

Curiosity

In a 2015 [PwC survey](#) of a thousand CEOs globally, 'curiosity' and 'open-mindedness' were identified as increasingly critical leadership traits in these complex and challenging times.

My own experience with c-suite executives supports this thesis and shows every leader and their organisations will benefit by investing in learning to become more curious.

Better answers to today's complex challenges and groundbreaking ways of grasping big opportunities come from asking the right questions. And the ability to ask probing, out-of-the-box questions comes from being deeply imaginative, and from having the courage and insight to ask penetrating 'Why' questions, as well as speculative 'What if' and 'How' questions? In other words, to be curious.

The nature of curiosity

To be curious is to be an inquisitive thinker, to explore, to investigate, to learn.

Children are naturally curious; the more ideas and new things to learn about to which they are exposed, the more curious they become. Remember the four-year old who at times drives her/his parents – and anyone else who will listen – crazy with seemingly insatiable 'Why?' questions. Children are beautiful examples of Plutarch's wisdom, "*The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled*".

Research suggests that success as a leader in our increasingly complex world may depend as much on curiosity as it does on cognitive intelligence (IQ) and emotional intelligence (EQ). People with a high curiosity quotient (CQ) are hungry to know more, they shun approved pathways, preferring diversions, unplanned excursions and impulsive left turns. In short curiosity is deviant, and non-conforming. Properly harnessed, curiosity cultivates innovation and creativity.

Curiosity can be learned as professor [Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic](#) of University College London explains: "Although IQ is hard to teach, EQ and CQ can be developed." Einstein put thus: "*I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious*".

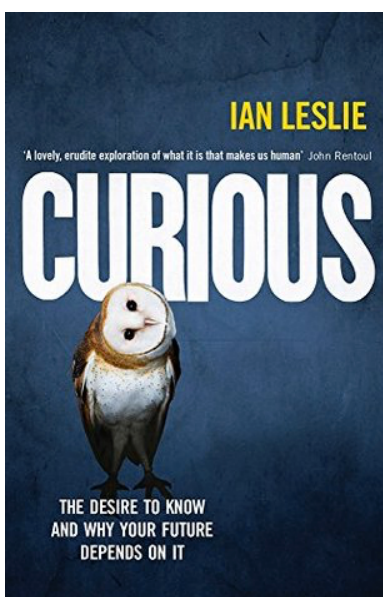
Forms of curiosity

In '[Curiosity](#)', an excellent recent book, Ian Leslie explains there are three forms of curiosity.

The way young children are attracted to everything novel is known as *diversive* curiosity. In adults *diversive* curiosity manifest as a restless search for the next and the new. Today's society and technologies enable us to enjoy the 24/7 news cycle, to be AO (always online) using our smart phones and tablets as extensions of ourselves. Every news bite, headline, tweet and LinkedIn update is a delight on which the *diversively* curious feast. It is mostly effortless from first thing in the morning to the last at night; in effect severing the link between effort and mental exploration.

When we harness our *diversive* curiosity by disciplined focus in a deliberate search for particular knowledge and insights we are exercising our *epistemic* curiosity. In contrast with the *diversive* form *epistemic* curiosity requires effort and can be learned. It cultivates an enduring appetite for problem solving, leading to higher levels of intellectual investment and knowledge acquisition over time. *Epistemic* curiosity started to come to the fore with the invention of the printing press and has exploded with access to the Internet

and search engines.



The third form is *empathic*, a curiosity about the thoughts and feelings of others. Displaying empathic curiosity is not about being prurient or voyeuristic, it is exercised when you genuinely put yourself in the shoes and mind of another person. Thus whereas diversive curiosity makes you ask where a person lives, empathic curiosity makes you wonder why they live there.

What's your curiosity profile?

Of the many ways of self-assessing your CQ, I like this simple **20-question tool** from Harvard. If nothing else, completing this short inventory will make you think about your own level of curiosity and just how much you could benefit from lifting your score.

And remember, if you neglect your curiosity, i.e. stop learning and asking 'Why?', your CQ will decline. Becoming overly focused on day-to-day executive tasks limits the horizons to which you lift your eyes and brain. If you allow yourself to become incurious, you are less likely to achieve your potential as an executive; you risk slipping into the habit of accepting the status quo or believing there is only one solution or perspective that is the right one.

Being curious is predictor of leadership success

For a leader to 'become more curious' sounds simple enough, but it often requires a change in leadership style. Functional managers in HR, Finance, Marketing and Information Systems usually rise through the ranks by making things happen, providing fixes and implementing solutions, not by asking questions. As an enterprise leader many believe they must project confidence and know the answers. This results in an aversion in asking 'Why'? It may be seen as weakness, rather than the strength it truly is.

Having the confidence and humility to be a questioning leader are hallmarks of leadership potential. The **research** of Clayton Christensen and others from Harvard Business School shows that being sufficiently humble to admit not knowing all the answers helps leaders succeed.

Curiosity blossoms when we are exposed to new experiences and information. The novel and unexpected ignite our desire to learn. Hence the importance of seeking out fresh perspectives and listening to those with original thoughts.

Ian Leslie has shown that curious leaders see the world with a beginner's mind. They don't ever assume they know it all, that experience is a substitute for open-mindedness. They constantly challenge their own and others' assumptions by asking 'Why?', 'What if?' and 'How?' questions.

What we learned from Steve Jobs

Steve Jobs was not exceptionally clever in a cognitive sense, nor was his emotional intelligence very high. However, Steve Jobs changed the world because of his passionate curiosity, perfectionism and ferocious drive. He revolutionised six industries: personal computers, animated movies, music, phones, tablet computing and digital publishing.

Everyone is born curious. But only some of us retain the habits of exploring, learning and discovering, as we grow older. Which side of the 'curiosity divide' are you?

Learn more about curiosity

- + **What's Your Curiosity Profile?** by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, Harvard Business Review December 2015
- + **A Curious Mind: The Secret to a Bigger Life** by Brian Grazer and Charles Fishman. Fans of Russell Crowe will be additionally interested in Brian Grazer whose movies include *A Beautiful Mind*.
- + Loewenstein, G, **The Psychology of Curiosity: A Review and Reinterpretation**, *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 116, No. 1, (July 1994), pp. 75–98.