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*Deeply Understanding Improvement*

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Edgar Schein and John Shook  
**On Coaching**

Lean Enterprise Institute



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Lean Healthcare Academic Conference at Stanford

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*Has organizational development forgotten to gauge the personal side of change—merely fixing things through industrial engineering? Or has it in fact become so dominated by the social side that there is no longer any rigor to the analysis of the work itself? This dialogue between authors and leading thinkers Edgar Schein and John Shook explores these and many other questions about the nature of coaching, humble inquiry, and the dynamics of organization improvement through its people.*

*This dialogue, which is the second annual one between the two, took place late last year at the Lean Healthcare Academic Conference at Stanford, and was moderated by senior improvement Denise Bennett of Stanford Children's Health. Denise is an experienced coach and teacher in strategy and planning, leadership, organizational development and continuous improvement. She is a founding Director of the Australasian Lean Healthcare Network, Board Member of Lean Enterprise Australia and an active member of the Lean Global Network. Shook and Schein will meet again this year to build on this conversation at this year's event on October 8-9. What follows is a lightly edited-for-clarity version of their conversation.*

**Denise Bennett:**

When we put this session together, we wanted to focus on two themes. Firstly, humble inquiry and asking questions. The other theme is about relationships. Our guests today are experts in both of those subjects. We're really honored to have John Shook and Professor Schein here. I've been so fortunate in my journey learning about lean and practicing lean to have had John as my teacher. For over ten years now, he has helped me, encouraged me and challenged me. I've learned so much from him, and every time we get together, I learn a little more, so we're really pleased that he's been able to come today.

My first encounter with Professor Schein's work was when I worked at City of Melbourne. We were working on our leadership framework, articulating the skills and practices we required of our leaders and moving from a culture of leaders asking rather than telling. We found Professor Schein's book *Helping*, and we really used the ideas and thinking within it as the basis for shifting leadership behavior in the organization. Soon after starting at Stanford Children's Health, I discovered that Professor Schein is a local and through Dr. John Toussaint and James Hereford, Terry Platchek and I got to meet him. He agreed to participate in our conference last year and we didn't hesitate to invite him back again this year. One of the real highlights of being at Stanford has been getting to know and learn from Professor Schein.

I'm going to kick off with asking both our guests a question. We will ask Professor Schein to answer it first, then we will move to John. Both guests will have eight to ten minutes to give their thoughts. Both of you write about and practice leadership by asking rather than telling. Most of us are better tellers than we are askers. I wonder if you would share the framework or structure you use for asking questions, and then give us some insight as to how you go about transitioning leaders from telling to asking.

**Professor Schein:**

A nice simple question. I'm going to use the privilege of being first to answer that in a rather long way.

Talking about improvement and lean really takes me back into my own history, so I'm going to need to give you five minutes of where I have encountered all this. Going really back to 1958, I had been a professor for a couple years by then at the MIT Sloan School of Management. My mentor, Douglas McGregor, the name is someone you should know because his Theory Y is a basically optimistic view that people are okay and they want to work. The manager's job should be to support the work of direct reports because he or she can only succeed if the people below them succeed. Command and control, telling people what to do, what

McGregor called Theory X leads to micro-managing, loss of engagement and poor results in terms of quality and safety.

I was at that point an experimental social psychologist. I had very little interest in applied work, but had agreed to teach in a school of management. I was obliged to do what my boss told me to do. McGregor said, “You should go to Bethel next summer and experience one of these new workshops that had evolved from Kurt Lewin’s work in the mid to late 40s at MIT. If the name Kurt Lewin is not familiar to you, he’s another underpinning in this entire field, a social psychiatrist who came over from Germany and almost literally created the whole group dynamics movement. In the process of doing that, they invented something that is another crucial underpinning.

The researchers had observed a bunch of people working in a group to try to understand better the dynamics of group work. While they were discussing this, some of the group participants wandered by and said, “Can we listen to your talking about us?” The researchers said, “Sure.” They went on. Pretty soon, a couple of the participants said, “Wait a minute. What you just said happened is not how we perceived it. You said we were doing this and that, and we saw it differently.” The researchers were smart enough, rather than to argue, to pick up on that and said, “Wait a minute. Why don’t you tell us what you saw?” Therein was the invention of sensitivity training, the T-group, experiential learning, and Action Research.

It grew out of that almost incidental, “Hey, maybe the participants have something to contribute to our understanding of what’s going on” which of course now we take for granted. We’ve got to talk to the people to be able to redesign their work. I don’t know how many of you are aware that this experiential notion goes way back to the late 40s and early 50s.

**What we then discovered in the T-group was that to get people to tell you how they feel about whats going on requires suspending a lot of the cultural rules that we normally live by.**

How you really feel about how the nurse treats you is not something you’re licensed to tell, frankly, unless you are in what came to be called a ‘cultural island’, a special relationship, a trusting relationship, or if the nurse is asked, “How does she feel about the doctor yelling at her?” it’s not automatic that she would feel free to tell you. It requires a special relationship to suspend the rules of intact politeness and, most important, psychologically if you’re feeling unsafe.

What the T-group and sensitivity training did was to create the conditions for what I later came to call a Level 2 relationship which is more personal, which suspends some of the rules of pure transactional Level 1 relationships and enables people to talk more openly. That is something we take for granted today, and I’ll talk a little more about relationships in a minute, but I learned something else in those days in Bethel, mainly that the idea of improving organizations, which is sort of the hallmark of what we now call organization development, was very much alive well before all the statistical and re-engineering and so on.

How many of you remember the managerial grid? Have any of you even heard of the managerial grid? Probably a few of you have. That was a major improvement program that the oil companies were sponsoring which involved training groups of employees, instilling the tools of team building and encouraging them to redesign their own work to be more effective. This was long before Deming or Juran any of these things came up. It was considered a normal thing in an organization to try to get employees to do their own self-improvement process.

Then, we learn something else. One of Kurt Lewin’s famous students was a young professor by the name of Alex Bavelas, who did the first real experiment in redesigning work. He took

a unit of Proctor and Gamble where there were packagers, and they were trying to figure out whether the packaging process could be improved to be more efficient. Rather than having an engineer look at it, they learned that if you bring the employees together and get them into a safe Level 2 relationship to talk about it — and you made it clear that it was important to improve the method without their rates being cut... (that was very important)--. They redesigned the work, were much more efficient, and yet the company killed the program. Why? Because the suppliers of the soap that was being packaged couldn't keep up the pace, and the sellers at the other end, the marketers, couldn't absorb the product at the rate at which they were packaging it.

I mentioned that to then show you that this concern about systems goes way back.

Unfortunately, I think when the re-engineering started, the Six Sigma, the various statistical programs, I think they forgot that bit of history. They forgot about asking people. They forgot about creating open Level 2 relationships, and they forgot about the need to fix the whole system rather than just the subsystem. I think the engineers took over, the people were forgotten.

I remember going to a Shingo lean talk about 15 years ago where the speaker had just been to Japan and talked to the Toyota people, and in the keynote address said, "We're doing great on the statistical stuff, but we've forgotten the people." I worry that engineering emphasis still dominates with the designers. The experts who know how work really should be done in the abstract are still dominating the field and the human dynamics researcher says... "Let's figure out what's really going on because the complicated, hierarchic bureaucracy where we have many levels of the hierarchy, and we know what everyone's role should be and therefore the procedures and processes of how people should behave instead of really living in the system and seeing what really goes on there."

**This was the first real discovery of how organizations are complex systems. Just fixing the packaging line without changing the production line and changing the sales and marketing line did not allow improvement. It could improve a little bit, but the rest of it was still in limbo.**

My main point is we have to examine the Level 2 relationships that are more personal, that overcome the bureaucratic and hierarchical constraints that typically operate. We need to get out the data, in order to know how people feel, in order to know what might work and how we can improve the system. I don't know if I really addressed your question.

**Bennett:**

Thank you Professor Schein for that helpful background and we'll be able to come back around to the topic of asking questions in a little bit. I'm going to hand over to John now.

**John Shook:**

Good morning. I'll try to respond to your question directly.

Okay. Here we are again a year later. Last year, we did a little dialogue for a few weeks in preparation (before the summit). This year, we did not. Well, "unprepared" or maybe preparing since the 1970s or since 1958, so 60 or so years of preparation.

For fun, I'll just take the exact opposite view. I think discussion of organizational change is now so dominated by the social side that there is no rigor to the technical analysis. The issue is how we can change our work. You can't redesign work effectively just with the social side

and asking people about how they feel. There's a lot of history here, so I'm going to go into some of the background again. It is interesting how this seems to reinvent itself every few years.

I don't know how many of you know how much we owe Ed for what we all do. That includes the look back you provided, Ed, with the T-group and the work of McGregor and all the work you yourself have done: all this does indeed go back a very long way. Even here in the realm of lean in healthcare, things get reinvented. It's astounding. I enjoyed your story of the Shingo Conference that you were at ten years ago. There was someone who had just returned from Japan who said we had forgotten the people side. I just returned from Japan yesterday and I think, conversely, we've forgotten the industrial engineering side.

In fact, that relates to a lesson I take away from these 40 or so years that I've been doing this. When I first went to Japan to begin learning about some of these things in 1977. Then, I learned quickly that many of these things I went to Japan to learn had originated here in the US. Many of the examples that Ed just told us about, and some others went back even further. The work of Deming, the quality movement work that Ed talked about and the way it was introduced to Japan and is perhaps most relevant to what we're doing here, actually came in the late 40s before Deming.

Deming is broadly credited with influencing Japan. He did indeed go to Japan after the second world war. But, he was preceded by a young 29 year old MIT electrical engineer who went over in 1947, spent three years and wrote a text book while he was there to teach

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the Japanese captains of industry. His name was Homer Sarasohn. The Japanese wanted him to teach the statistics side of quality control. That's what they had specifically determined wanted to learn. They knew their statistical process control was very poor.

They made vacuum tubes during the war and the Japanese found out the failure rate of vacuum tubes they produced was 90-something percent. They had heard about the Americans' vastly superior performance in producing vacuum tubes and understood that to be the result of statistical process control. So, they were eager to learn about SPC from

this young engineer. But, Homer, in his 29 year old wisdom, told them, "Before you learn these things, you need to have a problem consciousness. You need to have a clear purpose for what problem you want to solve."

These Japanese industrialists, including the founders of Panasonic, Fujitsu, and Sony, were truly titans of industry. Homer made them all go back to the factories and investigate what was wrong, technically, to confirm their performance problem. Only then would he agree to teach them anything about statistical process control.

What I'm suggesting is that here was this early effort on the part of this individual, and ultimately his Japanese students, to combine the social and technical dimensions of continuous improvement of work. The ideal social-technical conditions. As for Toyota's role in this, obviously Toyota didn't invent the notion of socio-technical systems. But I think Toyota's accomplishments are useful for us in how they gained insights into this riddle of how the social and technical can be effectively combined.

Success is not just a matter of success with the social side, the group dynamics side, by asking people, "How do you feel?" It is true that the person who does the work knows best the problems in the work. The person who does the work knows the best, yes, but unless

we give them problem solving skills, they won't necessarily know how to make progress in improving it.

It's frustrating that we tend to take sides and emphasize one side or the other. What's important is really how we go about combining the technical with the social. Combine social/people skills, and understanding this dynamic of social and technical and this really takes off. Again, that insight is not new. Social-technical theory has been with us since the 1960s at least. The theory may seem obvious to us now, but to actualize it in the real world is something that, for whatever reason, at least the one company Toyota, succeeded in. They're not perfect, but through happenstance they came up with means by which they could truly integrate the social with the technical.

I think even in health care, when we look to Toyota for guidance, it often is true. For the last 20 or 30 years of focusing on lean, there've been long periods where all focus has been on the engineering side. So many lessons learned revolve mainly around industrial engineering. But IE goes back to the 1930s and before. So many lean activities even today and even in healthcare are just industrial engineering. The Gilbreaths were doing this in hospitals in the 1930s and even teaching it in Japan.

**What we really mean by respecting people is, more than anything, how we develop capabilities. How we develop capabilities as a group is through experiential learning.**

Fast forward to today and the focus of many leaders is on how we can get people involved to improve their own working conditions. The challenge is really how you can do both of those at the same time – walk and chew gum at the same time. You heard this morning a lot about “respect for people,” which is an absolutely critical principle and practice. What we really mean by respecting people is, more than anything, how we develop capabilities. How we develop capabilities as a group is through experiential learning. The ideas you are sharing with us are important lessons. How do we actualize those? These are lessons that the lean world needs, regarding how the you could put the social and technical sides together.

Nowadays, on the other hand, I meet people working in healthcare or even in industrial companies who have a lot of experience studying the social dimensions of organizations, but have never had a chance to learn the rigor of detailed analysis of the work, of the task at hand.

**Schein:**

It triggers a short story that helps me understand. I had gotten very interested in safety issues. A couple of years ago, I went to a safety conference sponsored by both MIT and ETH, the big university in Zürich, to look at safety internationally. I met there a French sociologist by the name of Renee Amalberti who wrote a little book about safety and told us this story that the safety problem is very much dependent on how much we understand the technology and what we're trying to do.

One extreme, you have the fishing boat captain going out into the ocean. The safety issue there is very little technology because the ocean and the weather and the movement of the fish is very unpredictable. The safety issue is very much a reflection of the captain's skills and his personal knowledge.

At the other extreme, you have the blood bank where the technology and the tests of what's right and what's wrong not only are very well understood, but they are legislated. There're all kinds of rules and standards. In between, you've got various different kinds of tasks that are, to varying degrees, understood, regulated and standardized.

Renee made the quip that really caught my ear. He said, “In going to a hospital as a patient, you go through the entire process. When you’re being operated on in a complicated surgery, it’s a lot more like the fishing captain. When you’re in the ICU being given standard treatments or having your blood replaced, it’s a lot more standardized and regulated.

I found that if we don’t ask ourselves what’s the actual task and how much do we understand it and how regulated is it and how standardized should it be, if we don’t analyze that, then we don’t know how much it could be social and how much it should be technical. I agree with you, except it’s task contingent.

**Shook:**

I agree 100 percent. *Humble Consulting* - This is a great book. I read it first a year ago. And then again on the plane coming back from Japan yesterday. I’m not sure if the typology – the categories of relationships – made so much sense to me when I first read it a year ago, but they really resonate with me now a lot. Ed’s description of Level 2 relationships is powerful.

When we come together in a consulting relationship, the nature of the relationship is important, but also it’s also important for peer relationships and manager-subordinate relationships. How to embody the same principles and practices in ongoing working relationships is very much on my mind.

I realized that in the terms you put in the book, Ed, the context is established by the problem that you need to fix. So for example on a given day a random company calls you up and they want you to do some assessment – the first thing you will try to do is understand why. The meat of the question you directly ask may not be literally, “Why would you do that?” But, that’s exactly what you’ve got to try to find out. That’s what sets the context for the kind of relationship you will establish. It might mean working together to solve a problem that leads to an ongoing personal relationship or it may be that you’re in an emergency. It all begins with the problem that we need to solve.

That establishes the first context. The second thing is you mention that we need to do the task analysis. What is the work to be done? Without those two things, any sense of the work we need to do together can’t be understood. That’s the beginning, that’s what establishes the





foundation for both doing any kind of continuous improvement work or for establishing Level 2 relationships. Without that foundation, based on accomplishing the task at hand, the relationship is just a house of cards.

**Schein:** The key issue I've discovered in recent years is the problem of access and validity of information. The biggest problem in the safety arena is that people know stuff that they either choose not to reveal or they are scared to reveal. What really pushed me into this level one, level two relationship is that the normal transactional, professional relationship does not really make the parties safe to speak up.

Even in medicine, we're beginning to see literature and talks by Atul Gawande, He says, "Patients will always tell you what you need to know. The inner thinking that you have, the doctor will... I don't feel right about this or I don't fear to tell what I'm really worried about." I want to put all of this into context of getting out the information we need in order to do something better. If we don't know what's going wrong, we don't know how to fix it.

My passion for, "We've got to get past transactional relations into more personal relations" is the very pragmatic argument in order to get people to speak up and tell you the truth so that you know what you're really dealing with. That's the ultimate logic.

**Shook:** That was an amazing segue into the next question.

**Bennett:** I'm not going to ask a question because I'd really like to give the opportunity to the group. There's a microphone over here. Please feel free to ask a question.

**Shook:** I think it possible to tie that observation, about the ultimate logic, to Denise's first question which had to do with why we often ask questions rather than tell. I think that linked very much to this.

**Schein:** What was her first question again?

**Shook:** Why do we ask questions rather than tell?

**Schein:** Oh, okay.

**Shook:** I think that's very much what you're getting at.

**Schein:** To get out information.

**Shook:** To get out real information. So the skill with asking questions becomes important. The need for telling, never totally goes away. But, recognize that whenever you tell, you've started down a certain path in the relationship. That's certainly true in helping or consulting relationships, but even with managers at work, too.

Here's a story of when I first discovered that. I worked for Toyota in Japan starting in 1983. I experienced a lot of things then that I didn't understand at the time. Over the years, I've peeled back one layer at a time to learn where all those things came from. I realize that there is a deep connection between the things I experienced and the exact same things that Ed taught us about a few moments ago.

I find it so amazing each time I discover such a connection. It is exhilarating to know that what was happening to me in my experience in Japan working for Toyota had a connection with fundamental socio-technical principles. There were individuals in Toyota that understood the same human dynamics Ed speaks of. The principles are universal and Toyota managers were able to put them into practice in the way they managed and worked with people.

One personal story to illustrate. When I started with Toyota in 1983... I was relatively well prepared, which is to say I knew quite a lot about Japan, but I was still unprepared to work for a Japanese company in such an intense way.

It was about three years into my experience of working in very deep type two relationships with my mentor and bosses, which is really what I described in that book *Managing to Learn*. Those are Type 2 relationships. That's a story of a Level 2 relationship that was such a deeply personal relationship that I think it went deeper than the usual sense of a Level 2 relationship.

After three years I realized that I had been working steadfastly without anyone ever giving me a solution, per se, and rarely did anyone telling me exactly what to do. It was such an insight when I realized that for three years, while I wasn't being told what to do, neither was I just being turned loose and set totally free on my own. I always had a clear sense of what problem I needed to solve and was focused on what needed to be done in the current situation to solve it.

**I learned that whenever you tell someone what to do, one of three things happens. First, you take away their opportunity to think. Secondly, you take away responsibility. Finally, oh by the way, if you tell them what to do, you just might be wrong.**

Then, I was being asked, "How do you improve this? How do you solve that problem?" My boss would do everything he could not to tell me what to do. Occasionally, he would. When he did, we both knew that we had both failed. He failed to ask me questions that would give me an insight, and I failed to come up with some way of grasping what was going on so that I could have my own solution. It was at that three year point that I asked him: "I've been here three years, and you've never told me what to do."

His immediate response was a reflection of the Level 2 relationship we shared. He was able to say, "It took you three years to figure this out?"

I said, "Yes. Maybe I would have understood more quickly if you had told me what was going on."

After some back and forth like this he said to me, "John, whenever you tell someone what to do, you take responsibility for that action away from them. We want people to have ownership and responsibility for what they do and not simply execute a task. That's why you want to avoid telling them what to do."

I learned that whenever you tell someone what to do, one of three things happens. First, you take away their opportunity to think. Secondly, you take away responsibility. Finally, oh by the way, if you tell them what to do, you just might be wrong. The exchanges I experienced with my mentor were equally about the technical situation and social situation and it was all very much wrapped up in the fact that we were experiencing a Level 2 relationship.

If you read Ed's book and read mine, *Managing to Learn*, you can see an interesting relationship between the two books. *Managing to Learn* tells the story of a personal relationship and a problem solving experience. What I experienced in these narrative is something in between the Level 2 to Level 3 relationship. It was almost like a Level 3 relationship in a work setting.

**Shook:** Type three, but appropriate for a work situation. In Japan at that time it was normal to go very deep in a personal way in terms of the coaching and mentoring. It is often challenging for us in typical depersonalized work situations, but we can aim for type two relationships that will at least take us further. It looks like maybe Level 2.5.

**Schein:** He triggers a lot of thought.  
The important questions I really feel need to hear a couple of thoughts. One of them is that the biggest problem I have begun to see in the telling is that the subordinate doesn't understand and won't tell you that he or she doesn't understand.

**Shook:** Very often.

**Schein:** Whereas on top of what you're saying, I'm not only taking responsibility away, but I had the illusion that we're moving forward, and I don't realize that not only have many people misapplied what I've asked them to do, but we're actually regressing because, as you said, they might not agree.

I see that as being one of the deepest problems in our organizations. The illusion that managers have that they have given clear instructions and when you go down into the organization, you discover employees who say, "I thought I knew what he meant, but I'm not entirely sure," but why didn't you tell him you didn't understand? Because he's impatient. He wants me to be able to figure it out. That's another myth that the delegator needs you to figure it out. The VW executive said, "You engineers figure out how to make a car that will meet the US emissions requirements."

**Schein:** They'll figure it out... but at a great cost to the company. Telling has this huge danger that you have the illusion of moving forward, and you don't have a Level 2 relationship when the employee says, "Boss I don't understand or I don't agree." If you don't get that feedback, we're in jeopardy.

**Shook:** So, there's this big change that can happen. The act of telling people what to do carries with it the problems we've mentioned. Especially a false understanding of what the organization needs and is capable of.

Another dilemma managers face is this dichotomy between empowerment on the one hand versus command and control on the other. Those are two extremes each of which carries a clear and inherent danger. Rather, we need engaged leadership with Level 2 relationships, that enables avoiding either of those two extremes. Reading *Humble Consulting* again on the plane on the way home gave me a new framework to think about this. I have said for years,

and probably you have all said the same, that relationships are important. It is often stated as a truism that success at work is all about relationships. But without a practical framework, I think know how useful such platitudes are, which is not at all.

**Audience question 1:** I'd like to thank you for this incredible opportunity to be able to ask you a question like this. Okay, so Dr. Schein in your book, you talk a lot about humble inquiry.

**Schein:** In *Humble Inquiry*?

**Question 1:** Yes. You talk a lot about asking questions from a genuine state of curiosity, or this word humble. When we try to do this in the real work setting, we're learning to- if we are at humble inquiry, it's easy to either be guilty of this ourselves, and we are seeing other people that we may be coaching, we get into asking rhetorical questions, but refusing to answer questions, but refusing in a manipulative way, and I was wondering if you could both speak to your experience of overcoming this in organizations on how to coach others how not to do that, and also how to get yourself in the right mind frame that you don't do it yourself. Does that make sense?

**Schein:** It makes complete sense that it's very hard to do. We all are taught that mindfulness is very important if you link that to in a Level 1 relationship, my mind is on my needs, which the lawyer, the doctor, the salesman, the repairman, all the people from whom I get services are going to supply to me. So, I arrive with a mindset of I'm the customer. I'm the patient, so I'm going to wait for the service to be given to me.

If you're in the delivery side, if you're the sales person or the nurse or the doctor, you have to remember that in order to find out how you can really help me, you have to take a mindset of curiosity, and that's a conscious process to remind yourself what your job is. Your job is to find out how to be helpful. It's not about just exercising your skills. It's exercising them in a way that you will actually help, and if you take that helping attitude, that drives curiosity.

How can I help if I don't know what the problem is? I have to remind myself if someone calls me, I'm their consultant, that my job is not to sell my book or my process or my ideas. My job is to be helpful, and I can't be helpful if I don't know how to help and I don't know how to help if I don't know what's on his or her mind.

So, I approach that very initial interaction- the doctor walks in with a new patient. The doctor should, at that point, be 100 percent curiosity. Why is this person here? What's going on? Rather than make all kinds of assumptions. Similarly, when a patient arrives at the ICU or whatever, the nurse's most important job is to figure out as quickly as she can what's going on here and how to be helpful to the patient in terms of what's going on.

The rhetorical question, the stereotype, the "I think I know what this is all about" is something I think we have to consciously learn to suppress if we're in this helping business. If you really want to just tell someone something that should not be defined as healthy. There are occupations where you can just tell; you can be a news reporter or whatever, but when you're trying to gather the data, you can't afford to just stereotype or think you know what's going on. I don't know if I've helped you with this issue. You have to consciously learn to monitor

yourself. I call it accessing your ignorance. Access your ignorance. Allow your curiosity to come forth.

**Shook:**

So, first of all, I think in terms of a spirit or the idea of curiosity in all this. One question I often hear is, “Okay, I’m trying to coach and ask instead of tell. But, if I already know the answer, I feel like I’m playing a game.”

If I’m just playing a game, I will try to think of a good rhetorical question, but if it is just a game and I don’t feel good about it and neither will the coachee. That’s part of the challenge when you shift trying to ask instead of telling. You think to yourself, “Wait a minute. I should tell this person something I know. I’m not being genuine. I’m not being authentic.” When that happens it means we’ve gotten confused about our role. It is useful to always remember that your problem is solved is not the same as their problem is solved.

If, say, an apprentice mechanic is working on a brake, and the mechanic doesn’t know how to fix the brakes, and I know how to fix the brakes, it’s very tempting to just tell him, here’s how you fix the brake, and you may have to do that. The thing is, fixing the brake is his or her problem to solve. My problem to solve is the fact that I know how to fix the brake, but he or she doesn’t. That’s completely different and that – confusing the subordinate’s problem with my own – becomes something we can mitigate by being aware of it. It may be that I in fact want to be humble, I want to be curious, and I want to be helpful. But, simply “being” those traits isn’t necessarily so easy. Rather, very specifically and practically, I can simply believe that my problem to solve is a different one.

As soon as I find myself going into the mode of solving someone’s problem, then I’m working against the real problem, which is that the person does not have the insight to know how to solve the problem that they need to solve. Keeping those separate, your problem and their problem, is a specific way to deal with the challenge you raise. When I wrote *Managing to Learn*, Edgar and I got to talking, and by the way, the only time in my entire professional career I actually paid my own money to go to a workshop was Ed’s. In about 2009 or something like that.

**To “ask why” is one of the most famous of lean practices.**

I wrote *Managing to Learn* to tell the story of how different mentoring relationships can be powerful, but it wasn’t written in a way to be easily useful as a manual so that someone could easily extrapolate from it what to do. It was a retelling, a mixed and mashed up version of my own experience, but recast in a way that people could learn a different way to approach work and a different way to manage and mentor others. I think your question has to do with the framework I use for asking questions. I basically just completely adopted Ed’s four types of questions typology. It works perfectly. I simplified my own approach. The way we teach asking questions using the A3 methodology is to first try to stay in the what category as long as possible. Not even asking “how,” not even “why.”

To “ask why” is one of the most famous of lean practices. Some of my own most powerful learning came from a very humble teacher, a humble leader. Mr. Fujio Cho, who I happened to see just last week, was the chairman of Toyota and was my boss many years ago. He’s long been famous in the lean community, and is famous for advocating that to solve problems or make improvements, we should “go see” – leaders should go to the gemba. If there’s one Japanese term that I like to use even in an English context, it is gemba. As a word, “gemba” captures a certain spirit of empiricism that is essential to lean thinking. As Mr. Cho famously

said: “Go see, ask why, show respect.” Ask why really means to tap into your inner curiosity. Maintain a spirit of scientific inquiry.

So, at the gemba, the first question we ask is not “why?”. Starting off with why questions starts to take you down a certain path and you will just tell me what you already think about why something happened. Rather, ask what is happening. What is happening with the situation?

**Starting off with why questions starts to take you down a certain path and you will just tell me what you already think about why something happened. Rather ask what is happening.**

The longer I can stay in “what,” the more deeply I can understand the problem situation. Then we can get into why, which is a diagnostic question, with a deeper, more accurate and objective grasp of the situation. So, in a totally natural way, this typology of questions, leading the way with humble inquiry, I can more accurately understand what’s really going on. When we transition to diagnostic inquiry – asking why something is happening – that’s when we start to generate ideas and hypotheses, and solicit insights from the team. There’s a place for that, but going through the sequence of the typology, I think, is something that’s very learnable. With just a little training and some reinforcement we can learn to do those things.

**Audience question 2:** Thank you. I feel like I’m interrupting Monet while he’s painting!

**Bennett:** You feel like that?

**Question 2:** As an internal consultant with the VA, I get called in to consult on implementing clinic elimination and how to design spaces for clinicians to do clinical work using methods in a future that’s yet unknown work methods. People call me in. Either they want a check list and bullet points, and want me to tell them what to do, and I’m really not sure that’s what I want to do, but that’s what’s asked of them, and just a shade or meaning on what you’ve already talked about is how you make that initial transition when you’ve been invited to do one thing, and ultimately, you want to get there with them, but you know they’ll get more value from it if you learn more about them early, and their needs. In your consulting relationship, how do you make that initial transition?

**Schein:** I think that’s a question that’s very much on both internal and external consultants’ minds. The client wants answers. The client is impatient and may attribute to you a solution, and I think the first thing you have to remember is the fishing boat to blood bank example. Using the brake fixing is actually a bad example, because you know how to fix a brake, and I suspect that most of the problems that you run into in medicine you don’t know exactly how to fix it. Even the surgeon going to fix something that is routine will encounter stuff in the body that they didn’t anticipate. Therefore, you should start with the notion the client thinks you know how to fix it, but you probably know until you’ve learned a lot more, you’re not sure whether what you know will apply to that situation or not. Let’s say a client comes in and says they have an engagement problem. The client wants you to recommend a survey, to recommend a survey that will test the level of engagement, so we get some numbers and really fix it. They have reason to believe that I know which would be good surveys, and therefore I should give them an answer.

I’ve discovered that if I resist answering the question immediately, I find a way to hear two

things the client has said. He said I want an engagement survey, but he also said “I’m a little worried about the engagement problem.” I’ve found that I have to learn to listen to the worry and avoid listening to the content of what they want. I discovered that if you actually implement that and say: “can you tell me what’s worrying you about engagement,” they answer their questions and lo and behold, you’re suddenly in a dialogue rather than having to answer their question as to which engagement survey to use, so this question of what is worrying you, I’ve found, is amazingly useful to me in lots of situations.

Particularly, I suspect, doctors, when they’re trying to talk initially to a patient about whatever, my joints hurt, and they know that it’s arthritis or whatever, I found that a good orthopedist or a good physical therapist, if way well ask, “What’s bothering you about the pain?” And I say I can’t move my arm enough, now we’re beginning to get somewhere. Why is it important for me to move my arm? A quick diagnosis was, “We could fix that. It’s a torn rotator cuff, and it can be fixed perfectly with surgery,” But I then had to volunteer the answer, Yes, but I’m not willing to give up my right arm for eight weeks. I really can’t do enough with my left arm. Is there any other option beside surgery?” “Well, yes, we could do the cortisone shots. We could do physical therapy.”

“That’s what I really want,” and now we are on track but the orthopedic surgeon had to listen to why I didn’t want surgery before we were really solving the problem.

What’s worrying you is my standard approach to when someone wants an answer. I say why is this a problem? What’s worrying you? I’ve found that that usually works. People want to tell you more about why they brought you in and tell you everything they want fixed before you’re trapped into having to actually start to give answers. Try it.

**Shook:**

The only thing I’d add is that there is the matter of how to facilitate the process of getting to the real problem. It’s not necessarily as simple as addressing directly of what the real problem might be. We try creative and roundabout ways to get there, to discern simply why;why do you want to see a surgeon.

When we’re in the role of an outside consultant, sometimes it’s complicated by whether or not we’re talking to the real customer. In the example you just gave, very often, that’s something that’s cascaded down, and it’s cascaded down imperfectly. We can suppose there was a vice president or a C-Suite person who had some problem consciousness - they had something they wanted - and in this case they thought that their solution was going to be the engagement survey.

So this has cascaded down to someone on the front lines where it becomes their task. To have the conversation you want to have about what the real problem may be is often hard to have with that person who doesn’t really know. But, therefore this is another case where I find that using “what?” questions can be helpful. What can we know or learn about before getting to a solution discussion? For example, let’s take this engagement survey example again. The phone call begins, “We want to do an engagement survey. Can you come in and conduct an engagement survey for us?” A line of questioning might be, “What do you know now about the level of engagement? What would we like engagement to be like?” Before you know it, you’re having the conversation that Ed’s talking about.

Once you’re having a conversation about where they’d like their employee engagement to be versus where they perceive it to be now, you’ve already got them out of their solution zone.

I think it also is an indication of something that is a problem in the lean world or organizational

development world, which is we want to do these things for their own sakes: I'm going to do assessments because we do assessments here. So, we need to break through that to the real reason of why we want to do it. Focus on the outcomes instead of task compliance is something we want to achieve but sometimes in the initial conversation it may take some time to get there. How to get off this thing of task compliance to focus on what the real problem is, which relates to the performance outcome that we want.

It was mentioned earlier this morning, I think it was either Sue O'Neill or Craig Albenez, that we need to manage by process. I think that's true and as a corollary, we want individuals to own outcomes not just the tasks. And that way they can truly own the tasks and how they are combined to then create outcomes that they want. So, as opposed to accountability for task, which leads to compliance mentality, we seek responsibility for outcomes.

So, Toyota again. Even on something that is as repetitive and task oriented as working on an assembly line, it is possible to change focus from task compliance to outcome. The fact that you can take even work of that sort, which is usually considered to be among the most disrespectful-to-humans work in the history of work, and you make it work that is respectful for people. The key thing is to give people responsibility not just for the task that's been

**The key thing is to give people responsibility not just for the task that's been given to them, but the outcome they produce. The definition of that outcome, then, best begins with quality and safety. So you are responsible for outcome that is perfect.**

given them, but the outcome they produce. The definition of that outcome, then, best begins with quality and safety. So you are responsible for outcome that is perfect. In the case of an auto assembly line; you have 60 seconds to do your work. I'm going to hold you accountable not just for doing the tasks as quickly as you can. I'm going to ask you to be responsible for the perfect outcome of zero defects, of zero safety concerns. Then a person can actually own how, over time, how to make improvements, but not just random improvements of apparent efficiencies, improvement of the process that leads to the perfect outcome. I think this confusion, the confusion between doing a task for compliance versus understanding its purpose or reason why, gets in the way of almost everything we do in organizational improvement programs.

**Audience question 3:**

Okay. I'm Christine from Stanford Children's and I'm so honored to be here, with both of you. I've been practicing my humble inquiry for the last year on my team, my spouse and my 10-year-old.

Yeah. I've been practicing my humble inquiring journey over the last year and I have a manager specifically, who I have been practicing my skill on. It's to the point now when she comes into my office, she says, I know you are going to ask me a whole bunch of questions. Let's just get that part over with and I thought well, gosh, I mean maybe I clearly haven't done a good job answering questions so I turned it around on her and of course had her read all through the books and said, if you think you know the questions I'm going to ask then why don't you come in and ask me those questions? So, I just wanted to comment on how can I coach my young leaders to also ask the right questions to me and I'm asking them the right questions, if that makes sense at all?



**Schein:**

Wow. You know, I think relationships have to evolve. They don't happen. And what you're describing is a situation where when this would happen in an encounter group we would take the time out and say let's go to a meta- level and examine what's happening here. And when you're in the situation like you've described, I think you and your boss have to say, time out. If you feel you can predict that I'm always going to ask you questions, let's talk about how we can do this better. Rather than second guessing it or having her second guessing it. A Level 2 relationship should allow for reflection and saying, "how are we doing? Is this working? Am I getting through to you or I don't entirely understand."

If we don't take the time out to reflect and analyze incidents such as you described, where what you are experiencing is a little bit...it's offline. It's not working smoothly. I think we have to also learn how to handle those situations by saying, what's going on here? Where are we having the difficulties? Am I speaking too much or am I asking too many questions? What's your reaction? If we can't talk about that we don't have a Level 2 relationship. Okay?

I think there are pairs of people who may not be able to have a Level 2 relationship. I think the world is a very complicated open system and relationships are themselves very complicated open systems that we can evolve to a higher level where we feel more comfortable with each other. And then can say, I don't understand or I don't know how to tell you something else that I'm feeling, but to get there it may require interim tests, trial and error, seeing how you respond and accept the fact that you're in an open systems world.

Now, we haven't talked about culture, but I think national and occupational culture are both enormously important to understand in how they could screw up conversations, in the sense of what we mean in one culture isn't the same as what that same word or phrase means in another culture. I suspect that you were talking about outcomes. I suspect the quality and safety of outcomes are not only different across national cultures, but I know for a fact that the outcome with the chief of the hospital, the outcome with a doctor and the outcome for the nurse and the outcome for the patient could be four different things. They don't all operate from the same playbook.

The head of the hospital doesn't want any unwarranted deaths. That's a key outcome or bad ratings on surveys or an infection rate going up. The doctor has his own criteria of whether this patient is getting better in terms of what she's doing or not. The nurse has her criteria of how to run a smooth ICU ward or whatever. The emergency room has its own criteria. They want to reduce waiting time.

So, let's not pretend that deciding what's better, what's a good outcome, is itself a simple conversation. I think some of the hardest problems of improvement are that we don't agree on the outcomes, and we each come in with "if we do this we'll solve that problem." But maybe if we solved one problem we're creating something new over here.

A very interesting case happened at Stanford, actually. The idea was to have nurses who would be dealing with a cancer patient having chemotherapy on the next day would visit the patient the night before to help explain and reduce a lot of the anxiety they assumed the patient would be experiencing the next day. They thought that was a very important improvement in the whole therapy process. They agreed to it.

So, on day X, nurse Y goes to Patient Records to get the records on the person she's going to visit that night, and Patient Records says well we don't have them right now. Well who has the patient records? Well they're being processed because of some part of the patient records system needed to enter some stuff. So, you'll have to get it from them. So, she goes to them

and they say we can't release those because we haven't yet finished with them. So, this whole idea that was developed over weeks and months goes down the tubes because they can't get the data to the nurse, what she needs to go visit that patient that night.

Now what's at fault here? What's at fault here is not thinking through systemically initially what is involved in all the steps to get this perfect solution of the nurse visiting the patient the night before to actually be implemented. And to me, that's the world I encounter all the time. Things are always way more complicated than we assume. And, we haven't yet figured out the perfect diagnostic system that gets all of the no's in the open system properly under control to make this final outcome work. It's still a very open process.

**Bennett:** So, John, I'm just going to give you a moment to respond to Christine's question.

**Shook:** I'd like to refer back to a couple of frameworks that we've already discussed. I think we agree with Ed's typology of four types of questions. The question that is specifically useful and intended for exactly these situations is Ed's process inquiry question. Now, if you combine that with Ed's new framework around levels of relationships, we can consider type four questions in the context of Level 2 relationships, then we can see tremendous potential for progress that can take us forward in terms of addressing the question you raise.

The other thing I would tie back to the previous discussion. I think it's very important that we make sure that it doesn't feel like a game. And I think it often can feel that way, if we aren't careful. It's beautiful when the process works as intended. I think those two things – to note process inquiry and the level of relationship it just won't work with that. I think about my own experience is my boss Mr. Cho and when we would take questions to him. He wouldn't answer the questions right away necessarily, he'd just tell a story. And, then at the end he would give us a question or some sort of direction to explore and we would walk out of the room energized with something to go do that felt like our own idea

And in my own coaching, if I had my ideal session, at the end of the session the individual doesn't know whether they were asked a question or given instructions.

They know what they're going to do next and they're doing it with ownership. That's all.

**Question 3:** That skill takes time to develop.

**Shook:** It does take some time.

**Question 3:** I've been working on the questions and I feel like now I need to take it to that next level.

**Shook:** And I've noticed really a framework it's a type four question working toward a Level 2 relationship.

**Bennett:** Okay, I've been watching the amount of time we are taking to respond to each question and I think we've probably only got time for one more one.

**Audience question 4:**

Thank you. Final question. I have a question and I would frame this in regards to trying to practice being a good listener and some of the personal challenges I have with that sometimes and the question relates to the variability and verbosity of people. And there are...it's never easy to be a good listener, but it's much easier when a person that you're interacting with, I would say, has efficient and effective communication skills.

And, then there are the people, the outliers that you know you can ask them a very specific question and they're just going to start talking for the next hour. And my question to you guys is do you have any tricks in to how...I can't tell when I get in those situations because I just want the conversation to stop.

How do you handle these people because they are significant people that are like that I would say and also how do you balance being a good listener and inefficiency in that scenario when everything you have to get done in a day?

**Schein:**

Well, you know, what I should have said at the outset, that my position in all this is, I don't take "how" questions because the answers are unique to each of you. And I am very worried, I'm even worried today in the context of this conversation, that the levels of relationship and the kinds of typology of questions that that becomes an answer of how I'm going to answer to certain kinds of problems. My experience is that every situation is unique and I have to be agile, which would include when I've encountered the situation that you described, I feel quite comfortable interrupting and saying, wait a minute. I didn't understand the last thing you said, which may be true or not. But, I have to be agile. I have to vary my routine according to what the other party is presenting to me.

So, get away from looking for how-to answers and create your own set of options, you know?

When I encountered this situation here are some things that my own experience that have worked for me. When I encountered that kind of situation, maybe I used these options, but get away from solutions thinking into open systems agile systemic thinking, where you start with the assumption that the world is not a well ordered place and learn how to make do with whatever is available to you.

**I don't take "how" questions because the answers are unique to each of you.**

It triggers this quick story of my son-in-law doctor surgeon, who figured out how to try to quickly establish a relationship with a team in his surgical suite that were all strangers. He no longer has a dedicated team. They arrive and nine times out of 10 he doesn't initially know that chief nurse and the anesthesiologist and so on, and yet he firmly believes I've got to quickly make us all accountable for this, what we're going to do and, how am I going to get this across? He could "he knows that they'll hear that or not in all kinds of ways.

So, what he chose to do, which I kind of admire that he figured out, he said to himself, we have to do the damn checklist and we get impatient with it. We run our way through it, but we have to do it. So he said to the chief nurse, let's do the checklist in a very slow, careful way. I want us to take each item, make sure that everyone is on board with that item. His demeanor was to get very upfront, looked at everyone's eyes, are you with me and, took five minutes maybe instead of 20 seconds to work his way through the checklist to convey his

sense of we're in this together, we're all accountable and if anything isn't working I want you to tell me. He tried to overcome the strangerhood by the way he used the checklist. So, that's what I mean by agility.

He knew what he wanted, a climate approaching Level 2. He was dealing with strangers and he had to figure out how do I do that. You would have to figure out how do I cut this person who talks too much off without offending them? I'm sure that you could figure out some way.

**Shook:**

What I would add to that is to recognize we're all good at different things. Everyone here has their own approach in some situations. What I find is that, for myself as well, we tend to take the things that we're good at and use that in any situation. Maybe, we're at a situation that would cause all very different responses. I think it falls on what Ed was saying, maybe start thinking about what kind of situation is this, and then see that as an opportunity to recognize even by my own weaknesses. In some other ways I see in TPS or lean, is that not just assistance to effectively execute things, but as a system that is intended to identify weaknesses. It's not just a system to win the game, it's a system to identify weaknesses. To identify my weaknesses and consider how I can improve. I'm probably better at drawing out the person that doesn't talk, than I am at stopping the person who talks too much. Again, we're all good at different things. Given that, what I need to do as a coach is to improve in dealing with the situations you were talking about.

**In some other ways I see in TPS or lean, is that not just assistance to effectively execute things, but as a system that is intended to identify weaknesses. It's not just a system to win the game, it's a system to identify weaknesses. To identify my weaknesses and consider how I can improve.**

**Bennett:**

Thanks John, unfortunately our time is up. I feel like we're leaving with a more alignment this year. Who was in the session last year.. We've covered a lot of territory. We've talked about relationships. We've talked about asking questions. I'd like you to join with me in thanking both our guests today.

**Schein:**

We talked about different parts that we were mentioning. I think you do tend to talk mostly about cases like the blood bank. I talk mostly about the diabetes clinic. We're each right because we're talking to different contexts. I think if we were to start with the common problem, we agree, like how do we deal with diabetes patients, you might discover that the social context is the real problem.

**Bennett:**

There might be an opportunity for you to work together on a problem.

**Shook:**

That's a good idea! But my assessment of current trends is to conclude the opposite actually. I think that there's specifically a problem with organizations trivializing the technical side of the work nowadays.

**Denise:**

OK, thank you both.

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