

# The Business Case for Curiosity



# Three insights about Curiosity

- Curiosity is much more important to an enterprise's performance. When our curiosity is triggered, we think more deeply and rationally about decisions and come up with **more-creative solutions**.
- By making small changes to the design of their organizations and the ways they manage their employees, **leaders can encourage curiosity**—and improve their companies.
- Although leaders might *say* they treasure inquisitive minds, in fact most stifle curiosity, **fearing it will increase risk and inefficiency**.

- In a survey of more than 3,000 employees from a wide range of firms and industries, only about **24% reported feeling curious** in their jobs on a regular basis, and about **70% said they face barriers to asking**.



"I KNOW I SAID, 'FEEL FREE TO ASK QUESTIONS.' BUT I DIDN'T ACTUALLY MEAN IT."

# Benefits of Curiosity

- Fewer decision-making errors.

When our curiosity is triggered, we are less likely to fall prey to confirmation bias (looking for information that supports our beliefs rather than for evidence suggesting we are wrong)

# Benefits of Curiosity

- **More innovation and positive changes in both creative and noncreative jobs.**
- In a field study INSEAD's Spencer Harrison and colleagues asked artisans selling their goods through an e-commerce website several questions aimed at assessing the curiosity they experience at work. A one-unit increase in curiosity (for instance, a score of 6 rather than 5 on a 7-point scale) was associated with 34% greater creativity.
- In a separate study, Harrison and his colleagues focused on call centers, where jobs tend to be highly structured. The results showed that the most curious employees sought the most information from coworkers, and the information helped them in their jobs—for instance, it boosted their creativity in addressing customers' concerns.

# Benefits of Curiosity

- **Research confirms that encouraging people to be curious generates workplace improvements.**
- For one study I recruited about 200 employees working in various companies and industries. Twice a week for four weeks, half of them received a text message at the start of their workday that read, “What is one topic or activity you are curious about today?.....”
- After four weeks, the participants in the first group scored higher than the others on questions assessing their innovative behaviors at work, such as whether they had made constructive suggestions for implementing solutions to pressing organizational problems.

# Benefits of Curiosity

- **Reduced group conflict.**

- Research found that curiosity encourages members of a group to put themselves in one another's shoes and take an interest in one another's ideas rather than focus only on their own perspective. That causes them to work together more effectively and smoothly: Conflicts are less heated, and groups achieve better results.



# Benefits of Curiosity

- **More-open communication and better team performance.**

Working with executives in a leadership program at Harvard Kennedy School, my colleagues and I divided participants into groups of five or six, had some groups participate in a task that heightened their curiosity, and then asked all the groups to engage in a simulation that tracked performance. The groups whose curiosity had been heightened performed better than the control groups because they shared information more openly and listened more carefully.

# Two Barriers to Curiosity

- **They have the wrong mindset about exploration.**

-Leaders often think that letting employees follow their curiosity will lead to a **costly mess**.

-They also believe that disagreements would arise and making and executing decisions would slow down, raising the cost of doing business.

# Two Barriers to Curiosity

- **They seek efficiency to the detriment of exploration.**
- These leadership tendencies help explain why our curiosity usually declines the longer we're in a job. In one survey, I asked about 250 people who had recently started working for various companies a series of questions designed to measure curiosity; six months later I administered a follow-up survey.
- Although initial levels of curiosity varied, after six months everyone's curiosity had dropped, with the average decline exceeding 20%.
- Because people were under pressure to complete their work quickly, they had little time to ask questions about broad processes or overall goals.

# Five Ways to Bolster Curiosity

1. Hire for curiosity.
2. Model inquisitiveness.
3. Emphasize learning goals.
4. Let employees explore and broaden their interests.
5. Have “Why?” “What if...?” and “How might we...?” days.

# Hire for curiosity

- In 2004 an anonymous billboard appeared on Highway 101, in the heart of Silicon Valley, posing this puzzle: “**{first 10-digit prime found in consecutive digits of e}.com.**” The answer, **7427466391.com**, led the curious online, where they found another equation to solve. The handful of people who did so were invited to submit a résumé to Google.
- IDEO, the design and consulting company, seeks to hire “**T-shaped**” employees: people with deep skills that allow them to contribute to the creative process (the vertical stroke of the T) and a predisposition for collaboration across disciplines, a quality requiring empathy and curiosity (the horizontal stroke of the T). The firm understands that empathy and curiosity are related.

# Model inquisitiveness

- Leaders can encourage curiosity throughout their organizations by being inquisitive themselves. In 2000, when Greg **Dyke** had been named **director general of the BBC** but hadn't yet assumed the position, he spent five months visiting the BBC's major locations, assembling the staff at each stop. Employees expected a long presentation but instead got a simple question: **"What is the one thing I should do to make things better for you?"** Dyke would listen carefully and then ask, **"What is the one thing I should do to make things better for our viewers and listeners?"**
- Management books commonly encourage leaders assuming new positions to communicate their vision from the start rather than ask employees how they can be most helpful. It's bad advice.

# Model inquisitiveness

- Why do we refrain from asking questions? Because we fear we'll be judged incompetent, indecisive, or unintelligent. Plus, time is precious, and we don't want to bother people.
- As people climb the organizational ladder, they think they have less to learn. Leaders also tend to believe they're expected to talk and provide answers, not ask questions.

# Model inquisitiveness

- **Patricia** Fili-Krushel told me that when she joined **WebMD Health** as chief executive, she met with a group of male engineers in Silicon Valley. They were doubtful that she could add value to their work and, right off the bat, asked what she knew about engineering. Without hesitation, Fili-Krushel made a zero with her fingers. **“This is how much I know about engineering,”** she told them. **“However, I do know how to run businesses, and I’m hoping you can teach me what I need to know about your world.”** When leaders concede that they don’t have the answer to a question, they show that they value the process of looking for answers and motivate others to explore as well.



# Model inquisitiveness

- New hires at Pixar Animation Studios are often hesitant to question the status quo, given the company's track record of hit movies and the brilliant work of those who have been there for years. To combat that tendency, **Ed Catmull**, the cofounder and president, makes a point of talking about times when Pixar made bad choices. Like all other organizations, he says, **Pixar is not perfect**, and it needs fresh eyes to spot opportunities for improvement. In this way Catmull gives new recruits license to question existing practices. Recognizing the limits of our own knowledge and skills sends a powerful signal to others.

# Model inquisitiveness

- **Bob Langer**, who heads one of MIT's most productive laboratories, told me recently that this principle guides how he manages his staff. As human beings, **we all feel an urge to evaluate others—often not positively**. We're quick to judge their ideas, behaviors, and perspectives, even when those relate to things that haven't been tried before. **Langer avoids this trap by raising questions about others' ideas, which leads people to think more deeply about their perspective** and to remain curious about the tough problems they are trying to tackle. In doing so, he is modeling behavior that he expects of others in the lab.

# Emphasize learning goals

- When I asked Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger how he was able to land a commercial aircraft safely in the Hudson River, he described his passion for continuous learning. Although commercial flights are almost always routine, every time his plane pushed back from the gate he would remind himself that he needed to be prepared for the unexpected. “What can I learn?” he would think.
- But those who are passionate about continuous learning contemplate a wide range of options and perspectives.

# Emphasize learning goals

- **It's natural to concentrate on results**, especially in the face of tough challenges. But focusing on learning is generally more beneficial to us and our organizations, as some landmark studies show.
- A body of research demonstrates that framing work around learning goals (developing competence, acquiring skills, mastering new situations, and so on) rather than performance goals (hitting targets, proving our competence, impressing others) boosts motivation.

# Emphasize learning goals

- **And when motivated by learning goals, we acquire more-diverse skills, do better at work,** get higher grades in college, do better on problem-solving tasks, and receive higher ratings after training. Unfortunately, organizations often prioritize performance goals.
- **Many companies replaced its performance management system with one that tracks both learning and performance.** Employees meet regularly with a coach to discuss their development and learning along with the support they need to continually grow.

# Emphasize learning goals

- Writers and directors at Pixar are trained in a technique called “plussing,” which involves building on ideas without using judgmental language.
- Instead of rejecting a sketch, for example, a director might find a starting point by saying, “I like Woody’s eyes, and what if we...?” Someone else might jump in with another “plus.”
- This technique allows people to remain curious, listen actively, respect the ideas of others, and contribute their own. By promoting a process that allows all sorts of ideas to be explored, leaders send a clear message that learning is a key goal even if it doesn’t always lead to success.

# Let employees explore and broaden their interests

- Organizations can foster curiosity by giving employees time and resources to explore their interests.
- In the 1930s some employees caught a coworker leaving the factory with a bag full of iron pieces and machinery. They accused him of stealing and asked the company to fire him. The worker told the CEO, **Adriano Olivetti**, that he was taking the parts home to work on a new machine over the weekend because he didn't have time while performing his regular job. Instead of firing him, Olivetti gave him time to create the machine and charged him with overseeing its production. The result was **Divisumma, the first electronic calculator.**

# Let employees explore and broaden their interests

- Some organizations provide resources to support employees' outside interests. Since 1996 the manufacturing conglomerate United Technologies (UTC) has given as much as \$12,000 in tuition annually to any employee seeking a degree part-time—no strings attached.
- Even though UTC hasn't tried to quantify the benefits of its tuition reimbursement program, Gail Jackson, the vice president of human resources when we spoke, believes in the importance of curious employees. **“It's better to train and have them leave than not to train and have them stay,”**



# Let employees explore and broaden their interests

- **Employees can also broaden their interests by broadening their networks.** Curious people often end up being star performers thanks to their diverse networks, my research with the University of Toronto's Tiziana Casciaro, Bill McEvily, and Evelyn Zhang finds. Because they're more comfortable than others asking questions, such people more easily create and nurture ties at work—and those ties are critical to their career development and success.

# Let employees explore and broaden their interests

- **Deliberate thinking about workspaces can broaden networks and encourage the cross-pollination of ideas.**
- In the 1990s, when Pixar was designing a new home for itself in Emeryville, across the bay from San Francisco, the initial plans called for a separate building for each department. But then-owner Steve Jobs had concerns about isolating the various departments and decided to build a single structure with a large atrium in the center, containing employee mailboxes, a café, a gift shop, and screening rooms. Forcing employees to interact, he reasoned, would expose them to one another's work and ideas.

# Let employees explore and broaden their interests

- **Leaders can also boost employees' curiosity by carefully designing their teams.**
- Consider Massimo Bottura, the owner of **Osteria Francescana**, a three-Michelin-star restaurant in Modena, Italy, that was rated the Best Restaurant in the World in 2016 and 2018. His sous chefs are Davide di Fabio, from Italy, and Kondo Takahiko, from Japan. The two differ not only in their origins but also in their strengths: Di Fabio is more comfortable with **improvisation**, while Takahiko is obsessed with **precision**. Such “collisions” make the kitchen more innovative, Bottura believes, and inspire curiosity in other workers.

# Have “Why?” “What if...?” and “How might we...?” days

- As every parent knows, *Why?* is ubiquitous in the vocabulary of young children, who have an insatiable need to understand the world around them.



# Have “Why?” “What if...?” and “How might we...?” days

- For half the workers, the information was presented as the “**grow method**”—our version of a control condition. We encouraged that group to view those elements as immutable, and we stressed the importance of following existing processes that managers had already defined. For the other half, the information was presented as the “go back method.” We encouraged those employees to see the elements as fluid and to “**go back**” and rethink them. A week later we found that the workers who’d read about the “go back method” showed more creativity in tasks than the workers in the “grow method” group.

# The Five Dimensions of Curiosity

- In one study, highly curious children aged three to 11 improved their intelligence test scores by 12 points more than their least-curious counterparts did.
- Psychology students who felt more curious than others during their first class enjoyed lectures more, got higher final grades, and subsequently enrolled in more courses in the discipline.

- To that end we use either “**diversive curiosity**” (as when a bored person searches for something—*anything*—to boost arousal) or what he called “**specific curiosity**” (as when a hyperstimulated person tries to understand what’s happening in order to reduce arousal to a more manageable level.)



# Five Dimensions

- *deprivation sensitivity*—recognizing a gap in knowledge the filling of which offers relief. This type of curiosity doesn't necessarily feel good, but people who experience it work relentlessly to solve problems.
- *joyous exploration*—being consumed with wonder about the fascinating features of the world. This is a pleasurable state.
- *social curiosity*—talking, listening, and observing others to learn what they are thinking and doing. Human beings are inherently social animals, and the most effective and efficient way to determine whether someone is friend or foe is to gain information. Some may even gossip to do so.

# Five Dimensions

- *stress tolerance*—a willingness to accept and even harness the anxiety associated with novelty. People lacking this ability see information gaps, experience wonder, and are interested in others but are unlikely to step forward and explore.
- *thrill seeking*—being willing to take physical, social, and financial risks to acquire varied, complex, and intense experiences. For people with this capacity, the anxiety of confronting novelty is something to be amplified, not reduced.

# Five Dimensions

- Joyous exploration has the strongest link with the experience of intense positive emotions.
- Stress tolerance has the strongest link with satisfying the need to feel competent, autonomous, and that one belongs.
- Social curiosity has the strongest link with being a kind, generous, modest person.
- In a survey of 3,000 workers in China, Germany, and the United States, we found that 84% believe that curiosity catalyzes new ideas, 74% think it inspires unique, valuable talents, and 63% think it helps one get promoted.

# Five Dimensions

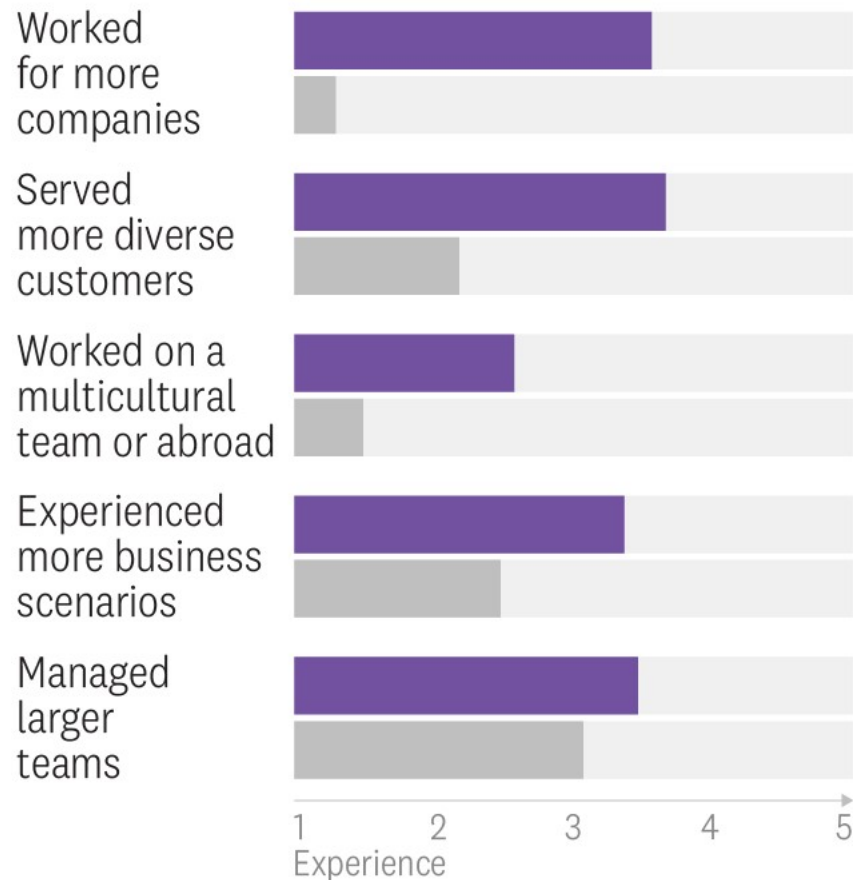
- Four of the dimensions—joyous exploration, deprivation sensitivity, **stress tolerance, and social curiosity**—improve work outcomes.
- The latter two seem to be particularly important.
- Without the ability to tolerate stress, employees are less likely to seek challenges and resources and to voice dissent and are more likely to feel enervated and to disengage. And socially curious employees are better than others at resolving conflicts with colleagues, more likely to receive social support, and more effective at building connections, trust, and commitment on their teams.

From Curious to Competent

# Experiences That Transform Curiosity into Competence

- Consider 20 leaders, all rated as extraordinarily curious. Ten leveraged that into high competence scores (represented by purple bars); 10 did not (gray bars). What made the difference? The extent to which they were given the opportunities below.

## The top 10 had:



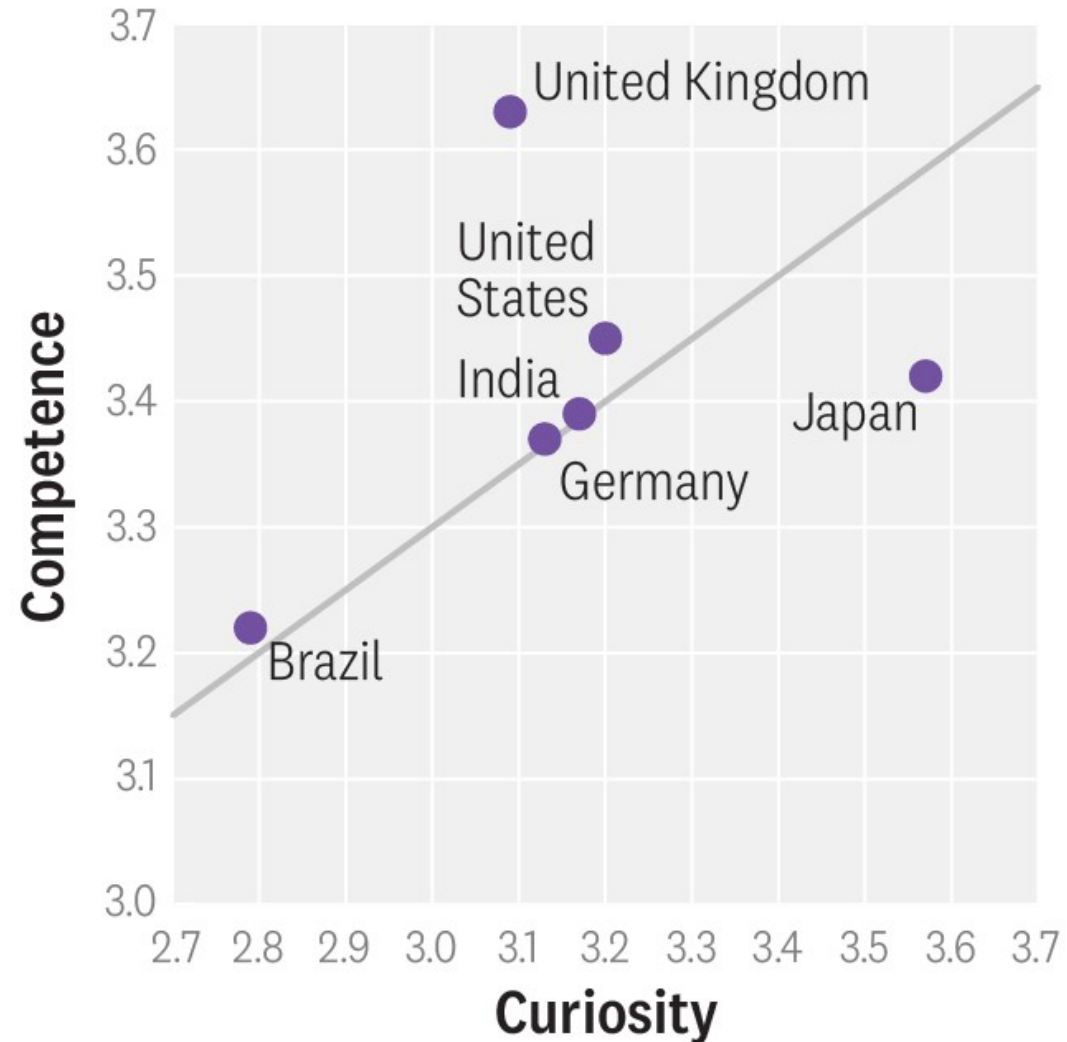
Although the Japanese have lots of curiosity, their competence scores are barely average.

The British, by contrast, are less curious but more competent. Why these differences?

We believe that Japan's cultural norms limit people's development by rewarding tenure above all and by discouraging big job moves.

Meanwhile, British firms embrace company and role changes along with coaching.

This is yet more evidence that although curiosity is a necessary ingredient for executive success, in itself it's not enough.



Note: Egon Zehnder selected these countries because they were the only ones in its database.

Thank You