

A lack of curiosity killed the cat

Curiosity killed the cat refers in everyday parlance to the dangers of needless risk-taking and experimentation. But a *lack of* curiosity is what kills many an executive's career.

This is a story about Luke Potter (pseudonym) who believed the reasons for his previous success as a CEO could easily be transferred to his new role. Luke is still wondering why he failed and why he was asked to leave.

The best leaders are the best learners

At 50, Luke thought he was at the top of his game. Somewhat bored, he told others he had chosen to move on from his old company after more than 10 years as CEO and was taking a break. When an executive search firm approached him, their pitch reinforced his self-belief, "You're recognised as one of the most successful leaders in the sector and ABC Ltd really needs your skills." He was chuffed and accepted without a second thought. He didn't even discuss it with his wife or close friends. After all he'd been a great success, hadn't he?

What Luke didn't see was that he was trapped in attitudes and habits that suited another, now distant era.

Truth is, his old firm had gently moved him on and he hadn't really sought to understand why his severance package had been so generous.

Self renewal

The great John Gardner of Stanford University [wrote](#) about 'self renewal' as the urgent need for leaders who want to make a difference to commit themselves to continue learning and growing. This is exactly what Luke was not doing. In fact, he not even aware of the need.

Past success as a leader is not a predictor of future success. If you rely on your old paradigms about what works and what doesn't, you miss the point. Every organisation, and therefore every senior executive role, is different. The external environment is changing, and organisational strategy and culture must change to align with the environment. A leader's main task is to ensure strong 'fit', including that of his or her own style.



Luke, like most leaders in the position he found himself, tried hard in his new company. He didn't stop and reflect deeply on what was needed. The more he struggled, the harder he worked, recalling – and recounting to anyone who would listen – this is how I did it last time. Remembering how successful he was; if he used the same formula he would be again. Surely?

Alas Luke was failing. He was isolated; he became the classic 'lonely CEO'. And no one would tell him why. He hired an executive coach, and when she tried to show him that he needed to flex and learn, he severed the relationship. Her message didn't fit his paradigm.

Luke was trapped. Just like the barnacle about which John Gardner wrote in his 1990 [address](#) to McKinsey & Co: "Not long ago, I read a splendid article on barnacles... This article had an unforgettable opening paragraph. 'The barnacle' the author explained 'is confronted with an existential decision about where it's going to live. Once it decides... it spends the rest of its life with its head cemented to a rock...' End of quote. For a good many of us, it comes to that." Just like Luke.

Transform or move on

A leader with Luke's ambition needs to develop transformational skills, to be able to adapt by learn, and to grow in new situations. If you can't – or won't do this – then you need to move on into a culture that suits you; one that doesn't need to change – at least in the near term.

Without curiosity, without as Gardner put it being an 'insatiable learner', no leader can succeed in today's fast moving environment.

And Luke compounded his isolation by engaging with friends and business associates from his old firm; he was seeking reassurance that he was on the right track. He was reassured, but falsely. In an earlier [post](#) I explained the dangers of using the wrong networks for support: "It's true, as Herminia [Ibarra](#) of INSEAD writes, that 'we cannot regenerate in isolation; we develop in and through our relationships with others'. But if these others are the people who know us best, then they more likely to hinder than help our exploration. You need to break out of the grip of your friends and associates. To venture to the periphery of your networks to canvass all the possibilities your skills, experience and energy offer you."

You have to challenge yourself

If you don't want to be killed by a lack of your own curiosity you have to challenge yourself. As John Gardner put it "It takes a real sense of personal commitment, especially after you have arrived at a position of power and responsibility to grow and challenge conventional wisdom."

Read both '[Are you Learning as Fast as the World is Changing](#)' from the Harvard Business School blog for another angle on the truism '*In a world that never stops changing, great leaders never stop learning*' and '[What Else Might I Do?](#)' by Herminia Ibarra in her address to Egon Zehnder.

As a CEO if you don't challenge or yourself – and give others permission to challenge you – then, like Luke you will stagnate.

And there will be another case of a lack of curiosity killing the cat.

If you found this post helpful, you may also want to read these

- + [Does your network bind \(and blind\) you?](#)
- + [If you keep on going the way you are, you will miss the road to your future](#)

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