

# Humble Inquiry

THE GENTLE ART OF ASKING INSTEAD OF TELLING

## EDGAR H. SCHEIN

“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” (p.21). Asking the right questions could build a relationship, solve questions and move things forward. Everybody doing their own job requires good communication; good communication requires building a trusting relationship; and building a trusting relationship requires Humble Inquiry.

This book is special for people who are in leadership roles. It is leaders who need humble inquiry most because complex interdependent tasks will require building positive, trusting relationships with subordinates to facilitate good upward communication.

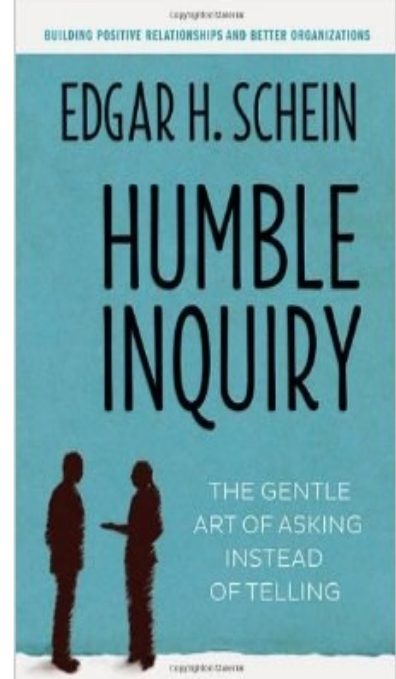
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Edgar H. Schein** is the Society of Sloan Fellows Professor of Management Emeritus at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Schein investigates organizational culture, process consultation, research process, career



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dynamics, and organization learning and change. Schein investigates organizational culture, process consultation, research process, career dynamics, and organization learning and change.



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## CHAPTER ONE & TWO

### HUMBLE INQUIRY

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**Those  
who humble  
themselves  
shall be  
exalted**

*“What we ask and the particular form in which we ask it 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.” (p.19)*

#### HOW DO ASKING BUILD RELATION- SHIPS?

Schein states that people find it easy to tell than to ask in a humble way. However, if part of the goal of the conversation is to improve communication and build a relationship, telling is more risky than asking.

On one hand, telling puts the other person down. When the listener was told something he had already known, he would get impatient or even offended.

On the other hand, asking temporarily empowers the other person in the conversation and temporarily makes the inquirer vulnerable. The other person knows something that the inquirer wants to know, which enables the other person to help the inquirer and opens the door to building a relationship.

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#### WHAT IS HUMILITY?

There are three kinds of humility:

- 1) Basic humility, the humility that we feel around elders and dignitaries
- 2) Optional humility, the humility that we feel in the presence of those who awe us with their achievements
- 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

It is recognition of this third type of humility that is the key to Humble Inquiry and to the building of positive relationships.

#### WHAT IS INQUIRY?

The kind of inquiry the author is 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 arouses positive helping behavior in the other person. This attitude is reflected not only by asking specific questions, but also through body language and silence of curiosity and interest that makes others talk before we said something.

## HUMBLE INQUIRY

Humble Inquiry maximizes inquirer's curiosity and interest in the other person and minimizes bias and preconceptions about the other person. Humble Inquiry comes across differently depending on the situation. Conversations always occur within a set of cultural rules. When you try to humble inquiry, try to minimize your own preconceptions, clear your mind at the beginning of the conversation, and maximize your listening as the conversation proceeds. Humble Inquiry plays out also depends on the assumptions the two parties make about the purpose of the conversation, their relative status, and the degree to which they already have a relationship. Humble Inquiry does not influence either the content of what the other person has to say, nor the form in which it is said.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DIFFERENTIATING HUMBLE INQUIRY FROM OTHER FORMS OF INQUIRY

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There are four forms of inquiry:

Humble inquiry; Diagnostic inquiry;

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#### DIAGNOSTIC INQUIRY

What differentiates this form of inquiry is that it influences the other's mental process. By asking a further question instead of answering the original question, the inquirer taking charge of the direction of the conversation and must consider where or not this is desirable. This form of inquiry which influences the client's mental process can be further classified by what the questioner's diagnostic focus is.

- 1) Feelings and Reactions—questions which focus others on their feelings and reactions in response to the events they have described or the problems that have been identified.
- 2) Causes and Motives—questions about motivation or about causes that focus the others on their motivations in relation to something that they have been talking about.
- 3) Action Oriented—questions that focus others on what they did, are thinking about doing, or plan to do in the future.
- 4) Systemic Questions—questions that build understanding of the total situation

#### CONFRONTATIONAL INQUIRY

The essence of confrontational inquiry is that you now insert your own ideas but in the form of a question. Rhetorical questions or leading questions are forms of telling. The question may still be based on curiosity or interest, but it is now in connection to inquirer's own interests. Confrontational questions can be humble if your motive is to be helpful and if the relationship has enough trust built up to allow the other to feel helped rather than confronted.

#### PROCESS-ORIENTED INQUIRY

Whether this counts as Humble Inquiry or not depends on the motives of the person shifting the focus. The power of this kind of inquiry is that it focuses on the relationship itself and enables both parties to assess whether their relationship goals are being met.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE CULTURE OF DO AND TELL

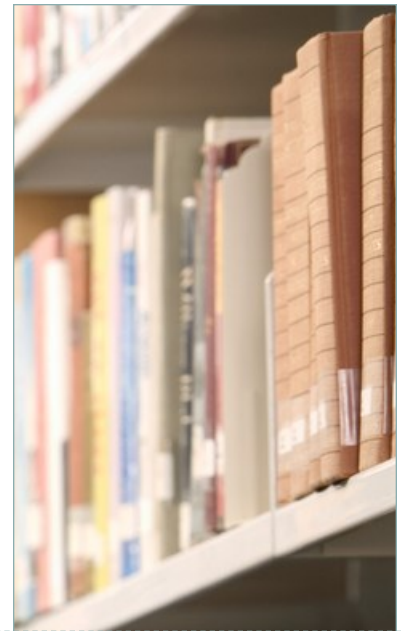
#### Why do specific aspects of the U.S. culture make Humble Inquiry more difficult?

**The main problem**—a culture that values task accomplishment more than relationship building

When we deal with culture at the tacit assumption level, we have to think clearly about what our assumptions actually are, quite apart from our espoused values. The result of a pragmatic, individualistic, competitive, task-oriented culture is that humility is low on the value scale.

**A second problem**—the culture of tell

We take it for granted that telling is more valued than asking. Asking the right question is valued, but asking in general is not. To ask is to reveal ignorance and weakness.



*“Most important of all, we value task accomplishment over relationship building and either are not aware of this cultural bias or, worse, don’t care and don’t want to be bothered with it.” (p.55)*

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT NOW?



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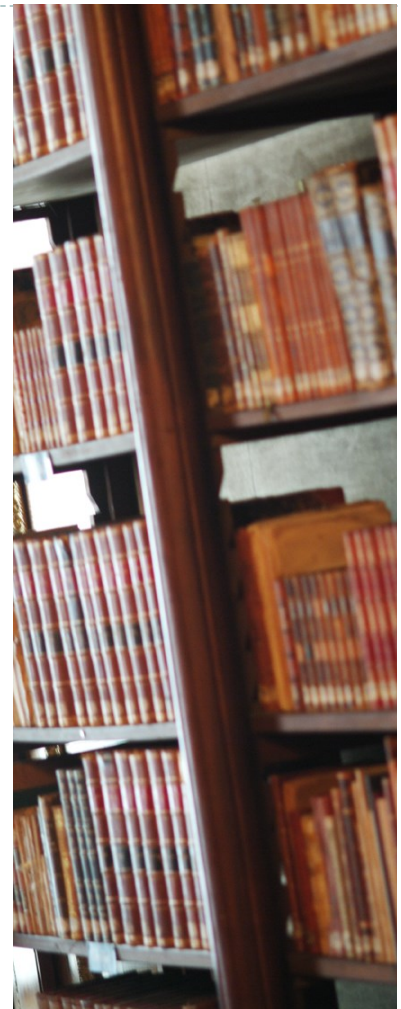
#### The Changing Demands of Future Tasks

The world is becoming more technologically complex, interdepend-

ent, 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.

#### The Special Challenge to Leaders

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.







## CHAPTER FIVE

### STATUS, RANK AND ROLE BOUNDARIES AS INHIBITORS

#### Status and Rank

Situation rules determine the appropriate form of Humble Inquiry where there is a status or rank difference at the outset of the conversation. What we have to learn as we look ahead to more interdependent tasks is how to bridge those status gaps when we are in fact mutually dependent on each other.



Source: <http://blog.cordys.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/bridgegap1.jpg>

*“Humble Inquiry is necessary ..., because we may find ourselves in various kinds of interdependencies in which open, task-relevant information must be conveyed across status boundaries.” (p. 81)*

#### ORGANIZATION-AL, OCCUPATIONAL, AND NATIONAL CULTURE

Choice of topic has to take into account various cultural factors because what is considered personal is itself determined by rules that derive from organizational histories, the cultures of occupations, and national cultures.

#### TRUST AND SOCIAL ECONOMICS

Schein insists that trust 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.

#### Types of Role Relations—Task Oriented and Personal Oriented

Schein states that one determinant that defines the rules of a situation is relative status. Equally important in defining the situation is the role relationship of the parties or the purpose for which they have gotten together.

Task-oriented relationships, also called instrumental relationships, refers to one person needs something specific from the other person. It is impersonal and emotionally neutral.

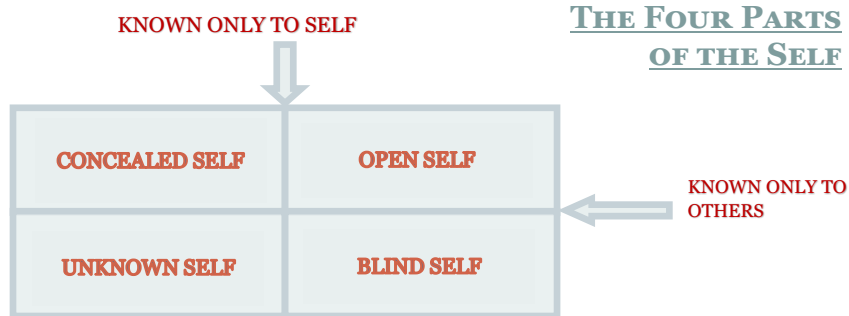
Personal Oriented relationships, known as expressive relationships, are driven by personal needs to build the relationship because one or both of the people involved are beginning to like the other. It is expected to be more emotionally charged because one or both parties are interested in each other and expect or want the relationship to continue.

#### Personalization as Relationship Building

Personalization is the process of acknowledging the other person as a whole human. The minimal level of personalization would be to share first and last names. Once the process of personalization has been launched and accepted, people are open to other personal questions and revelations. Humble Inquiry is 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.

## CHAPTER SIX

### FORCES INSIDE US AS INHIBITORS



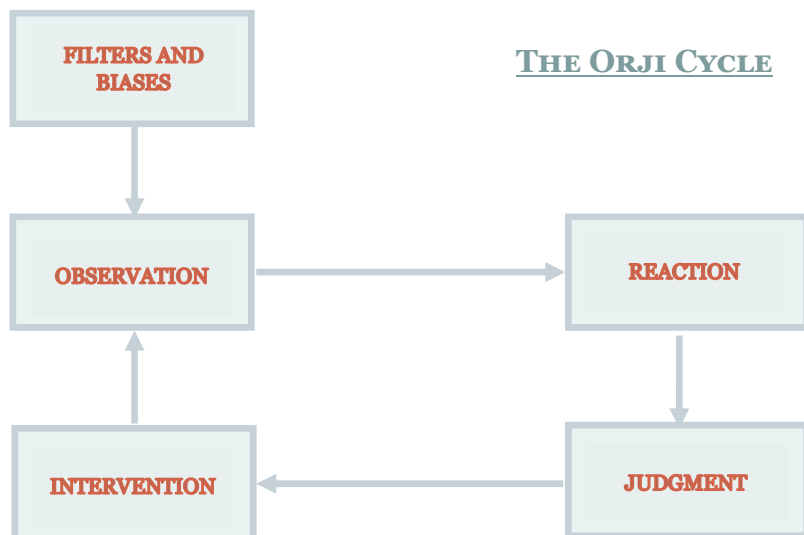
The Johari window is a useful simplification first invented by Joe Luft and Harry Ingham to explain the complexity of communication.

Schein says that we each enter every situation or budding relationship with a culturally defined **open self**—the topics that we are willing to talk about and know are OK to talk about with strangers—the weather, where you are from, name, rank, and serial number, and task-related information.

As we converse with others, we send a variety of signals above and beyond the intentional ones that come from our open self. Much of this information is passed without our being aware of it, so we must acknowledge that we also have a **blind self**.

**Concealed self** refers to all the things we know about ourselves and others but are not supposed to reveal because it might offend or hurt others or might be too embarrassing to ourselves.

**Unknown self** means those things that neither I nor the people with whom I have relationships know about me. I have to be prepared for the occasional unanticipated feeling or behavior that pops out of me.



#### PSYCHOLOGICAL BIASES IN PERCEPTION AND JUDGMENT—ORJI

What we observe (O), we react emotionally to what we have observed (R), we analyze, process, and make judgments based on your observations and feelings (J), and we behave overtly in order to make something happen—we intervene (I). Humble Inquiry is one category of such an intervention.

Observation (O)

Observation should be the accurate registering through all of our senses of what is actually occurring in the environment and what the demands are of the situation in which we find ourselves.

Reaction (R)

The ORJI cycle diagram shows emotional reactions occur as a result of what we observe.

Judgement (J)

The author implies that people are constantly processing data, analyzing information, evaluating, and making judgments. This ability to analyze prior to action is what makes humans capable of planning sophisticated behavior to achieve complex goals and sustain action chains that take us years into the future.

Intervention (I)

Once we have made some kind of judgment, we act. Knee-jerk reactions that get us into trouble are interventions that are judgments based on incorrect data, not necessarily bad judgments.

## THE SKILLS OF ASKING

In general and Humble Inquiry in particular will be needed in three broad domains:

- 1) In your personal life, to enable you to deal with increasing cultural diversity in all aspects of work and social life;
- 2) In organizations, to identify needs for collaboration among interdependent work units and to facilitate such collaboration;
- 3) In your role as leader or manager, to create the relationships and the climate that will promote the open communication needed for safe and effective task performance.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DEVELOPING THE ATTITUDE OF HUMBLE INQUIRY

**What might be some ways of supporting ourselves in the process of learning to be more humble and more inquiring?**

- 1) Slow Down and Vary the Pace
- 2) Reflect More and Ask Yourself Humble Inquiry Questions
- 3) Become More Mindful
- 4) Try Innovating and Engage the Artist within You
- 5) Review and Reflect on Your Own Behavior after an Event
- 6) Become Sensitive to Coordination Needs in Your work
- 7) As a Leader, Build Relationships with Your Team Members
- 8) Build “Cultural Islands”



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## Questions

1) Think back over recent events and try to recall an incident when you acted inappropriately. Reconstruct what went wrong—inaccurate observation, inappropriate emotional reaction, bad judgment, or unsuitable action. Ask yourself where in the cycle you could have taken corrective action.



2) If you want to build more of a trusting relationship with one of your subordinates, how would you go about it? How personal would you be willing to be?

3) Can you think of examples in your work setting that illustrate the impact of cultural characteristics on task performance and communication?



## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

We have all been in situations where one or two people seem to dominate a conversation. And if we are honest, we will acknowledge that sometimes those dominant voices are our own! We have been socialized to demonstrate our knowledge and not the lack of it.

Schein suggests this is because we live in a culture that values problem-solving and task accomplishment over building relationships. Asking questions can seem to be an admission that we are not competent or informed or savvy. And so we avoid it.

I had the good fortune of working for a manager that understood the value of asking questions from a place of curiosity. During our supervision meetings, she would often say things like, “Tell me more about that”, “Why do you think that is the best course of action?” and “What do you think the next step should be?” Her demeanor and tone of voice clearly demonstrated her curiosity – the questions were not asked from a stance of challenging my choices or ideas; she truly was interested in why I was making certain recommendations or pursuing a specific outcome. Over time, we cultivated a strong working relationship and I valued the input she offered because I knew she had my best interests at heart.

## REFERENCE

Schein, E. (2013). *Humble inquiry: the gentle art of asking instead of telling*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett—Koehler Publisher, Inc.