

Humble Inquiry

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Preface to the Second Edition

The motivation to write a second edition of this book continues to be personal and professional for both of us. We can see in today's and tomorrow's world more reasons than ever why *Humble Inquiry*—the gentle art of asking questions to which we don't already know the answer—must be practiced to build better relationships and to help others to untangle the complex situations we are confronted with daily.

What is new in this second edition is a deepening and broadening of this concept, seeing it as both a set of guidelines for to how to ask better questions and as an entire attitude that includes better listening, better responding to what others are trying to tell us, and better revealing of ourselves to facilitate positive relationship building that leads to more effective problem-solving in our daily interactions. And we need to do more of this than ever because our cultural scripts continue to push us in the wrong direction, toward thinking we know the answer and feeling that it is appropriate to tell it to others as if it is *the truth*.

Is it inevitable that as the world becomes more interlinked and multicultural, most of the time we do not know what is *really going on* or *why this is happening now*? We hope that the deeper and broader approach to Humble Inquiry presented here will help you to see around and through the brazen *telling* provided by others, and to deepen the skills to *learn* what really matters.

Keeping up with the content of accelerating change is really hard. Naturally we all share the inclination to focus on what we know, on our industry, or on our area of expertise, where we can be comfortable keeping up with what is changing. Yet trying to keep up with the *content* of accelerating change may actually be

less important than keeping up with the *context* of accelerating change. There is a real difference between the content question “What changed?” and the context question “What is going on?” or “Why is this happening?”

This is particularly important now because, as strange as this sounds, our reactions to right and wrong, fact or opinion, truth or lies, have evolved since the first edition of this book came out in 2013. This second edition begins with the same incident of someone telling Ed something that was neither helpful nor true. The person doing the telling had a strong need to tell, with, no doubt, good intentions to be helpful. At that time, Ed’s mild annoyance was the spark that lit the flame for the first edition, and the teller was easily forgiven for passionately expressing a point of view, even though the facts it was based on were not entirely accurate! The difference now, as we work on the second edition, is that the sense of what is truth and objective reality is *itself* being called into question with alarming regularity.

We have entered into a different relationship with right and wrong, with facts versus alternative facts, with empirical evidence versus opinion or belief. As long as humans have made decisions, we have formulated and relied upon these believed distinctions between right and wrong, reality and illusion. What has changed is that we are now more explicitly, or tribally, encouraged to challenge the other view, regardless of the empirical scientific evidence supporting either view. Have we come to believe, now more than ever, that *telling* is the way to lead?

Part of the acceleration of change, therefore, is the increased tendency to trust our passion about a belief, even sometimes in contradiction to the scientific basis. In the hyper-partisan and tribal public square, the *force* with which beliefs are expressed seems to matter even more than the *facts* and their basis in science. Whether it’s climate crisis or pandemic—two profound challenges of our current physical world—the partisan

perspective, or context, too often overpowers or outshouts the science in matters that have actual impact on our lives. It is as if inconvenient or threatening realities matter less than how rigidly, consistently, and tribally the alternative views are argued and demonstrated. For some, the point is more about winning the argument, about “us” and “our view” than it is about truths that can be checked, verified, and agreed upon. It seems increasingly the case that the last thing that some want is to *agree* because there is more to be gained by continuing to amplify the argument and reinforce the division between “us” and “them.” More than ever, the increased use of Humble Inquiry can become an essential learning process to collectively discover the essential elements of shared experience that we can live with and progress within.

This global divisiveness has accelerated at least as fast as the rate of change we have experienced since the first edition. What may be most perilous about this tribalism is that it makes it okay to not learn or relearn. If there is one rationale we can offer above all for reading this book, it is this: through Humble Inquiry you can learn more about what is happening in your work and in your life, and you can learn to consistently *separate the signal from the noise*. In a world that inevitably confuses fact with alternative fact and fiction, we hope this book will help you learn in your conversations and relationships what really matters to the people you care about and need to care about. With added inquiry and reflection, you can also learn new things about yourself.

And Humble Inquiry might also help you relearn *how to learn*. You may discover that there is more actionable information in the details of what’s *really going on* than in simply knowing what happened or what has changed. Relearning how to inquire, listen, reflect, and then act, is what the Humble Inquiry *attitude* is all about. A deep thinker about the future, Bob Johansen describes a polarity between *certainty* and *clarity*. Certainty is the belief and adherence to a point of view, often accompanied by vehement

argument. Clarity is being able to see and learn more of what is really going on, the full spectrum of dimensions that emerge as critically important as events unfold.¹ We add that seeing with more clarity and abandoning certainty are benefits of a Humble Inquiry attitude.

To facilitate this learning, this edition provides new stories and illustrations to further illuminate the Humble Inquiry concept. You will also find more exercises and suggestions for learning and practicing Humble Inquiry. One thing that is not new but cannot be stressed enough is that Humble Inquiry is both an attitude and a process. It is not an algorithm or set of rules. Though the term itself is not new, the nuances and complications associated with practicing this form of communicating and relationship building can be applied in new situations everyday. We can all learn to be better humble inquirers.

Who Is This Book For?

This book is for anyone who is seeking more productive positive relationships, looking for new ways of understanding what is really going on, or wanting to be more helpful. Of course all of us could benefit from more productive relationships, new ways of understanding, and learning how to be more helpful. However, people in leadership roles particularly need to hone these skills because this art of inquiry becomes more challenging as power and status increase. Our culture emphasizes that leaders set direction and articulate values, all of which predisposes them to *tell* rather than *ask*. Yet it is such leaders who may need Humble Inquiry most because intricate interdependent tasks require building positive, open, and trusting relationships above, below, and around them, in order to facilitate safer and more effective task performance and innovation in the face of a perpetually changing context.

How This Book Is Organized

In the first few chapters we explain in greater detail what Humble Inquiry really means on a practical day-to-day basis. In Chapter 3 we sharpen this by contrasting Humble Inquiry with other forms of inquiry used by helpers and coaches. We dive into these questions: What are the social, cultural, and psychological forces at work that inhibit us from easy acceptance of this form of relationship building? To be humbly inquiring, what do we have to *unlearn* and *relearn* to be successful?

Chapter 4 digs into the cultural forces operating in us all the time, especially in the United States, and tries to show how this subtly encourages telling and inhibits Humble Inquiry. Chapter 5 elaborates this argument by analyzing how patterns in organizational hierarchies, and in society generally, create many of the “rules” that further complicate Humble Inquiry. These forces interact subtly with our own intrapsychic forces and cognitive biases to make open and honest conversations more challenging.

Chapter 6 examines in greater detail the subtle social dynamics of conversations, and Chapter 7 explores what happens inside our head in the few moments between when we observe something and when we react to it. All of this is intended to help you understand both why you may not be using Humble Inquiry when you should be, and what you might have to unlearn and relearn to improve your situational skills in conversations.

Chapter 8 provides a summary of where we have been and where we need to go. Last, we conclude the book with discussion suggestions and exercises that will help the reader learn how to differentiate asking from telling and build inquiry skills that will open communication and deepen relationships. Unlearning and relearning happen in small steps based on self-observation, reflection, trial and error, analysis, resetting goals, and continuing to learn. We hope this book will intrigue you and guide you on that

path. How each of us adopts Humble Inquiry may be unique—it's not formulaic. And the process starts here.

Peter A. Schein and Edgar H. Schein
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Humble Inquiry

Introduction: What Is Humble Inquiry?

It all started with a story that Ed has told many times in the last few years:

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 an elderly woman walking her dog chose to stop.

In a loud voice she said, “Some of those are poisonous, you know.”

I replied, “I know.”

She added, “Some of them can kill you, you know.”

I must have been a sight squatting down looking at this profusion of spring mushrooms, but to this day I still wonder why she didn’t just wander over and ask, “What are you doing? What are you looking at?”

What struck me was how her need to lecture me not only offended me but also made it difficult for me to respond in a positive manner. I realized that her tone and her “telling” approach prevented me from building 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, which was not even correct. These mushrooms would have given me indigestion, but they were not the deadly kind.

We find in this story one of the major problems of our time. We value telling each other things, showing off how much we know, and winning arguments, whether we’re using verified data or not. Winning, being right, convincing others—these victories are so important to many people that they feel free to spin, invent, or lie because what is true and what is not true has become a matter of

debate. Opinionated distortions—what may be considered tactical necessities in politics, where winning is indeed the most important thing—have crept into too much of our discourse about empirically measured reality.

Why are asking questions, and building positive relationships, suddenly so important?

Because in an increasingly volatile 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 (1) the assumption that other values may be different but are no worse and no better than our own, and (2) we may need to know what others know in order to solve our own problems.

How We Define Humble Inquiry

An Art

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 another person.

An Attitude

Humble Inquiry is not just asking questions; it is a total attitude that includes listening more deeply to how others respond to our inquiry, responding appropriately, and revealing more of ourselves in the relationship building process.

Humble Inquiry is a great way to connect to another person, to build a relationship.

There are many contexts in which productive relationships, completing work tasks—even helping others to save lives—absolutely depend on inquiring in the right way to figure out what

is really going on. If you allow yourself to be really interested in what you don't know about another person, to be open to your natural curiosity, what more could you learn? Would this make it easier and more comfortable to reveal things about yourself that you are pretty sure the other person might be interested in? Would this be a new way of building relationships at work? *Inquiring* and *revealing in this way* are the key processes of displaying the Humble Inquiry attitude.

Humble Inquiry can help you make sense of complex situations that you do not or cannot understand on your own.

When a team is trying to solve a tricky problem of what to do next and is stuck among several alternatives, Humble Inquiry means asking, “*What else* do we need to know?” or “How did we/you arrive at this point?” This is particularly true when others propose something that we oppose or don't understand. It is asking the question, “How do we connect the dots to make sense of this predicament that we don't fully understand yet?”

Humble Inquiry helps involve others in problem-solving and decision-making by *helping them* to see a problem, to be clear about their motives in a given situation, or to articulate what kind of help they need from a friend or coach.

When you are asked for advice, do you jump in with a response, pitching your solution? An alternative Humble Inquiry approach might start with asking why advice is needed, why it is needed now, why it is you who is being asked for advice. The context may be much more important than the content of your response.

The attitude of Humble Inquiry is based on curiosity, openness to the truth, and the recognition that insights most often come from conversations and relationships in which we have learned to listen to

each other, and have learned to respond appropriately to make joint sense out of our shared context, rather than arguing each other into submission.

Does Humble Inquiry Require Embracing Humility in the Here-and-now?

Why is the word *humble* so important in this form of questioning? The Humble Inquiry attitude does not require that humility be a major *personality* trait of a good inquirer. But even the most confident or arrogant among us will find ourselves humbled by the reality of being dependent on others, and by the sheer complexity of trying to figure out what is important and what is not. We can think of this as *Here-and-now Humility*, accepting our dependence on each for information sharing and task completion.

Displaying Here-and-now Humility is one key to building positive relationships with those upon whom we are dependent because it reveals our genuine interest and curiosity in others as critical partners. The ability to embrace Here-and-now Humility, and to face challenges with this attitude of Humble Inquiry, becomes especially important for leaders when they recognize their own dependence on the people they are leading.

How Does This Square with Wanting People to Speak Up?

Couldn't we argue that nowadays it is equally important to value *telling*, that people be courageous and tell it like they see it, to speak up to power, to get out of a bystander mentality, to blow the whistle when necessary? The paradox is that the main inhibitor of useful telling is often our own failure to inquire in a way that *makes it safe* for others to tell us the truth, or at least to share all of what they know.

Our failure to ask *humbly* and with the right *attitude* has created work climates in which people do not feel psychologically safe to share what they know. Do we even see such work climates in