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Humble Inquiry Insights from Edgar Schein's latest

by [Mark L. Vincent](#)

While reading Edgar Schein's recent book *Humble Inquiry: the Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling* (Barrett-Koehler, 2013, 123pp.), an enterprise leader finds they must question if they really know anything. That is both troubling and

wonderful. Troubling because it shakes up one's world to realize that the culture of telling and instructing in which they have steeped themselves strips curiosity, reflection and learning away, leaving the leader less capable in a world that demands capability of them. Wonderful because Schein provides simple wisdom to start accessing one's ignorance once more.

Stated simply, Humble Inquiry brings more power to gain insight and

innovate than telling ever will.

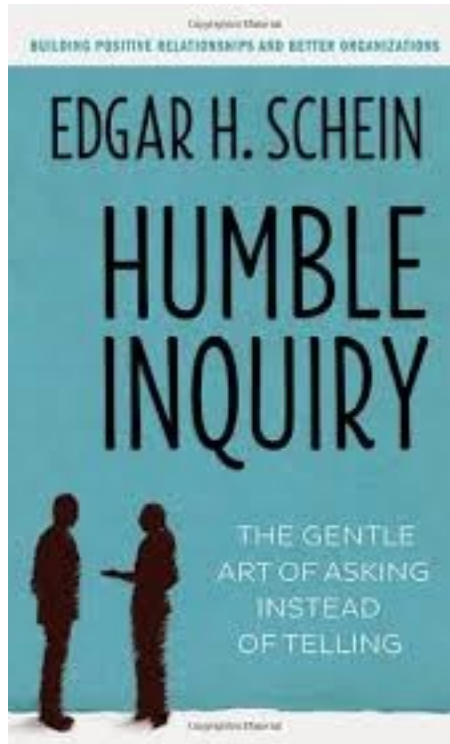
Schein, a retired MIT professor, is considered a god-father of sorts in the worlds of executive coaching and process consulting. His seminal book *Helping* put a client-centered approach to organizational development on paper. Now, with *Humble Inquiry*, he distills how it is effectively and repeatedly accomplished.

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Here are a few insights from Schein that demonstrate the worth of acquiring and spending time with this little volume:

- His definition of humble inquiry: *"...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.2).
- *One of the most powerful tools of humble inquiry is to "ask for an example"* (p.32).
- *"...the greater the sociological distance between the upper and lower levels of status or achievement...the harder it is for the superior to be humble and learn the art of Humble Inquiry"* (p. 54)
- And a key reason enterprise leaders should take his insights seriously: *"...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. The capacity to plan ahead and to organize our actions according to plan is a unique aspect of human intelligence"* (p.93).

Schein points out that the complexity of tasks requires skill to make and mutually benefit from relationships just as much as it requires task competence. This skill doesn't come from knowing, however. It comes from not



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knowing, being comfortable with not knowing, and courageous enough to ask. Even more, it requires being sincerely interested in the other person, what they know, how they know it, what it means, and then being able to celebrate the wonder of knowing them.

According to Schein, a culture of telling cuts off the Humble Inquiry that forms relationships and gets at the information everyone needs to discover and know to innovate, avoid disaster, and build effective teams. Telling, driven by a near worship of efficiency and a crippled ability to form relationships, leads to hurry, lack of reflection and learning, and many avoidable mistakes that cause harm to the bottom line.

The phrase *accessing ignorance* is one of the descriptive phrases that helps the reader understand what is meant by Humble Inquiry. Schein's sixth chapter details the forces that inhibit leaders from doing it. He brings back the Johari window concepts of the blind and unknown self. Without permission to explore in these arenas, leaders will function out of the networks of power, knowledge and relationships they already have rather than be open to learning or make use of what is discovered.

Further, a discipline of Humble Inquiry shortens the cycle of resistance, helping the leader begin accessing ignorance more rapidly, more frequently and more effectively.

Schein's work provides concrete action steps for people who need quantitative steps to follow, while reminding people who like the human side of enterprise that they can't lose sight of a solid bottom line.