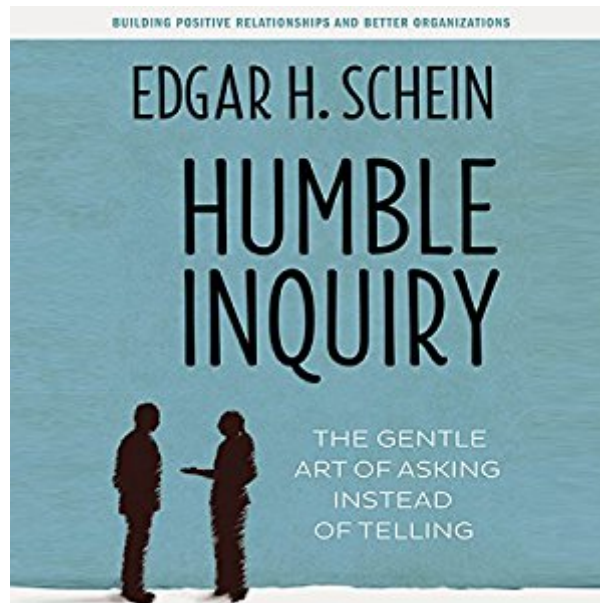




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# **Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art Of Asking Instead Of Telling**



## Synopsis

The key to effective communication. Communication is essential in a healthy organization. But all too often when we interact with people - especially those who report to us - we simply tell them what we think they need to know. This shuts them down. To generate bold new ideas, to avoid disastrous mistakes, to develop agility and flexibility, we need to practice Humble Inquiry. Ed Schein defines Humble Inquiry as "the fine art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person." In this seminal work, Schein contrasts Humble Inquiry with other kinds of inquiry, shows the benefits Humble Inquiry provides in many different settings, and offers advice on overcoming the cultural, organizational, and psychological barriers that keep us from practicing it.

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## Customer Reviews

"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." - Edgar Henry Schein  
We all live in a culture of telling and find it difficult to ask questions. This limits our ability to build relationships with others. Schein recognizes this gap and explains the concept of Humble Inquiry effectively. He writes that Humble Enquiry builds interdependence by helping us have better information, and building mutual respect with others. The basic concept of humble enquiry is to learn how to ask questions instead of

to tell us and approach conversations with genuine curiosity and humility. Schein explains that what we ask, how we ask it, and when we ask it - all matter. Schein has used several real life examples to explain the concept of Humble Inquiry. These examples make us understand how humble enquiry can be used or practiced in our day to day life. Through this book Schein does not intend to teach how to practice humble enquiry, the true message, we believe, is to educate readers about the value of building relationships by asking questions that arise from curiosity and interest. In this book, Schein often refers to task-oriented culture in US. He explains that there is a lack of attention to relationship issues, which in turn ends up dampening task accomplishment. Schein's suggestions feel counter-intuitive in this culture of task performance, interpersonal competitiveness and telling rather than asking. Schein suggests that a leader can use humble inquiry to help others see their interdependence and build mutual respect, which will lead to collaboration. Schein has done a great job in introducing readers to concepts that they would have ignored otherwise in their day to day lives. Schein defines strategic humility and categorizes humility as: basic humility (attitude towards somebody who has a high title); optional humility (attitude towards somebody who shows that they are capable); and Here-and-now humility (situational attitude towards somebody in order to build a relationship). Here-and-now humility is crucial for the understanding of Humble Enquiry. Schein's example of a surgical team performing a complex operation provides a good context for these three types of humility. This book is a good read for managers who are looking to bring a change in their communication style. Communication plays an important role in strategic management for an organization. Without effective communication, the goals, objectives and vision developed by senior management may not be properly conveyed or perhaps miscommunicated to other stakeholders. Schein emphasizes the importance of developing an attitude of humble inquiry which is often found missing when a person higher up in hierarchy communicates with people working under him. Dynamics within organizations is constantly changing with time. Companies are transforming from a hierarchical organizational structure to more people oriented. People oriented organizations like Software or Service companies need a communication structure which encourages idea from all. Schein echoes the same thought and believes that organizational transformation is required so that leaders start listening and asking questions. Humble enquiry can lead to efficient exchange of information which may have been lost otherwise. Schein's style of writing is simple and to the point. This book helps us pay attention to conversations in our day to day lives and how they can be transformed to incorporate Humble Enquiry. This is one strategy that can be applied across all industries and can be practiced by anyone within the organization - starting from an intern and going

all the way up to the CEO, results can be extraordinary.

Edgar Schein was a professor of management at MIT is considered to be one of the founders of the discipline of organizational psychology. He says that this book *“Humble Inquiry”* represents a culmination and distillation of my 50 years of work as a social and organizational psychologist. *“Humble Inquiry”* provides a profound solution to a critical problem experienced in business today. The world of work is becoming more technologically complex, interdependent, and culturally diverse. We need groups of people to accomplish almost all task as hardly anything is done by alone individual anymore. Building relationships is more necessary simply to get things accomplished, but at the same time, it is more difficult.

*“Relationships are the key to good communication; good communication is the key to successful task accomplishment,”* Schein explains. In high hazard industries in which safety is paramount, accidents are always studied very carefully for what can reveal. Studies of airplane crashes, chemical industry accidents, nuclear plant accidents, the NASA Challenger and Columbia disasters, the British Petroleum gulf spill, there was a common finding. Lower-ranking employees had information that would have prevented the disaster, but it was ignored or overridden by their seniors. Their input clearly was not welcome and they gave up. They chose to accept the serious risks they observed, instead of annoying their managers with *“bad news.”* In most instances, what was absent was a climate in which junior member of staff felt safe to bring up issues that need attention and would have reduced the likelihood of accidents, and, in the medical field, mistakes that cause harm to the patients. Without good upward communication, no organizations can be safe. Even less dramatic contexts, it is abundantly clear that no organization can be effective without good upward communication. If it is so important, why have we allowed this situation to exist? Schein identifies social, psychological the absence of a method for this problem. Key to his solutions profound solution is *“Humble Inquiry.”* Learning to ask better questions helps to build positive relationships. *“Humble Inquiry”* is described as *“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.”* This form of asking shows an interest in the other person and a willingness to listen. People generally do not like being told things gratuitously, especially things they already know. This is because this type of telling implies a superiority and the presumption of the receiver’s intellectual inferiority. Our culture overvalues telling and undervalues asking which is probably why we do so

little asking. The work *humble inquiry* means to be publicly deprived of the status you believe you should have, and to lose face. This point is necessary for the understanding of *humble inquiry*. There are three types of humility, each different from the other. There is the humility that we feel around elders and dignitaries. There is the humility that we feel in the presence of those who have amazing achievements, and there is *here-and-now* humility, which results from our occasional dependence on someone else in order to accomplish a task we have undertaken. Humble Inquiry is a function of the third type of humility. Asking temporarily empowers the other person in the conversation, and temporarily makes me vulnerable. Consider a manager asking a junior member of his staff his opinion of what they should do. Or a surgeon asking nurse for her opinion. In our culture, a manager should have all the answers, and so should the surgeon. The reality is that every leader and every manager and every surgeon is de facto dependent on their subordinates and must face up to their *Here-and-now* Humility. Not facing up to this fact puts superior performance beyond reach at best and created dangerous situations at worst. Simply asking a subordinate a question is not Humble Inquiry and does not achieve the objective of genuine input without massaging it to suit the manager. Too often, what is phrased as question is simply *telling* in disguise. *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,* says Schein. The questions have to be chosen carefully so they are genuine questions, the timing must be considered and one's underlying attitude in asking needs to be sincere. People read another person's intentions rather easily, it very difficult to fake sincerity. This is why humility is required. One of the key ingredients in Humble Inquiry is curiosity and the desire to know what you do not know. Asking why colleague disagree with the project, is different to asking what colleagues think of the project. It difference is the openness to a view that may well be different to yours. Good communication particularly upward communication requires building a trusting relationship; and building a trusting relationship requires Humble Inquiry. This is not simple for many reasons among them the complexity of our human brain, the complexity of social relationships and our difficulty, as first in being vulnerable the foundation of humility. The burden falls on the person with higher-status to humbly for input, to ask for help, and to create an environment that gives permission for the help to be given by a junior member of the 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. being Here-and-now Humble implies loss of status. Questioning is both a science and an art. Humble Inquiry goes beyond just overt questioning. an attitude of interest and curiosity. Feelings of Here-and-now Humility are, for the most part, the basis of curiosity and interest. 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. 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. there is no absolute formula for Humble Inquiry. Remember: Humble Inquiry is the skill and the 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. WHAT I LEARNED I had to reflect carefully on what I was really trying to do in a supervisory role before leaping into action. I had to accept my dependency on others for the relevant information and be Here-and-now Humble, i.e., ask the faculty for help instead of telling them what to do. I had to figure out what kind of question would really provide the answer, and, more importantly, how to ask that question. in My house was on a street that feeds directly onto the main highway into Boston. I was in my front garden when a woman drove up and asked me whether I could direct her to Massachusetts Avenue. "Where are you trying to get?" (Humble Inquiry). She replied that she was trying to get to downtown Boston. on. To this day I wonder what would have happened to her if I had told her how to get to Massachusetts Ave. WHAT I LEARNED Don't jump in telling answers until you know what the other person really needs to know. Don't assume that the person with the question has asked the right question. Humble Inquiry is not a checklist to follow or a set of prewritten questions — it is behavior that comes out of respect, genuine curiosity, and the desire to improve the quality of the conversation by stimulating greater openness and the sharing of task-relevant information. HUMBLE INQUIRY Humble Inquiry maximizes my curiosity and interest in the other person and minimizes bias and preconceptions about the other person. I want to access my ignorance and ask for information in the least biased and threatening way. I do not want to lead the

other person or put him or her into a position of having to give a socially acceptable response. Can we simulate interest and get credit for being caring if we don't have the feeling or attitude that Humble Inquiry demands? Humans are very sensitive creatures and we send many signals of which we are not aware.

### DIAGNOSTIC INQUIRY

What differentiates this form of inquiry is that it influences the other's mental process. This form of inquiry which influences the client's mental process can be further classified by what the questioner's diagnostic focus is.

### CONFRONTATIONAL INQUIRY

The essence of confrontational inquiry is that you now insert your own ideas but in the form of a question. You are tacitly giving advice, and this often arouses resistance in others and makes it harder to build relationships with them because they have to explain or defend why they aren't feeling something or doing something that you proposed.

### PROCESS-ORIENTED INQUIRY

If I am trying to develop a good relationship and feel the conversation going in the wrong direction, I can humbly ask some version of "What is happening?"

"Are we OK?"

"Did I offend you?"

to explore what might be wrong and how it might be fixed. 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. The more we remain curious about the other person rather than letting our own expectations and preconceptions creep in, the better our chances are of staying in the right questioning mode.

### Why Is This Important Now?

#### The Changing Demands of

The world is becoming more technologically complex, interdependent, and culturally diverse, which makes the building of relationships more and more necessary to get things accomplished and, at the same time, more difficult. Relationships are the key to good communication; good communication is the key to successful task accomplishment; and Humble Inquiry, based on Here-and-now Humility, is the key to good relationships. A surgical team requires perfect coordination from every member. All of these group situations require the members of the group to build relationships with each other that go beyond just "professionals working with each other."

Checklists and other formal processes of coordination are not enough because they cannot deal with unanticipated situations. Through Humble Inquiry teams can build the initial relationships that enable them to learn together. As they build higher levels of trust through joint learning, they become more open in their communication, which, in turn, enables them to deal with the inevitable surprises that arise in complex interdependent situations.

The more complex the task, the greater the degree of interdependence and the more the boss has to acknowledge a Here-and-now Humility and engage in Humble Inquiry. Subordinates are always in a

vulnerable position and must, therefore, first be reassured before they will fully commit to open communication and collaboration. Consider the leader in the relay race who asks whether the receiver is right- or left-handed and has a preference or a need that should be considered. Such Humble Inquiry becomes especially relevant when leaders realize they are completely dependent on all the workers in the plant doing their jobs, using a technology that they themselves do not understand and, therefore, could not tell the workers what to do even if they wanted to. From the subordinates' points of view, these rules can best be thought of as the rules of deference, or how subordinates are supposed to show respect for their superiors; from the superiors' points of view, they are the rules of demeanor, or how superiors are supposed to act in a way that is appropriate to their status. For example, when the superior is speaking, the subordinate is supposed to pay attention and not interrupt; the superior is supposed to make sense and behave in a dignified manner.

### TYPES OF ROLE RELATIONSHIPS

**TASK ORIENTED AND PERSONAL ORIENTED** I will call these task-oriented and person-oriented relationships. A "professional," which implies working together competently but avoiding personal involvement. When we deal with a salesperson, we expect a certain amount of emotional distance, conversation limited to the product, price, and delivery issues. A person-oriented relationship is expected to be more emotionally charged because one or both parties are interested in each other and expect or want the relationship to continue. A huge question is whether with growing task complexity and cultural diversity it will be possible to maintain these status boundaries. Or will relationship building in the task arena inevitably require some degree of personalization? The question we must then ask is whether the key to making interdependent relationships work is to personalize them to some degree. Evidently they had decided that spending time with each other was more important than for each of them to eat with their professional peers. This decision enabled them to explore getting to know each other at a more personal level, something that they evidently felt they needed to do in order to function well as a team in the OR. Humble Inquiry is by definition more personal because it hinges on being curious about and interested in the other person, but the choice of topic can range from task related to very intimate. In medicine there are occupational traditions among doctors and nurses, which create professional distance. Trust in the context of a conversation is believing that the other person will acknowledge me, not take advantage of me, not embarrass or humiliate me, tell me the truth, and, in the broader context, not cheat me, work on my behalf, and support the goals we have agreed to. 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.

Readability Light +----

SeriousInsights High ---+ Low Practical High ----+ Low Ian Mann of Gateways consults internationally on leadership and strategy

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