increases organizational capacity to learn more from cross-cultural teamwork, reduces stress, and increases organizational engagement and productivity.”

—**Jyotsna Sanzgiri, MBA, PhD, Professor, California School of Professional Psychology, Alliant International University**

“This book is particularly important for leaders who in these complex times need advice and tools for building trust in their relationships with subordinates individually or in teams.”

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“Ed Schein has provided a new and thoughtful reframing of interpersonal dynamics through the notion of *Humble Inquiry*. This short book is packed with insights as Schein rigorously explores the impact of his ideas in his usually clear and readable style.”

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“*Humble Inquiry* is an elegant treatment of how to go about building and sustaining solid, trusting relationships in or out of the workplace. A masterful take on a critical human skill too infrequently practiced.”

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“A fast read and full of insight! Considering the cultural, occupational, generational, and gender communication barriers we face every day, *Humble Inquiry* proposes a very practical, nonthreatening approach to bridging those gaps and increasing the mutual understanding that leads to operational excellence.”

—**Rosa Antonia Carrillo, MSOD, safety leadership consultant**

“A remarkably valuable guide for anyone interested in leading more effectively and building strong relationships. Ed Schein presents vivid examples grounded in a lifetime of experience as husband, father, teacher, administrator, and consultant.”

—**Robert B. McKersie, Professor Emeritus, Sloan School of Management, MIT**

“Ed Schein has an eye for bold yet subtle insights into the big picture and a knack for writing about them clearly. *Humble Inquiry*—like his previous book *Helping*—shows that he is equally talented at bringing fresh thinking to well-trodden ground.”

—**Grady McGonagill, EdD, Principal, McGonagill Consulting**

“What did I gain from reading *Humble Inquiry*? I became more aware of the subtle but powerful ways we affect each other as we talk and how the right kind of questions can dramatically improve the quality and efficiency of communication, with benefits that range from increased patient safety and satisfaction to employee motivation and morale to organizational performance. You can’t afford to not know about this.”

—**Anthony Suchman, MD, MA, University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry**

“With the world as his classroom, Ed Schein continues to guide us through modern day chaos with the powerful behaviors of *Helping* and *Humble Inquiry*. This is a must-read for anyone who truly wishes to achieve important goals!”

—**Marjorie M. Godfrey, Codirector, The Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy & Clinical Practice Microsystem Academy**

Humble Inquiry

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Humble Inquiry

The Gentle Art of Asking
Instead of Telling

EDGAR H. SCHEIN



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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
San Francisco
a BK Business book

Humble Inquiry

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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
235 Montgomery Street, Suite 650
San Francisco, California 94104-2916
Tel: (415) 288-0260, Fax: (415) 362-2512
www.bkconnection.com

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First Edition

Paperback print edition ISBN 978-1-60994-981-5

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-60994-982-2

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-60994-983-9

2013-1

Cover designed by Susan Malinkowski, Designleaf Studio.

Produced by BookMatters, copyedited by Tanya Grove, proofed by Anne Smith, indexed by Leonard Rosenbaum.

This book is dedicated to my
main teachers and mentors:
Gordon Allport, Richard Solomon,
David Rioch, Erving Goffman,
Douglas McGregor, and Richard Beckhard.

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Introduction: Creating Positive Relationships and Effective Organizations

The motivation to write this book is personal and professional. On the personal level, I have never liked being told things gratuitously, especially things I already know.

The other day I was admiring an unusual bunch of mushrooms that had grown after a heavy rain when a lady walking her dog chose to stop and tell me in a loud voice, “Some of those are poisonous, you know.” I replied, “I know,” to which she added, “Some of them can kill you, you know.”

What struck me was how her need to tell not only made it difficult to respond in a positive manner, but it also offended me. I realized that her tone and her *telling* approach prevented the building of a positive relationship and made further communication awkward. Her motivation might have been to help me, yet I found it unhelpful and wished that she had asked me a question, either at the beginning or after I said “I know,” instead of trying to tell me something more.

Why is it so important to learn to ask better questions that help to build positive relationships? Because in an increasingly complex, interdependent, and culturally diverse world, we cannot hope to understand and work

with people from different occupational, professional, and national cultures if we do not know how to ask questions and build relationships that are based on mutual respect and the recognition that others know things that we may need to know in order to get a job done.

But not all questions are equivalent. I have come to believe that we need to learn a particular form of questioning that I first called “Humble Inquiry” in my book on *Helping* (2009), and that can be defined as follows:

Humble Inquiry is the fine art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person.

The professional motivation to explore Humble Inquiry more extensively comes from the insights I have gained over the past fifty years of consulting with various kinds of organizations. Especially in the high hazard industries in which the problems of safety are paramount, I have learned that good relations and reliable communication across hierarchic boundaries are crucial. In airplane crashes and chemical industry accidents, in the infrequent but serious nuclear plant accidents, in the NASA Challenger and Columbia disasters, and in the British Petroleum gulf spill, a common finding is that lower-ranking employees had information that would have prevented or lessened the consequences of the accident, but either it was not passed up to higher levels, or it was ignored, or it was overridden. When I talk to senior managers, they always assure me that they are open, that they want to hear from their subordinates, and that they take the information seriously. However, when I talk to the subordinates in those same organizations, they tell me either they do not feel safe bringing bad news to

their bosses or they've tried but never got any response or even acknowledgment, so they concluded that their input wasn't welcome and gave up. Shockingly often, they settled for risky alternatives rather than upset their bosses with potentially bad news.

When I look at what goes on in hospitals, in operating rooms, and in the health care system generally, I find the same problems of communication exist and that patients frequently pay the price. Nurses and technicians do not feel safe bringing negative information to doctors or correcting a doctor who is about to make a mistake. Doctors will argue that if the others were "professionals" they would speak up, but in many a hospital the nurses will tell you that doctors feel free to yell at nurses in a punishing way, which creates a climate where nurses will certainly not speak up. Doctors engage patients in one-way conversations in which they ask only enough questions to make a diagnosis and sometimes make misdiagnoses because they don't ask enough questions before they begin to tell patients what they should do.

It struck me that what is missing in all of these situations is a climate in which lower-level employees feel safe to bring up issues that need to be addressed, information that would reduce the likelihood of accidents, and, in health care, mistakes that harm patients. How does one produce a climate in which people will speak up, bring up information that is safety related, and even correct superiors or those of higher status when they are about to make a mistake?

The answer runs counter to some important aspects of U.S. culture—*we must become better at asking and do less telling in a culture that overvalues telling*. It has always bothered me how even ordinary conversations tend to be defined by what we *tell* rather than by what we *ask*. Questions are taken for granted rather than given a starring role in the

human drama. Yet all my teaching and consulting experience has taught me that what builds a relationship, what solves problems, what moves things forward is *asking the right questions*. In particular, it is the higher-ranking leaders who must learn the art of Humble Inquiry as a first step in creating a climate of openness.

I learned early in my consulting that getting questioning right was more important than giving recommendations or advice and wrote about that in my books on *Process Consultation*.¹ I then realized that giving and receiving help also worked best when the helper asked some questions before giving advice or jumping in with solutions. So I wrote about the importance of asking in my book *Helping*.²

I now realize that the issue of asking versus telling is really a fundamental issue in human relations, and that it applies to all of us all the time. What we choose to ask, when we ask, what our underlying attitude is as we ask—all are key to relationship building, to communication, and to task performance.

Building relationships between humans is a complex process. The mistakes we make in conversations and the things we think we should have said after the conversation is over all reflect our own confusion about the balancing of asking and telling, and our automatic bias toward telling. The missing ingredients in most conversations are curiosity and willingness to ask questions to which we do not already know the answer.

It is time to take a look at this form of questioning and examine its role in a wide variety of situations, from ordinary conversations to complex-task performances, such as a surgical team performing an open-heart operation. In a complex and interdependent world, more and more tasks are like a seesaw or a relay race. We tout teamwork and use

lots of different athletic analogies, but I chose the seesaw and the relay race to make the point that often it is necessary for *everyone* to do their part. For everyone to do their part appropriately requires good communication; good communication requires building a *trusting relationship*; and building a trusting relationship requires *Humble Inquiry*.

This book is for the general reader, but it has special significance for people in leadership roles because the art of questioning becomes more difficult as status increases. Our culture emphasizes that leaders must be wiser, set direction, and articulate values, all of which predisposes them to tell rather than ask. Yet it is leaders who will need Humble Inquiry most because complex interdependent tasks will require building positive, trusting relationships with subordinates to facilitate good upward communication. And without good upward communication, organizations can be neither effective nor safe.

About this book

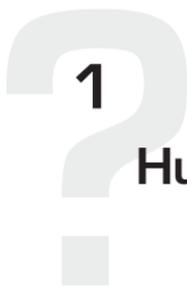
In this book I will first define and explain what I mean by *Humble Inquiry* in Chapter 1. To fully understand *humility*, it is helpful to differentiate three kinds of humility: 1) the humility that we feel around elders and dignitaries; 2) the humility that we feel in the presence of those who awe us with their achievements; and 3) Here-and-now Humility, which results from our being dependent from time to time on someone else in order to accomplish a task that we are committed to. This will strike some readers as academic hairsplitting, but it is the recognition of this third type of humility that is the key to Humble Inquiry and to the building of positive relationships.

To fully explain Humble Inquiry, Chapter 2 will pro-

vide a number of short case examples, and Chapter 3 will discuss how this form of questioning is different from other kinds of questions that one may ask.

Chapter 4 will discuss why it is difficult to engage in Humble Inquiry in the kind of task-oriented culture we live in. I label this a “Culture of Do and Tell” and argue that not only do we value *telling* more than *asking*, but we also value *doing* more than *relating* and thereby reduce our capacity and desire to form relationships. Chapter 5 argues that the higher we are in status, the more difficult it becomes to engage in Humble Inquiry while, at the same time, it becomes more important for leaders to learn how to be humble from time to time. Not only do norms and assumptions in our culture make Humble Inquiry difficult, but the complexity of our human brain and the complexity of social relationships also create some constraints and difficulties, which I discuss in Chapter 6.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I provide some suggestions for how we can increase our ability and desire to engage in more Humble Inquiry.



1

Humble Inquiry

When conversations go wrong, when our best advice is ignored, when we get upset with the advice that others give us, when our subordinates fail to tell us things that would improve matters or avoid pitfalls, when discussions turn into arguments that end in stalemates and hurt feelings—what went wrong and what could have been done to get better outcomes?

A vivid example came from one of my executive students in the MIT Sloan Program who was studying for his important finance exam in his basement study. He had explicitly instructed his six-year-old daughter not to interrupt him. He was deep into his work when a knock on the door announced the arrival of his daughter. He said sharply, “I thought I told you not to interrupt me.” The little girl burst into tears and ran off. The next morning his wife berated him for upsetting the daughter. He defended himself vigorously until his wife interrupted and said, “I sent her down to you to say goodnight and ask you if you wanted a cup of coffee to help with your studying. Why did you yell at her instead of asking her why she was there?”

How can we do better? The answer is simple, but its implementation is not. We would have to do three things: 1) do less telling; 2) learn to do more asking in the particular form of Humble Inquiry; and 3) do a better job of listening

and acknowledging. Talking and listening have received enormous attention via hundreds of books on communication. But the social art of asking a question has been strangely neglected.

Yet what we ask and the particular form in which we ask it—what I describe as Humble Inquiry—is ultimately the basis for building trusting relationships, which facilitates better communication and, thereby, ensures collaboration where it is needed to get the job done.

Some tasks can be accomplished by each person doing his or her own thing. If that is the case, building relationships and improving communication may not matter. In the team sports of basketball, soccer, and hockey, teamwork is *desirable* but not essential. But when *all the parties* have to do the right thing—when there is complete, simultaneous interdependence, as in a seesaw or a relay race—then good relationships and open communication become *essential*.

How Does Asking Build Relationships?

We all live in a culture of Tell and find it difficult to ask, especially to ask in a humble way. What is so wrong with telling? The short answer is a sociological one. *Telling* puts the other person down. It implies that the other person does not already know what I am telling and that the other person ought to know it. Often when I am told something that I did not ask about, I find that I already know that and wonder why the person assumes that I don't. When I am told things that I already know or have thought of, at the minimum I get impatient, and at the maximum I get offended. The fact that the other person says, "But I was only trying to help—you might not have thought of it," does not end up being helpful or reassuring.

On the other hand, *asking* temporarily empowers the other person in the conversation and temporarily makes me vulnerable. It implies that the other person knows something that I need to or want to know. It draws the other person into the situation and into the driver's seat; it enables the other person to help or hurt me and, thereby, opens the door to building a relationship. If I don't care about communicating or building a relationship with the other person, then telling is fine. But if part of the goal of the conversation is to *improve* communication and build a relationship, then telling is more risky than asking.

A conversation that leads to a relationship has to be sociologically equitable and balanced. If I want to build a relationship, I have to begin by investing something in it. Humble Inquiry is investing by spending some of my *attention* up front. My question is conveying to the other person, "I am prepared to listen to you and am making myself vulnerable to you." I will get a return on my investment if what the other person tells me is something that I did not know before and needed to know. I will then appreciate being told something new, and a relationship can begin to develop through successive cycles of being told something *in response to asking*.

Trust builds on my end because I have made myself vulnerable, and the other person has not taken advantage of me nor ignored me. Trust builds on the other person's end because I have shown an interest in and paid attention to what I have been told. A conversation that builds a trusting relationship is, therefore, an interactive process in which each party invests and gets something of value in return.

All of this occurs within the cultural boundaries of what is considered appropriate good manners and civility. The participants exchange information and attention in suc-

cessive cycles guided by each of their perceptions of the cultural boundaries of what is appropriate to ask and tell about in the given situation.

Why does this not occur routinely? Don't we all know how to ask questions? Of course we think we know how to ask, but we fail to notice how often even our questions are just another form of telling—rhetorical or just testing whether what we think is right. We are biased toward telling instead of asking because we live in a pragmatic, problem-solving culture in which knowing things and telling others what we know is valued. We also live in a structured society in which building relationships is not as important as task accomplishment, in which it is appropriate and expected that the subordinate does more asking than telling, while the boss does more telling than asking. Having to ask is a sign of weakness or ignorance, so we avoid it as much as possible.

Yet there is growing evidence that many tasks get accomplished better and more safely if team members and especially bosses learn to build relationships through the art of Humble Inquiry. This form of asking shows interest in the other person, signals a willingness to listen, and, thereby, temporarily empowers the other person. It implies a temporary state of dependence on another and, therefore, implies a kind of *Here-and-now Humility*, which must be distinguished from two other forms of humility.

Three Kinds of Humility

Humility, in the most general sense, refers to granting someone else a higher *status* than one claims for oneself. To be *humiliated* means to be publicly deprived of one's claimed status, to lose face. It is unacceptable in all cultures to humiliate another person, but the rules for what constitutes

humiliation vary among cultures due to differences in how status is granted. Therefore, to understand Humble Inquiry, we need to distinguish three kinds of humility based on three kinds of status:

1) *Basic humility*—In traditional societies where status is ascribed by birth or social position, humility is not a choice but a condition. One can accept it or resent it, but one cannot arbitrarily change it. In most cultures the “upper class” is granted an intrinsic respect based on the status one is born into. In Western democracies such as the United States, we are in conflict about how humble to be in front of someone who has been born into it rather than having achieved it. But all cultures dictate the minimum amount of respect required, or the expected politeness and acknowledgment that adults owe each other. We all acknowledge that as human beings we owe each other some basic respect and should act with some measure of civility.

2) *Optional humility*—In societies where status is *achieved* through one’s accomplishments, we tend to feel humble in the presence of people who have clearly achieved more than we have, and we either admire or envy them. This is *optional* because we have the choice whether or not to put ourselves in the presence of others who would humble us with their achievements. We can avoid such feelings of humility by the company we choose and who we choose to compare ourselves to, our reference groups. When in the presence of someone whose achievements we respect, we generally know what the expected rules of deference and demeanor are, but these can vary by occupational culture. How to properly show respect for the Nobel Prize–winning physicist or the Olympic Gold Medal–winner may require some coaching by occupational insiders.

3) *Here-and-now Humility*—There is a third kind of

humility that is crucial for the understanding of Humble Inquiry. Here-and-now Humility is how I feel when I am dependent on you. My status is inferior to yours at this moment because you know something or can do something that I need in order to accomplish some task or goal that I have chosen. You have the power to help or hinder me in the achievement of goals that I have chosen and have committed to. I have to be humble because I am temporarily dependent on you. Here I also have a choice. I can either not commit to tasks that make me dependent on others, or I can deny the dependency, avoid feeling humble, fail to get what I need, and, thereby, fail to accomplish the task or unwittingly sabotage it. Unfortunately people often would rather fail than to admit their dependency on someone else.

This kind of humility is easy to see and feel when you are the subordinate, the student, or the patient/client because the situation you are in defines relative status. It is less visible in a team among peers, and it is often totally invisible to the boss who may assume that the formal power granted by the position itself will guarantee the performance of the subordinate. The boss may not perceive his or her dependency on the subordinate, either because of incorrect assumptions about the nature of the task that is being performed or because of incorrect assumptions about a subordinate's level of commitment to the particular job. The boss may assume that if something is in the subordinate's job description, it will be done, and not notice the many ways in which subordinates will withhold information or drift off what they have been trained for. But, if I am a boss on a seesaw or in a relay race in which everyone's performance matters to getting the job done at all, I am *de facto* dependent on the subordinate whether I recognize it or not. Getting the seesaw to move and passing the baton will work only if all the participants,

regardless of formal status, recognize their dependence on each other. It is in that situation where Humble Inquiry by all the parties becomes most relevant, where the humility is not based on a priori status gaps or differences in prior achievement, but on recognized here-and-now interdependence.

When you are dependent on someone to get a task accomplished, it is essential that you build a relationship with that person that will lead to open task-related communication. Consider two possibilities. You are the boss in the relay race. *Telling* the person to put out her or his left hand so that you, who are right-handed, can easily pass the baton, may or may not lead to effective passing. However, if you decide to engage in Humble Inquiry prior to the race, you might ask your teammate's preference for which hand to use. You might then discover that the person has an injured left hand that does not work as well, and it would be better for you to pass with *your* left.

Shouldn't the subordinate have mentioned that before the race anyway? Not if in that culture for one person to speak up directly to a person of higher status is taboo. If the baton pass is an instrument a nurse passes to the surgeon, isn't it enough for the surgeon to *tell* the nurse what she needs and expect a correct response? Ordinarily yes, but what if the nurse is temporarily distracted by a beep from monitoring equipment or confused because of a possible language problem or thinks it is the wrong instrument? Should he not speak up and admit that he does not understand, or are the cultural forces in the situation such that he will guess and maybe make a costly mistake? If, in the culture of that operating room, the doctors are gods and one simply does not question or confront them, that nurse will not speak up, even if there is potential harm to the patient. My point is that in both of those examples, the boss and the

doctor are de facto dependent on their subordinates and must, therefore, recognize their Here-and-now Humility. Failure to do so and failure to engage in Humble Inquiry to build a relationship *prior to the race or the operation itself* then leads to poor performance, potential harm, and feelings of frustration all around.

When such situations occur within a given culture where the rules of deference and demeanor are clear, there is a chance that the parties will understand each other. But when the team members in an interdependent task are more multicultural, both the language and the set of behavioral rules about how to deal with authority and trust may vary. To make this clear, let's look at a hypothetical multicultural example from medicine, keeping in mind that the same cultural forces would operate in a comparable example of a task force in a business or in a curriculum committee in a school.

THREE KINDS OF HUMILITY— A SURGICAL TEAM EXAMPLE

Consider these three types of humility in the context of a hypothetical British hospital operating room where a complex operation is being performed. The surgeon is Dr. Roderick Brown, the son of Lord Brown, who is a respected senior surgeon and works with the Royal Family; the anesthesiologist is Dr. Yoshi Tanaka, recently arrived from Japan on a residency fellowship; the surgical nurse is Amy Grant, an American working in the United Kingdom because her husband has a job there; and the surgical tech is Jack Swift, who is from a lower-class section of London and has gone as high as he is likely to go at the hospital.³

All the members of the team would feel some *basic humility* with respect to the surgeon, Dr. Brown, except pos-

sibly Amy, who does not particularly respect the British class structure. Both Amy and Dr. Tanaka would feel *optional humility* with respect to Dr. Brown because they can see how talented Brown is with surgical tools. Jack is likely to feel such *optional humility* with respect to all the others in the room. What none of them may be sufficiently aware of is that they are *interdependent* and will, therefore, have to experience *Here-and-now Humility* from time to time with respect to each other.

Dr. Brown, the senior surgeon, may know implicitly, but would not necessarily acknowledge openly, that he is also dependent on the other three. A situation might well arise where he needs information or something to be done by the others in the room who have lower status than he. In the context of the task to be done, situations will arise where an occupationally higher-status person temporarily has lower status by virtue of being dependent and, therefore, should display *Here-and-now Humility* to ensure a better performance and a safer outcome for the patient.

The higher-status person often denies or glosses this kind of dependency by rationalizing that "I am, after all, working with professionals." That implies that they are all competent, are committed to the superordinate goals of healing the patient, and accept their roles and relative status in the room. It implies that they don't feel humiliated by having orders barked at them or having help demanded of them. Their "professionalism" also typically assumes that they will not humiliate the person with higher status by offering criticism or help unless asked. The burden then falls on the higher-status person to ask for help and *to create the climate that gives permission for the help to be given.*

Situational Trouble or Surprise. If things work smoothly, there may be no issues around status and open communication. But what if something goes wrong or something unexpected occurs? For example, if Dr. Tanaka is about to make a major mistake on the anesthetics, and the nurse, Amy, notices it, what should she do? Should she speak up? And what are the consequences of her speaking up about it? Being American, she might just blurt it out and risk that Dr. Tanaka would, in fact, be humiliated by being corrected by a lower-status nurse, a woman, and an American.

If the corrective comment was made by Dr. Brown, it might be embarrassing, but would have been accepted because the senior person can legitimately correct the junior person. Dr. Tanaka might actually appreciate it. Jack might have seen the potential error but would not feel licensed to speak up at all. If Amy or the tech made the mistake, they might get yelled at and thrown off the team because from the point of view of the senior doctor, they could easily be replaced by someone more competent.

What if Dr. Brown was about to make a mistake, would anyone tell him? Dr. Tanaka has learned in his culture that one *never* corrects a superior. This might go so far as to cover up for a surgeon's mistake in order to protect the face of the superior and the profession. Amy would experience conflict and might or might not speak up depending on how psychologically safe she felt in the situation. That might be based on what kind of history of communication and relationship she had with Dr. Brown and other male surgeons in her past career. She might not know whether Dr. Brown would be humiliated by having a nurse offer a corrective comment or question. And humiliation must be avoided in most cultures, so it would be difficult for her to speak up unless she and Dr. Brown had built a relationship in which she felt safe to do so.

Jack would certainly not speak up but might later tell terrible stories about Dr. Brown to his tech colleagues if the operation went badly and the patient was harmed or died unnecessarily. If this incident later led to an official inquiry, Jack and Dr. Tanaka might be called as witnesses. They might be asked what they had observed and would either have to lie or, if they admitted that they saw the mistake, might be criticized for not having done anything at the time.

All this would result from Dr. Brown (the leader) being insensitive to the cultural rules around speaking up across status boundaries and not doing anything to change those rules within his surgical team. What is missing in this scenario, and it is often missing in all kinds of complex interdependent tasks, is a social mechanism that overrides the barriers to communication across status lines where humiliation is a cultural possibility. To build this social mechanism—a relationship that facilitates relevant, task-oriented, open communication across status boundaries—requires that leaders learn the art of Humble Inquiry. The most difficult part of this learning is for persons in the higher-status position to become Here-and-now Humble, to realize that in many situations *they are de facto dependent on subordinates and other lower-status team members.*

This kind of humility is difficult to learn because in achievement-oriented cultures where knowledge and the display of it are admired, being Here-and-now Humble implies loss of status. Yet this is precisely the kind of humility that will increasingly be needed by leaders, managers, and professionals of all sorts because they will find themselves more and more in tasks where mutual interdependency is the basic condition. That might at times require leaders to ask their team, “Am I doing this correctly? Tell me if I am doing something wrong.” This is even harder to learn when

some of the members of the team come from traditional cultures in which arbitrary status lines must not be overridden and where task failure is preferable to humiliation and loss of face.

What would it take to get Dr. Tanaka, Amy, and even Jack to confront Dr. Brown when he is about to make a mistake? Efforts to define common goals, require procedures such as checklists, and standardize training are necessary but not sufficient because, in a new and ambiguous situation, team members will fall back on their own cultural rules and do unpredictable things. A leader of any multicultural team who really wanted to ensure open task-related communication would use Humble Inquiry to first build a relationship with the others that would make them feel psychologically safe and able to overcome the conflict they may experience between their duties and their culturally and professionally defined sense of deference.

What Is Inquiry?

Having defined what *humility* means in this analysis of Humble Inquiry, we need next to ask what *inquiry* means. Inquiry is also a complex concept. Questioning is both a science and an art. Professional question askers such as pollsters have done decades of research on how to ask a question to get the kind of information they want. Effective therapists, counselors, and consultants have refined the art of questioning to a high degree. But most of us have not considered how questions should be asked in the context of daily life, ordinary conversations, and, most importantly, task performance. When we add the issue of asking questions across cultural and status boundaries, things become very muddy indeed.

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.

Inquiry, in this context, does imply that you ask questions. But not any old question. The dilemma in U.S. culture is that we don't really distinguish what I am defining as Humble Inquiry carefully enough from *leading* questions, *rhetorical* questions, *embarrassing* questions, or statements in the form of questions—such as journalists seem to love—which are deliberately provocative and intended to put you

down. If leaders, managers, and all kinds of professionals are to learn Humble Inquiry, they will have to learn to differentiate carefully among the possible questions to ask and make choices that build the relationship. How this is done will vary with the setting, the task, and the local circumstances, as we will see in later chapters.

In the next chapter, I want first to provide a wide range of examples of Humble Inquiry to make clear what I mean by it and to illustrate how varied the behavior can be depending on the situation and the context.

QUESTIONS FOR THE READER

- Think about various people whom you admire and respect. What is the type of humility that you feel in each case?
- Think about tasks that require collaboration. In what way are you dependent on another person? Try to reflect on and recognize the temporary Here-and-now Humility that is required of each of you as you help each other. Do you think you can talk about this kind of humility with each other when you next discuss your joint task? If not, why not?
- Now think about yourself in your daily life with friends and family. Reflect on the kinds of questions you tend to ask in ordinary conversation and in task situations. Are they different? Why?
- What is the one most important thing you have learned about how to ask questions?
- Now take a few minutes just to reflect quietly on what you have learned in general so far.

This material has been excerpted from

Humble Inquiry
The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling

by Edgar H. Schein

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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