

# Ask, don't Tell

By Denise Gaskin, Ph.D.



Over the course of my life I have had something happen to me so frequently, that when I came across the phrase “ask, don't tell” I finally understood why it has happened.

I am a redhead. And I come with the “factory installed” set of traits for those of us born a redhead. I have blue eyes, pale skin with freckles, and a wicked ability to sunburn. I also have the tendency to look like I have a sunburn, or am suffering from heat stroke, when I get very hot. My skin turns red from exertion or heat, but the red tone will dissipate when I cool down. I know a sunburn from just being very hot.

When I was a child, before the proliferation of sunscreen, my mother made me wear t-shirts with my swimsuits to protect my shoulders and back from getting crispy. A special thanks to my mom for making me do that, because she saved me from a lot of pain. Although today I still want to wear a t-shirt over my swimsuit, but maybe for different reasons.

I've used almost every sunscreen product on the market. I could work in this industry because I have a deep understanding of sun protection products and how they work for sun-sensitive people like me. I don't just use these products, I study them. I know what they are made from and how they work. I know about SPF and blocking ultraviolet radiation and how you should reapply and layer sunscreen when exposed to the sun for a long period of time. I do not want to burn, ever, so knowing as much as possible about sunscreen has been a high priority for me.

## This Happens

So complete strangers have always, and I mean always, felt the need to walk up to me on the street, and tell me that I need to be wearing sunscreen. They sometimes yell at me. They do not ask me if I am wearing sunscreen, in fact they don't ask me any questions at all.



## THEY TELL

What I hear in their words is I am irresponsible, ruining my skin (and my life), and maybe even stupid and lazy. I feel lectured. I have always wondered why a stranger would walk up and tell me something without knowing the slightest thing about me?

And it has happened HUNDREDS of times, not a handful, since I was a

child. It has happened primarily in my adulthood. My mom probably got the same treatment from perfect strangers when I was a child. What makes it ok for someone to think they can do this?

## Why We Don't Ask

When I read Edgar Schein's book *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*, I found the answer to my age-old question. It was a lightbulb moment for me. Schein says 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." He goes on to say we live in a culture of **Tell** and find it difficult to ask, especially in a humble way. But what is so wrong with telling? Because *Telling* puts the other person down and implies that the other person does not already know what you are telling them, and that the person *should* know what you are telling them.

When I am told things I already know or have thought about, I get irritated at the least and offended at the most. I used to push back on the "teller" only to get a defensive kind of response such as "but I was only trying to help." The implication is that I might not realize I am a redhead standing in the hot summer sun, while not wearing sunscreen. Really? If that is the case, I have bigger problems than potential sunburn. You see what I mean? It comes across as preachy, arrogant, and it makes the little hairs stand up on the back of my neck. Every time.

Why would this good Samaritan not just ask me if I needed sunscreen? Or ask me if I was feeling alright if I looked like I was experiencing a heat stroke. Well, according to Schein, asking temporarily empowers the other person in the conversation and temporarily makes the person doing the asking vulnerable. It implies that the other person knows something that we don't. It draws the other person into the situation and into the driver's seat and gives them the opportunity to help or hurt us. In other words, asking builds relationship through a vulnerable kind of conversation. Telling puts a wedge between us. If you don't care about communicating or building a relationship, then telling may be fine. But if part of your goal is to improve communication and build a relationship, you need to engage in more asking.

## We Live in a Culture that Values Task Accomplishment

The U.S. culture is individualistic, competitive, optimistic, and pragmatic. And this means that humility (asking) is low on our value scale. We take it for granted that telling is more valued than asking. To ask is to reveal ignorance and weakness. Knowing things is highly valued and telling people what we know is almost automatic because we have made it habitual in most situations. We are especially prone to telling when we gain power such as a job promotion at work. In our culture it could seem like we are not doing our job if we ask, “what should we do?” instead of telling our subordinates what to do. There is nothing more satisfying than giving advice. We feel so good when we think we have solved someone else’s problem.

Stephen Potter (1950’s) described the western culture using the terms *gamesmanship* and *one-upmanship*. It was meant as British humor but points to a much deeper view of how much we value competition, even in conversation. Potter says there are several ways to gain points in competitive conversation: making a smart remark, putting someone down who has claimed too much, and turning a clever phrase even if it embarrasses someone else. We compete on who can tell the most- the most interesting, or outrageous event, the best story or movie, or the best joke. There are some social boundaries here as frequently embarrassing or humiliating someone in conversation will eventually us socially ostracized. To be an effective gamesman you must know how to win without cheating.

## If You are not Winning, You Must be Losing

The implication here is that if you are not the winner in the conversation, then by default, you must be the loser. If you do not tell first, someone else will tell and get the credit. In this tacit assumption, someone is the alpha. It does not occur to us that both parties could win. In an improvisational theatre each person’s job is to set up his partner to deliver a great line that gets laughs. This requires a relationship in which one-upmanship is not desirable. We also love to tell because we are in a hurry and want the interaction to just get to the point. We are obsessed with accomplishment and getting as much done as possible in the shortest amount of time.

## Humble Inquiry

We don’t want to be told things that are not useful. And nothing is more frustrating to listeners than to be told things or given advice that we already know. It makes us feel demeaned. I have learned to see those who have “told me” about the dangers of sunburn as having good intentions. And now, through Schein’s teachings I can see how they, like me, grew up in a culture that values telling. I am looking at my own tendencies to tell, and not ask.

There are ways of asking that allow us to engage in Humble Inquiry and there are types of inquiries that miss the mark. Here are some examples.

Humble Inquiry- asks questions to get and keep the conversation started such as “What’s happening?” and “What brings you here?” and “Go on....”.

Diagnostic Inquiry- a common deviation from Humble Inquiry happens when you get curious about something the other person is telling you and you focus on it. You are now steering the conversation and influencing the other person.

Confrontational Inquiry- is where you insert your own ideas but in the form of a question. You say things like “Did that not make you angry?” instead of asking “How did that land on you?”. Another example is asking “Were the others in the meeting shocked?” vs. “How were others in the meeting reacting?”.

Process-Oriented Inquiry- can count as a Humble Inquiry because its intention is to pause the current conversation and ask some version of “What is happening?”. The power of this kind of inquiry is that it focuses on the relationship itself and enables both parties to assess whether the relationship between the two people is meeting its goals.

I value collaboration and teamwork. To get better at both, I know I need to become more skilled in Humble Inquiry. Humble Inquiry maximizes curiosity and interest in the other person and minimizes bias and preconceptions. I want to inquire in ways to best discover what is really on the other person’s mind. I want to have deeply curious conversations. And the next time I have a drive-by sunscreen admonition, I promise to smile and have empathy for the person because we both grew up in this culture of Tell, and I am just as susceptible to telling rather than asking. Maybe I can ASK into her TELL? It’s a thought.