

Leadership Goal: Better Listening

By Phil Ramsey

With the start of a new year, many educational leaders will be thinking about how they can improve their leadership practice. Perhaps that's true of you. Learning and development isn't just for the inexperienced. All of us need to keep moving forward and building our capability. Let's take a moment to look at why, in his book *Humble Inquiry* (see the Book Review in this issue) leadership expert Ed Schein says that special attention needs to be given to listening as a core leadership skill.



To start to understand why listening is so important it is good to think about what we mean by 'leadership'. Canadian leadership and organisational philosopher Elliot Jaques emphasised that we shouldn't think of leadership as a role. Instead, leadership is something you do while you are carrying out a role. For instance, you might have the role of teacher or principal or administrator. Think of leadership as a process you can use to make sure you carry out that role well.

What does it mean to 'do' leadership? According to Jaques it is the process of building relationships that enable you to work effectively with others. Whether you think of yourself as a leader or not, if you build collaborative relationships as you do your work, you are doing leadership.

Of course, it is also true that some people think of themselves as leaders while they are wrecking relationships that could help them in the future. They think they are doing leadership when they *tell* others what to do, even though healthy relationships are more often based on listening rather than telling.

Culture and Listening

Ed Schein spent decades exploring the interplay of leadership and culture. In *Humble Inquiry* Schein explains how cultural forces often mean that as we gain experience our ability to listen deteriorates. We find it easy to listen to people who we respect; they naturally hold our attention, and we are curious about what they are going to say. And who we respect is shaped by our culture.

When you grow up in a community, you learn through observation how you are meant to behave. That includes learning who the people with high status are; the ones you are *required* to respect. Anthropologists use this as a fundamental way of classifying cultures. Some cultures value *ascribed status*, where people are given respect based on who they are (the family they come from, the position they hold in the community, etc.). Other cultures value *achieved status*, where people are given respect based on what they have achieved in areas the community thinks are important.

And here's the problem when it comes to listening: in organisations, as you gain experience it's likely that you both achieve more and are put in positions of high status. So, as you progress, the culture you are in makes it more common for others to respect you, and to listen to what you have to say. That in turn means it takes more of an effort for you to listen to others around you, who perhaps

haven't achieved as much or are in positions viewed as being of lower status. It doesn't help your listening when others expect you to take a 'leadership by telling' approach and when, because of your experience, you have plenty of things to say.

Humble Inquiry

Based on years of work with outstanding leaders and organisations, Schein provides a way to unlock this cultural challenge. Cultural values may shape when you decide *in advance* that you will treat someone with respect, or when you will show humility by asking questions rather than asserting your own opinions. Because of the way cultures work, this decision becomes automatic: you decide without really thinking about it. The alternative is to make a deliberate and conscious decision *in the moment* to be humble.

Humility means to take up the mindset that the person you are talking to is superior to you; that you are talking with someone with knowledge or insight that you can learn from. An attitude of humility is possible for anyone who realizes that the world is full of things they don't know. And this is a great attitude to have when you collaborate with others.

As we've discussed regularly in this newsletter, the complexity of work means that collaboration is now essential for just about everyone. You can't get things done independently. Making changes and getting results involves working with others and being dependent on them for the help they can provide. You might think of this as interdependence, because they also depend on you. But if you are consciously and deliberately aware of your dependence on them, you'll be more authentic in how you seek their views and value their perspective. Humility generates a mindset that will naturally make your questions more respectful, no matter who you are talking to. And this in turn will strengthen your relationships. You'll be truly doing leadership.

Don't Hold Back

Being a leader implies taking the initiative. When we think about collaboration and interdependence, we might be inclined to wait for someone else to take the first step. Why treat someone else as superior, if the result is them using your vulnerability, making you feel inferior?

In complex situations, though, the reality is that you *are* dependent on others. What will help you embrace this reality? Realise that being humble in the moment doesn't detract from your worth. You have dignity and value. You have added to this with what you have achieved and the positions of responsibility you have attained. Reflecting on your experience and achievements can help you build the confidence to take a position of humility in the moment, as required.

Pay Attention to Your Questions

By Phil Ramsey

The term 'Humble Inquiry' combines two elements: a mindset and an action. Ed Schein emphasises that it is primarily an attitude, where humility is chosen as the basis for building respectful relationships. Notice, though, that the attitude gets expressed through the practice of *inquiry*. In other words, humility moves us to ask questions.



We are surrounded by questions and may not give much thought to what the ones we ask sound like to other people. Some questions are really statements of opinion in disguise, like "Isn't this terrible?" Many leave little doubt as to what we prefer. Others are designed to lead the listener to a conclusion, or to help us diagnose the other person's problem.

In each case we are not positioning ourselves humbly. We are thinking of ourselves as the person in the superior position. Even when our motives are good - we really want to help - these are not the kind of questions that make a fundamental difference to relationships. And sometimes our questions are toxic, when we use them to tell someone off. "Why on earth did you do that?" is punishment poorly disguised as interest in what someone has to say.

As Schein describes most of us find it easy to (1) withdraw from conversations, (2) tell rather than ask, or (3) ask questions that make it look like we think we are superior to others, even if that isn't how we feel. Humble inquiry is all about our ignorance; situations where we are curious and ask questions because we realize how much we don't know. As Schein says, it takes discipline and practice to be comfortable with ignorance so we can stay focused on the other person.

It is tempting to provide a list of acceptable humble questions, but a list won't convey the attitude with which they are asked. A list won't convey the tone of voice needed to show real curiosity. And that makes a big difference. People can usually tell when our questions aren't sincere. Or they decide that we are not interested when our follow-up questions show we weren't really listening to their answers. It is best to find ways to open up conversation - ways that feel right to you - and then practice showing sincere interest. Notice how people respond. And become aware of any tendency you may have to lose interest or slip into telling mode.

A good rule of thumb for any kind of development is that "awareness is curative". The more we notice what we do and the impact it has, the more readily we adjust our practice. Challenge yourself to grow your ability to sustain a humble position in conversation.

BOOK REVIEW: **Humble Inquiry**

By Phil Ramsey

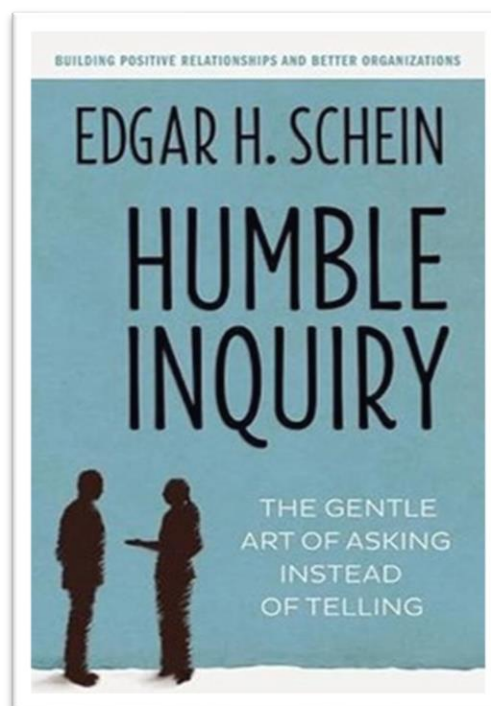
Ed Schein has had a long and distinguished career as a teacher, writer and as a consultant to major organizations. His work includes the classic book *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, and he has been a leading thinker on subjects related to organisational learning. It feels like Schein has drawn on all his experience in *Humble Inquiry* as he tries to capture the attitude that makes a real difference when it comes to leadership.

People concerned with leadership and change have for years recognised that relationships are crucial to effective collaboration. There is so much to learn about how to have good conversations and avoid the traps that derail people who are trying to work together.

A lot of the training we do and the techniques we use aim to disrupt unhealthy patterns of how we talk together. As I read *Humble Inquiry* it felt like Schein was explaining something truly fundamental: an attitude that is an essential ingredient to the kinds of conversation we have been trying to encourage.

Schein does a fantastic job of describing what he means by humble inquiry and why it is such a challenge to show real interest in other people. He draws on his deep understanding of culture to show why we so often choose telling rather than asking. And Schein has an intriguing chapter where he discusses why we find humility personally challenging. He uses a classic teaching tool, the Johari Window, to give fresh insight into the dynamics of how we interact with one another.

I wasn't expecting to enjoy *Humble Inquiry* as much as I did, perhaps because earlier works have been full of relatively heavy academic writing that felt like a chore to read. I found *Humble Inquiry* very accessible and engaging. It doesn't try to include too much. Instead, Schein commits to explaining each issue with one concept that he applies elegantly, and then illustrates with mini-cases drawn from his rich experience as a consultant. Now I'm keen to read his sequel to this, *Humble Leadership*. I'm hoping he will take a similar approach. If you are interested in how conversations build relationships I'm sure you'll enjoy *Humble Inquiry*.



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