

Curiosity as a Compass for Complex Change



At Performance Frontiers, our experience in guiding executives through the intricate landscapes of organisational change has revealed the truth that the capacity for curiosity is a critical advantage that unlocks the flow of meaningful change. In a world poised for unprecedented evolution, we are witnessing a surge of leaders hungry to learn how to inspire and embed cultures of curiosity, recognising this as paramount for adaptation, innovation, and purposeful leadership. We believe in forging a future where organisations are not just resilient, but regenerative; driven by an expansive and conscious approach to leadership.

The good news is that curiosity isn't a luxury, it's our natural state; a fundamental brain function that directs our attention and drives learning. From the moment we enter the world, we are wired to explore, question, and make sense of our surroundings. Think of a child, utterly absorbed in discovering how a toy works or why the sky is blue. This innate wonder is powered by a relaxed brain state, often characterised by alpha and theta brain waves, which are associated with calm alertness, creativity, and deep learning. When our nervous system is regulated, our heart and brain enter a state of coherence, fostering optimal cognitive function and an open, receptive mind. This is the fertile ground from which genuine curiosity springs, often accompanied by the release of dopamine (the brain's 'pleasure drug'), which fuels our drive to explore and learn, allowing us to see possibilities rather than just problems.

The Shadow of Threat

How Change Stifles Curiosity

However, the modern workplace, particularly during periods of complex change, often pulls us away from this natural state. Organisational transformation, while necessary, can trigger deep-seated threat responses. When faced with uncertainty like job security, new processes, shifting power dynamics, our ancient survival mechanisms kick in. The amygdala, our brain's alarm system, goes into overdrive, flooding our system with stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline (epinephrine). This physiological response, often referred to as the 'fight, flight, or freeze' response, is designed to prepare us for immediate danger, narrowing our focus to perceived threats. All of a sudden, our body still looks like an adult in a boardroom but our nervous system is running riot like an animal being chased across the desert in a fight for survival.

While essential for survival in a truly dangerous situation, our threat response severely impacts our capacity for curiosity. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for higher-order thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, becomes inhibited. Our attention constricts, making us less likely to consider diverse viewpoints, challenge assumptions, or explore novel solutions. Instead, we cling to what is known, even if it's no longer effective. This explains why organisations, once giants like Kodak, Blockbuster, or Nokia, failed to adapt; their collective threat response to emerging technologies stifled the very curiosity needed to innovate. As leaders, understanding this neuroscientific reality is crucial: a threatened brain, inundated with stress chemicals, is a closed brain, incapable of the expansive thinking required for true transformation.

Cultivating Calm

Strategies for Nervous System Regulation and Redirected Focus

The good news is that we can consciously intervene. By actively regulating our nervous system, we can shift from a state of threat to one of curiosity, redirecting our attention towards problem-solving and forward momentum. This isn't about ignoring challenges; it's about approaching them from a place of calm strength.

Practical strategies for nervous system regulation at work include:



Mindful Breathing: Simple, deep belly breaths activate the vagus nerve, a key player in the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms the body. This helps to increase the release of GABA, the brain's primary inhibitory neurotransmitter, which acts as a 'braking mechanism' to slow neuron firing and reduce anxiety. A few minutes of conscious breathing before a challenging meeting can significantly reduce physiological stress.



Micro-Breaks and Movement: Stepping away from your desk for even five minutes, stretching, or a short walk can release accumulated tension and re-oxygenate the brain, enhancing cognitive flexibility. This can also help regulate serotonin levels, contributing to improved mood and a sense of well-being.



Nature Connection: If possible, spend time outdoors. Exposure to natural environments has been shown to reduce stress hormones and improve mood, fostering a more open and creative mindset.



Heart-Brain Coherence Practices: Techniques like focused gratitude or appreciation can help synchronise heart rhythms and brain waves, promoting a state of calm focus conducive to curiosity. These practices can also encourage the release of oxytocin, a hormone associated with social bonding and trust, which can foster a more collaborative and curious environment.

Once regulated, we can consciously redirect our attention. This involves engaging the prefrontal cortex by asking open-ended questions, actively listening, and seeking to understand rather than to judge. Frame challenges as "puzzles" to be solved collaboratively, rather than insurmountable "problems." This shift in perspective, backed by a calmer nervous system, allows us to access our innate problem-solving abilities and generate innovative solutions. It builds forward momentum by transforming potential paralysis into purposeful action.

Sustaining the Spark

Layered Puzzles and Unveiling Mysteries

Harnessing curiosity isn't a one-off event; it's a continuous practice, a commitment to lifelong learning and exploration. For leaders, this means fostering an environment where curiosity is not just tolerated but celebrated and integrated into the fabric of the organisation. Think injecting colour, play, texture and fun into the environment on the regular. The sustained engagement with new ideas and challenges continues to stimulate dopamine pathways, reinforcing the reward associated with learning and discovery and keeps the team engaged.

We begin by tackling the "layered puzzles"; the complex, interconnected challenges within our immediate operational sphere. Each solved puzzle builds confidence and capability, creating a virtuous cycle of learning and adaptation. This iterative process allows teams to develop systems thinking, understanding how different parts of the organisation interact and influence each other, and feel more deeply connected and invested in the organisation.

Ultimately, this sustained curiosity prepares us to explore the "mysteries of our world"; the deeper, more profound questions about our purpose, our impact, and our potential. What kind of future are we building? How can our organisation contribute to a more regenerative society?

These are questions that transcend immediate objectives, inviting us to engage with a broader, more holistic vision. By nurturing curiosity, we not only solve today's problems but also empower ourselves and our teams to shape a more conscious, adaptable, and ultimately, more fulfilling future. It is through this continuous journey of enquiry that we truly unlock our innate edge, transforming challenges into opportunities for profound growth and collective impact.

To further embed these principles and cultivate a truly curious culture, we invite you to explore the [Performance Frontiers ASK Toolkit](#). This practical resource is designed to equip leaders with the art of asking powerful questions; questions that not only challenge assumptions and uncover insights but also foster psychological safety and ignite the innate curiosity within your teams. By consciously shifting your questioning approach, you can actively support a transition from reactive problem-solving to proactive exploration, empowering your people to engage with complexity, unlock innovative solutions, and collectively shape a more regenerative future.

