

## Advocacy and Inquiry

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Advocacy and Inquiry are two key communication behaviors with critical implications for interpersonal, group, and organizational effectiveness. Advocacy refers to stating one's views; inquiry refers to asking questions. This entry discusses the features of both productive and unproductive advocacy and inquiry, how the quality and balance of these two behaviors impacts learning, and the relevance of these two behaviors for facilitating conversation, managing emotions, and providing feedback, all of which are critical skills for organization members, as well as action researchers.

In conversations on complex and controversial issues, when there is a high degree of advocacy and little inquiry, people are unable to learn about the nature of their differences. People may feel the speaker is imposing a view on them without taking into account their perspective, which can lead to either escalating conflict or withdrawal. When there is a high degree of inquiry, but no one is willing to advocate a position, it is difficult for participants to know where the other stands, and the lack of progress can lead people to feel frustrated and impatient. As a participant in a conversation, being aware of the balance of advocacy and inquiry can help you determine how best to contribute at a given time. If you hear that people are advocating but not asking questions, inquire into their views before adding your own. If you hear people asking questions for information but not stating an opinion, advocating your view may help the group move forward.

While the balance of advocacy and inquiry is important for a productive conversation, so is the quality. High quality advocacy involves stating your view while being open to influence. Others can only influence your reasoning if you make your reasoning steps explicit. To advocate effectively, you need to provide the data you see as salient, and state how you go from the data to your conclusions. It is also useful to make your points one at a time. Asking others for their reactions after you have layered several points can

leave them unsure where to start.

Even when the quality of advocacy is high, it needs to be balanced with inquiry or people are likely to feel they are being pushed. However, not all inquiry is equal. Closed questions that evoke a yes or no answer are useful for establishing facts, but do not elicit rich information. A rhetorical or leading question, designed to get the other person to comply, is a form of disguised advocacy and tends to elicit defensiveness. Other types of low quality inquiry include forced choice questions that limit the response to predetermined options, and questions that imply that others are at fault.

High quality inquiry, in contrast, includes questions that are open-ended, that test your understanding of others' meanings, that probe how they arrive at their views, that solicit the views of everyone at the table, and that encourage challenge of your own view. High quality inquiry expands rather than limits the range of responses, and promotes action rather than eliciting excuses. It requires a willingness to reflect on how your own actions contributed a problem rather than focusing blame on others.

<b>Low quality inquiry</b>	<b>High quality inquiry</b>
“Do you understand what I am saying?”	“What is your reaction to what I am saying?”
“Don’t you agree?” “Don’t you think it would be better if...?”	“In what ways is your view different?” “My view is X, how do you see it?”
Did you do that because of X or Y?	“What was your thinking on that? What led you to do what you did?”
“Why can’t you do X?”	“What would it take to do X?”
“Why didn’t you just tell me?”	“What led you to not tell me? Did I

	contribute to your not speaking up, and if so, how?"
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High quality inquiry serves several purposes. It encourages the expression of diverse opinions, doubts and concerns. It generates information for more informed choice and increased commitment; and it facilitates insight and adoption of new perspectives.

Conversations that involve a high degree of advocacy often move quickly from point to point. While inquiry can slow the pace of the conversation, it increases the rate of learning. In conversations characterized by advocacy, people may state what they think, but not what they think about each other's thinking. At the end of such a meeting, participants may feel that the conversation lacked focus and depth, and that little progress was made on any one issue. You can counteract this risk by coupling advocacy and inquiry. For example, you might say, "Here is what I think about XYZ... What are your reactions to my reasoning? Do you see any gaps? Are there data that I am unaware of, or additional data we should collect?"

Encouraging others to question your views, and checking to ensure you have understood others' meanings accurately, are the types of inquiry that help keep a conversation focused, produce deeper understanding, demonstrate your openness to learning, and reduce defensiveness. They help people make progress on the substantive issue, and they build relationships.

People are often reluctant to ask questions because they worry they will be perceived as either uninformed, lacking initiative, or challenging the other's credibility and authority. Leaders can minimize these concerns of subordinates by: emphasizing the importance of learning from mistakes, acknowledging their own errors, and rewarding others for doing the same. People can minimize the risk that they are perceived as challenging others' credibility or authority by explaining that the purpose of their question is to learn. For this to be credible your mindset has to be that the other might be right, and that you have something to learn by understanding their logic.

Productive advocacy and inquiry are both informed by using the ladder of inference – a model of the reasoning steps people take as they size up situations and decide what action to take. Below are examples of using the ladder of inference as a guide for productive advocacy and inquiry in different situations: facilitating a substantive conversation, managing your own and others emotional reactions, and providing feedback.

### **Facilitating Conversation**

When you facilitate a conversation you can determine what inquiry is useful by paying attention to the quality of people’s reasoning. Ask yourself whether you are hearing data, interpretations, or conclusions. The purpose of your inquiry should be to help all parties involved make their reasoning explicit so they can learn from their different perspectives. Before you begin asking questions it is helpful to explain your purpose. For example, you might say: “ That’s an important point for us to discuss. I’d like to understand your thinking before we either agree or disagree.”

Typically, when people advocate, they only state their conclusions, not the steps in their reasoning. If that is the case, ask them to go down their ladder of inference to provide the data on which their conclusions are based. You might say: “What information do you have on that?” “What’s an example of what you are saying?” Or, “What have you seen or heard that leads you to think so?”

Too often people assume that words or terms have the same meaning for everyone. Testing your own understanding, and encouraging others to test theirs, can reduce miscommunication and improve the efficiency of the conversation. For example you might say, “Here’s my understanding of what we mean by X...How do others understand it?” Once people agree on the data and meanings, you can inquire about their different evaluations, explanations, and thoughts about what to do.

When people have opposing views, ask them to reflect on each other’s data and reasoning, not just the data that supports their own conclusions. For example, “How would you interpret or explain the data he/she has presented?” Or, “What information, if

we could collect it, would lead you to change your view?”

Sometimes, when people have difficulty making progress on controversial issues, it is not because they disagree about the data. They are stuck because they have different interests, concerns or values that have not been addressed. If so, ask: “What is at stake for us?” What concerns do we need to address? How can we meet our different interests?”

### **Managing Emotions**

High quality advocacy and inquiry are useful when we have strong emotional reactions. Our emotions do not just happen to us; they are a function of the assumptions we hold, the inferences we make – the story that we tell ourselves - about what has happened. For example, in your performance review, your boss says to you, “You’ve been doing well this quarter, but there are things you need to improve.” If you feel confident and like your boss, you may focus on “you’ve been doing well,” hear it as a compliment, and feel good. If you see your boss as overly critical, and not open to disagreement, you may focus on “there are things you need to do to improve,” hear it as an unfair criticism that you can’t contest, and feel upset. In either case, if your emotional experience leads you to focus on only one part of the message, you may end up with a distorted view of your performance.

Use your emotions as a window on your reasoning. Ask yourself:

- What did I hear the other say or see them do?
- Did they say or do something that I missed?
- How am I interpreting them?
- What assumptions am I making about their motives? What alternative explanations might I consider?
- How might I be contributing to the problem?

By coupling advocacy and inquiry you can talk about your own and others’ emotions without assuming or casting blame. When upset, you might say, “I’m feeling (upset, angry, frustrated) at the moment. I’d like to talk about why, and get your reaction.” When others are upset you can acknowledge their emotions, inquire into what upset them,

empathize with their concerns, and ask how you may be contributing to the problem.

The need to inquire into our reasoning when we are upset may be obvious. Less obvious is the need to reflect when we feel positively, particularly when dealing with difficult issues. If you find yourself feeling relieved when a group reaches quick agreement on a difficult topic, be concerned. Take the time to inquire into how people have reached their apparent agreement. You may discover important differences that have been overlooked.

### **Providing Feedback**

Combining high quality advocacy and inquiry is important when giving others feedback. You need to be willing to disclose your assessment, explain the consequences of the person's behavior without attributing bad motive, and be ready to change or expand your interpretation based on what you hear. For example, when giving feedback to someone you perceive as indirect and asking leading questions:

- Give an example of the behavior that concerns you (*"When you said to John, 'Don't you think it would be a better if you had done X'?...."*)
- Check that you have understood them (*"I understood you to be saying that, in your view, he should have done X. Is that right?"*)
- If so, advocate what you think are the consequences or implications of the behavior (*"When you ask a rhetorical question, the other person is likely to hear it as a disguised criticism, and see you as indirect. You could be right that they should have done X, but they don't yet understand your reasoning. If you are indirect, they may wonder why, feel defensive, or respond indirectly themselves."*)
- Inquire into their reactions, alternative interpretations, or reasoning for acting that way (*"What is your reaction? Do you see it differently? What is your concern about being direct with your criticism?"*)

People are often concerned that if they advocate their views they will be seen as controlling. Yet, if they only inquire they won't be able to influence their desired outcomes. By combining high quality advocacy and inquiry, people can create organizational cultures of mutual learning and action. They can express strong views that

are helpful and persuasive, while also being open to influence and discovering where they might be wrong.

**Philip W. McArthur** *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research*, Ed. David Coughlin and Mary Brydon-Miller, Sage Press 2014.

See also: Theories of Action, Action Science, Double Loop Learning, Learning Pathways, and The Ladder of Inference

### **Further reading**

Argyris, C. (2004). *Reasons and rationalizations: The limits to organizational knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Noonan, W. (2007). *Discussing the undiscussable: A guide to overcoming defensive routines in the workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Smith, D. (2011). *The elephant in the room: How relationships make or break the success of leaders and organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.