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Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling [review] / Schein, Edgar H.

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conflict and the systems that support it, would make for an effective knowledge base for educating a congregation or corporate religious community in the art of peacemaking and reconciliation.

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HUMBLE INQUIRY: THE GENTLE ART OF ASKING INSTEAD OF TELLING

By Edgar H. Schein
San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler
(2014)
Paperback, 125 pages

Reviewed by STANLEY E.
PATTERSON

Edgar H. Schein brings “50 years of work as a social scientist and organizational psychologist” to bear on this simply written but profoundly insightful book. He presents the concept of gently asking rather than telling as a means of engaging another person in the context of life and particularly leadership. The purpose of the book is framed in the response to a question Schein poses to the reader:

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. (p. 1)

He presents leadership as a relational process which involves conversation as opposed to command as a means to achieving the necessary goals toward mission accomplishment. The *gentle inquiry* is a communication technique that recognizes the need for all people engaged in the organizational community or team to feel valued and in possession of dignity. The collective outcome of a culture habit of asking rather than telling is the formation of a community that is bonded in positive relationships and mutual respect. It moves away from the concept of employee/boss to one of participants in an ordered community who are committed to pursuing a common purpose through a network of trusted relationships.

The book is ordered in a way that introduces the art of humble inquiry through short case studies that present narratives which illustrate the practice of inquiry that positively impacts relationships. These case studies are followed by a presentation that contrasts humble inquiry with other types of inquiry that mask the desire to tell rather than genuinely inquire. This temptation is presented as a natural condition of the culture of “do and tell” that marks our conditioning in the command and control models that have marked the history of leadership and management behavior.

Another element that has powerful implications for those seeking to

implement asking rather than telling is our attitudes toward status, rank, and role boundaries. These forces, which emerge from our stereotypes of where people belong in the structures of society or organizations, can stand as challenging barriers to efforts toward creating a more relational platform upon which we launch our efforts to fulfill goals and objectives. Schein states that these barriers reside in us and create forces that inhibit purposeful humble inquiry. Our psychological efforts to maintain self at a level of superiority relative to others will resist behavior that implies equality or even subordination. These inhibitors require us to see a shift from telling to asking as an adaptive process that requires change in us and how we see others—not always as easy as might be imagined.

Schein delivers on his stated purpose in the Introduction—he convincingly and successfully makes the case for relational leadership via the simple humble art of asking instead of telling. The book is well-written and edited in a clear and organized manner. It seems that I was either so drawn into his point or, more likely, he wrote and presented what my heart has long desired to see demonstrated in our personal and organizational leadership environments—a respect for all wherein the dignity of all is preserved regardless of role or station in life.

Schein makes a case for leadership as conversation, not command. The implications are especially pertinent to our religious institutions where the “level” ground at the altar of grace silently professes the equal status of all of God’s children, while behaviors and stereotypes all too often reveal a stratified community where telling often overrides humble inquiry.

I give this book a 5-star rating and

recommend it to all who wish to lead effectively in the midst of this complex postmodern society that longs for genuine connection and resists the traditional command and control leadership model that is accustomed to telling rather than asking.

STANLEY PATTERSON is chair and professor of Christian Ministry at Andrews University and serves as the Executive Director of the Christian Leadership Center of Andrews University.

REDEFINING LEADERSHIP: CHARACTER-DRIVEN HABITS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERS

*By Joseph M. Stowell
Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (2014)
Hardcover, 175 pages*

Reviewed by BRANDON WESTGATE

This book is a must-read for all who desire to better understand themselves in the light of the leadership qualities of Jesus, who, in the opinion of Stowell, is the greatest Leader the world has ever seen. He brings us to the reality of the counter-intuitive techniques and unique leadership tendencies that mark the methods of a true leader. He abandons the typical formula used by many leadership book authors, with their step-by-step methods of manipulation of others to achieve desired results. Instead, Stowell focuses not on the techniques of manipulation or posturing to gain an advantage or a position, but rather on the position of the leader’s heart to recognize the advantage of leading like Jesus led.

Stowell writes in a very easy to follow format and the flow of this work is very logical and intuitive. He challenges his readers time after time to think deeply about their own leadership tendencies and possible charac-