

1

The Business Case for Curiosity

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“Open the window, it’s a big world out there.”

Sakichi Toyoda, founder of
Toyota Industries Corporation

“If you’re comfortable, you’re doing it wrong.”

Ted Lasso, TV character

Trigger Question: overall, would you say that curiosity is encouraged at your company?

Envisage a world where we recognize that unknown unknowns are the primary catalysts of economic and social change. Unknown unknowns are things that we are neither aware of nor understand. In this world, everything is considered an “accident” in the statistical sense, with finite probabilities of occurrence. This shift means that familiarity can no longer be relied upon, and it has profound implications for expertise, know-how, assumptions, and predictions. Amidst ever-increasing organizational and contextual complexity, professionals collaborate, ploughing through vast knowledge and unprecedented data volumes, often assisted by machines.

This description of future work implies torrents of high-knowledge content and accelerating complexity, which some leaders are already experiencing as today’s reality. An organization that lacks curiosity risks becoming complacent, failing to learn from mistakes, fostering arrogance, and missing out on innovation in the face of new competition. How well-suited are our

present organizations and leadership styles for such a situation? That's the question this chapter will answer.

What Is Curiosity?

Curiosity is the mindset that challenges the status quo, driving discovery, exploration, and learning.

While curiosity is often associated with children exploring the world, it's equally crucial for adults, helping them to learn and grow, fostering positive connections between people and driving innovation for companies. Being curious means actively seeking novelty, welcoming ideas that challenge our viewpoints, and letting our mistakes trigger curiosity rather than embarrassment. It means asking, "Why was I wrong? What can I learn from it?"

Three dimensions of curiosity

We'll dive into the various components of curiosity in later chapters. For now, it suffices to introduce the dimensions of curiosity. Curiosity, as a concept, comprises three dimensions:

- **Transpersonal Curiosity:** This dimension is about the thirst for knowledge, the desire to explore the unknown, and the drive to understand the world around us. It motivates us to seek answers to questions and challenges the status quo. It can also be referred to as intellectual curiosity.
- **Interpersonal Curiosity:** This dimension relates to our interest in people, their stories, and their perspectives. It drives us to connect with others, build relationships, and

gain insight into different viewpoints. It can also be termed Empathic Curiosity.

- Intrapersonal Curiosity: In this dimension, curiosity turns inward. It involves self-reflection and a deep desire to understand our own thoughts, emotions, and motivations. It prompts us to question our beliefs and biases. You can also use the term Self-reflective Curiosity, if you wish.

The Importance of Curiosity for Organizations

Curiosity drives innovation, prevents settling for the status quo, nurtures organizational humility, and promotes divergent opinions. It supports organizational learning, particularly in the context of after-action reviews, and encourages learning from failures. Start-ups, unburdened by rigid routines, excel in this aspect, being four times more likely to learn from mistakes compared to mature organizations.

This does not mean that scale-up or grown-up companies are lost to curiosity. There are numerous examples of grown-up companies who challenge the status quo inside their organization and successfully embrace innovation in products and services and/or customer and employee engagement.

For instance, when comparing the global subscription numbers of on-demand television between the “new” Netflix and the “old” Disney, we see that the Disney+ has been overtaking Netflix for a while

already. With the right focus, established organizations can also embrace curiosity and outpace start-ups.

In times of change, standing still means moving backwards. Leadership teams that embrace curiosity create thriving organizations, constantly improving their current operations and preparing for the future.

The Implications of Curiosity for Leaders

Curiosity requires champions. A manager's curiosity profile significantly influences their team's curiosity appetite. When a manager demonstrates a high propensity for curiosity by modelling it, generating ideas, questioning the status quo, and showing a hunger for learning, their team responds in kind with a high collective learning footprint.

Conversely, when a manager does not emphasize the importance of learning, the team becomes reluctant to consume knowledge or share their expertise. Role modelling also includes asking questions, actively listening in meetings, and being open to different answers.

Your answer to the trigger question at the beginning of this chapter ("Overall, would you say that curiosity is encouraged at your company?") will have a direct relationship to how well your leader is managing the team: whether they are uplifting the team towards openness and exploration or, on the other hand, stifling them.

The overall answer to the question varies per team. I encourage the leadership teams I work with to look

for best practice teams and praise their leader's ability to create curiosity. Overall, however, 51% of employees report that their company encourages curiosity. The good thing is that half of employees feel empowered. The other half just needs to be invited onto the bus.

Additionally, if agility in volatile times is important, it pays for leaders to focus on how much their culture and operational processes support curiosity. For instance, whether employees feel that they can ask questions at work. My research has shown that 65% of employees feel they cannot.

The top four barriers to curiosity, as shared by employees and managers in my diagnostics, are, in this order:

1. Top-down decision-making by management.
2. I am too busy to explore new ideas.
3. We don't learn from our mistakes.
4. Inquisitiveness and creativity do not lead to public or financial recognition.

Understanding the status quo helps. Once we know it, we can do something about it.

Reverse Feedback

A good sign of a really curious leader is whether they ask for feedback from their team members. This is also called "reverse feedback" indicating that feedback can also flow from the subordinate to the manager instead of the other way around.

How often does your manager ask this simple question: “How am I doing as your superior?”

Such a simple, open question requires humility and vulnerability on the part of the leader. Humility to acknowledge that subordinates can give the manager important feedback. And vulnerability to ask the question in the first place.

Few managers ask this question. In surveying more than 30 global companies and thousands of professionals, I have found that only 23% of first-line managers, 46% of mid-level managers, and 6% of senior execs ask this very question.

According to self-awareness researcher Tasha Eurich, people prefer not to ask for feedback because it makes them uncomfortable. She distinguishes three kinds of excuses to justify not asking this question: She calls this the “Ostrich trinity”.¹

The first excuse is “I don’t need to ask for feedback”. This excuse is driven by arrogance where the person thinks they are superior and right and that the opinion of others does not matter. The second excuse for only a few people asking the question can be summarized as “I should not ask for feedback”. Here there is a worry that asking the question negatively influences the relationship, as if asking the question conveys weakness or comes at a cost. The third kind is “I don’t want to ask for feedback”. In this case, the person dreads the potential answer and fears they might not like it.

The truth, however, is this: when we ask for feedback, something interesting and counterintuitive happens. Our relationships become better because

people naturally reward us for seeking critical feedback. When we do so, we are also perceived as being more efficient (by bosses, peers, and employees); further, our humility gets rewarded with a new perspective on how we can improve.

The research is clear about the correlation of good versus bad leaders and how readily they ask for feedback: 83% of top-performing leaders regularly solicit feedback, compared to just 17% of the worst-performing leaders.²

Why Is Curiosity Hard for Professionals and Organizations?

Everyone is born with curiosity, but its object and degree vary based on individual circumstances. As we go through life, some of our curiosity becomes dormant. Similarly, companies and organizations can either grow or diminish their capacity for curiosity. The main reasons for diminished curiosity in both individuals and organizations include a mindset of thinking we know, the schooling system, fear, stress, routine, limiting beliefs, algorithms (as explained in Chapter 3), and non-conducive environments. A lack of curiosity prevents individuals, organizations, and societies from becoming their best versions.

Curious professionals are proactive, aiming to win, while incurious ones aim to avoid losing. In the era of the fourth industrial revolution, driven by information technology and biotechnology, companies cannot afford to be incurious. An organization

that lacks curiosity will become complacent, fail to learn from mistakes, foster arrogance, and miss out on innovation in the face of new competition.

A Shift in Culture

For a century, management thinking rooted in perpetuating the past and command-and-control leadership has hindered curiosity's growth. This culture often promotes conformity over curiosity. However, with the right motivation and external support, we can rediscover our innate curiosity. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought radical change, and it's the curious who thrive, whether individuals, organizations, or societies. Remember that curiosity is intrinsic; we just need to reconnect with it.

A growing number of professionals and companies have embraced the curiosity movement. In these organizations, leadership teams recognize the power of curiosity. They grant permission, assess individual and organizational curiosity, establish curiosity Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), identify curiosity drivers and detractors, and integrate curiosity into corporate values and core processes, such as innovation and go-to-market strategies. Companies like Dell, Nike, ChampionX, Disney, NASA, Novartis, and others lead the way.

Curiosity is the engine of growth in our world. Especially when change is the only constant. Curiosity helps us to explore new possibilities and gets us out

of our comfort zone. Curiosity drives us forward, generates new ideas, and helps us and the world around us to evolve. Curiosity helps us challenge the status quo. It moves us from entropy to evolution and enables us to continue to test, learn, experiment, and grow. It's also at the heart of business success with research suggesting it really is the secret ingredient to successful, happier, more creative, and more inclusive workplaces.

Imagine how different our world would be without curiosity. We would not be interested in news or reading articles; would not try to understand the effects of climate change; would not be keen to meet new people, design new products, and services for our companies, improve our environments; nor reflect on our own beliefs, travel, or collect stamps. Nor create better products. Nor start new companies.

The Opposite of Curiosity

As the founder of the Global Curiosity Institute, you might think I am a curious individual. In reality, I am a recovering conformist. I also often relapse into situations where my curiosity gives way to conformity.

Let me share a personal example to explain why conformist behaviour is often stronger than curiosity.

There is this Vietnamese restaurant close to our house in the old centre of Antwerp. We live right in the middle of the beautiful old town. I read recently

that Antwerp was named the most idyllic place to visit in Europe. If you are into historic centres and interested in Belgium, I'd say that Bruges is the first place to visit, closely followed by Antwerp. When walking around the cobblestone streets, it is easy to imagine oneself back in time. My neighbour, who happens to be a city-guide, told me that Antwerp used to be bigger than London in the sixteenth century. With all that history, Antwerp is a magnet for intellectual curiosity. In 2022, 11.6 million visited this radiant city.³

With all these international visitors, there are lots of wonderful restaurants. Because we lived many years abroad, we are often drawn to international restaurants. When we just moved houses, we explored all of the restaurants in the immediate vicinity. Now, one year later, we find ourselves going back to the same restaurants we consider to be good.

This is one aspect of curiosity: it decreases over time. In the beginning we are high on exploration; after a while we settle into routines which feel good. These routines are woven into our lives. We take the same road to our favourite store, we tend to stick to our preferred channels of news, we eat lunch in the office with the same group of colleagues just because it feels good, it is easy, it does not require us to spend energy. We are on automatic pilot.

These routines make life easy for us. Without them, life would be much harder. I would hate to rethink every day where I would get my daily dose

of news from, or what new recipe of baking bread I should try. Our Vietnamese restaurant is not very different. The atmosphere is good and cosy, the owners know us by now—that we like Jasmine tea and that I always ask for an extra portion of Basmati rice.

We also order the same dishes every time. There are two reasons for this: one rational and one emotional. The rational reason is that their vegan/vegetarian options are limited, so we kind of need to choose among a limited set of options. A more important reason is emotional: we know what to expect with each dish and gladly revisit our comfortable early choices.

During keynotes, I often ask people to indicate with a show of hands whether they like to go back to the same restaurants. You should see the response as many hands go up. Then I ask the group whether they then order the same familiar dishes they know to be good, or explore new dishes they have not tried before. Believe it or not: there are more people who reorder the same dish rather than explore new ones.

What is your normal go-to strategy in selecting a restaurant? Or where to order a take-away? Or what to cook tonight?

If you find yourself going to the same place, you are likely a recovering conformist like me. Regardless of whether I tell myself that I am a rather curious fellow, I find myself slipping at times. Especially when I experience stress. I trust you recognize this.

Curiosity Is Hard

The restaurant story highlights something important. It is hard to be curious all the time. We cannot be curious about the world around us all the time: it would simply take too much energy. It is also hard to be curious about people around us all the time. And is even less likely that we question ourselves regularly. Even though we have no problem in offering others the benefit of our knowledge, we are less ready to let others change our minds, even when the new ideas are better. In the words of behavioural economist and Nobel Prize laureate Daniel Kahneman, “Human beings possess an almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance.”⁴

One approach to understanding a concept is to juxtapose it against its opposite and see what happens. The challenge is to find the right word. Language is functional, we use language to express our thoughts. Thoughts are more important than words. That’s why it is sometimes hard to find the right words for the thoughts we want to express. We often don’t think about the extent, depth, and breadth of words like ... curiosity. Even less what its opposite is.

When asking groups what they think the opposite of curiosity is, I often hear words like: “closed-mindedness”, “boring”, “not interested”, “apathy”, or “indifference”. What would your suggestion be for an antonym of curiosity? Think about it: your answer could provide valuable insights into how you experience curiosity at work and in other aspects of life.

The opposite of curiosity is “conformity”.

Now, conformity is a wonderful word. It describes intuitively why it is desirable for me to go back to my favourite Vietnamese restaurant: it feels comfortable; and as long as things don’t change, it will remain so.

When things are comfortable, I dial down my curiosity in what restaurant I select. When I have an opinion about something, I resent people who volunteer an alternative view. When I observe a problem at work that is vaguely familiar, I easily jump to a conclusion. Sherlock Holmes had something to say about how easy it is for people to assume they know and disregard what is factual: “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly, one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”

Guises of Conformity

Conformity comes in different guises, We’ll go deeper in the different dimensions influencing curiosity in Chapter 4. Let us already discuss the main contours of these dimensions. They are:

- **Self-imposed Conformity:** The world is a complex place to live in. Work is hard and stressful. In order to cope and decrease the noise around

us, we create mental routines and shortcuts to ease ourselves through the day. Often we are even not aware of them. We stick to our preferred brands for our daily needs, listen only to our pre-set channels to access the latest news and eat with the same gang of colleagues at work every day. We don't think of venturing out and changing these routines.

- **Team Conformity:** Our tribe gives us a sense of belonging and in turn demands loyalty, conformity to rules and beliefs of the team. Failure to do so ends up in potential expulsion.
- **Societal Norms:** Being part of a society also means adhering to societal norms, i.e., adhering to what society considers good or bad, right or wrong, success or failure.
- **Conformity and Technology:** Though new technology creates efficiency, it also creates dependence. What would we do without our GPS? Internet technology compounds this effect: algorithms on social media invite us to stay in the cosy echo chambers of like-minded people and prevent us from becoming curious about different-minded people and alternative points of view.

Become aware of all the greater powers that prevent you from showing up curiously and what their consequences are. The more we are aware, the

more you will understand the underlying forces, and the more it will empower you. In fact, if you think of a line with conformity on the one end and curiosity on the other, the ideal harmony is not on the side of curiosity, but somewhere in the middle. After all, conformity is not all that bad; we actually need it to get through the day individually, and also to lubricate our social relationships.

Todd Kashdan, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Well-Being Laboratory at George Mason University describes this in a powerful metaphor. “Imagine you’re at a fancy dinner party. Everyone’s using the salad fork for the salad, so you follow suit. You’re not sure why, but it just feels right. This is conformity in action — a social lubricant, reducing friction and making our interactions smoother and more predictable.”⁵

Finding a Balance

It is important to recognize when we are conforming out of habit or fear, rather than genuine interest. This requires self-awareness and honesty. It’s about asking: “Am I doing this because it’s what I truly care about, or because it’s what I think is expected of me?” Second, we need to give ourselves permission to be different. This means embracing our quirks, passions, and unique perspectives. It means standing up for what we believe in, even if it goes against the grain.

We also need to communicate our individuality in a way that respects others' expectations. It's about finding ways to express our individuality that enrich our relationships, rather than strain them.

To express ourselves, we need language. Language is a social construct handed on by previous generations. Each word hides historic meaning and cultural connotations. The old phrase 'Curiosity killed the cat' is a good example of an old connotation of curiosity that has been handed down over generations. Until roughly 50 years ago, Curiosity carried negative connotation and was related to looking through keyholes, gossip and questioning the authority of people in power such as elders or managers. Nowadays, curiosity viewed as a positive concept: we want our children to challenge their teachers and actively look for employees who can disrupt the status quo. I encourage you to reflect on what meaning curiosity has in your part of the woods.

Fascinating, right! Hope you are getting warmed up. If you want to go deeper with me and explore the neuroscience of curiosity, join me in the next chapter where we investigate how curiosity is influenced by the inner workings of our mind and brain. Before that, do reflect on the questions below.

Questions for Reflection

- How do you define curiosity in your personal and professional life? How does this definition

align with or differ from the three dimensions of curiosity discussed in this chapter?

- Think about a recent situation at work where you faced a complex problem. How did curiosity play a role in finding a solution? If it didn't, how might curiosity have changed your approach?
- Reflect on your current organization or team. How does it encourage or discourage curiosity among its members? What changes could be made to foster a more curious environment?
- Consider a time when you or someone you know demonstrated high levels of intellectual curiosity. What impact did it have on the outcome of the situation?
- In what ways do you currently engage in self-reflective curiosity? How can you enhance your self-awareness to better understand your thoughts, emotions, and motivations?

Notes

1. Eurich, T. (2017). *Insight: The Surprising Truth about How Others See Us, How We See Ourselves, and Why the Answers Matter More Than We Think*. New York: Crown Currency.
2. Folkman, J. (2015). Top ranked leaders know his secret: Ask for feedback. Forbes.com. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joefolkman/2015/01/08/top-ranked-leaders-know-this-secret-ask-for-feedback/> (accessed 29 October 2024).
3. <https://www.antwerpen.be/info/cijfers-en-onderzoek-toerisme> (accessed 25 September 2024).

4. Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Macmillan.
5. Kashdan, T. (2023). A new perspective on conformity. Provoked with Dr. Todd Kashdan. <https://toddkashdan.substack.com/p/a-new-perspective-on-conformity> (accessed 25 September 2024).