

## Leading through Inquiry: Do Ask, Don't Tell

*"Carpenters have hammers, dentists have picks, and physicians have stethoscopes. It is hard to envision any of these people working in their chosen fields without their basic set of tools. Managers, too, have a basic set of tools: questions." ~ Terry J. Fadem, *The Art of Asking: Ask Better Questions, Get Better Answers* (FT Press, 2008)*

Good communication is a hallmark of healthy organizations, but it's often founded on the belief that employees thrive when given clear directions. In today's increasingly complex organizations, it's not enough to tell people what to do.

Leaders who ask evocative questions instead of giving instructions set the stage for better communication, employee engagement and high performance, especially when they're charged with supervising knowledge workers.

Effective communication encourages two-way conversations that traverse hierarchies and power differentials. Without this, leaders create high-risk environments.

After airplane crashes, chemical and nuclear accidents, oil spills, hospital errors and cruise-ship disasters, expert reviewers have frequently found that lower-ranking employees had information that could have prevented these events or lessened their consequences. Senior managers were guilty of ignoring their subordinates and being consistently resistant to hearing bad news.

Employees often worry about upsetting their bosses, so they settle for silence – a decision that exposes their organizations to risks with potentially irreversible outcomes. This dynamic plays out in government offices, hospitals and corporations with divisions in power and status, regardless of how democratic and "fair" they claim to be.

How can you create a climate that encourages people to speak up, especially when safety is on the line? How do you convince your staff to correct you when you're

### *A Message from Nancy...*

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



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about to make a mistake?

Learn to ask the right questions instead of telling your staff what to do.

Questions should be genuine, based on curiosity and without an agenda. Effective leaders master the art of “humble inquiry,” says Edgar H. Schein, PhD, an MIT Sloan School of Management professor emeritus and consultant.

In his new book, *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013), Dr. Schein describes his title’s skill as “the 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.”

Unfortunately, asking questions runs counter to traditional business cultures that value achievement and performance over building relationships. Nonetheless, soliciting others’ input is a fundamental aspect of human relations for leaders who want to foster solid relationships, trust, communication and high performance.

So many of our conversations lack inquisitiveness, as we’re reluctant to concede that we don’t know everything. Many organizations expect their leaders to be wise, set direction and inspire us.

In truth, leaders are the ones who should be inquiring and listening to others’ responses. Employees cannot excel at complex interdependent tasks until their leaders build positive, trusting relationships and facilitate safe, upward communication.

## What’s Wrong with Telling?

**W**e live in a culture of telling, where conversations become opportunities to show how smart or funny we are. While we ask questions to show interest in another person, we just as often want to sway them to our viewpoint or get something from them.

When we tell, we put other people in a position of inferiority they come to resent. One-way communication implies that they don’t know what we’re telling them and that they should already know it. This approach provokes defensiveness. People stop listening to you so they can work on a snarky comeback.

In contrast, asking questions temporarily empowers your conversation partners, giving them an opportunity to share what they know. You deliberately put yourself in the inferior position: of wanting to know something about them. This technique opens the door to relationship-building.

Many of us do ask questions, but we fail to notice how disingenuous they are. When we ask leading or rhetorical questions, for example, we already know the answers. Our conversation becomes yet another exercise in telling.

## The Fear Behind Asking Questions

*“When we become leaders, we feel that it is important for us to have answers rather than questions. Asking questions – or being unable to answer questions addressed to us – may show that we are somehow lacking as leaders. But this attitude leads to inertia.” - Michael J. Marquardt, *Leading with Questions: How Leaders Find the Right Solutions by Knowing What to Ask* (Jossey-Bass, 2005)*

**A**re you afraid that asking questions will be misinterpreted as a show of ignorance? Do you find it difficult to ask questions because people will think you don’t have all of the answers?

Displaying this level of vulnerability is truly terrifying for many leaders.

You have to make a choice:

- A. Risk appearing fallible by asking questions.
- B. Risk creating a culture where people wait to be told what to do.

In today’s achievement-oriented culture, displays of knowledge are admired. As Dr. Schein told a team of academic interviewers for the March 2011 edition of *Academy of Management Learning & Education*:

*“The whole point of being a leader is that you now ‘know everything.’ Leaders are supposed to know what to do, so people below the leader are going to defer to him or her – let them be the deciders even if they don’t know enough to make good decisions. But in a world where leaders do not know everything, where the subordinates are highly skilled technicians, how are we going to get leaders to admit that they don’t know everything and actually ask for help?”*

Take the first step: Banish any obsolete beliefs about omnipotence, and focus on practicing humility, Dr. Schein emphasizes. Ask real questions. Embrace the reality that you depend on your subordinates. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with soliciting their feedback (i.e., “Am I doing this correctly? Please tell me if I’m doing something wrong”). Employees will be flattered that you value their advice.

## Defining Inquiry

Professional pollsters, researchers, therapists and executive coaches have dedicated years to refining their inquiry skills. The rest of us take it for granted that we know how to ask questions. We tend to mimic our role models – usually parents, teachers and bosses – who rely on superficial or social questions that are essentially disguised forms of telling:

- Why weren't you at home (in class, at the meeting)?
- How could you screw this up?
- When did I ever tell you to do this?
- What were you thinking?

These seemingly open-ended questions are actually quite controlling. If you want someone to reveal the full story, avoid steering conversations in any given direction. Distinguish open inquiry (Dr. Schein's "humble inquiry") from the three other types of inquiry:

1. Diagnostic
2. Confrontational
3. Process-oriented

## Open Inquiry

Open inquiry evolves from authentic interest in another person. We ask questions to encourage honesty and minimize preconceived biases. We have no real agenda, other than to garner information.

Your primary goals are to discover what's on the other person's mind, cultivate respect and trust, and find connections in common experiences.

Leaders who use open inquiry become more informed, closer to people and better prepared to influence outcomes. You can ask questions about:

- Feelings and reactions
- Causes and motives
- Actions
- Shared systems and situations

## Diagnostic Inquiry

It's easy to veer off the path of open inquiry by homing in on a particular detail. Doing so may steer the conversation in a different direction and inadvertently return control to you.

As a leader, your perceived position may interfere with your conversation partner's mental processes. This is neither right nor wrong, but recognize that you've left the realm of open inquiry. You're now engaged in diagnostic inquiry.

Determine why you're steering the conversation in a different direction. Are you trying to get the job done, or are you inappropriately indulging your curiosity?

## Confrontational Inquiry

Leaders sometimes insert their own ideas in the form of a leading or rhetorical question. By doing so, you're tacitly giving advice and trying to influence your conversation partner's answers. Your partner may experience this as manipulative and become resistant.

Look at the differences in how these questions are asked:

Confrontational	Open
"Did that make you angry?"	"How did that make you feel?" <i>(feelings and reactions)</i>
"Do you think they sat that way because they were scared?"	"Why do you suppose they sat that way?" <i>(causes and motives)</i>
"Why didn't you say something to the group?"	"What did you do?" <i>(actions)</i>
"Were the others in the room surprised?"	"How did the others react?" <i>(shared systems and situations)</i>

Confrontational questions can be open, as long as your conversation partner believes you're trying to be helpful. Timing, tone of voice and other cues will establish your motive.

## Process-Oriented Inquiry

Leaders practice process-oriented inquiry when their focus is the conversation itself. This may be helpful when a discussion starts badly. You can explore solutions by asking:

- "What's happening right now?"
- "Are you feeling defensive?"
- "Have I offended you in some way?"
- "Are we OK?"
- "Anything else we need to say about this?"
- "What should I be asking now?"

## Conquering the Countercultural

As the researchers who interviewed Dr. Schein reinforce in the Academy of Management Learning and Education:

*“In most cultures, asking and accepting help from a subordinate or admitting not knowing the answer to a subordinate’s question disrupts the normal social order. It is ‘countercultural,’ thus often ‘not done,’ and might be felt by the leader as a loss of face and even career-threatening in highly political organizations.”*

The underlying attitude of competitive one-upmanship that plagues senior leadership teams will continue to stifle inquiry until you shift your attitude. Focus on being curious about others, without letting personal expectations and judgments cloud communication. Enjoy the benefits of asking meaningful questions in a psychologically safe work environment.

It takes discipline and practice to allow yourself to appear vulnerable. Consider working with an executive coach to break through any vulnerability barriers and perfect the art of humble inquiry.

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