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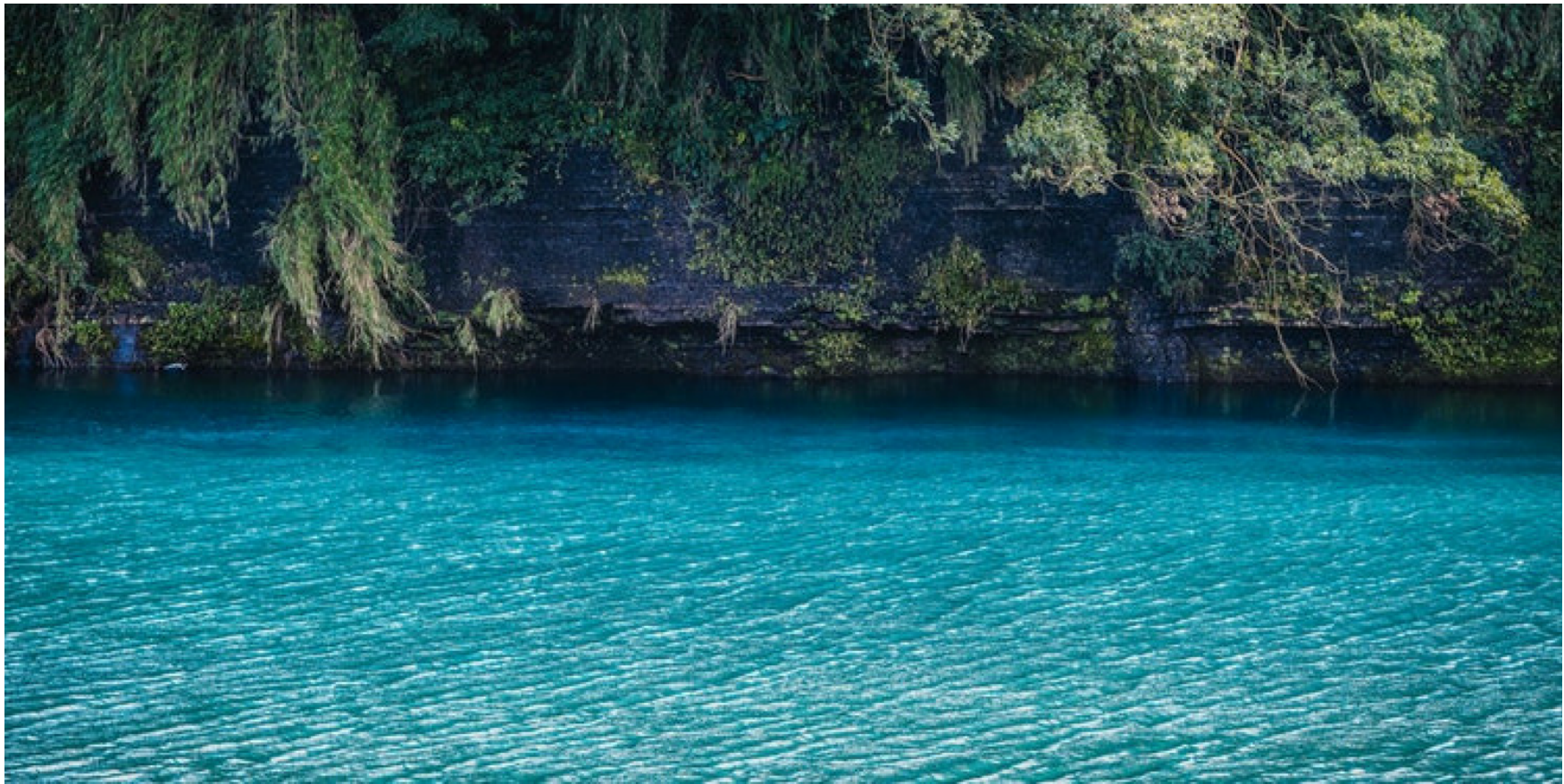
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# Using Humble Inquiry to Lead, a Manager's Guide



Berrett-Koehler Aug 16, 2018 · 4 min read

In a 2014 study by Catalyst, Jeanine Prime and Elizabeth R. Salib identified humility as one of four key leadership behaviors that link to inclusion, which subsequently fosters team citizenship, innovation, a sense of belonging, and a sense of uniqueness.

Asking questions might be the surprising element of this approach. The concept of humble inquiry turns the positive humility great leaders display toward their employees into an active practice of nurturing personal relationships. This combination leads to stronger relationships, more engaged employees, reduced turnover, and higher profits.

## More Asking, Less Telling

A positive workplace relationship between leaders and employees doesn't

happen overnight. It's something that must be built and nurtured. Edgar H. Schein, former professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management and father of organizational psychology for the past 50 years, created a strategy called humble inquiry that strengthens relationships between managers and subordinates and ultimately improves the outcomes of any organization.

The idea behind humble inquiry is simple and gentle, impactful and long-lasting. Instead of making demands of coworkers or telling them what they must do or think, humble inquiry invites them into the conversation as people who can offer valuable contributions. Some benefits of this approach, defined by Edgar H. Schein and Peter A. Schein in their book, *Humble Leadership: The Power of Relationships, Openness, and Trust*, include employee engagement, empowerment, organizational agility, ambidexterity, and innovation.

Consider this example: You need to understand why someone on your team completed a task in a way that, on the surface, appears problematic. One approach could be to first tell the person of the error or demand an

explanation. The subordinate is immediately put on the defensive, and trust and respect suffers. Humble inquiry takes the opposite approach: “You completed this task in a unique way. It would benefit me to understand; could you walk me through your work?” This question, and the respectful questions that follow, establishes collaboration and starts a true discussion that can solve the problem and create rapport for the future.

“Humble Inquiry is the fine 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,” writes Schein. Implementing the concept, however, can be challenging. Schein identifies three key steps for practicing humble inquiry:

1. Do less telling.
2. Learn to do more asking in the particular form of humble inquiry.
3. Do a better job listening and acknowledging.

## Leadership with Collaboration

When communication with leadership is a one-way street, employees can feel disconnected, as if they have nothing to offer — and even if they have something to offer, they aren't given the opportunity to contribute.

Humble leadership, of which humble inquiry is a key element, inverts this dynamic and moves leadership from a transactional relationship model to one of nurturing personal relationships. The Scheins write in *Humble Leadership* that the model's benefits “can flourish in the rapidly changing world when the fundamental relationship between leaders and followers, helpers and clients, and providers and customers becomes more personalized and cooperative.”

With humble leadership, employees are encouraged to collaborate, feel heard, and contribute. A small inquiry on a manager's part can result in a flood of innovative ideas and opinions that otherwise would have never been voiced because workers felt as if they couldn't say anything.

Humble leaders work to build open and trusting relationships because they see the value such connections hold for the overall organization. As the

Scheins write in *Humble Leadership*, “It is up to you to create a learning environment in which you and your group can cooperate in identifying and fixing the processes that solve problems, and maybe then can change the world.”

## Consulting with Humility

Humble inquiry and leadership aren't limited to manager-employee relationships, but can also be applied to consultant-client relationships. Humble consulting places a premium on the human relationships that consultants build with their client organizations. Instead of robotically dispensing advice and collecting a check, this approach emphasizes that consultants take the time to truly understand the client's concerns prior to charting a course of action.

In the second installment of the *Humble Leadership Series*, *Humble Consulting: How to Provide Real Help Faster*, Edgar H. Schein, writes that humble consulting “presumes that you are committed to being helpful, bring a great deal of honest curiosity, and have the right caring attitude, a

willingness to find out what is really on the client's mind.” At the heart of this model is humble inquiry, which personalizes the process so that you can build a deeper relationship with your client. With this strategy, the client guides the consultant as much as the consultant guides the client — and the benefits include identifying stronger solutions more efficiently.

## The Humble Trifecta

Humility as a core business philosophy recognizes that we don't have all the answers and taking a superior stance diminishes our coworkers, while failing to produce the best solutions. Humble inquiry establishes that conversations are better than lecturing, humble leadership advances the concept into managerial relationships, and humble consulting applies the principles to a consultant-client setting.

The great thing about humble inquiry is that it doesn't require hours of advanced training or complex planning. It just starts with asking a question, and another, and another. From there, all you need to do is listen.

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