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The Power of Curiosity: Keeping Things Interesting in the (Hybrid) Workplace

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"Because a stimulated intellect is a *sine qua non* to carry out challenging tasks, managers must consider establishing the right conditions in the workplace that encourage and foster vigorous social exchanges among the employees in their pursuits of intellectual curiosity."

When was the last time you saw a member of your team's eyes light up about a question?

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Real Motivation

We actually know a lot now about what motivates people at work, but there has been rather inconsistent application of this knowledge. Essentially, research tells us that there are a number of work satisfaction factors (such as autonomy, competence and connection) which drive people. As one theorist puts it, it's all about vertical job loading – adding things like autonomy, responsibility, efficacy and task-diversity – which increase engagement.

This view has slowly replaced an older, more one-dimensional belief that people are narrowly motivated by financial self-interest. For a long time, the argument was that an organisation just needs to align a worker's financial interests with the success of the organisation (i.e., bonuses or share options), and that person will in turn be motivated.

We say 'inconsistent application' above because a lot of systems are still set up on this financial reward model as the primary motivator for people. What we know though is that financial factors only motivate us up to a point. In the day-to-day, these matters are often far from our mind.

With the rise of remote and hybrid work, generating genuine intrinsic motivation for work is even more important. How do we get remote workers not just going through the motions but truly interested and engaged in the work they are doing? Well, money isn't the primary motivating factor at play here.

Getting Curious

Here we want to talk about a factor which is not as regularly contained in lists of intrinsic motivators at work but is deeply important: curiosity. Humans are naturally curious creatures. From our earliest times, our world is shaped by our outwardly moving curiosity, i.e., discovering and learning about the environment we are in, how we can interact with it, and the

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causes and effects that propel us.

In fact, as far as there is research on this topic in the workplace, it links curiosity with an whole host of positive factors including retention of information, innovation, and openness to others. As we can probably intuitively understand, if you are curious about something you are much more likely to bring your full attention to it, to return to thinking about it and to get creative around the questions and problem.

Curiosity is also crucial for how we connect with others. Showing interest in people, learning how we are different and the same, and remaining open to change, are the basis for mutually positive relationships.

Curiosity really is a ‘wonder state’ for much of what we are trying to achieve together.

What does “curious” motivation look like?

So, how do leaders bring curiosity to the table at work? If you’re noticing a lack of engagement in your team, consider adopting these practices:

- **Curiosity is buoyed in connection**

Working together to learn and solve problems is highly energising for our curiosity. Get people working together on questions, problems and even their everyday work, where feasible. We are naturally curious about the views and approaches of others. Constant solo work is sure to result in disengagement.

- **Orchestrate curious ‘challenges’**

Bring in some big thinking ‘challenges’ for your team. Not only are these highly engaging, but they can also be fertile ground for innovation and new and improved practices. These sessions should encourage people to ask “why?” and “what

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if?” Consider setting a goal of quarterly improvements to how you do things, or greater customer engagement, led by your team’s curious exploration.

- **Weekly or monthly stretches**

Give team members new assignments or projects, which allow them to step a little bit outside of their usual domain. Even better, if they get an opportunity to self-select to some degree. In identifying gaps in our knowledge, we become motivated to fill them. This might look like partnering with another team, taking on a new responsibility or leading a process enhancement.

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