

Curiosity: A Vital Component in Your Leadership Toolkit

Mastering the skill

Samuel Johnson said "Curiosity is one of the most permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous intellect."

Being curious makes you a better leader. Why? Curiosity goes hand in hand with openness, one of the essential qualities of an effective leader. Leaders with an open mind know they don't have all the answers. And, they're willing to appreciate that their answers may not be the best ones. As a result, they are far more likely to foster a culture of openness and dialogue in their teams and organizations. They invite and encourage others to contribute their ideas and perspectives. In the process, they enable better performance and the growth and development of those they lead.

How can you make curiosity work for you? Here are five concrete ways.

Be intentional: Set a daily intention to be curious and choose one or more ways of being curious today. For example, one leader I coach has built his curiosity by challenging himself to listen deeply to everyone else in a meeting before he speaks. Realizing that he was not hearing from his team because he was often dominating conversations, he wanted to build the team's confidence in speaking up and contributing their ideas.

Choosing to enter each meeting with curiosity strengthened his leadership. Now, team members are increasingly stepping up and contributing. Teamwork is stronger and so are the leader's relationships with team members. This is a result of being intentional about being curious.

Separate what you know from what you think you know: Have you ever found yourself thinking something is true, only to find out later that you were completely wrong? Being a more curious leader helps you get better at noticing when you might be making assumptions or jumping to conclusions without considering all the facts. If that's one of your leadership defaults, get into the habit of being curious about yourself and asking a few questions:

- What do you know to be true about a situation; what makes you so sure?
- What might you be missing, overlooking or assuming?
- How might you be wrong?

When you develop a practice like this, you'll be giving your curiosity muscles a good workout. Even better, you'll learn to appreciate when you may be falling into the very human habit of assuming things, rather than focussing on what is true.

Ask more questions: One of the best ways to be more curious is to ask a question and listen fully to the answer. If your question is a good one (think open-ended at a minimum), you'll naturally be conveying a desire to learn more. Many leaders who practice this skill have found that the right question can be a powerful way of opening and deepening conversations and learning.

Be curious about your own perspective: Are you more likely to be open or closed in your thinking or your approach to a conversation, a relationship or a situation? How might your perspective be serving you or getting in the way? The more you know about your own perspective, the better. You can begin by noticing your innate style and approach. For example, are you actively inviting others to contribute or signalling



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in some way that you're not interested in what they may have to say? How might being curious about your perspective in the moment enable you to shift your stance?

Ask for feedback: Not sure if you're being curious enough? Perhaps you're wondering how you can use curiosity to strengthen your openness. One of the best ways to learn more is to ask those around you for feedback. You can ask a close, trusted colleague for informal feedback or dive into a formal 360 leadership assessment that gathers input from your direct reports, your peers, your boss and yourself. There are lots of ways to get a read. Be curious about what you learn, especially about what's working and what still needs work. Then use your curiosity to refine your approach.

Is your curiosity piqued? I hope so. Curiosity is a powerful skill to add to your leadership toolkit. You can do it in five concrete ways:

- be intentional about being curious;
- focus on what you know to be true;
- ask more questions;
- pay attention to your own perspective;
- invite feedback from others.

As you become more aware and in tune with yourself and the ways in which you are being curious or closed, you can begin to reflect on what might be leading you in each direction. The more you know about this quality in yourself, the more you can do to use curiosity in deepening your leadership effectiveness.

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