CURIOSITY

A PRIMARY DISCIPLINE IN LEADERSHIP TODAY

PERFORMANCE FRONTIERS
To appreciate why curiosity is considered a primary discipline in leadership today, we explore what is occurring in the current and emerging organisational context. We unpack some of the key blockers to curiosity and what we can do about them. To help illustrate the shift required in leadership we look at US Submarine Captain David Marquet’s story and the deep soul-searching he undertook in his journey toward curiosity as a leadership practice.

THE CONTEXT

More and more in organisations today, we see our effectiveness in teams and as leaders being determined by our ability to network and influence others through connection, encouragement and inspiration. We know that we need to work laterally across the system, looking for partnership opportunities and for ways of leveraging the potential of the whole organisation.

We’re being asked to become more ‘eco minded’ and less ‘ego minded’ as we shed the traditional leadership autocratic frameworks that once told us we needed to know and have all the answers, or at least rely on someone who did. We’re learning to release the frameworks that once saw us protecting the status quo, believing that resources and information were not to be shared, except with the select few.

We understand that if our organisation is to remain relevant, we need to find ways to create an aligned, living network of high performing, interconnected teams, working nimbly, with our customers/clients at the centre.

To achieve this, we’re being called on more and more to think in agile and responsive ways, understanding that the state of stability is a long-gone phenomenon. In order to stay relevant and potent, we must by become more interconnected, agile and aware of the broader context. Operating with a fixed mindset and depending on the tried and true, can and has, resulted in misadventures of epic proportions – think of Kodak, Blockbuster and the Taxi Industry to name the obvious few.

We’re reminded daily of the need to become more Horizontal and Agile in our Leadership, developing a whole system mindset, looking for and appreciating the inherent advantages of achieving mutually beneficial relationships, seeing abundant possibilities in collaboration and partnership, and looking for ways to realise the truth embedded in the maxim: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

We’re being invited to see that in order to achieve this inherent potential, to unlock possibility, to build connections and to go beyond pre-conceptions, all this and more, is enabled by our ability to be curious.

“The best in business have boundless curiosity and open minds.” Robin Sharma
CURIOSITY

To be curious is to be inquisitive – to be prepared to not know – to discover new possibilities through inquiry – to work responsively with an open mind and to be prepared to be changed by what we learn – to be genuinely interested in others and what they know – to suspend our own agenda and invest in an alternate perspective – to expand knowledge and possibility through inquiry – to validate and encourage the expression of alternate perspectives and diversity of thought.

Industry leaders consistently endorse the importance of curiosity. To cite two examples: in a recent McKinsey interview, Ismail Amla, Capita Chief Growth Officer spoke to the disciplines of curiosity, agility and growth mindset, when asked of the core capabilities to drive growth (Capita is an international outsourcing company headquartered in London, with revenues of £3.9 billion). In another instance, Korn Ferry’s CEO, Gary Burnison, said he believed agility to be the No. 1 predictor of success, and he defined learning agility by using one word: curiosity. In his words: ‘The successful individual will figure out what to do even if they don’t already know what to do.’

THE BENEFITS

Much has been written about the power and importance of curiosity in organisations today (see the Harvard Business Review’s Curiosity Collection). Fostering curiosity in ourselves and others can:

- Foster an open mind and increase the ability to adapt to change and external pressures
- Enable us to think deeply and rationally about decisions
- Reduce decision making errors
- Fuel creative solutions
- Assist leaders in gaining trust and respect
- Help develop trusting and more-collaborative relationships
- Feed innovation and collaborative discoveries
- Reduce social conflict in teams
- Increase social cohesion and connection
- Foster and validate diverse views

With so many benefits, it’s curious that a “curiosity deficit” is a common phenomenon in teams, organisations and society at large. There are a number of barriers that can get in the way of a curious approach, and many of these are found in ourselves. To fully realise the benefits of curiosity, we can ask ourselves: What curiosity-blocking elements of the human condition do we need to recognise and be mindful of?

“Curiosity is the engine of achievement.”
Ken Robinson
THE BLOCKERS

In our work at PF, we invite leaders and teams to lean into their vulnerability and acknowledge their blockers to curiosity. Commonly shared obstacles include: the pressure to achieve outcomes and deadlines, the risk of inefficiency, their own impatience and, in some cases, not trusting other people’s abilities or their intentions.

We’ve discovered 3 mindsets typically underpin each obstacle: Judgments, Biases and Assumptions. We’ve provided the following examples of how they show up:

Judgments that block productivity or constructive outcomes, and in some cases, seeing others as less-than. For example: ‘this is a boring meeting and I have nothing to offer’, or, ‘such and such is not to be trusted’, or, ‘they are either not interested or don’t have the time to hear about partnering’.

Biases that predetermine an outcome. For example: the Anchoring Bias, where we rely too heavily on, or prefer, the first piece of information we are shown. Or, the Confirmation Bias where we seek out and only listen to information that confirms our own views, while ignoring any information that contradicts our current thinking.

Assumptions that fix our beliefs such as: the belief that curiosity will lead to inefficiency. Or, the way we have done it before has always worked and therefore we shouldn’t explore alternate ideas.

It is fundamentally important to recognise that we simply cannot be judgmental and curious at the same time. One cancels out the other. M.Challis, Performance Frontiers

Before we judge ourselves too harshly for these curiosity blockers, let’s take a moment to consider the human condition. We can turn to Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman and his work on the two thinking types he refers to as System 1 and System 2. Kahneman gives us a powerful insight into why we often take shortcuts in our thinking. For the moment, let’s think of Judgments, Biases and Assumptions as shortcuts for the human brain.

Kahneman has discovered that as the brain uses such a significant percentage of our daily energy-spend, it seeks to conserve energy wherever possible by placing much of our thinking on auto-pilot – he calls this System 1. It could be argued that curiosity blockers are in fact automatic, energy conserving, and often subconscious ways of thinking. System 2, on the other hand, is the realm of conscious thought, problem solving, and decision making. It takes more time and requires more energy.
To summarise:

**SYSTEM 1**
- FAST
- DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS: unconscious, automatic, effortless
- IT OPERATES WITHOUT: self-awareness or control “What you see is all there is.”
- FUNCTION: Assesses the situation, delivers updates
- INFORMS 97% of all our thinking

**SYSTEM 2**
- SLOW
- DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS: deliberate and conscious, effortful, controlled mental process, rational thinking
- IT OPERATES WITH: self-awareness or control, logical and sceptical
- FUNCTION: seeks new/missing information, makes decisions
- INFORMS 3% if all our thinking

Yes, you read that correctly, 97% of our thinking is automatic and only 3% is conscious. According to studies around decision making, we average approximately 35,000 decisions each day. Many of them are made for us in System 1, such as brushing our hair out of our eyes while having a conversation or deciding to put our left shoe on before our right shoe. If we had to consciously process all these decisions on a daily basis, our brains would shut down.

So, what does this imply for us when it comes to overcoming our curiosity blockers?

Critically, we can see that if the formula is correct, we have 3% to play with when choosing to become more conscious and deliberate about being curious.

Anecdotally, in our work at PF, we would suggest that most of us have some work to do to move our curiosity and Leadership Practice into System 1. To overcome our blockers and become more curious, we’d like to recommend the following four steps:

1. **Recognise and take ownership of our curiosity blockers**
2. **Become purposeful and deliberate in choosing to practise curiosity (more on this as a leadership practice on page 6)**
3. **Recognise the energy it will take to shift to System 2 and become aware of and release our curiosity blockers**
4. **Purposefully invest energy in becoming curious, working in System 2 until a curious way of thinking becomes habitual, and this thought process can move to System 1**
THE LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

To help us consider the art of curiosity as a Leadership Practice, we refer to David Marquet. In his book, ‘Turn the Ship Around’ he tells the story of his appointment to Captain a US Military Submarine the USS Olympia. The Olympia was one of the top-class subs in the fleet at that time. For a year prior to taking his commission, he trained and researched the ins and outs of the craft meticulously. He believed in his preparation that he needed to be across everything and essentially know all the answers in how the ship ran. Four weeks before taking the Captaincy, his orders were changed and he was given an entirely different submarine to Captain – the USS Santé Fe. Effectively he would be taking on a craft about which he knew almost nothing.

As the story goes, this required him to completely re-think his approach to leadership and to do some deep soul-searching. What he discovered was that by not having the answers and needing to be authentically and genuinely curious, his effectiveness as a leader to influence others through connection, encouragement and inspiration allowed him and his crew to ultimately achieve great success. In his words:

‘...my not knowing the answer ahead of time helped me. Instead of a scripted meeting where I pretended to solicit ideas, we had an an honest conversation.’

‘Walking the ship, I would ask the crew questions about their equipment and what they were working on. They were skeptical about these questions initially. That’s because normally I would have been "questioning," not curious. I would have been asking questions to make sure they knew the equipment. Now I was asking questions to make sure I knew the equipment.’

This story helps us understand the need and importance of the authentic question and how being curious can have an impact on others, inviting them to be genuine. We can also take from David’s story that giving himself permission to ‘not know’ and ‘not have the answers’ took courage and humility where no doubt he achieved a great deal of respect from the crew.

THE INVITATION

Our invitation to you in reading this article is to consider for yourself the power and importance of your curiosity. And, by acknowledging the benefits and possible upside within a more Horizontal way of leading, to make a deliberate and courageous choice to be curious in situations where historically you may not have been. To stretch into this space, to explore the potential that can be unlocked and to discover the part of you that could well be changed by connecting to and learning something for the first time. The invitation is to discover that ‘something’ in you and that ‘something’ in others that needs to emerge.

To be genuinely and completely curious is to be ready to be completely changed.

Dr Martin Challis – Performance Frontiers
