

The Call for Curiosity: Cultivating Inquisitive Leadership

— Volume 6, December 2019

“Look out the window and see what is visible but not yet seen.”

— Peter Drucker

Albert Einstein once memorably claimed, “I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.” I’m sure we would all quibble with the assertion of “no special talents,” but the impact of his insatiable curiosity should draw little debate. The human tendency to continually push the boundaries of knowledge has led to the great discoveries and transformative moments of humankind. It is an especially apt time to heed this lesson, here at the dawn of 2020. This is the very year Peter Drucker predicted would mark our complete transition into a knowledge-based economy—when people generate value with their minds rather than their muscle. While we have been headed down this path for almost half a century, we are still grappling with the profundity of change it has wrought, especially our ideas and practices concerning management and leadership and, significantly, within a world Drucker could never have foreseen—marked by unprecedented uncertainty and constant disruption.

In “The Business Case for Curiosity,” a recent issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, professor Francesca Gino explains how new research indicates that curiosity is more important than ever to enterprise performance. Cultivating it at all levels helps leaders and their employees adapt to uncertain market conditions and external pressures: “When our curiosity is triggered,” Gino writes,

“we think more deeply and rationally about decisions and come up with more creative solutions.”

When asked in a recent interview with CNNMoney what makes the best CEOs, our Chairwoman, Jill Ader, had an immediate, strong response: “With a world that is less knowable, less predictable, we need really curious leaders.” In speeches elsewhere, she has explained in detail how highly curious people engage the world, situations, their teams, and colleagues differently:

- They assume less
- They ask more questions
- They ask different, better questions
- They value not just what people think, but what they feel
- They listen intently to the answers they receive

The image of an omniscient hero leader calling the shots is increasingly an artifact of the past. “If I hear a leader say ‘I have my playbook...It will work again,’ that’s a big red flag for me,” Ader continues, “Really today it is about staying curious, getting feedback, knowing that you don’t have all the answers. So it’s not just humility as a nice trait. It is because you can not possibly know.” From this place of openness and of vulnerability, today’s leaders gain the trust of others and inspire confidence and productivity.

The reality is that curious, bold leadership is not something you simply have or don't have; you build upon what is there, you learn it and continue to constantly develop it. To do this, a leader must become deeply curious and familiar with his or her own self. The late, great Harvard Business School scholar, Chris Argyris, left an invaluable legacy when he emphasized the need for leaders and their teams look inward. "Managers and employees must reflect critically...identify the ways they inadvertently contribute to the organization's problems and then change how they act," Argyris wrote. This is the crux. Leaders need to be made aware of their self-limiting beliefs, to become curious about who they are and how they got there. Otherwise, they put a cap on their ability to grow—and their ability to lead others effectively. Ader offered her own story as a case of personal evolution. "Introversion had a stranglehold on my identity," she explained. "So when people first starting asking if I would stand to be the Chair. I couldn't see it." Like the many leaders she has helped to break through their fears, Ader shared that she had to make a major identity shift. "It has been a big growth journey for me," she explained. "What I value, what is expected of me, is completely different."

Curious leaders often bring a fresh "beginners mind" to old problems and stubborn challenges. They continually challenge assumptions and practices and ask deep, penetrating "Why?" questions. They dare to be and think differently, seeking out countervailing theories and inviting debate. Above all, they place a premium on the art

of questioning and brainstorming over the fear of failure. In so doing, they solicit and embolden the deep-seeded inquisitiveness and productivity their organizations need. As leadership and innovation expert Linda Hill, co-founder of Paradox Strategies and Harvard Business School professor, has explained: great leaders today "create the context in which others are willing and able to create and perform"; they "set the stage," rather than dominating in the starring role.

What we have learned repeatedly in our CEO work is that while many leaders realize they have to get more curious about new things, they are still missing the essential point about becoming more curious about themselves. Today's bravest, most discerning leaders are those who are willing to look inward and say, "okay, I've been successful this far, but I can't transform my organization until I transform myself." The good news is that many CEOs have become aware of this. In our survey of 402 CEOs, 79% agreed they need the capacity to transform themselves as well as their organizations. "We need to keep pushing the limits and expanding the sort of mindsets...and for me the biggest mindset shift is curiosity," Ader concluded, "because if you get more curious, if you ignite your curiosity, you are more interested in disparate views." Driving success in today's extremely complex world has never been more challenging. It is leaders' core sense of curiosity which promises to best unlock the barriers and push the boundaries of knowledge and performance well into the future.

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