



Balancing Inquiry and Advocacy

Managers in Western corporations have received a lifetime of training in being forceful, articulate “advocates” and “problem solvers.” They know how to present and argue strongly for their views. But as people rise in the organization, they are forced to deal with more complex and interdependent issues where no one individual “knows the answer,” and where the only viable option is for groups of informed and committed individuals to think together to arrive at new insights. At this point, they need to learn to skillfully balance advocacy with inquiry.

When balancing advocacy and inquiry, we lay out our reasoning and thinking, and then encourage others to challenge us. “Here is my view and here is how I have arrived at it. How does it sound to you? What makes sense to you and what doesn’t? Do you see any ways I can improve it?”

Balancing inquiry and advocacy is sometimes hard on people’s cherished opinions, which is one reason why it is so difficult to master. But the payoff comes in the more creative and insightful realizations that occur when people combine multiple perspectives.

We don’t recommend inquiry alone. People almost always have a viewpoint to express, and it is important to express it – in a context that allows you to learn more about others’ views while they learn more about yours. Nor do we recommend that you switch in rote fashion from an adamant assertion (“Here’s what I say”) to a question (“Now what do you say?”) and back again. Balancing inquiry and advocacy means developing a variety of skills. It’s as if all the “colors” of conversation could be spread out on an imaginary palette. As the creator of your part of the conversation, you should be able to incorporate styles from all four quadrants of the palette.

This palette chart, of course, is only the beginning of a taxonomy of roles that people can play in conversation. There are probably a dozen more distinct combinations of varying levels of inquiry and advocacy, each with a different impact.

There are dysfunctional forms of both advocacy and inquiry. For example, in organizations, adroit people can skew the inquiry process by relentless “interrogating,” without caring at all for the person being questioned. In the same vein, advocacy can feel like an inquisition if the advocate simply “dictates” his point of view, while refusing to make his reasoning process visible. People who are unwilling to expose their thinking may also “withdraw” into silence, instead of taking the opportunity to learn through observation.

One of the most destructive conversational forms is “politicking,” in which there is no overt argument – just a relentless refusal to learn while giving the impression of balancing advocacy and inquiry. In workshops we see this form sometimes when people who have read *The Fifth Discipline* play “The Beer Game.” This game is a mock production-and-distribution system simulation, demonstrating how the structure of a system determines behavior. From the description of the game in *The Fifth Discipline* some readers conclude the best winning strategy is deliberately under-ordering beer and remaining in backlog throughout the game. When these people show up to play, they cling to their mistaken impression at all costs. Their strategy is disastrous for their team’s score, and it would be disastrous in

real life, because businesses that remain in backlog don't keep their customers. Nonetheless, these players refuse to consider any other course of play. When people ask them to change for the sake of their teammates, they don't argue back. They simply call attention to their "superior" status: "Look, I've read the book. Trust me. I know what I'm doing."

It is said that each of us has a natural predilection toward either advocacy or inquiry. Debate and law teach advocacy; journalism and social work (if they're practiced well) teach inquiry. Men are rewarded more for advocacy; women are more rewarded for inquiry. In the South, women are even taught that it is a sign of poor breeding to state what you want or need. (Instead of saying, "Can you get me a mint julep?" a thirsty woman would say, "It's a terribly hot day. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all had some special refreshment?") During the 1970s, many women had a hard time with advocacy, but now that more women have joined managerial ranks in organizations, members of both genders are becoming more adept at balancing the two forms.

Protocols for balancing advocacy and inquiry

Balancing advocacy and inquiry is one way for individuals, by themselves, to begin changing a large organization from within. You don't need any mandate, budget, or approval to begin. You will almost always be rewarded with better relationships and a reputation for integrity.

The purpose of these conversational recipes is to help people learn the skills of balancing advocacy and inquiry. Use them whenever a conversation offers you an opportunity to learn – for example, when a team is considering a difficult point that requires information and participation from everyone on the team.

PROTOCOLS FOR IMPROVED ADVOCACY

Make your thinking process visible (walk up the ladder of inference slowly).

What to do	What to say
State your assumptions, and describe the data that led to them.	<i>"Here's what I think, and here's how I got there."</i>
Explain your assumptions.	<i>"I assumed that . . ."</i>
Make your reasoning explicit.	<i>"I came to this conclusion because . . ."</i>
Explain the context of your point of view: who will be affected by what you propose, how they will be affected, and why.	
Give examples of what you propose, even if they're hypothetical or metaphorical.	<i>"To get a clear picture of what I'm talking about, imagine that you're the customer who will be affected . . ."</i>
As you speak, try to picture the other people's perspectives on what you are saying.	

Publicly test your conclusions and assumptions.

What to do	What to say
Encourage others to explore your model, your assumptions, and your data.	<i>"What do you think about what I just said?" or "Do you see any flaws in my reasoning" or "What can you add?"</i>

Refrain from defensiveness when your ideas are questioned. If you're advocating something worthwhile, then it will only get stronger by being tested.	
Reveal where you are least clear in your thinking. Rather than making you vulnerable, it defuses the force of advocates who are opposed to you, and invites improvement.	<i>"Here's one aspect that might help me think through . . ."</i>
Even when advocating: listen, stay open, and encourage others to provide different views.	<i>"Do you see it differently?"</i>

PROTOCOLS FOR IMPROVED INQUIRY

Ask others to make their thinking process visible.

What to do	What to say
Gently walk others down the ladder of inference and find out what data they are operating from.	<i>"What leads you to conclude that?" "What data do you have for that?" "What causes you to say that?"</i>
Use unaggressive language, particularly with people who are not familiar with these skills. Ask in a way that does not provoke defensiveness or "lead the witness."	<i>Instead of "What do you mean?" or "What's your proof?" say "Can you help me understand your thinking here?"</i>
Draw out their reasoning. Find out as much as you can about why they are saying what they're saying.	<i>"What is the significance of that?" "How does this relate to your other concerns?" "Where does your reasoning go next?"</i>
Explain your reasons for inquiring, and how your inquiry relates to your own concerns, hopes, and needs.	<i>"I'm asking you about your assumptions here because . . ."</i>

Compare your assumptions to theirs.

What to do	What to say
Test what they say by asking for broader contexts, or for examples.	<i>"How would your proposal affect . . .?" "Is this similar to . . .?" "Can you describe a typical example . . .?"</i>

Check your understanding of what they have said.	<i>"Am I correct that you're saying . . .?"</i>
Listen for the new understanding that may emerge. Don't concentrate on preparing to destroy the other person's argument or promote your own agenda.	

PROTOCOLS FOR FACING A POINT OF VIEW WITH WHICH YOU DISAGREE

What to do	What to say
Again, inquire about what has led the person to that view.	<i>"How did you arrive at this view?" "Are you taking into account data that I have not considered?"</i>
Make sure you truly understand the view.	<i>"If I understand you correctly, you're saying that . . ."</i>
Explore, listen, and offer your own views in an open way.	<i>"Have you considered . . .?"</i>
Listen for the larger meaning that may come out of honest, open sharing of alternative mental models.	
Use your left-hand column as a resource.	<i>"When you say such-and-such, I worry that it means . . ."</i>
Raise your concerns and state what is leading you to have them.	<i>"I have a hard time seeing that, because of this reasoning . . ."</i>

PROTOCOLS FOR WHEN YOU'RE AT AN IMPASSE

What to do	What to say
Embrace the impasse, and tease apart the current thinking. (You may discover that focusing on "data" brings you all down the ladder of inference.)	<i>"What do we know for a fact?"</i> <i>"What do we sense is true, but have no data for yet?"</i>
	<i>"What don't we know?"</i>
	<i>"What is unknowable?"</i>

Look for information that will help people move forward.	<i>"What do we agree upon, and what do we disagree on?"</i>
Ask if there is any way you might together design an experiment or inquiry that could provide new information.	
Listen to ideas as if for the first time.	
Consider each person's mental model as a piece of a larger puzzle.	<i>"Are we starting from two very different sets of assumptions here? Where do they come from?"</i>
Ask what data or logic might change their views.	<i>"What, then, would have to happen before you would consider the alternative?"</i>
Ask for the group's help in redesigning the situation.	<i>"It feels like we're getting into an impasse and I'm afraid we might walk away without any better understanding. Have you got any ideas that will help us clarify our thinking?"</i>
Don't let conversation stop with an "agreement to disagree."	<i>"I don't understand the assumptions underlying our disagreement."</i>
Avoid building your "case" when someone else is speaking from a different point of view.	

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