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Differentiating Humble Inquiry from Other Forms of Inquiry

One of the best ways to understand Humble Inquiry is to position it relative to some other forms of inquiry. We have a tendency to think of asking or telling as just simple alternatives when, in fact, there are many forms of each with different consequences. In this chapter I want to make clear how Humble Inquiry differs from several other kinds of inquiry that appear to be very similar but actually control the flow of the conversation more than one might want to do in a given situation.

Four Forms of Inquiry

It is not enough to decide, "OK, instead of always *telling*, I am going to be more *inquiring*," because there are so many ways of inquiring. As I enter a conversation and attempt to build a relationship, I should be aware of the choices I have in *how* I inquire and to understand that some seemingly very open ways of inquiring are actually quite controlling of the other person. If we really want to get the other person's full story, we have to avoid steering the conversation inadvertently.

In the analysis of how to be helpful to another person, I distinguish four fundamentally different forms of inquiry which will be useful in this analysis:⁴

- 1) Humble Inquiry
- 2) Diagnostic inquiry
- 3) Confrontational inquiry
- 4) Process-oriented inquiry

HUMBLE INQUIRY

Humble Inquiry maximizes my curiosity and interest in the other person and minimizes bias and preconceptions about the other person. I want to *access my ignorance* and ask for information in the least biased and threatening way. I do not want to lead the other person or put him or her into a position of having to give a socially acceptable response. I want to inquire in the way that will best discover what is really on the other person's mind. I want others to feel that I accept them, am interested in them, and am genuinely curious about what is on their minds regarding the particular situation we find ourselves in.

A dramatic example of this is how Ken Olsen, the founder of Digital Equipment Corporation, used to wander around the company, stop at an engineer's desk, and ask: "What are you working on?" Because Ken was genuinely interested, the pair would end up in a long conversation that would be satisfying both technically and personally. Even when the company had over 100,000 people worldwide, Ken was well known and loved because so many people had experienced him as a humble inquirer. This love was especially surprising because Ken could also frequently fall into the telling mode and be brutal and tyrannical. We take it for granted that the boss is always telling us things, we expect that; genuine interest from the boss is much rarer and much more appreciated.

Does such inquiry have to be sincere? Can we simulate interest and get credit for being caring if we don't have the

feeling or attitude that Humble Inquiry demands? Humans are very sensitive creatures and we send many signals of which we are not aware (as I discuss further in Chapter 6). In talking to many subordinates in organizations, I find that the insincere boss is spotted very quickly and often resented. I suspect, therefore, that if I am not really interested, the other person will sense it, no matter how I phrase my questions. This means that all kinds of questions, even some kinds of *telling* can be Humble Inquiry if the motive behind the behavior is sincere interest. That interest will be conveyed in body language, tone of voice, timing, and other cues.

As the examples in Chapter 2 show, Humble Inquiry comes across differently depending on the situation. Conversations always occur within a set of cultural rules, and it is, therefore, not desirable to try to develop standard categories of questions that do or do not qualify as Humble Inquiry. What can be said is that whatever you do when you try to humbly inquire, try to minimize your own preconceptions, clear your mind at the beginning of the conversation, and maximize your listening as the conversation proceeds. In fact, the most important diagnostic that the other person will use to decide whether or not you are interested is not only what you ask but also how well you hear the response. Your attitude and motive will then reveal themselves in your further questions and responses as the conversation proceeds.

How Humble Inquiry plays out also depends on the assumptions the two parties make about the purpose of the conversation, their relative status, and the degree to which they already have a relationship. If they encounter each other as strangers in a neutral situation, such as at a cocktail party, the conversation itself becomes an exploration of how much each person can claim that the other will acknowl-

edge and accept. If I choose not to tell but to approach the other in a Humble Inquiry manner, I will either stay silent or begin with something neutral like, "Hello, my name is Ed Schein. What is your name?" The ritual dance then begins with alternate telling and acknowledging. If I become interested and choose to remain in the Humble Inquiry mode I will emphasize exploratory questions that minimize my telling and maximize letting the other person tell his or her story in as unbiased a way as possible.

Examples of how to get the conversation started and keep it going:

"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 "Fine, how are you?" 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. Within a given culture, participants know when they are asked a scripted question and know to give a scripted answer. We all learn many kinds of scripted inquiries that are not really meant to elicit a sincere response. This can become problematic when the cultures involved have different rules. In my executive classes at MIT, the U.S. students sometimes sincerely asked Japanese colleagues to dinner with "Can you come to dinner next Saturday?" and received a yes answer only to find that no one showed up. We learned that the Japanese were scripted to answer yes,

which meant "I have understood your invitation" but did not mean "Yes, I will come." We further learned that it was necessary and OK to follow up with "Please come to our house. Will you be able to come at 6:30?"

To summarize these points and to sharpen the distinction between Humble Inquiry and the forms of inquiry which I discuss next: Humble Inquiry does not influence either the content of what the other person has to say, nor the form in which it is said.

DIAGNOSTIC INQUIRY

One of the most common deviations from Humble Inquiry occurs when I get curious about a particular thing the other person is telling me and choose to focus on it. I am not *telling* with this kind of question, but I am steering the conversation and influencing the other person's mental process in unknown ways. This was illustrated in my earlier example of giving directions when someone asked me how to get to Massachusetts Avenue and I responded with "Where are you trying to get?" I was steering the conversation, but because I had been asked for help, I thought of this as still Humble Inquiry, though I was running the risk that the other person might say, "none of your business."

What differentiates this form of inquiry is that it influences the other's *mental process*. By asking a further question instead of answering the original question, I am taking charge of the direction of the conversation and must, therefore, consider whether or not this is desirable. The main issue is whether this steering is in the interest of getting the job done, as was my question, or is it indulging my curiosity in an inappropriate way? An example of such indulgence would be if I asked, "Why are you trying to get to Massachusetts Aveue?"

This form of inquiry which influences the client's mental *process* can be further classified by what the questioner's diagnostic focus is.

1] Feelings and Reactions—questions which focus others on their feelings and reactions in response to the events they have described or the problems that have been identified

Examples:

“How did (do) you *feel* about that?”

“Did (does) that arouse any *reactions* in you?”

“What was (is) your emotional *reaction* to that?”

As innocent and supportive as these questions might seem, they take control of the situation and force others to think about something that they may not have considered and may not want to consider. I don't think of these questions as Humble Inquiry because asking for feelings may be pushing deeper than the other is willing to go. Asking about feelings is one way to personalize the relationship, which may or may not be appropriate in the situation you are in at that moment.

2] Causes and Motives—questions about motivation or about causes that focus the others on their motivations in relation to something that they have been talking about

Examples:

“Why did that happen?”

“Why did (do) you feel that way?”

“What may have caused this . . . ?”

“Why do you suppose that happened?”

With such questions I am clearly forcing the other person to join me in figuring out what may be going on and am satisfying my curiosity. Whether or not we view this as

Humble Inquiry depends upon how relevant the inquiry and the answer are to accomplishing our common task.

3) Action Oriented—questions that focus others on what they did, are thinking about doing, or plan to do in the future

If others have already reported actions, I can build on that. But often when people present their problems, they don't reveal past, present, or possible future actions, which I might need to bring out with questions.

Examples:

"What have you tried so far?"

"How did you get here?"

"What did you (he/she/théy) *do* about that?" (in response to a complaint)

"What are you going to *do* next?"

Action-oriented questions clearly push the other person even further into your line of thinking. In that sense, these questions also influence the other's mental process and should be used only when you feel justified in exerting that influence. For example, in the case of the COO whose leadership team always sat in the same seats, I bluntly asked him, "What did you *do*?" I felt this was justified because we were both trying to solve the problem of understanding the culture he was in. My steering him into thinking about his actions was legitimated by the fact that I was in the helper role and we were working on a joint task.

4) Systemic Questions—questions that build understanding of the total situation

Stories that others tell us about themselves typically involve other people as well—family members, friends, bosses, colleagues, and/or subordinates. You may decide

that it is important for you and the teller to understand the reactions or actions of others that have been mentioned and may, therefore, ask what someone else in the other's social system might be thinking, feeling, or doing. This form of questioning is very powerful if you and the other have agreed to explore a situation in greater detail.

Examples:

"What did she (he/they) *do* then?"

"How do you think she felt when you did that?"

"What do you think he will do if you follow through on what you said?"

"How would they have reacted if you had told them how you felt?"

These four kinds of diagnostic questions steer one's mental process and help one to become more self-aware. However, they are still questions and they do not imply any particular solution. They may qualify as Humble Inquiry depending on the context in which they are asked and the state of the relationship.

CONFRONTATIONAL INQUIRY

The essence of confrontational inquiry is that you now insert your *own ideas* but in the form of a question. When we talk about rhetorical questions or leading questions, we are acknowledging that the question is really a form of telling. The question may still be based on curiosity or interest, but it is now in connection to your own interests. I now want information related to something that I want to do or am thinking about.

Almost by definition this form of inquiry can rarely qualify as Humble Inquiry because the inquirer is taking charge of both the process and content of the conversa-

tion. You are tacitly giving advice, and this often arouses resistance in others and makes it harder to build relationships with them because they have to explain or defend why they aren't feeling something or doing something that you proposed.

Confrontational questions can cover the same categories of diagnosis as above.

1) Feelings and Reactions

"Did that not make you angry?"

vs.

"How did that make you feel?"

2) Causes and Motives

"Do you think they were sitting that way because they were scared?"

vs.

"Why do you suppose they were sitting that way?"

3) Action Oriented

"Why didn't you say something to the group?"

vs.

"What did you do?"

"Why don't we go to the movies tonight?"

vs.

"What shall we do tonight?"

"Have you thought of going on a diet?"

vs.

"What are you doing about your weight?"

4) Systemic Questions

"Were the others in the room surprised?"

vs.

"How were the others in the room reacting?"

Confrontational questions can be humble if your motive is to be helpful and if the relationship has enough trust built

up to allow the other to feel helped rather than confronted. Timing, tone of voice, and various other cues tell the listener about your motives. What I have found most important is to ask myself what my motives are before I ask a confrontational question. Am I feeling humble and curious or have I fallen into thinking I have an answer and am just testing out whether or not I am right? If I am just testing my own thought, then I have drifted into telling and should not be surprised if the other person gets defensive. When I asked "What did you *do*?" of the COO whose team sat in the same spots, I clearly had no thought in my head as to what he might have done. But our culture of Tell is so strong that when I relate this story to fellow consultants and ask them what they would have said if they had been in my shoes, most of them come up with various suggestions to the COO instead of the open question I asked.

PROCESS-ORIENTED INQUIRY

An option that is always on the table is to shift the conversational focus onto the conversation itself. Whether this counts as Humble Inquiry or not depends on the motives of the person shifting the focus. If I am trying to develop a good relationship and feel the conversation going in the wrong direction, I can humbly ask some version of "What is happening?" ("Are we OK?" "Did I offend you?") to explore what might be wrong and how it might be fixed. Instead of continuing with the content of the conversation, this kind of inquiry suddenly focuses on the here-and-now interaction. Just how this might be worded depends very much on the actual situation, but it would always make the other person conscious that there is a two-person interaction going on and that it can be reviewed and analyzed.

Process-oriented inquiry can also be categorized.

1) **Humble Process Inquiry**

“What is happening here?”

“Have we gone too far?”

“Is this too personal?”

2) **Diagnostic Process Inquiry**

“Why did you choose to tell me about your feelings in this particular way?”

“What do you think is happening between us right now?”

“What should I be asking you now?”

3) **Confrontational Process Inquiry**

“Why were you so defensive just now when I was trying to tell you how I felt?”

“Are you upset, have I upset you?”

“Are you stimulated by what I am asking you?”

The power of this kind of inquiry is that it focuses on the relationship itself and enables both parties to assess whether their relationship goals are being met. Used with humility this kind of inquiry is probably also the most difficult to learn because our culture does not support it as normal conversation. Except in special training events we tend to avoid talking about *how* we are talking or saying something specific about our relationship. Yet this form of inquiry is often the most powerful way to get out of awkward or difficult conversations because it allows both parties to reset, to restate what they are there for, what they want, and, in other ways, recalibrate their expectations.

In Summary

Saying to oneself that one should *ask* more and *tell* less does not solve the problem of building a relationship of mutual

trust. The underlying attitude of competitive one-upmanship will leak out if it is there. Humble Inquiry starts with the attitude and is then supported by our choice of questions. The more we remain curious about the other person rather than letting our own expectations and preconceptions creep in, the better our chances are of staying in the right questioning mode. We have to learn that diagnostic and confrontational questions come very naturally and easily, just as telling comes naturally and easily. It takes some discipline and practice to access one's ignorance, to stay focused on the other person.

If we learn to do this, the positive consequences will be better conversations and better relationships. For many situations it may not matter; we may not care. But especially if you are dependent on others—if you are the boss or senior person trying to increase the likelihood that your subordinates will help you and be open with you—then Humble Inquiry will not only be desirable but essential.

Why is this so difficult? We need next to look at the cultural forces that favor telling.