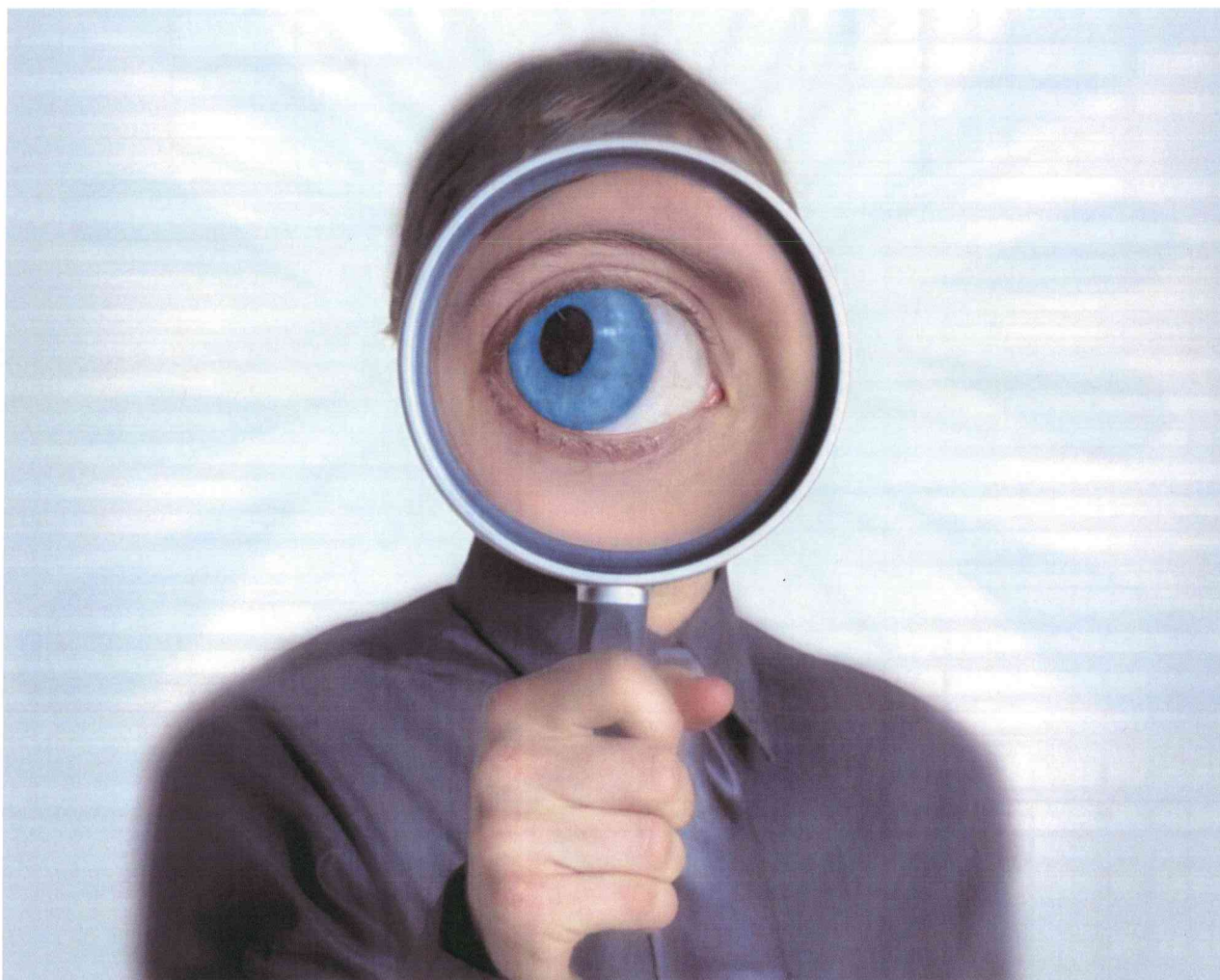


# Curiosity: The Gateway Competency

JULIE WINKLE GIULIONI AND BEVERLY KAYE

Curiosity can be cultivated and developed like any other competency. There are six key practices that promote curious behaviors.



Consider the following scenarios: Mia is always energized by her interactions with customers. Every conversation yields an insight she can't wait to do something about.

Because of his genuine interest in learning more about his staff, Ty uncovers an employee's passion for solving puzzles and is able to adjust her job responsibilities to include troubleshooting customer problems.

Juan's favorite word is "why." He can't get through a conversation without digging into why people do what they do, why things work as they do and why the organization conducts business as it does. Sometimes others can answer his questions and sometimes they can't. But this always inspires a lively conversation about how to improve the way things get done.

Strip away the details of each of these situations, and at the core is a leader demonstrating curiosity — about customers, employees and work itself.

The notion that a spirit of inquiry is important to leadership success isn't new. Curiosity is one of the top five character strengths identified by positive psychology researchers Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson most closely linked to fulfillment and happiness. Todd Kashdan seconds this in his book, *Curious?: Discover the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life*. Rod Kurtz, guest lecturer at Wharton, said, "Insatiable curiosity is a key to great leadership." And in his research-based book, *The Corner Office*, Adam Bryant identified passionate curiosity as one of the five essentials for executive success.

But here's the little secret nobody's talking about — curiosity is a gateway competency. It provides the basis from which employees can respond to the complexity and changeability of today's global workplace, and it allows leaders to deliver bottom-line business results.

#### Gateway to Other Critical Competencies

Curiosity may be the most helpful competency in business today. Start with genuine inquisitiveness, a bias toward asking and learning, and an authentic interest in others and what they might have to share and there's no limit to a leader's potential.

#### ON THE WEB

Learners' natural curiosity can be harnessed to facilitate knowledge transfer and communication. To learn how, visit [CLOmedia.com/articles/view/3536](http://CLOmedia.com/articles/view/3536).

Curiosity acts as a powerful foundation, elevating the quality and boosting the effects of nearly every other competency one might bring to bear in the workplace. Consider the relationship between curiosity and leadership competencies. As a leadership fundamental, listening falls flat by itself. The mechanics of asking questions, nodding and saying "uh huh" lack heart without curiosity. Start with that spirit of inquiry and people sense a genuine interest. This can unleash an outpouring of information from which the curious leader is able to benefit.

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Working with others to achieve goals is how most employees spend a good portion of their time. Collaboration can be tedious sometimes, but curiosity can bring relief. While many start from a place of "here's how I do it," the curious leader starts from a true interest in others' experiences and what ideas they might have. This changes the energy of the interaction, helps to build relationships and can lead to innovative results.

Curiosity also supports coaching. At their core, effective coaches are curious. They are genuinely interested in the other person. They use questions strategically, as a tool to advance insight, understanding and action. Those questions and interactions can deepen awareness and accelerate project completion and success.

Negotiations can be more effective when the spirit of curiosity facilitates transparency about each party's interests, needs and concerns. It fuels understanding

while infusing a sense of care into an interaction between two parties with alternate viewpoints.

Curiosity promotes problem solving. Root cause analysis requires an open, inquiring mind, and tools, techniques and meetings can guide teams through the problem-solving process. And curiosity about others' experiences, thoughts and ideas is the fastest path toward lasting solutions.

#### Six Keys to Unlock Curiosity

Curiosity illuminates needs, builds rapport and establishes trust. It also can introduce a fresh perspective as solutions are identified and implemented in novel ways. Further, curiosity is a competency that can be cultivated and developed like any other. There are six key practices that promote curious behaviors.

that people are generally complex and interesting. Everyone has a back story, hobby or offbeat pastime, a different way of approaching a topic. As a result, curious leaders expect to be surprised and enlightened every time they interact with others.

**Gag the "fix it" reflex.** Most leaders have risen to their roles because they are good at solving problems. Yet overused, this skill can endanger and in some cases completely extinguish curiosity. Most leaders can't wait to fix a situation an employee brings to them. Highly successful and curious leaders gag their "fix it" reflex. Rather than telling the employee what to do, they use the opportunity to engage the other person and learn more.

**Embrace ignorance.** It takes a smart person to acknowledge that he or she doesn't know something.

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**Relinquish control.** Curiosity is all about becoming comfortable with the unknown. Every once in a while, it can be helpful to consciously enter a conversation not knowing how it will turn out. Leaders should ask questions they don't know the answers to. Loosening control means not guiding others toward the "right" answers already in mind. It frequently means that a leader is following someone else's conversational lead rather than his or her own. Curiosity means taking a leap of faith and trusting that all will unfold as it should, without forcing the issue.

**Jettison judgment.** Be honest. How many words do people speak before we make judgments about who they are, what they're like or what they're trying to communicate? There's an epidemic of judgment and skepticism in the workplace for a number of reasons such as time pressures and lack of confidence, but curiosity and judgment cannot coexist. The most successful and curious leaders have developed the ability to suspend judgment. They engage fully without needing to put people or issues in tidy boxes. They get the whole story before making any decisions.

**Expect surprises from every party.** The most curious, successful leaders approach life assuming

That's frequently what sets the stage for the greatest sharing, input and learning. Genuine curiosity demands a fundamental belief that there's no shame in admitting a lack of understanding. Curiosity always benefits from leading with ignorance rather than ego.

**Woo the cue.** Successful, curious leaders are not passive consumers of information — they actively engage with others. They are on high alert for signals and cues that require exploration: an emotionally charged word, a facial expression, a pause or hesitation, a reaction. All are invitations to dig deeper, follow up, ask for examples or invite the other person to say more. These cues are similar to traffic signs, helping leaders navigate the conversation with curiosity and purpose.

#### Gateway to the Bottom Line

Developing the ability to approach individuals, situations and conversations with curiosity — that sense of inquiry, interest and wonder — can affect a person's energy and enthusiasm for work. It can help to build strong relationships with others, and that's just the beginning.

Curiosity supports and inspires innovation because curious leaders model the behaviors required

to innovate. They engage employees through challenging dialogue and spark creativity through their questions and openness to hearing the answers. Their curiosity can encourage others to apply a sense of inquiry and fresh eyes to their own work. In this type of environment one might expect to see a consistently full pipeline of innovative new products hit the market.

There are many other ways curiosity contributes to business results. Consider talent development and retention. Curious leaders know their employees, what they're doing and how satisfied and engaged they are. This kind of leader knows when a valued staff member may be ready to look for employment elsewhere or when it's time to stretch someone with a new challenge or assignment.

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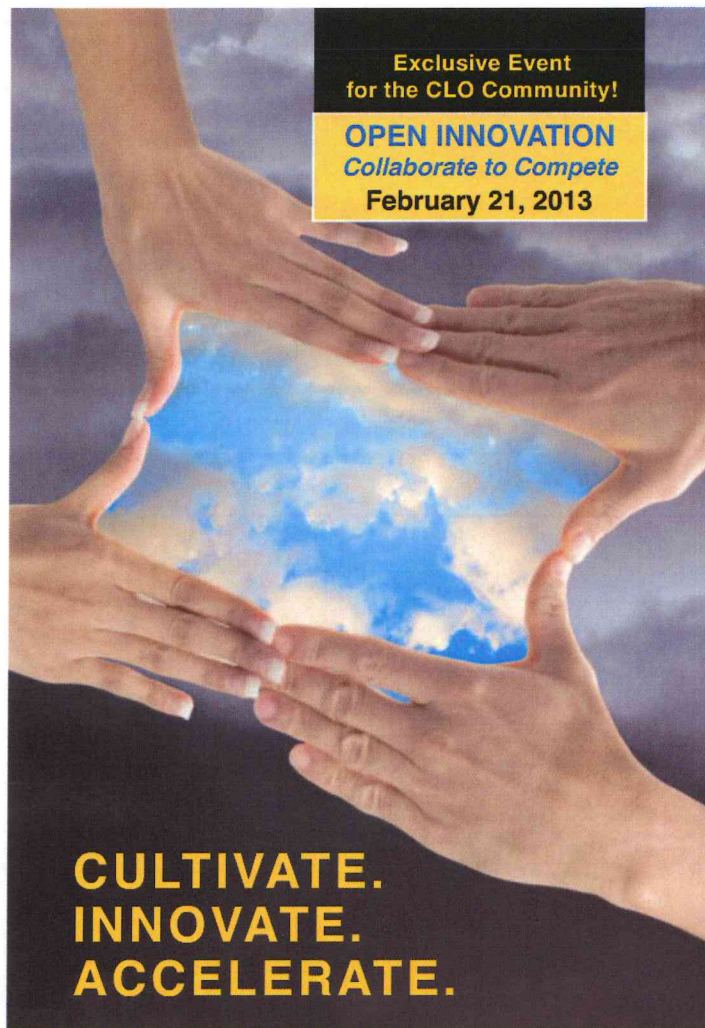
Beyond employees, curiosity also impacts the customer. Curious leaders understand their customers, what they want, when they're pleased and when they're not. Genuine interest enables a level of customer intimacy that allows the organization to deliver better products, more targeted service and greater value than competitors.

Curiosity supports and boosts other critical leadership competencies, and it drives bottom-line business results. Curious leaders appreciate the nuances of cost, process and other dimensions of the business. They dig deeply into how things work and, as a result, surface opportunities for improvement. They figure out what's required to achieve operational excellence, and this rubs off on others who'll do the same. **CLO**

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