

Inquiry: The Power of Genuine Curiosity

What is "Inquiry"?

In the 5 Secrets of Effective Communication, "inquiry" is the practice of asking gentle, probing questions to deeply understand another person's experiences, emotions, and thoughts.

Often, when we hear what someone is going through, our immediate temptation is to offer solutions or ask leading questions designed to guide them to a "fix". If you have ever been on the receiving end of this, you likely know exactly how frustrating and invalidating it can feel.

Imagine going to a doctor with severe, unexplained pain. If the doctor recommends surgery immediately, without running any tests or asking a single question about your symptoms you would probably feel upset and refuse the treatment. This is exactly how people feel when you offer solutions without taking the time to listen first.

Practicing inquiry allows you to truly grasp what is happening beneath the surface for the other person. By asking thoughtful questions, the other person feels genuinely heard and understood, while you gain a much more accurate understanding of their reality.

Here are key tips for how to effectively use Inquiry in your communication:

1. The Importance of Pure Intention

When engaging in any type of communication, your underlying intention is everything. When using Inquiry, your sole purpose should be to learn more about the other person and how they are experiencing the world in that moment. Because we all experience life differently, it is vital to approach their perspective with genuine curiosity rather than judgment.

Avoid using questions as weapons to intentionally upset the other person or to prove a point. The purpose of inquiry is always to understand, never to attack.

- Example of what to avoid: A wife is exhausted after working 60 hours all week. She previously agreed to clean the house but hasn't had the energy. Saying, "What do you think of the dirty house?" is

using a question to intentionally induce guilt, not to understand her fatigue.

2. Asking to Expand the Experience

Effective inquiry involves asking questions that invite the other person to speak openly and extensively about what they are going through. Encourage them to share the story behind what happened, how they felt, and what they were thinking.

Most people have a deep desire to share their inner thoughts because it validates their presence and reality in the world. It feels incredibly relieving for most people to be able to share what is going on in a safe, non-judgmental space.

- Example: "What was that like for you when she said that to you?"

3. Open-Ended vs. Closed-Ended Questions

To help a person share more of what is coming up for them, open-ended questions are usually the most effective tool. An open-ended question requires more than just a simple "yes" or "no" answer, opening the door for richer detail.

While closed-ended questions are useful for confirming facts, relying on them too heavily can stall the conversation, prevent the person from sharing deeper information, and prematurely end the interaction.

- Example: "What is the story behind that awesome tattoo of yours?"

4. Asking Questions for Clarity

Inquiry is also a powerful tool for making sure you are interpreting their words correctly, rather than just assuming you understand. This demonstrates to the other person that you are actively engaged and invested in getting their perspective exactly right. It shows profound care and respect for what they are saying.

- Example: "Am I getting it right that you were probably feeling nervous about the test coming up?"

5. Asking to Understand More Deeply

Sometimes, initial statements are just the tip of the iceberg. It is highly beneficial to ask the person to expand on their experience so you can reach a deeper level of understanding. This helps you grasp the full emotional weight of what has happened to them.

- Example: "Can you share more of what was going through your mind when he raised his voice?"

6. Resist the Urge to Problem Solve

Because we care deeply about the people in our lives, our natural instinct is often to try and fix their distress so they don't have to hurt anymore. However, when we immediately jump to solving the problem, the other person rarely feels heard.

Be very careful with questions that are actually just disguised attempts at problem-solving, as this can irritate the other person and shut down the connection.

- Example of disguised problem-solving: "Do you think that maybe she was upset and that's why she said that?"

7. The Role of Tone and Delivery

Just as with any communication skill, how you ask the question is just as important as the words you use. If your tone sounds skeptical, sarcastic, or rushed, the other person will immediately go on the defensive. Keep your voice gentle, maintain relaxed eye contact, and allow for pauses so the person has time to process their feelings before they answer.