

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: THE CURIOUS LEADER

In my executive coaching experience, I am encouraged when I meet a senior leader who demonstrates curiosity. I can recognize it—as can the leader’s stakeholders. Feedback tends to indicate that a leader’s curiosity is one of the attributes the stakeholders consider to be a strength.

What do Michael Dell, Reed Hastings, and Jack Dorsey have in common? You guessed it. They all place a high value on curiosity as a leadership trait and have the humility and confidence necessary to be a curious leader. Leaders of today and tomorrow need to understand, anticipate and create the future. See *Harvard Business Review* (September 11, 2015), [Why Curious People are Destined for the C-Suite](#).

According to former Navy Seal, Jeff Boss—now author, coach, and consultant—[Embrace Curiosity: 4 Ways Questioning Makes You a Better Leader](#), *Forbes*, May 22, 2016, the benefits of being a questioning (curious) leader are that curiosity fosters competence and confidence, fuels growth, and builds adaptability.

So why do I feel encouraged about a leader when I see the trait of curiosity? Usually this means that the leader has the confidence and humility to ask questions and show their vulnerability; they are open to hear others’ ideas, and to the changes that could follow from being open to different viewpoints. Also, generally, they are communicative and life-long learners.

It is ironic that, whereas most leaders would say that curiosity in their organization is good—after all, it leads to innovation, seeing things in new ways, thinking creatively, staying ahead of the curve—many organizations do not foster it. Rather, their structures, strictures, behaviors, and culture work against it.

Todd Kashdan did a fascinating study that he described in *Harvard Business Review* (October 21, 2015), [Companies Value Curiosity but Stifle It Anyway](#). Check it out and see where your industry falls in building a culture that nurtures rather than nixes curiosity.

While the research on the relationship between a curiosity quotient and EBIDTA is not predictive, we firmly believe that curiosity in the C-suite (and beyond) is a competitive advantage.

What can you as a leader do to make sure your organization is rewarding and not repressing curiosity?

1. If you want innovation or appropriate risk-taking, don’t punish failed attempts. In fact, celebrate them when appropriate. Remember, “if at first you don’t succeed . . .” There will be no “try again” if people are afraid of potential negative consequences of failure.
2. Don’t cling to “we have always done it this way”-isms. Be open to changing what should be changed.
3. Give people freedom. Micromanaging smothers and saps motivation.
4. Push decision-making down in the organization. Let people question the status quo.
5. Support your own and others’ time to think—sometimes called “calendar white space.” Reward the questions that arise as people have time to ponder the issues in the organization’s processes, products, and culture — questions such as: “Why are we doing this? What are other ways we can do this? Can’t we do it better?”

Is the culture in your organization optimal for curiosity? Are people eager to pursue the questions that come from their inquiring minds? What changes need to be made to make sure all are confident in their curiosity?