

Aren't You Curious?

How leaders have used curiosity as a tool to manage conflict and build presence.

Bill runs a business worth over 1 Billion Euros with a team of 4000 people. His strong leadership skills had helped him to the top, but when we met, things were difficult. Bill was struggling at this new company, and the harder he worked, the worse things seemed to get. Together we realized that when Bill felt threatened, his 'working harder' was part of the problem. When he put his head down to push through to the goal, he stopped hearing what was going on around him. Bill forgot to be curious. He stopped noticing and trying to understand the reactions of the people around him; stopped being curious about other options or solutions to achieving his objectives. Bill is not alone. Most leaders, in certain situations or points in their career, forget to be curious. Making curiosity a conscious practice, however, has not only helped many of my clients significantly increase their ability to successfully manage conflict, but it has also helped them to achieve that often obscure goal of improving their presence.

When I speak about curiosity I am referring to the ability to keep an open mind for slightly longer than usual - to ask questions and truly listen to the answers. Leaders who are consistently curious invest time in understanding others' perspectives – in asking themselves why people have reacted (or overreacted) in a specific way, and in adapting their response based on what they have learned. They are curious about how the person across from them sees the world.

Martin was furious. He had received an insulting email sent with the entire management team blind copied. He spent the first twenty minutes of our discussion reviewing a variety of possible angry responses that may have made him feel better in the short term, but would certainly have escalated an already explosive situation. When I asked Martin why he thought his colleague had reacted in that way, I received a blank stare in response.

Most of us, when we are truly angry, find it difficult to try to see things from our "opponent's" perspective – when this is almost always the first step to resolving a tense situation, achieving our ultimate objective and reducing our stress. Misunderstandings, so often at the source of a problem, are hard to resolve if we don't start asking questions. Clients who have learned to hit pause when they are ready to react, and instead get curious about why the problem exists in the first place, manage to reduce the number, intensity, and associated stress of conflictual situations at work (and at home.) It took Martin a while to speak to his colleague, and the response was not enlightening in this case, but Martin achieved two key things through this process. First, he avoided a dangerous escalation and eventually managed to achieve his objective by

investing more time in understanding the perspective of everyone involved. Second, Martin was able to make curiosity a consistent practice – he had learned to pause and wonder “why” before reacting.

Many of my clients, even the most senior, hear a difference of opinion as a personal attack. Rationally, they may understand that this is not the case, but emotionally, it is not always that easy. Jerome tended to react to these types of discussions by shutting people out, which rarely helped him to achieve his overall objective, and made some relationships at work more difficult. Jerome is an excellent listener, however, so he pulled on these strengths to change his approach. When he heard another view, he taught himself to pause before assuming it was a personal attack. Instead he got curious and started truly listening to his colleagues and trying to understand. As he practiced and strengthened his skills in this area, he also realized that instead of losing power, he had gained increased respect and influence.

Laura, a strategic consultant, had risen through her firm based on her knowledge – or so she thought. Knowledge was, for her, her source of credibility, and when she met new clients she was therefore enthusiastic about showing them what she knew. This often backfired in introductory meetings. In reality, Laura had much more to offer her clients than knowledge – she was a skilled consultant with a quick analysis of the clients’ problem and a creative, out of the box thinker. Laura, naturally curious in other situations, started working on being incredibly curious about the client in that first meeting. She needed to temporarily give up her need to impress with knowledge, but the results she saw quickly helped her turn this into a habit.

In each of these cases, these leaders were able to significantly increase their effectiveness by remembering to be curious. They worked hard to understand other people’s perspectives, which increased their influence within the organization. Their defensiveness significantly decreased while their confidence increased. They attained a “noteworthy quality of poise and effectiveness,” (Merriam Webster’s definition of Presence.)

Being curious is something we all know how to do. When we are feeling attacked, however, and move into a “fight or flight” mode, it is hard to remember to pause, and rely instead on our curiosity. One of my clients even put a post-it on his computer with just the word “curiosity” as an ongoing reminder. It may sound simple, but the benefits are limitless.

*Referenced clients were happy to share their stories, although their names have been changed.

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