

# Introduction: Creating Positive Relationships and Effective Organizations

The motivation to write this book is personal and professional. On the personal level, I have never liked being told things gratuitously, especially things I already know.

The other day I was admiring an unusual bunch of mushrooms that had grown after a heavy rain when a lady walking her dog chose to stop and tell me in a loud voice, “Some of those are poisonous, you know.” I replied, “I know,” to which she added, “Some of them can kill you, you know.”

What struck me was how her need to tell not only made it difficult to respond in a positive manner, but it also offended me. I realized that her tone and her *telling* approach prevented the building of a positive relationship and made further communication awkward. Her motivation might have been to help me, yet I found it unhelpful and wished that she had asked me a question, either at the beginning or after I said “I know,” instead of trying to tell me something more.

Why is it so important to learn to ask better questions that help to build positive relationships? Because in an increasingly complex, interdependent, and culturally diverse world, we cannot hope to understand and work

with people from different occupational, professional, and national cultures if we do not know how to ask questions and build relationships that are based on mutual respect and the recognition that others know things that we may need to know in order to get a job done.

But not all questions are equivalent. I have come to believe that we need to learn a particular form of questioning that I first called “Humble Inquiry” in my book on *Helping* (2009), and that can be defined as follows:

***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.***

The professional motivation to explore Humble Inquiry more extensively comes from the insights I have gained over the past fifty years of consulting with various kinds of organizations. Especially in the high hazard industries in which the problems of safety are paramount, I have learned that good relations and reliable communication across hierarchic boundaries are crucial. In airplane crashes and chemical industry accidents, in the infrequent but serious nuclear plant accidents, in the NASA Challenger and Columbia disasters, and in the British Petroleum gulf spill, a common finding is that lower-ranking employees had information that would have prevented or lessened the consequences of the accident, but either it was not passed up to higher levels, or it was ignored, or it was overridden. When I talk to senior managers, they always assure me that they are open, that they want to hear from their subordinates, and that they take the information seriously. However, when I talk to the subordinates in those same organizations, they tell me either they do not feel safe bringing bad news to

their bosses or they've tried but never got any response or even acknowledgment, so they concluded that their input wasn't welcome and gave up. Shockingly often, they settled for risky alternatives rather than upset their bosses with potentially bad news.

When I look at what goes on in hospitals, in operating rooms, and in the health care system generally, I find the same problems of communication exist and that patients frequently pay the price. Nurses and technicians do not feel safe bringing negative information to doctors or correcting a doctor who is about to make a mistake. Doctors will argue that if the others were "professionals" they would speak up, but in many a hospital the nurses will tell you that doctors feel free to yell at nurses in a punishing way, which creates a climate where nurses will certainly not speak up. Doctors engage patients in one-way conversations in which they ask only enough questions to make a diagnosis and sometimes make misdiagnoses because they don't ask enough questions before they begin to tell patients what they should do.

It struck me that what is missing in all of these situations is a climate in which lower-level employees feel safe to bring up issues that need to be addressed, information that would reduce the likelihood of accidents, and, in health care, mistakes that harm patients. How does one produce a climate in which people will speak up, bring up information that is safety related, and even correct superiors or those of higher status when they are about to make a mistake?

The answer runs counter to some important aspects of U.S. culture—we *must become better at asking and do less telling in a culture that overvalues telling*. It has always bothered me how even ordinary conversations tend to be defined by what we *tell* rather than by what we *ask*. Questions are taken for granted rather than given a starring role in the

human drama. Yet all my teaching and consulting experience has taught me that what builds a relationship, what solves problems, what moves things forward is *asking the right questions*. In particular, it is the higher-ranking leaders who must learn the art of Humble Inquiry as a first step in creating a climate of openness.

I learned early in my consulting that getting questioning right was more important than giving recommendations or advice and wrote about that in my books on *Process Consultation*.<sup>1</sup> I then realized that giving and receiving help also worked best when the helper asked some questions before giving advice or jumping in with solutions. So I wrote about the importance of asking in my book *Helping*.<sup>2</sup>

I now realize that the issue of asking versus telling is really a fundamental issue in human relations, and that it applies to all of us all the time. What we choose to ask, when we ask, what our underlying attitude is as we ask—all are key to relationship building, to communication, and to task performance.

Building relationships between humans is a complex process. The mistakes we make in conversations and the things we think we should have said after the conversation is over all reflect our own confusion about the balancing of asking and telling, and our automatic bias toward telling. The missing ingredients in most conversations are curiosity and willingness to ask questions to which we do not already know the answer.

It is time to take a look at this form of questioning and examine its role in a wide variety of situations, from ordinary conversations to complex-task performances, such as a surgical team performing an open-heart operation. In a complex and interdependent world, more and more tasks are like a seesaw or a relay race. We tout teamwork and use

lots of different athletic analogies, but I chose the seesaw and the relay race to make the point that often it is necessary for *everyone* to do their part. For everyone to do their part appropriately requires good communication; good communication requires building *a trusting relationship*; and building a trusting relationship requires *Humble Inquiry*.

This book is for the general reader, but it has special significance for people in leadership roles because the art of questioning becomes more difficult as status increases. Our culture emphasizes that leaders must be wiser, set direction, and articulate values, all of which predisposes them to tell rather than ask. Yet it is leaders who will need Humble Inquiry most because complex interdependent tasks will require building positive, trusting relationships with subordinates to facilitate good upward communication. And without good upward communication, organizations can be neither effective nor safe.

### **About this book**

In this book I will first define and explain what I mean by *Humble Inquiry* in Chapter 1. To fully understand *humility*, it is helpful to differentiate three kinds of humility: 1) the humility that we feel around elders and dignitaries; 2) the humility that we feel in the presence of those who awe us with their achievements; and 3) Here-and-now Humility, which results from our being dependent from time to time on someone else in order to accomplish a task that we are committed to. This will strike some readers as academic hairsplitting, but it is the recognition of this third type of humility that is the key to Humble Inquiry and to the building of positive relationships.

To fully explain Humble Inquiry, Chapter 2 will pro-

vide a number of short case examples, and Chapter 3 will discuss how this form of questioning is different from other kinds of questions that one may ask.

Chapter 4 will discuss why it is difficult to engage in Humble Inquiry in the kind of task-oriented culture we live in. I label this a “Culture of Do and Tell” and argue that not only do we value *telling* more than *asking*, but we also value *doing* more than *relating* and thereby reduce our capacity and desire to form relationships. Chapter 5 argues that the higher we are in status, the more difficult it becomes to engage in Humble Inquiry while, at the same time, it becomes more important for leaders to learn how to be humble from time to time. Not only do norms and assumptions in our culture make Humble Inquiry difficult, but the complexity of our human brain and the complexity of social relationships also create some constraints and difficulties, which I discuss in Chapter 6.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I provide some suggestions for how we can increase our ability and desire to engage in more Humble Inquiry.