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## Humble Inquiry: Are You Asking the Right Questions?



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Safety Culture & Promotion



An excellent organization is one that can nimbly execute its strategy while continually learning from itself. Its structure is designed to provide management with constant feedback and performance from normal work. Its safety leadership spends considerable resources to carefully listen to the “weak signals” from frontline employees, work teams and key stakeholders alike to help build the capacity and risk tolerance necessary for employees to fail fast, fail softly, learn how to learn quicker and perform brilliantly.

Shoemaker and Day define these weak signals as, “A seemingly random or disconnected piece of information that at first appears to be background noise but can be recognized as part of a significant pattern by viewing it through a different

frame or connecting it with other pieces of information.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Detecting Weak Signals With Humble Inquiry**

While managing today’s specialized work teams and flatter organizations, senior leadership and safety professionals can seldom remain experts in what is going on within all aspects of their company. At the same time, high-performance work teams require a significant amount of interdependence, effective communications, strong relationships and knowledge management. For management to continually improve and support team performance, it must develop the art of asking the kind of questions known as humble inquiry.

### **What Is Humble Inquiry?**

The notion of humble inquiry was originally developed and explained by Edgar Schein, a former professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management. From his book on the subject, he defines humble inquiry as, “...asking questions to which you do not already know the answer; building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person.”<sup>2</sup>

We learn that this attitude and behavior is critical for excellent organizations to listen for the “weak signals” that are essential in building the safe space needed to create a flexible, learning and proactive safety culture.

### **Learning Is Vital**

Humble inquiry helps leadership recognize how to care for and think differently about the safety of their workers. The worker is not a problem to be fixed, but becomes the problem solver to safety and quality management solutions.<sup>3</sup>

Once leadership understands that safety management expertise already lives within their workforce, safety managers can start to draw from that expertise by building the positive relationships encouraged through humble inquiry. This can ultimately result in workers helping create problem statements and effectively drive smarter and more effective solutions.

### **Questioning vs. Asking**

Many of us do not understand the difference between questioning and asking. Failing to understand this difference will thwart any attempts at using humble inquiry to build positive relationships with your workforce.

Here is the difference<sup>4</sup>:

- Questioning is a skill that enables you to obtain information from a decision influencer.
- Asking is a skill that enables you to obtain an action from a decision influencer.

Let’s compare these differences between what safety managers might be traditionally expected to ask vs. humbly inquire to achieve better results:

Traditional questions:

- What was the last incident that you had?
- Where are you on completing the review of our SOPs?
- Do you have all the company-spec’d PPE you need?
- Have you read and initialed the updated work process bulletins?

Humble inquiries:

- What is making your life hard at work?
- What gets in the way of working safely?
- What has been your experience while using different kinds of safety helmets?
- Tell me about the risks and benefits if the team revised the current workflow?

### **Humbly Inquire—Then Take Action**

Asking better questions and establishing rapport with workers is not just about building relationships. You must be

prepared to act on what you hear! It is the safety manager's job to promote and speak on behalf of the workforce, explaining the implications of situations identified to their management.

Another benefit of effective humble inquiry is the ability to collect and manage considerably more organizational data (generated from the bottom up) than is created by implementing "Do and Tell" directives from the top down. Are your current SMS inquiry forms structured to collect qualified information while classifying, measuring and trending changes in worker performance?

### **Humble Inquiry: Essential to a Learning and Reporting Safety Culture**

A learning and reporting safety culture demands that management utilize humble inquiry to keep its culture resilient. Proper use of humble inquiry will allow you to collect not only the good, but much more of the bad and the ugly.

Therefore, how the company responds to failure matters. Management's response to failure telegraphs everything the worker needs to know about how serious the organization is about being resilient.

If you respond negatively, with a "Do and Tell" mentality, you are going to hide data all the way through your organization, and you will have several one-way conversations. If you respond positively, the organization must deal with lots of performance-rich and qualified information. Although some of this information will not reflect well on the organization, senior leadership will be constantly aware of how their world is truly operating and how best to nimbly act upon it.

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### **Resources**

<sup>1</sup> Shoemaker and Day, How to Make Sense of Weak Signals, MIT Sloan Management Review, April 01, 2009

<https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-make-sense-of-weak-signals/>

<sup>2</sup> Humble Inquiry. Edgar H. Schein. Berrett-Koehler Publishers. San Francisco. 2013. ISBN 978-1-60994-981-5

<sup>3</sup> Conklin, Todd, 5 Principles of HOP, Vector Solutions Podcast, August 4, 2019

<https://www.vectorsolutions.com/resources/blogs/5-principles-of-human-and-organizational-performance-hop-with-dr-todd-conklin/>

<sup>4</sup> WikiDiff, "What's the difference between ask and question?", <https://wikidiff.com/ask/question>



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