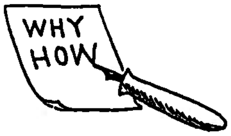
36 Balancing Inquiry and Advocacy



Rick Ross, Charlotte Roberts

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 which 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 which 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

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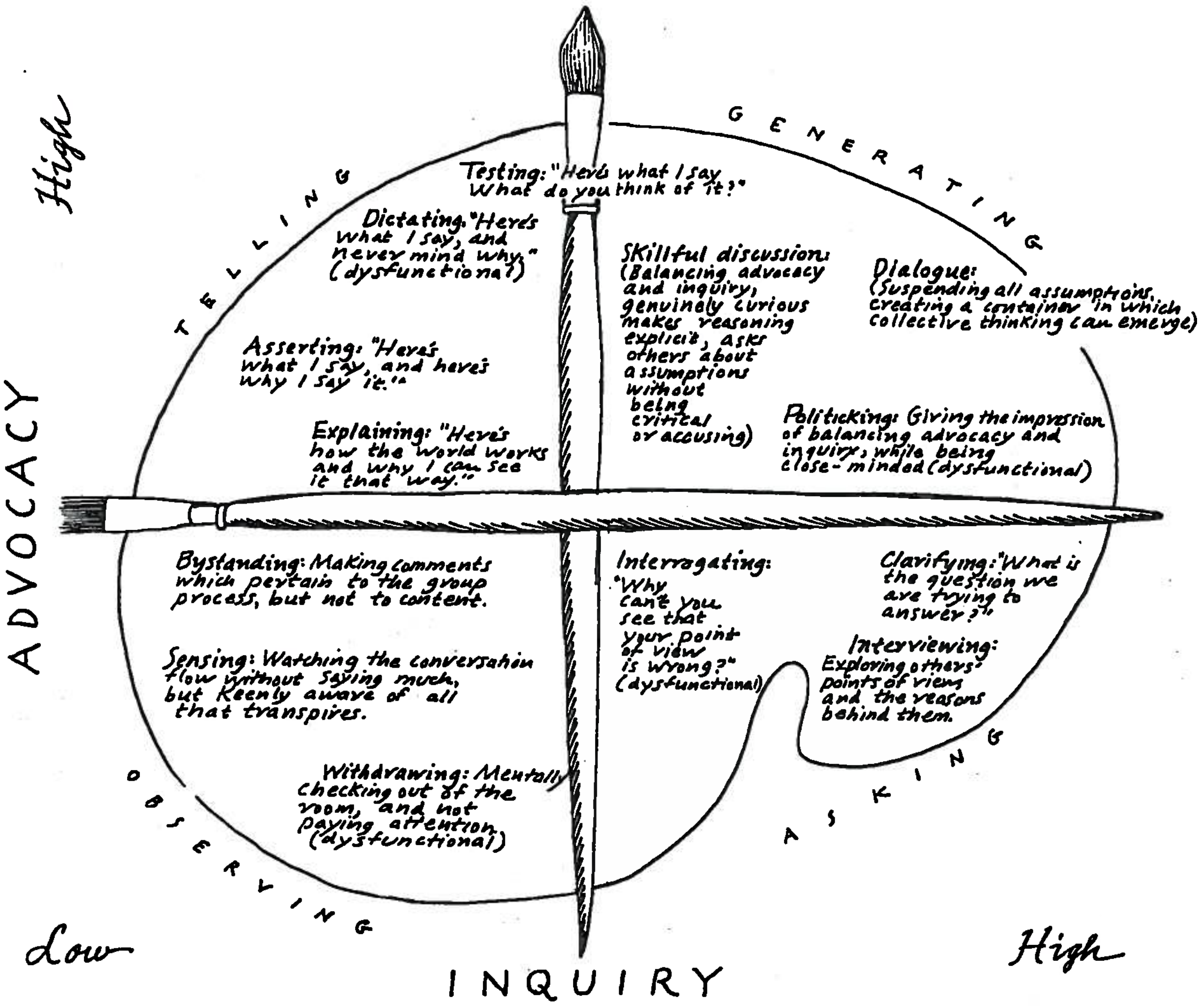
[*] This diagram is an expansion of the "Inquiry/Advocacy matrix" developed by Diana McLain Smith.


High
Low
High
ADVOCACY
INQUIRY
TELLING
GENERATING
OBSERVING
ASKING
Testing: "Here's what I say What do you think of it?"
Dictating: "Here's what I say, and never mind why." (dysfunctional)
Asserting: "Here's what I say, and here's why I say it."
Explaining: "Here's how the world works and why I can see it that way."
Skillful discussion: (Balancing advocacy and inquiry, genuinely curious makes reasoning explicit, asks others about assumptions without being critical or accusing)
Dialogue: (Suspending all assumptions, creating a container in which collective thinking can emerge)
Politicking: Giving the impression of balancing advocacy and inquiry, while being close-minded (dysfunctional)
Bystanding: Making comments which pertain to the group process, but not to content.
Sensing: Watching the conversation flow without saying much, but keenly aware of all that transpires.
Withdrawing: Mentally checking out of the room, and not paying attention. (dysfunctional)
Interrogating: "Why can't you see that your point of view is wrong?" (dysfunctional)
Clarifying: "What is the question we are trying to answer?"
Interviewing: Exploring others' points of views and the reasons behind them.

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 Dis-*

cipline 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 which 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 inquiry and advocacy. 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.[*]

}} **Also see "Opening Lines" (page 263).**

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[*] **The *Fifth Discipline,* p. 27ff.**

[*] **These protocols were adapted, with many changes, from course material developed for *Leading Learning Organizations* (1993, Endnitas, Calif.: Ross Partners); from material developed by Diana McLain Smith and Philip McArthur of Action Design; and from *The Fifth Discipline,* pp. 200–1.**

1. 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.	*"Here's what I think, and here's how I got there."*
Explain your assumptions.	*"I assumed that . . ."*
Make your reasoning explicit.	*"I came to this conclusion because . . ."*
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.	*"To get a clear picture of what I'm talking about, imagine that you're the customer who will be affected . . ."*
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.	*"What do you think about what I just said?" or "Do you see any flaws in my reasoning?" or "What can you add?"*
Refrain from defensiveness when your ideas are questioned. If you're advocating something worthwhile, then it will only get stronger by being tested.	

What to do	What to say
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.	*"Here's one aspect which you might help me think through . . ."*
Even when advocating: listen, stay open, and encourage others to provide different views.	*"Do you see it differently?"*

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

Compare your assumptions to theirs.

What to do	What to say
Test what they say by asking for broader contexts, or for examples.	*"How would your proposal affect . . . ?" "Is this similar to . . . ?" "Can you describe a typical example . . . ?"*
Check your understanding of what they have said.	*"Am I correct that you're saying . . . ?"*
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.	

3. 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.	*"How did you arrive at this view?" "Are you taking into account data that I have not considered?"*
Make sure you truly understand the view.	*"If I understand you correctly, you're saying that . . ."*
Explore, listen, and offer your own views in an open way.	*"Have you considered . . ."*
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.	*"When you say such-and-such, I worry that it means . . ."*
Raise your concerns and state what is leading you to have them.	*"I have a hard time seeing that, because of this reasoning . . ."*

4. 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.)	*"What do we know for a fact?"* *"What do we sense is true, but have no data for yet?"* *"What don't we know?"* *"What is unknowable?"*
Look for information which will help people move forward.	*"What do we agree upon, and what do we disagree on?"*
Ask if there is any way you might together design an experiment or inquiry which 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.	*"Are we starting from two very different sets of assumptions here? Where do they come from?"*
Ask what data or logic might change their views.	*"What, then, would have to happen before you would consider the alternative?"*
Ask for the group's help in redesigning the situation.	*"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?"*
Don't let conversation stop with an "agreement to disagree."	*"I don't understand the assumptions underlying our disagreement."*
Avoid building your "case" when someone else is speaking from a different point of view.	

37 Conversational Recipes

Robert Putnam

The help Robert Putnam, a partner in Action Design, gave us in this part of the book emerged from his work on this piece for us, which in turn was based upon a more in-depth article for action science practitioners: "Recipes and Reflective Learning: 'What Would Prevent You from Saying It That Way?'" by Robert Putnam, in The Reflective Turn: Case Studies in and on Educational Practice, *(1991, New York: Teachers College Press). Philip McArthur, whose "Opening Lines" (page 263) provide an example of recipes, is also a partner in Action Design.*

People who are learning reflection and inquiry skills very quickly develop a repertoire of stock phrases. I call these phrases "recipes" because most of them are used like step-by-step procedures for getting a particular response. For instance, here is a conversation where "Paul," an in-house consultant, is trying to help "Linda," a supervisor, delve into the assumptions underlying a troublesome incident where someone had been fired:

PAUL: Are you and the other supervisors going to talk about this incident, to learn from it?
LINDA: I'm not going to bring it up.
PAUL: *What prevents you* from bringing it up?
LINDA: Nothing prevents me. What do you want me to say?

Later, Paul reflected, "I seemed to get myself into trouble with that line that I couldn't get myself out of." Then he described what went through his mind at that moment: "Am I handling it right? Am I too concerned about what I'm doing? Am I getting stuck in the technique?"

The value of recipes

PAUL'S REFLECTIONS SUGGEST EXACTLY THE DIFFICULTIES WE EXPECT IN the early stages of using any new technique. It feels unnatural. When he got into difficulty, he doubted his ability to follow-through consistently. And his self-consciousness made it even less likely that he would follow through competently. At first glance, you might assume that he was in a terrible double bind; he didn't have the sophistication to use inquiry techniques with skill, so he was stuck with "recipes"—canned remarks that "parrot" (as Paul himself pointed out) what a skilled intervenor would say, and that would inevitably "get him in trouble."

But the learning of skills begins with recipes. For instance, if you decide the ladder of inference (see page 242) is useful, how do you learn to apply it? Without practice, the concept won't be second nature; but until it's second nature, you can't practice with it effectively. So you short-cut the dilemma by following a set of rules:

1. Identify the conclusions someone is making.
2. Ask for the data that lead to the conclusion.
3. Inquire into the reasoning that connects data and conclusion.
4. Infer a possible belief or assumption.
5. State your inference and test it with the person.

Working recipes into obsolescence

RECIPES LIKE THESE PRODUCE USEFUL DATA, AND THEY COME QUICKLY to the tongue. Their vividness may also aid in focusing reflection.

But there is a caveat. Rules and guidelines can play a vital role only when we deliberately use them to move beyond rule- and guideline-based behavior. Recipes must be made to work themselves out of a job.

Here are some rules and guidelines for doing so. (Of course, these are also recipes; so they, too, must be made to work themselves out of a job.)

- *Examine your own conversations later.*

  Describe and reflect upon your use of the "recipes." Paul, for instance, used "What prevents you?" as a kind of advocacy, implying that Linda was hypocritical. But through his own retrospective critique, Paul realized the prejudgment he had made: "I see now, maybe it wasn't inconsistent for her to say, 'I don't want to talk about it now.' It may have been just a timing kind of thing. But I wasn't hearing that. I was sort of forcing it into an inconsistency kind of thing." For Paul, this sort of self-judgment is an invaluable way to learn.

- *Seek out generic strategies for improving your use of "recipes."*

  When you look at your earlier conversations, try to figure out general strategies for various impasses. For instance, Paul worked with a manager named Mike, who had given a mixed message to a subordinate. Over and over, Paul asked Mike what had led him not to say more directly what he really wanted. Later, listening to tapes of the conversation, Paul realized a maxim: rather than getting people in situations like Mike's to admit they are wrong, you can be more helpful by naming how they are caught in a dilemma and focusing on how they can manage it more successfully. Paul went on to use this maxim very successfully in work with other people.

- *Put yourself in the other person's vantage point.*

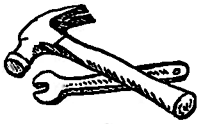
  This is a difficult rule to remember to follow. Paul, for instance, with all his training and reflection, still found himself advocating his point of view in a series of highly charged meetings about downsizing. Even his "recipes" were just subtle ways of trying to manipulate a plant manager, whose name was Greg, to change his mind. But finally, when Greg responded to one of Paul's recipes by saying what he feared his boss would do, Paul (as he said later) felt something shift within him. He began to talk openly in the group about how he might think differently "if I put myself in Greg's shoes." Greg, in response, articulated a breakthrough scenario. Gradually the group worked through its impasse and developed a proposal for restructuring their division more intelligently.

- *Ask for the perspective of the people you're working with.*

  By this time, Paul had moved beyond recipes. He was able to ask the people he worked with, "Am I inviting enough inquiry in my own advocacy? I tried to, but I don't know if it was just pro forma." His interventions had become less stilted, more natural. And his attention had turned away from "Will I or won't I get them to do what I think we should?" and more to "What can we accomplish?"

Recipes, when you first start using them, are gimmicks. You'll use them within your taken-for-granted way of framing the situation. But as you gain experience with them, the frame too may shift. You may be able to jump, without planning in advance exactly how to do it, from superficial technique to a deeper sense of practice.

38 Opening Lines



Philip McArthur

When . . .	. . . you might say . . .
Strong views are expressed without any reasoning or illustrations . . .	*"You may be right, but I'd like to understand more. What leads you to believe . . . ?"*
The discussion goes off on an apparent tangent . . .	*"I'm unclear how that connects to what we've been saying. Can you say how you see it as relevant?"*
You doubt the relevance of your own thoughts . . .	*"This may not be relevant now. If so, let me know and I will wait."*
Two members pursue a topic at length while others observe . . .	*"I'd like to give my reaction to what you two have said so far, and then see what you and others think."*
Several views are advocated at once . . .	*"We now have three ideas on the table [say what they are]. I suggest we address them one at a time . . ."*
You perceive a negative reaction in others . . .	*"When you said [give illustration] . . . I had the impression you were feeling [fill in the emotion]. If so, I'd like to understand what upset you. Is there something I've said or done?"*
You perceive a negative reaction in yourself . . .	*"This may be more my problem than yours, but when you said [give illustration] . . . I felt . . . Am I misunderstanding what you said or intended?"*
Others appear uninfluenceable . . .	*"Is there anything that I can say or do that would convince you otherwise?"*