

Placing Humility at the Heart of Leadership, Consulting and Coaching

Selected interviews and book excerpts from Edgar and Peter Schein

We are deeply honored to announce that Edgar and his son Peter Schein will join us at the 2019 Next Practice Institute to give the keynote address: *New Perspectives From a Lifetime's Scholarship and A New Collaboration*.

Internationally revered for his pioneering advancements to our field, notably in process consultation, career dynamics, and his model of organizational culture, Edgar Schein is renowned as one of the fathers of Organizational Psychology. In the past four years, in collaboration with his son Peter, Edgar has co-authored three books, and co-developed new perspectives on culture, change and leadership. Focusing on the evolving aspects of their perspective, Edgar and Peter will address the process of leadership, consulting, and coaching, as the world becomes more complex and interdependent.



Humble Consulting: How to Provide Real Help Faster: A book excerpt by Edgar H. Schein

Preface

This book brings together various insights and ideas I have acquired over fifty years of research, teaching, and consulting and, at the same time, reflects how the kinds of problems that organizations face in our rapidly changing world have forced the evolution of those ideas.

As I began my career as a human relations trainer and part-time consultant in the 1960s, I evolved the model of Process Consultation (introduced in my books *Process Consultation*, 1969; and *Process Consultation Revisited*, 1999), which emphasizes the need to involve the client in the process of figuring out what is wrong and what can be done about it. After several decades of working with this model and

updating the book, I began to realize that the model we were using for organization and management consulting really had broader applications to all kinds of helping relationships, resulting in the 2009 book *Helping*. Analyzing the helping process from a sociological point of view also revealed how much our cultural norms influenced what we thought should be both the client's role and the consultant's role in the helping process.

In my own experience as a helper, it seemed crucial that the client really be able to tell what is bothering him or her and be able to be open and trusting in doing so. I then discovered that the major inhibiting factor to clients' being open and trusting is the cultural force in the United States toward *telling* as being the heroic

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“Clients did not find the ‘*diagnose and then recommend*’ approach terribly helpful.”

model, which led helping and consulting models to be structured in terms of the formal professional stages of *diagnose* and then *tell as recommendations*. My management consulting friends told me that “this is required if you are really doing your job,” which, to my dismay, I found many clients passively believed. I recognized that the obsession with *telling* was a broader characteristic of the US managerial culture, which led me to write the book *Humble Inquiry* (2013) to point out how much potential harm was done in making subordinates feel psychologically unsafe in *upward reporting* if they saw safety or quality issues in how work was getting done.

In my own consulting efforts, I found that telling did not work and, furthermore, that the clients who called me in for consultation often had previously experienced the formal approach with other consultants and did not find the *diagnose and then recommend* approach terribly helpful. The formal process often missed the real problem or recommended things that could not be implemented for a variety of reasons that the consultant evidently had not considered.

At the same time, the problems that confronted leaders and managers became more complex to diagnose and even more difficult to “fix.” I also learned through several experiences that will be discussed in the cases in this book that sometimes just the earliest questions, comments, and puzzlements that I expressed in the *initial* contacts with a client proved to be very helpful in enabling the client to perceive and think about the situation. This often led to immediate next moves that the client could think of that were seen by both helper and client as immediately beneficial.

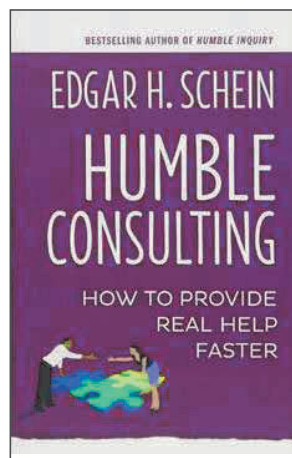
All this led me to go beyond the previous models and write about what I experienced— real help can be fast, but it requires an open, trusting relationship with the client that the helper has to build from the very beginning. Because of the difficulty and complexity of the problems, and because the client’s own view of what is going on is so important in the relationship, this also requires a great deal of humility in the consultant. So in this book I will describe the new kinds of problems, the new consultant-client relationship that will have to be built, and the new kinds of attitudes and behaviors that consultants will have to learn in order to be really helpful.

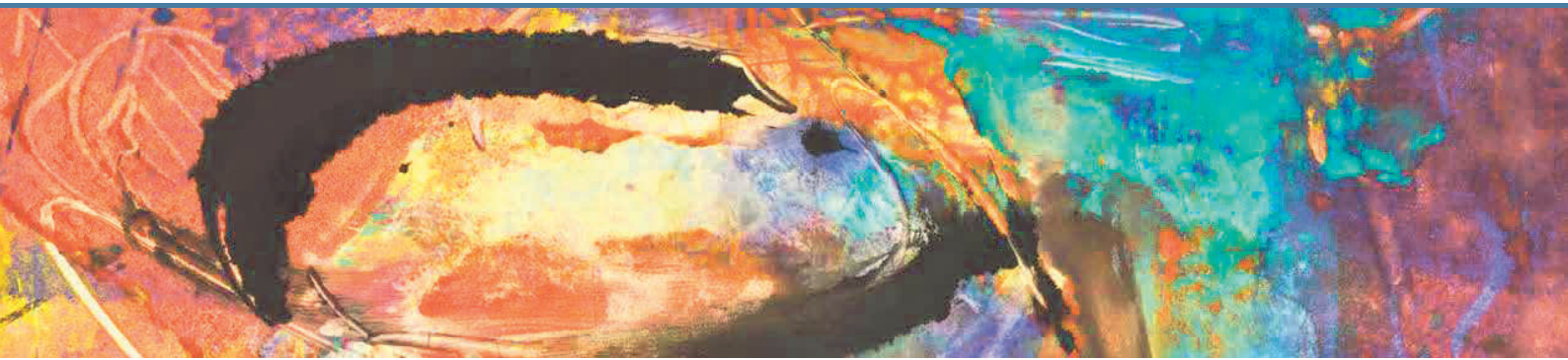
I think of this as an evolution in my thinking. Many of these ideas may have been implicit in earlier works, but they are only now coming into consciousness both as insights and as new principles of what has to happen if we really want to help on complex, dynamic “messy” problems and if we want to do it fast because, in many cases, clients need to do something adaptive right away.

The Historical Context of this Approach

Humble Consulting draws on elements of many prior models that deal with complexity, interdependence, diversity, and instability. Almost every theory of helping refers to the concept of *relationship*, but few of them talk about levels of relationships and what is involved in negotiating them. One exception is Otto Scharmer’s *Theory U* (2007), in which he explicitly differentiates levels of conversation in his analysis of how to reach the deepest level within ourselves and in our relationships to find the true sources of innovation.

The theories and models that are most relevant to understanding these kinds of problems and developing





workable *next moves* were initially best articulated in the study of highly reliable organizations by Karl Weick with his concepts of “loose coupling,” “sense making,” “embracing errors,” and “resilience” (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). On the sociological side, I have always found Erving Goffman’s analysis of interaction and “situational proprieties” to be an essential model for understanding how relationships are formed, maintained, and repaired when damaged (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967). Closely related are the systemic models of “organizational learning” (e.g., Senge, 1990) and family therapy (e.g., Madanes, 1981). The work on “mindfulness” (Langer, 1997) is crucial in what I see to be the new skills that will be needed. The change programs that rely on so-called lean methods, based on the work of Deming and Juran that evolved into the Toyota Production System, are relevant if they are well executed and involve the employees who actually do the work (Plsek, 2014). Open sociotechnical systems approaches to problem identification and solution as evolved by the Tavistock Clinic have provided much more helpful ideas than standardized methods of measurement, analysis, and problem solving.

Perhaps most relevant of all is what Bushe and Marshak (2015) have identified in the last decade as “*dialogic* organization development,” as contrasted with “*diagnostic* organization development,” in highlighting what leadership theorists like Heifetz (1994) also emphasize— that the complex problems of today are not technical ones that can be solved with specific tools. The best we can do is to find workable responses or what I am calling here “adaptive moves.” This will involve new kinds of conversations of a more dialogic, open-ended variety. The emphasis on the concept of “moves” is important in this context because it implies action without necessarily having a plan or solution in mind.

In the end I fall back on much of my learning in running sensitivity training groups in human

relations labs for the National Training Labs in Bethel, Maine, where the key operational concept was “spirit of inquiry” and accepting that we did not always know where our learning process would take us (Schein and Bennis, 1965). Building a relationship that enables the client to “learn how to learn” was then and becomes now more than ever one of the crucial goals of Humble Consulting.

The spirit of inquiry is best exemplified nowadays in the concept of “dialogue” as propounded by Bill Isaacs (1999) and in Barrett’s hugely insightful book *Yes to the Mess* (2012), which shows us brilliantly how the skills of improvisation as exhibited in the jazz combo provide some of the most important clues as to what helpers and leaders will have to be able to do in the future.

How the Book is Organized

Chapter 1 lays out the basic problem— the complex messy problems of today and the future require a new model of helping, coaching, and consultation. Chapter 2 lays out what are the new elements or components of the model of Humble Consulting. The following chapters then explain and exemplify each of those components. Chapter 3 explains the concept of a Level Two relationship. Chapter 4 shows how that relationship has to be built from the moment of first contact with the client by adopting a certain attitude that hinges on maximizing curiosity. Chapter 5 explores the whole concept of *personalization* as key to the new consulting model. Chapter 6 highlights that the consulting is almost always more helpful on the processes that occur between client and consultant as they explore how to make *adaptive moves*. Chapter 7 then explores the concept of adaptive moves in more detail and in terms of the innovations that are required to make them helpful. The book closes with some conclusions and challenges for the future.

What is the New Humble Consulting? (excerpts from Chapter 2)

A New Kind of Personal Relationship with the Client is Required

I said early on that the consultant should have a “relationship” with the client, but I never specified what I meant by that or what kind of relationship it should be. In working on messier problems and trying to get at what is really on the client’s mind and what is worrying him, I have found that the formal professional relationship that most models advocate will not get me there. I have to overcome “professional distance” and develop what I am calling a “Level Two relationship” that is more personal, more trusting, and more open.

In my book *Helping* (2009), I noted that asking for help is itself difficult in our culture, so potential clients feel “one down” and therefore not very open or trusting in their initial contact with the consultant. In the new role, the consultant must find a way to begin the personalization process from the very first encounter with the client to signal that she can be trusted and that it is safe to be more open with her. What I mean by “relationship” and Level Two will be explained in detail in Chapter 3.

The building of such a relationship begins from the moment of the first encounter, which means that the consultant must approach that initial encounter with an entirely different kind of initial behavior.

A New Kind of Behavior in the Very First Contact is Required

No matter what the client’s initial presentation might be, building the new relationship requires that I take a helping stance and try to personalize the conversation from the moment I am in contact with the potential client, whether this is on the phone or in an e-mail or in a first meeting over lunch. I am not there to scout or diagnose or develop a contract with the client; I am there to help in whatever way I can. If what I hear totally turns me off or asks me to do something that I can’t or won’t do, I have to be authentic and find a way to communicate that but to do so in a way that will still be seen as helpful.

This dilemma often comes up when a client wants me to recommend or do a particular kind of “culture survey,” or do something in a mindless way without

ONE OF THE 10 WORKING PROPOSITIONS OF HUMBLE CONSULTING:

If the problem is simple and clear, the helper should go into the expert or doctor role or refer the client to an expert or doctor. If the problem turns out to be complex and messy, the client and helper should engage in a dialogue to figure out a feasible *adaptive move*, knowing that this may not *solve* the problem but will provide some comfort and will reveal new information on the basis of which to figure out the *next adaptive move*.

Adaptive moves have to be *joint decisions* because the consultant will never know enough about the client’s personal situation or organizational culture, and the client will never know enough about all the consequences of a given intervention such as a survey or other diagnostic process tool. Therefore, one of the consultant’s responsibilities is also to understand the consequences of certain kinds of adaptive moves such as diagnostic interviews and surveys, and to fully brief the client about those consequences to determine whether or not the client is ready for such moves.

considering the consequences. I could just say no, but that would not be helpful. To be helpful and consistent with this new model, I would prefer to say, “Tell me a little bit more about what you have in mind.” “Why do you want to do this culture survey?” “What problem are you trying to solve?” And so on. To be able to do this requires adopting a new attitude in approaching those first contacts.

A New Attitude of Humility, a Commitment to Helping, and Curiosity

The essence of this new attitude is humility in the face of the complexity of the problems and humility in the relationship with the client in the sense that I am there to help work things out together, not to take over the problem and run with it. I am there to

empathetically honor the difficulties that the client faces and to focus on him and the situation, not on my own needs to sell myself, my skills, and my insights. [For more on what humility is and is not, see Curtis Watkins' *Field Guide* on page 88.] This attitude can best be captured by saying that I am genuinely committed to helping and genuinely care for the client and his or her situation. To ensure that

this gets through to the client from the beginning, I allow myself to become *genuinely curious*. It is honest, spontaneous curiosity that best conveys my interest and concern for the client. This attitude can thus be characterized best by three Cs— *commitment* to helping, *caring* for the client, and, above all, *curiosity*. I have found that this new attitude requires some new skills as well.

EDGAR SCHEIN is Professor Emeritus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Sloan School of Management. He is considered one of the fathers of Organizational Psychology. He was educated at the University of Chicago, Stanford University, and Harvard University, where he received his Ph.D. in Social Psychology. He worked at the Walter Reed Institute of Research for four years and then joined MIT, where he taught until 2005. He has published extensively including *Organizational Psychology, 3d Ed.* (1980), *Process Consultation Revisited* (1999), career dynamics (*Career Anchors, 4th ed. With John Van Maanen, 2013*), *Organizational Culture and Leadership, 4th Ed.* (2010), *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide, 2d Ed.*, (2009), a cultural analysis of Singapore's economic miracle (*Strategic Pragmatism, 1996*), and Digital Equipment Corp.'s rise and fall (*DEC is Dead; Long Live DEC, 2003*). He is the 2009 recipient of the Distinguished Scholar-Practitioner Award of the Academy of Management, the 2012 recipient of the Life Time Achievement Award from the International Leadership Association, and the 2015 Lifetime Achievement Award in Organization Development from the International OD Network.

PETER SCHEIN is a strategy consultant in Silicon Valley. He provides help to start-ups and expansion phase technology companies. Peter's expertise draws on over twenty years of industry experience in marketing and corporate development at technology pioneers including Pacific Bell and Apple Computer, Inc. He spent eleven years in corporate development and product strategy at Sun Microsystems. Through these experiences developing new strategies organically and merging smaller entities into a large company, Peter developed a keen focus on the underlying organizational culture challenges that growth engenders in innovation-driven enterprises. Peter was educated at Stanford University (BA Social Anthropology, *Honors and Distinction*) and Northwestern University (Kellogg MBA, Marketing and Information Management, *Top Student in Information Management*), and the USC Marshall School of Business Center For Effective Organizations (HCEO Certificate, 2017). The Forbes interview reprinted overleaf is based on his work with his father, Professor Edgar Schein and the book they co-authored *Humble Leadership: The Power of Relationships, Openness, and Trust* (2018).

