The INCLUSION-CURIOSITY Connection

Curiosity may be a natural friend to diversity. It opens the door to different points of view, facilitates insights and understanding, invites involvement and inspires greater engagement. Even better, there are ways to promote it.

By Julie Winkle Giulioni and Beverly Kaye

Increasingly, organizations recognize the untapped power of curiosity as a unique and potentially unbeatable competitive advantage in a crowded marketplace. Although it's hard to find curiosity on many leadership competency lists, it's critical to achieve genuine, sustainable organizational results. And, while not a panacea, curiosity is a priority that should be required of, and cultivated by, leaders at every level.

By its very nature, curiosity opens the door to different points of view, facilitates insights and understanding, invites involvement and inspires greater engagement. Intuitively, one might extrapolate its effects on other workplace dynamics and results, but there is research to confirm it.

In a recent pulse survey, part of an ongoing study, the authors asked leaders across the country how important curiosity is to a variety of business factors and outcomes. While "innovation" was the clear winner, "inclusion" came in second, and "building a culture that values diversity" and "business results" tied for third.

Add to this research from Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Melinda Marshall and Laura Sherbin, who summarized the premise behind curiosity in their HBR.org article, "How Diversity Can Drive Innovation." They wrote: "Leaders who give diverse voices equal airtime are nearly twice as likely as others to unleash value-driving insights."

On the Web
Participants in diversity initiatives need to shift from believing they understand someone else's reality to utilizing active listening, suspending judgment and questioning in a respectful manner: diversity-executive.com/articles/view/824.
For leaders seeking to move the needle on business results, innovation, and diversity and inclusion efforts, curiosity might be a one-stop tactic to help accomplish it all.

**How Does Curiosity Work?**

Previously an amorphous characteristic or mental process attributed to scientists and inventors, there is now a better understanding of curiosity’s capacity.

Analysis of chat responses during a November 2013 webinar attended by more than 250 leaders, paints a vivid picture of how curiosity effects change, specifically to:

- **The individual:** When people experience curiosity — whether on the giving or receiving end of it — they become engaged, motivated and inspired to seek answers. They make the leap from hearing to listening and enter a learning zone. They shift focus from themselves to others and the answers they may possess.

- **Situations:** "Authentic" and "genuine" are words frequently used to describe curious exchanges, and these qualities contribute to an environment that invites exchange, honors others’ interests and anticipates possibilities. This can dramatically transform the dynamics of even the most challenging situations.

- **Results:** The understanding and knowledge gained from genuinely curious exchanges directly support better business outcomes such as innovation and workable solutions while contributing to learning, development and stronger relationships and connections among individuals.

The aforementioned pulse survey also revealed that among diversity professionals across the country, individual contributors and senior executives are tied for the "most curious." Front-line supervisors are perceived as nearly 18 percent less curious than their employees and top leaders.

Curiosity manifests via three interrelated channels:

### How Curious Are You?

A person’s appetite for curiosity can impact his or her interactions. Take this quiz to determine your curiosity level. Set against a 1-7 never/always scale.

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#### MIND

- Give yourself time to ponder issues and outcomes?
- Wonder how things work?
- Engage in self-initiated research?

**Subtotal**

#### MOUTH

- Ask questions of others?
- Try to understand how others think, feel and behave?
- Explore "what if" with others?

**Subtotal**

#### MOTION

- Seek out different points of view?
- Experiment and try novel approaches?
- Stretch yourself with challenging experiences?

**Subtotal**

**Total**

57-63 You demonstrate an extraordinarily high level of curiosity. Use your powers for good by continuing to model and mentor others in this regard.

50-56 You bring considerable curiosity to your work and interactions.

43-49 You exhibit a moderate level of curiosity. Consider leveraging what you do naturally more frequently or in different contexts.

42 and below You may benefit from focusing conscious attention toward developing greater curiosity.

- **Mind:** Mental disciplines — that individuals are either naturally blessed with or consciously develop to expand their effectiveness — that lead employees to wonder, ruminate, ponder, consider, explore and research. They also may cultivate a greater tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty.

- **Mouth:** Verbal practices and processes that are generally associated with curiosity include asking questions; seeking out different or contrary points of view; working to understand how others think, feel and behave; focusing on why; engaging in explorations of issues, factors and possibilities; and continuously peeling back the layers of the onion through conversation.

- **Motion:** Deliberate acts and interactions with the broader environment — beyond conversations — that bring curiosity to life through things such as experimentation and learning through mistakes and failure, breaking or disassembling things to figure out how to put them back together better, intentionally exposing one’s self to new and different people or experiences, and volunteering for novel projects and challenges.

Given the interrelated nature of these channels, focusing on and cultivating one usually has a spillover effect onto the others.

**Why Curiosity and Diversity and Inclusion Align**

Diversity executives who want to promote curiosity in the workplace and explore ways to spotlight, teach and support it at all levels of the organization should consider the following strategies:

- **Apply natural approaches in new ways.** Organizations, managers and leaders remain passionately curious about the technical dimension of their work even as curiosity about the people dimension wanes. Consider how often managers become passionately interested in reports, analyses and prototypes from their employees. What if the level of curiosity that data earns was applied to other dimensions of work, and most
Importantly, leaders must challenge themselves to consider how curiosity plays out most naturally for them. Then, they can support greater inclusion by identifying one, two, or more ways to transfer and leverage those approaches amidst their people.

**Lose the baggage.** Chris Reagan, president of cash management company Glory Global Solutions, said he asks his organization often, “When does experience become baggage?” He said the knowledge and understanding gained from experiences can increase technical effectiveness and efficiency. But applying this dynamic—even in well-meaning ways—leads leaders to generalizations that can be dangerous, inaccurate, and undermine the ability to understand and bring out the best in each individual. As a result, it’s critical to approach people and situations with a clean slate. Forgive how others might have thought, responded, or acted in the past, be ready to start fresh and learn from each other.

**Focus on what matters.** In today’s action-packed, priority-rich, time-sensitive world, it’s not realistic to expect to operate at 100 percent curiosity levels all the time, so when it comes to people, identify what matters most. Curious leaders who are committed to diversity and inclusion explore with others:

- **Abilities:** What capacities, talents, and skills do employees truly enjoy and yearn to use more?
- **Experiences:** What history, background, and past occurrences shape current thinking?
- **Achievements:** How do past performance and accomplishments affect current behavior and future potential?
- **Aspirations:** What are employees’ hopes, dreams, and wishes about where they want to go and grow in their careers?
- **Barriers:** Anticipated obstacles and pitfalls can be the basis to consider alternatives or engage in remediation.

These topics become the basis of an ongoing curious dialogue between leaders and employees, a dialogue that can reveal differences that will contribute to an individual’s self-knowledge and development, as well as help to advance organizational results.

According to Price Cobbs, psychiatrist and author of “Black Rage,” “In organizations, curiosity manifests itself in developing new products and services and in refining and reinventing old ones. In today’s increasingly diverse workforce, curiosity manifests itself in people discovering differences and learning about them to enrich their own lives.”

There is a clear business case for curiosity, and there is also a compelling human case for it. Curiosity taps the power of diversity and instigates inclusion while enriching individuals. It is at the heart of the discovery process, supporting countless business processes and the human benefits that follow. That leaves just one more question: Why wouldn’t every leader lead with curiosity? 

**Does Sensitivity Kill Curiosity?**

Many leaders have suppressed their curiosity, thinking it’s more politically correct to simply avoid exploring or shining the light on differences. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” has become the unspoken philosophy in many organizations. But ignoring the differences—while somehow safer—also leaves a lot on the table: authenticity, human connections, untapped talents and energy, and engagement.

Patricia Pope, CEO and co-founder of consulting firm Pope & Associates, said most people are uncomfortable asking people who are different from them about their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion for fear it will be offensive. “Years ago, I hired an employee who stated in her interview that she could not work on Friday because she was a Jehovah’s Witness, and this was the day she did her ministry work.”

“I noticed that she also never participated in birthday or holiday celebrations at work. Recognizing that I was pretty ignorant, I expressed my interest in learning more about her religion and beliefs. Within 10 minutes, she scheduled an offsite lunch for us. She said this was the first time in her working career anyone had ever asked her about her religion. She appreciated it a great deal, and I believe she became even more engaged as a result.”

— Julie Winkle Giulioni and Beverly Kaye

**READER REACTION**

How can diversity leaders use leaders’ curiosity in a positive way and not offend a company’s diverse workforce in the process?

@topicm:
Leaders could allocate time for each employee, which would be spent researching and following up on that curiosity.

@WkplaceConflict:
By listening, which means stop doing all the talking!

@SafeHarbourCdn:
By creating an inclusive environment where people feel comfortable bringing their “whole self” to work.

What do you think? Join the discussion at tinyurl.com/oau83k8 or follow us @DiversityExec to discuss.

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