

# The life-changing art of asking instead of telling

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Reuters/Maranie Staab

An honest curiosity will often drive body language, too.

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The most satisfying, potentially life-changing books about management are inevitably those that are really about our wider culture. Whether at work, or at dinner parties, or home with our families, how do we behave around other people? And how are we complicit in what's not working?

A perfect example of this kind of book is *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking and Not Telling* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013) by [Edgar Schein](#), emeritus professor of management at MIT and a leading scholar of organizational psychology. That you may not have heard of it may have something to do with one of Schein's central observations: We're inconsistent in what we say we value versus what the "artifacts" tell us. In this case, our culture says it values humble attitudes, but our artifacts—our most popular instagrams, our celebrated CEOs, best-selling business book titles and subjects—undermine that ideal.

In theory we love curiosity and questions, but we routinely elevate people who have (or at least appear to have) the answers. We say we're fed up with mansplainers or any 'splainer, and may be afraid we unknowingly act like one, but we prop up "tellers" all the time, in turn putting pressure on ourselves to become one.

Relatedly, Schein writes that we've also been trained in a sense to cheer for the team, but we praise and literally enrich the individual for accomplishments. We put tasks and achievements before relationships, without recognizing the damage it does to our colleagues or families. In company culture, therefore, we may vocally praise the humble leader, without actually allowing him or her to behave humbly.

## How much do questions matter?

Schein has diagnosed two things he believes are missing from most conversations: “Curiosity, and a willingness to ask questions to which we don’t already know the answer,” he writes.

Cocktail party goers, or spouses, or managers, can sense when they’ve unsuccessfully launched a conversation, or shut one down, or missed a need for a conversation at the right time. But they may not know what other route would have led to a more open, natural, respectful dialogue.

There are some tactical approaches you can take to get there. Everyone has heard that open-ended questions are better than yes-no questions, for instance, but that golden rule doesn’t always solve the problem. And cultural programming can explain why.

Let’s look at the masterful NPR radio interviewer Terry Gross and [her go-to icebreaker](#): “Tell me about yourself.” It’s brilliant for an on-air interview, or for any journalist. But in everyday life, most people are not ready with “their story.” Or maybe they are in some micro-cultures, i.e. in Hollywood or in Silicon Valley, where everyone practices their elevator pitch, but not in others. The wonderful spirit of the question is outside many known cultural scripts, as Schein calls them.

If we are honestly looking for information, many of us know not to ask other types of questions that Schein identifies: leading questions, statements as questions, shaming questions, and rhetorical questions. But when you’re honestly seeking to gain knowledge or to understand another person, the right question should naturally arise. So, too, will the body language. (Sometimes just looking at someone expectantly, and waiting for them to start the conversation or offer a thought, will be enough to kick off a conversation.)

That said, Schein does provide a few examples of openers or lines that can express “Humble Inquiry”:

*“So ...” (with an expectant look)*

*“What’s happening?”*

*“What’s going on?”*

*“What brings you here?”*

*“Go on...”*

*“Can you give me an example?”*

“Paradoxically, ‘Hi, how are you?’ does not qualify as Humble Inquiry because it is culturally scripted to elicit a mere ‘Fine, how are you?’” Schein writes, adding, “I have observed that the only time I tell others how I really am is when they say something less scripted, such as ‘How

are things going?’ and add an expectant look.” (Incidentally, “how are things going” is [a surprisingly powerful and overlooked question](#) that does wonders to instill a sense of belonging among colleagues.)

Crucially, though, Schein makes the case for going beyond words to look at what you’ve internalized about who matters, or the need to protect your own reputation. The humility that he’s referring to in his titular concept is the kind that “recognizes your dependence on another person in the here-and-now,” not the kind in which you feel awed by a person’s abilities, possessions, or birthright.

This is a humility in which you temporarily lose status, which is scary. You may have to talk to yourself to avoid automatic reactions. Think: It doesn’t matter that I’m the older one, that I should know this, that I am the boss, that I’m the parent, that I have the most experience with this topic, that I have the PhD, that the team is judging me.

Insincere acts of inquiry are always detectable, Schein notes, so his book is probably best suited to anyone who feels a need to change, has an earnest interest in learning from others, and honestly believes that relationships come before external goals, but also feels shackled, whether by norms or pride.

“Humble Inquiry maximizes my curiosity and interest in the other person and minimizes bias and preconceptions about the other person,” writes Schein. “I want to access my ignorance and ask for information in the least biased and threatening way.”

Among his broader instructions for cultivating a habit of honest inquiry: Travel to distant countries and unfamiliar cultures, develop your skills of observation through art classes or mindfulness, go to the theater, try your hand at journaling, use these opportunities to expand your powers of observation and exercise your innate ability to think creatively. Also, recognize how much you have to learn and practice, and how many impulses to “tell” (rather than ask) that you’ll need to repress to make room for humble inquiry to filter in.

And as you make changes, he warns readers, expect friends and colleagues to be a bit bewildered by your new behavior.

*Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified the author of Humble Inquiry as Edward Schein. In fact, his name is Edgar Schein.*