

Humble Inquiry

Tags: [#coaching](#) [#human-relations](#) [#conversation](#) [#power](#)

Creator: edgar-schein peter-schein

Dialogue

The reluctance we display when someone asks us for feedback mirrors the degree to which we are afraid to offend or humiliate. We duck the issue by trying to emphasize positive feedback, knowing full well that what the others may really want to hear is where we see them as wanting or imperfect, so that they can improve.

Relationships -- and their levels.

The essence of the Humble Inquiry attitude is to drop the professional, task-oriented, transactional self and either ask about or reveal something that clearly has nothing to do with the purpose of the transaction, which invites acknowledgment and a more personal response. The Humble Inquiry attitude can, in that sense, be expressed not with a question but by revealing something personal about oneself as a prelude to humbly inquiring about the other person.

The point --> We all conceal things. A useful way to build a relationship is for people to open up more of their concealed selves. What do you mean by what's concealed -- and why does that work?

When's the right time to do this?

What are the kinds of things that help?

The goal of relationship building should be to reduce each other's blind spots by each revealing more of our concealed selves.

How does status play a role in this?

This is a bit of a dance. What are indicators the dance is going well? What about when the dance isn't going well?

Second edition -- what have you changed your mind on?

Reserve

Citing the work of Stephen Potter:

Potter noted that there are several ways to gain points in competitive conversation: making a smart remark, putting down someone who has claimed too much, and turning a clever phrase even if it embarrasses someone else in a conversation. We compete on who can tell the most—the most interesting story, the most outrageous adventure, or the best joke.

Humble Inquiry aids your personalizing process by projecting your attitude of interest and curiosity, asking questions to which you do not know the answers.

Quotes

Highlight [3]: 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.

Highlight [4]: 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.

Highlight [6]: Senior managers often say they are open, that they want to hear from their subordinates, and that they take the information seriously. But when we talk to employees in those same organizations, they tell us they were not asked sincerely, did not feel safe bringing bad news to their bosses even if asked, or tried speaking up but never got any response or acknowledgment. And when we see what happens to whistleblowers, it is a strong signal that truth may be the last thing that some organizations actually want to hear.

Highlight [78]: As we argued in the last chapter, the bias in U.S. culture in general, and business culture in particular, tends to be more transactional, to define most situations as “people getting together for the purpose of getting the job done, and perhaps little more than that.” Again, this often leads to professional relationships that may involve an implicit effort by the relevant parties to actively avoid personal involvement with each other, even favoring professional distance as the best path to task accomplishment. Strictly task-oriented relationships may be designed to be impersonal and necessarily emotionally indifferent. Yet even though that definition of the situation seems culturally favored, as tasks become more complex and interdependent, you have to realize that as a manager/leader, you have a choice—rather than follow a cultural script, you can redefine the situation to be more relational, expressive, and personal.

Highlight [80]: How can you convey to others that they can trust you? How do you show that you want to be helpful and caring without unwittingly offending people by offering something that they don't need or want? Generally, a key element is to learn to make yourself more vulnerable through Humble Inquiry. This can be challenging in that you risk being snubbed or ignored. If you let others in on your vulnerabilities, and they respond in a spirit of one-upmanship, assuming dominance or higher status because you were open with your Here-and-now Humility, how will you feel? Putting yourself out there and then being hung out to dry is personally and socially painful. To avoid this, we have many norms of etiquette about not embarrassing each other, to maintain "face" wherever possible, by which we mean that we should grant others their presented self, acknowledge them for who they want to be in a given situation, and expect them to acknowledge us in the same way. Revealing more about oneself than the situation might require is then an invitation to build the relationship to a higher level of trust and openness. The good news is that increasingly our culture rewards openness more than indifference, and entering expressive Level 2 relationships is far more satisfying than Level 1 transactionalism.

Highlight [81]: U.S. culture's emphasis on task performance, interpersonal competitiveness, and telling rather than asking, makes it more difficult to be humbly inquiring because we worry it may display weakness, real or perceived. Yet, paradoxically, only by learning to be more humbly inquiring and open to each other can we build up the mutual trust needed to work together most effectively.

Highlight [89]: A useful way to build a relationship is for people to open up more of their concealed selves, especially their reactions to each other and what signals they receive from the other's blind self. This has the effect of reducing the relative size of the blind self. We realize that in a relationship-building process the most difficult issue is how far to go in revealing something that normally we would conceal, knowing at the same time, that unless we open up more, we will have a harder time building the relationship. When such opening up is planned and formatted, as in special workshops or meetings designed for the purpose of improving relationships, we label this category of communication feedback and value it because it removes some of our blind spots. Such feedback can work precisely because the workshop intentionally legitimizes suspending the cultural rules that would normally make it unacceptable because unsolicited feedback is generally a countercultural process.

Highlight [89]: The reluctance we display when someone asks us for feedback mirrors the degree to which we are afraid to offend or humiliate. We duck the issue by trying to emphasize positive feedback, knowing full well that what the others may really want to hear is where we see them as wanting or imperfect, so that they can improve.

Highlight [90]: Gently asking about and/or revealing something that is culturally defined as personal are ways we break out of this normative dilemma. The essence of the Humble Inquiry attitude is to drop the professional, task-oriented, transactional self and either ask about or reveal something that clearly has nothing to do with the

purpose of the transaction, which invites acknowledgment and a more personal response. The Humble Inquiry attitude can, in that sense, be expressed not with a question but by revealing something personal about oneself as a prelude to humbly inquiring about the other person. We can choose to tell something to the other that reveals Here-and-now Humility in order to open the door to personalizing the conversation.

Highlight [91]: The goal of relationship building should be to reduce each other's blind spots by each revealing more of our concealed selves.

Highlight [95]: Humble Inquiry functions as an invitation to be more personal and is therefore the key to building a Level 2 relationship. Both parties need to engage in this process. If Taylor wanted to open the door to a more personal relationship (revealing the concealed self), but Morgan didn't, we could expect the conversation to become awkward quickly since Taylor reports to Morgan. How we listen and how we respond is equally determined by each person's attitude. The dance does not work unless both parties decide to cooperate and build a relationship of openness and trust.

Highlight [95]: Humble Inquiry aids your personalizing process by projecting your attitude of interest and curiosity, asking questions to which you do not know the answers. The implementation can be complex because either you are not sure what you should be curious about, or your questions can be misunderstood or even culturally inappropriate. Being curious about and asking about something can easily become too personal and lead the other person to be put off. Therefore, relationship building through the seesaw of asking and revealing always has to occur within the situational norms of what is and is not appropriate, unless or until both parties develop enough trust to agree to expand those boundaries as they each take some risks in getting to know each other better.

Highlight [112]: While "fail fast" fits very well into the culture of do and tell, it may not fit as well with our human intent to inquire and reflect. The bot that you reprogram does not care and is not offended. But when you impulsively react to a human colleague—whether you are telling, rebuking, praising, or ignoring—that colleague probably does care, might even be offended, and thereafter may not share the truth of what is actually going on. Rebuilding human relationships is a slower process than fixing or adapting an algorithm or prototype. Humble Inquiry is in the end an attitude to first ask and reflect. To speed up this process risks failing fast with human relationships that cannot as easily be reprogrammed in the next iteration.

References