

The strategist's bookshelf

The critical skill of attentive inquiry

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Two books by Edgar H. Schein: *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*, (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013), 123 pages and *Humble Consulting: How to Provide Real Help Faster*, (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016), 209 pages.

Edgar Henry Schein, award-winning author and former professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management, is noted for his research into corporate culture and group process consultation.^[1] His two recent books reestablish the importance of the quality of “humility” in the discussion of leadership traits and, more broadly, 21st Century management. Based on his several decades of research, teaching and consulting experience, Prof. Schein’s books lucidly articulate the concept of humility, and vividly demonstrate its effectiveness in leadership and consulting. These books arrived at a point in management practice when some of the ideas from 1960’s and 1970’s are getting renewed attention, for example, Carl Rogers’ non-directive counseling, an approach of listening, supporting and advising without directing a client’s course of action.^[2] Architects of executive management and leadership programs can now view YouTube talks by Prof. Schein on humility and easily insert “humility” segments into their executive education programs.

Most veteran managers have been on the receiving end of a consulting conversation that quickly became a soliloquy intended to explain what their actual problems “really” are. Schein deploys his skill in writing about such

unproductive interactions with clinical detail in *Humble Inquiry* and *Humble Consulting*, which, for the sake of brevity, are referred to here as *Inquiry* and *Consulting*. Both *Inquiry* and *Consulting* are written with the intent of genuinely listening to and helping the practitioner and there are synergistic links between the two books.

Inquiry focuses on “humility” and “inquiry,” concepts forged over fifty years of Schein’s consulting experience. He focuses on “here and now” humility, a situation where a person is dependent on another individual. He characterizes interdependent work situations, for example the dependence of leaders on their subordinates, as contexts of here and now humility. For these contexts, Schein advances, as appropriate, humble inquiry as “the fine art of drawing someone out, as asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, and as building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person.”^[3] *Humble Inquiry* combines both an attitude of building a relationship of trust and a skill set to enhance our curiosity about another person without letting our own expectations and preconceptions creep into our interactions. Contextual features that inhibit humble inquiry are: 1) the pervasive “do and tell” managerial culture and 2) organizational hierarchical status, rank and role. Nevertheless, Schein remains optimistic that thoughtful practitioners can develop humble inquiry skills.

Consulting focuses on providing help to clients confronting the messy

complex problems of today. Perhaps by necessity, *Consulting* is a slightly more complex read than *Inquiry*. Schein borrows the concept of the levels of relationship from Theory U[4] and advances his own concepts of personalization and adaptive moves.[5] Additionally, Schein stresses the following four constituents of humble consulting:

1. The need to build a level of personal relationship, beyond professional relationship, to be of genuine help to a client.
2. To view personalization as the primary principle of interaction from the very first contact with the client.
3. To focus on processes.
4. To employ adaptive moves innovatively to accomplish the tasks.

In Chapters 4 and 6 of *Consulting* Schein first walks the readers through initial encounters with clients and then through the practice of process observation. Commendably, Schein does not shy away from presenting his own failed consulting interventions along with his successes, and thus he comes across as a self-aware consultant. His admission of fallibility provides evidence of his own humility and enhances his credibility.

Schein offers some insights and methods that will be new even to seasoned corporate veterans. First, he precisely articulates the concepts of humility, humble inquiry and consultation types so that practitioners can fully grasp their nuances. Second, his categorizations of two actions – how to listen and how to respond – explains the complexity of these actions and how to manage them in practice. Finally, we were intrigued by the notion of adaptive moves, and would submit that the concept provides a way of talking

about human agency currently lacking in management literature.

Thoughtful leaders and managers are likely to find the books immensely useful. The principles enunciated in *Inquiry* offer executives a means to mitigate the self-deceptive follies that plague strategic decision making[6] and the challenge of building trust and productive relationships with subordinates. Organizational Development consultants,[7] especially process consultants, will get a quick refresher course in Consulting, and some new angles for practice.

Students aspiring either to be managers or consultants should be exposed to Schein's ideas. These books should serve as primary reading for instructors who teach organization behavior, leadership and management consulting courses. Particularly relevant to executive programs, Schein's concepts will likely resonate with participants' leadership experiences. He argues that humble consulting is a requisite leadership skill, a position we wholeheartedly endorse.

Schein elucidates his ideas with copious examples from his own consulting experience. The stories Schein tells are compelling and may seduce readers into believing that the profound ideas he is propounding are self-evident. True, most of his ideas can be facilely understood, but they are not so easy to put into practice. The "do and tell" culture he warns against and the single loop learning[8] process can entrap aspiring humble inquirers and consultants.

A word or two of caution. We could not help wondering whether, in the hands of gamesmen corporate leaders,[9] *Inquiry* could provide the tools for manipulation. Schein also skips the inevitable question: How should a consultant deal with potential

clients who are antithetical to his values? In the larger scheme of things, however, these are minor quibbles.

Notes

1. Schein, E. (1969), *Process Consultation: Its Role in Organization Development*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Schein, E. (1985), *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Schein, E. (1990), *Career Anchors: Discovering Your Real Values*. Jossey-Bass Pfeier.
2. Shefer, N., Carmeli, A. and Cohen-Meitar, R. (2018), "Bringing Carl Rogers Back In: Exploring the Power of Positive Regard at Work," *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 63-81.
3. Schein, E.H. (2013) *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Page 2.
4. Scharmer, C.O. (2016). *Theory U: Leading from the Future As It Emerges*, 2nd Edition, SoL Press.
5. www.safaribooksonline.com/library/view/humble-consulting/9781626567221/xhtml/ch07.html
6. Narayanan, V.K. and Fahey, L. (2013), "Seven management follies that threaten strategic success", *Strategy & Leadership*, Vol. 41 No. 4, pp. 24-29.
7. Bowe, D.D. and Nath, R. (1978), "Transactional Analysis in OD: Applications Within the NTL Model," *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 78-89.
8. Argyris, C. and Schön, D.A. (1978). *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*. Addison-Wesley.
9. Maccoby, M. (1976). *The Gamesman: The New Corporate Leaders*. Simon & Schuster.

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