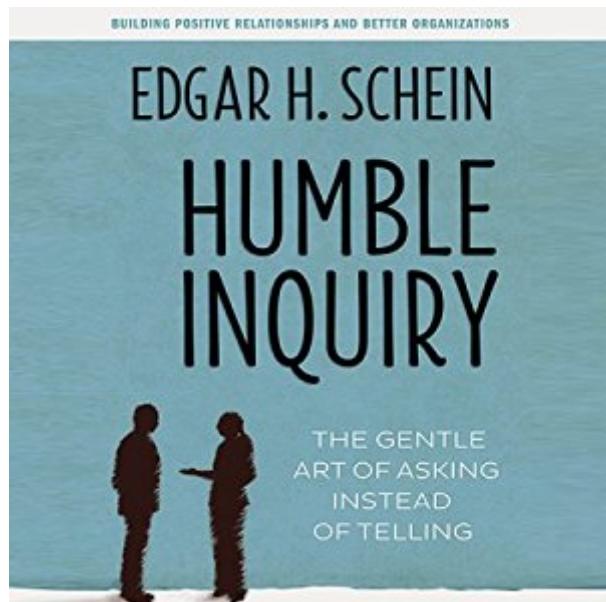


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# Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art Of Asking Instead Of Telling



## **Synopsis**

The key to effective communication. Communication is essential in a healthy organization. But all too often when we interact with people - especially those who report to us - we simply tell them what we think they need to know. This shuts them down. To generate bold new ideas, to avoid disastrous mistakes, to develop agility and flexibility, we need to practice Humble Inquiry. Ed Schein defines Humble Inquiry as "the fine art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person." In this seminal work, Schein contrasts Humble Inquiry with other kinds of inquiry, shows the benefits Humble Inquiry provides in many different settings, and offers advice on overcoming the cultural, organizational, and psychological barriers that keep us from practicing it.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

One question I have is how this humble inquiry approach can gain traction in industries where it seems to be totally undervalued. It is not the leadership approach that tends to be promoted in MBA programs - perhaps quite the opposite. I wanted to share an experience I had while teaching about relational coordination - coordinating work processes through shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect - in the MIT Operations Academy with executives from an international energy company who were trying hard to improve the safety culture of their organization. One executive asked me: "What kind of leadership is conducive to relational coordination?" I answered after thinking for a moment: "I don't know - I haven't studied it but probably something like leading through humble inquiry." He responded "That's what I thought and that's not what gets rewarded

here." It turns out that one of their senior leaders who was being recognized at the graduation ceremony was credited with helping to turn around the troubled Alaska region. He explained what happened: "I realized I wasn't going to accomplish anything by staying at headquarters. I went up to the region and talked to front-line operators and asked: What is your job and how can I help you to do it better?" What he learned through this process and perhaps just as importantly the relationships he built as a leader helped to turn around the safety outcomes of that region. This process sounded a lot like humble inquiry - like in the Toyota Production System and at Southwest Airlines in which managers lead by going to the front line to "see" and "ask."

Concise, cogent, and informed by a wealth of direct experience, "Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling," by Edgar H. Schein, is a testament to the importance of asking questions in a way that enables others to feel comfortable giving honest answers. A pioneer in organizational development whose work has been instrumental in shaping the field since the 1950s, Schein distills lessons from a lifetime of practice in solving difficult organizational problems, helping people build strong relationships, and moving cultures in a positive direction. Simple and profoundly wise, "Humble Inquiry," the best business book of the year in this category, has the makings of a classic. Although the book wears its learning lightly, its ambitions are far from modest, for Schein sets out to do nothing less than identify and address the root causes of miscommunication in our business culture. In his view, there are two essential problems. The first is our preference for telling rather than asking. Schein finds this especially characteristic of managers in the United States, who are immersed in a tradition of pragmatic problem solving that places a premium on efficiency and speed. The second problem is the high value many leaders place on task accomplishment as opposed to relationship building, which can make them impatient with the slow work of earning real trust. In Schein's experience, many leaders either are not aware of these cultural biases or don't care enough to be bothered with redressing them. Schein believes that such attitudes have become newly problematic in a diverse global environment in which a growing proportion of individuals do not necessarily share those values, and in which teams are an increasingly common organizational unit.

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