

***Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling* by Edgar H. Schein**

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.

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 successive 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.