

Being curious about curiosity

I was intrigued - indeed, curious - when I came across a Harvard Business Review article titled "Why Curious People Are Destined for the C-Suite". My curiosity started from this very title. What's a "C-Suite"? So the curious me looked up Investopedia. Here's what it says: "C-suite is a widely-used slang to collectively refer to a corporation's most important senior executives. It gets its name because top senior executives' titles tend to start with the letter C - for chief - as in chief executive officer, chief operating officer and chief information officer."

Ah, it all makes sense now. Curiosity will help get you up the corporate ladder. I've always known that. But if I had known about "C-Suite" earlier in my career, I could have written this article for the Harvard Business Review.

Being curious is a great habit to carry with us through life. The key is to stay hungry for answers. There was a line in the article that provides the motivation for us to adopt this habit - "...success may be less about having all the answers and more about wondering and questioning." So, I'd like to share my own feelings about curiosity using this line.

Have all the answers?

Can any one person have all the answers? We may know some of the things some of the time but surely, we can't know all the things all of the time! Even if we had all the answers, it does not guarantee that we would make the right decisions with them. To borrow from former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, there are "known unknowns" and there are "unknown knowns". The latter is crucial for my argument. Unknown knowns are "the things you think you know, that turn out you do not". It was only in 330 BC that Aristotle provided evidence that the Earth is spherical in shape. Before then, everyone believed that the Earth was flat. Hence, knowing something - anything - is relevant only for that moment. It may not always remain the right answer.

Wondering and questioning

Consider the terms wondering and questioning along with these others: inquisitive, seeking fresh ideas, creative thinking and increasing engagement. Only when we are hungry for answers are we able to achieve all these. Even if you think you know an answer (notice I did not say "THE answer"), it helps to talk aloud what is going through your mind. This habit will generate one or both of these outcomes:

1. You affirm the veracity of your argument or decision among your audience.
2. You increase engagement by planting ideas in your audience's minds to trigger new ideas.

Hence being curious, and building a culture of curiosity in your organisation, actually increases your chances of success.

How do we start to be curious?

We can start to make curiosity a habit with the help of our mobile devices. Each time we come across a word, phrase or topic for the first time, immediately look it up on our device. The topic could be as profound as sub-atmospheric socket technology or as innocuous as the number of chickens in the world. The next step is crucial - after reading up on it, find a way to use this new knowledge in a conversation or writing within the next 48 hours. For me, when I can't engineer a situation to impress someone with my new-found knowledge, I do it at the family dinner table. OK, so I get a death stare from my teenage daughter, but hey, the idea is to use it within two days.

So, if you think this is cool, go ahead and pick up this habit. Oh, and by the way, did you know there are 19 billion chickens in the world?