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# The Curious Leader

## Leadership Lessons to Cultivate Curiosity

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It's All About People

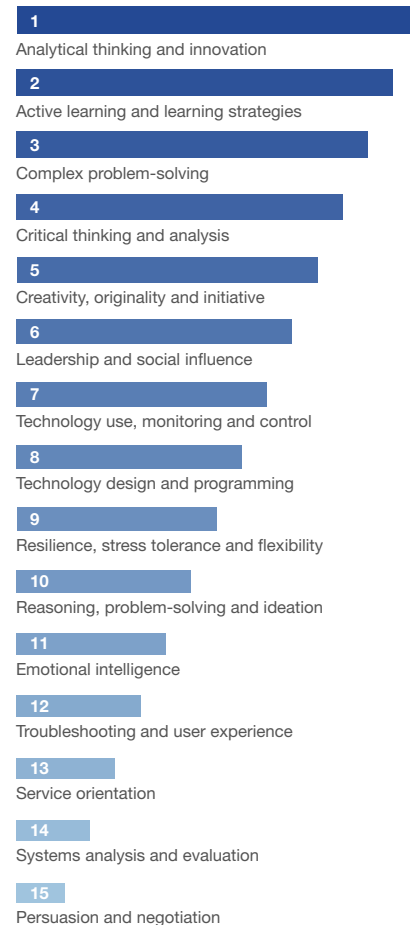
Businesses and their executives have been made aware throughout previous decades about the importance of innovation to become and remain competitive. The disruptive business models of Uber and Airbnb, the introduction of cloud computing in the IT industry and an automotive manufacturer shifting to producing mouth masks in the pandemic are great examples of this. Surveys like The Future of Jobs Report 2020 from the World Economic Forum have already indicated skills such as creativity, problem solving and ideation to be among the most in-demand skills to succeed in the innovation challenge.

**In this article, we want to go one step back and discuss a golden skill that is highly involved prior to realising profitable innovative outcomes, namely curiosity.**

Research agrees that having curious people and teams gives the organisation essential benefits such as better decision-making and collaboration. **Just as leadership has the most significant impact on people and overall business results, we believe leadership is also crucial to either embrace or stifle curiosity.**

In a joint project, Mercuri Urval, experts in Leadership Development and the Global Curiosity Institute, founded to foster a mindset of curiosity in society and organisations, combine expertise and aim with this paper to frame the concept and value of curiosity and to provide practical leadership lessons on how to cultivate the level of curiosity in people, teams and organisation.

### Top 15 skills for 2025



Source:  
Future of Jobs Survey 2020, World Economic Forum

## Curiosity and the fast pace of change

Today in business, work has become surprising, disruptive and changing faster than ever. With emerging technologies such as AI and blockchain, economic and health crises and new innovative business models, change is the constant factor. Executives experience immense pressure to lead their businesses through this rapidly changing world. Once, hard skills were the go-to solution to solve these challenges. Today however, a study done by Gartner indicates that **19% of the professional skills we own today will not be relevant in three years**. The lifespan of skills is getting

shorter and their relevance declines rapidly.

Business leaders now need to invest in another set of skills to navigate the waters of change, like curiosity, learnability and growth mindset. We could call them “**golden skills**”. These are skills that have been with us for decades, but they have never been more important and more of a differentiator now. These skills are needed for leaders to face changes with an open mind, to motivate their teams towards higher levels of innovation and output; and guide their organizations towards new frontiers.

A person is sitting on a rocky outcrop, looking out over a vast, hazy landscape at sunset or sunrise. The person is silhouetted against the bright, orange and yellow light of the sky. The landscape below is filled with rolling hills and mountains, all shrouded in a thick mist or haze. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

“

*The digital age asks for new skills. Skills that are becoming obsolete at an accelerating rate. Learning agility is the only way forward to adapt.*

”

# Curiosity, the greatest untapped human resource

Curiosity is – mostly - hard wired into our brain. We have a human need to explore, question and discover, acquire new information and resolve uncertainty. From the greatest inventions in life to the daily small ideas at work, curiosity is what makes this happen. **Curiosity is about openness to explore and experience, to cope with uncertainty and change, focus, and work on complex matters.**

As kids we ask 300 questions a day: Why? How? What? When we reach high school and by the time we have learned to adhere to societal systems, habits and rules, the number of questions we ask is down to zero. Even though workplaces have been going and are going through the change from top-down to more inclusive environments, once we enter the professional world, we find that not all workplaces are the “Walhalla” of curiosity. We are often told what to do and how to do it because efficiency matters most. If we find ourselves in this unfortunate situation, we become afraid to make mistakes, refrain from asking questions or volunteering ideas. Deviation from the standard procedures is not highly accepted. Questions professionals ask in such environments tend to be procedural: ‘What do I need to do/know to stay out of trouble’ and ‘What is important for my manager?’

Yet according to the research of the Global Curiosity Institute, 86% of professionals agree that curious employees are more likely to bring an idea to life at work, 79% are more likely to generate an idea and 75% are more likely to share an idea. Not embracing workplace curiosity is truly a missed opportunity since cultivating curiosity has a significant positive impact on an enterprise’s overall performance: **curiosity leads to better decision making, more creative solutions, greater collaboration with colleagues and higher levels of mental and physical energy, motivation and engagement in the workforce.** The importance of curiosity is clear.

*“Not embracing workplace curiosity is truly a missed opportunity since cultivating curiosity has a significant positive impact on an enterprise’s overall performance.”*

While research confirms that curiosity is more important to the performance of an enterprise than was previously thought, we believe leadership is one of the factors with the most significant influence on curiosity. **The shadow a leader casts on the team, department or organisation can either give curiosity wings, or can stifle it.** This statement was confirmed by an engagement survey done at Novartis where they were able to divide a set of favourable and unfavourable leaders. Looking at the different dimensions of engagement, the area where the impact was greatest, with a 22-point difference between the two groups of leaders, was curiosity. This shows that poor leaders stifle curiosity, great leaders promote it and create the culture required for teams to excel.

Creating such a culture means creating the right conditions for curiosity to flourish. Just as any other change process, this asks for strategic vision and initiatives, inspirational communication and an effective use of resources. What follows are best practices leaders can use to move this curious change process into the right direction.



# Leadership lessons for curiosity

1

## Give People Language

Things do not exist if we don't have the language to talk about it. Make people familiar with curiosity concepts like growth mindset, exploration and intellectual curiosity.

Now, you can start a discussion.

2

## Authorise Curiosity

Leader say they support curiosity, while in fact, employees don't feel support for or don't see the value of curiosity. Leaders giving permission and creating psychological safety have a more curious workforce.

3

## Listen to Learn

Having a questioning mindset, disabling your own opinion and asking sometimes the uncomfortable, but challenging "killer" questions stimulates curiosity and increases the quality of decision making.

4

## Democratise Learning

We need an always-on learning culture. Employees need continuous access to learning material and be stimulated to share new insights. Leaders are important role models in this.

5

## Self-awareness through intensive self-reflection

Leadership starts from a place of authenticity. Leaders putting curiosity at the heart of their leadership, exemplify curiosity to those around you.

6

## Hire for Curiosity

Shelf life of skills depletes much faster. Instead hiring for those skills that become obsolete, leader need to make sure they bring in valuable golden skills such as curiosity and learning agility.

## 1

## Give People Language

Even though curiosity is a trait that has been with us throughout history, from the explorers who travelled the world to disruptive industrialists like Elon Musk's launching of high performing electrical vehicles, the concept today is not yet overly present and discussed in our businesses. For a large part, this is due to not having the language, vocabulary and awareness to talk about curiosity. 20th century leadership and corporate strategy paradigms focused on a language of exploitation, efficiency, undernourished curiosity and exploitation. At the end of the 20th century, when economies started to move at much faster pace, many organisations realised they did not have the mental, strategic or leadership models to face such unprecedented change. **Cognitive research shows that things do not exist to us if we don't possess the language to perceive them.**

For a leader to create a curious climate, they need to start with giving people the words and stories for them to reflect on curiosity and have discussions with colleagues about the topic. When this is giving, we often see "Aha!"-moments. People all of the sudden are able to give meaning to things they unconsciously knew already but did not sufficiently acted upon.

**By organising structured sessions, leaders engage their teams in the world of curiosity.** Concepts like "intellectual curiosity", "empathic curiosity", "curiosity about our inner drivers", "exploration vs. exploitation", "growth vs fixed mindset" become clear and become seeds waiting to flourish. A tip can be to appoint change agents from all levels in the company to take the lead in these workshops and operate as motivators. You need followers to initiate a movement.

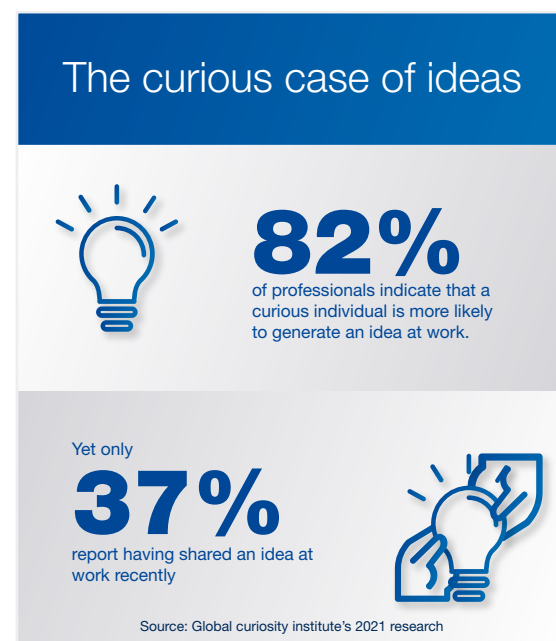
## 2

## Authorise Curiosity

Research done by the Global Curiosity Institute indicates a high discrepancy in perceived support for curiosity in organisations between leaders and employees. **In working with teams, we found that leaders are twice as agreeable to the statement that 'inquisitiveness and creativity leads to public and financial recognition' than their team reporting to them.** This gap between the two groups seems to be the result of different perceptions of the reality. Spencer Harrison at INSEAD also found that 81% of employees are convinced that curiosity makes no material difference in their compensation.

In order to leverage curiosity on all levels of the organisation, Harrison suggests focussing on a person's identity. One can be highly curious about a private matter, but not in his/her role.

Letting people bring in their interests with them to work can leverage curiosity. Next, authorising curiosity as a leader makes it part of our identity. **Leaders need to give permission and create psychological safety which allows people to engage in creative initiatives without the**



**stress of being punished.** This is characterised by providing a balanced amount of time and resources, and allow people to make high-volume, low impact mistakes which is the best way to learn.

## Listen to Learn

We are all guilty. We like to talk, explain, give answers, find solutions, share knowledge and expertise, judge, impose ideas and be perceived as confident. We do listen to others, but the intention is not always right. Leadership coach Jennifer Garvey Berger explains that most leaders listen to win (often by judging and responding in a way the problem or idea is swept away, so you win), and listen to fix (think while listening and impose a solution at the end). In a predictable world when there are right answers and knowable problems, these two ways of listening are useful.

Unfortunately, we do not live in such a world. In today's complex and unpredictable world where you don't know the solutions and even don't always understand the problem, we need to listen to learn. **By asking open ended, challenging, broad and stimulating "killer" questions with an open and curious voice, you as a leader trigger curiosity in people.** These questions often start with "why, how, what if...".

For example:

- What if we would not invest in our people for a year?
- How can we be beaten by the competition?
- Why can't we shorten a deadline that has been fixed for many years?

In this way, you as a leader open the conversation to different perspectives and new ideas which lead to better decision-making. Leadership teams can't decide about the strategic direction of companies without tapping into the collective wisdom of the entire workforce. We see that those leaders who can "disable" their own opinions and are genuinely interested in the "why" people think and behave in a certain way, can increase their impact fundamentally.

**Curious leaders need a questioning mindset and the right level of humility, empathy and inquisitiveness to invite ideas from their teams and have the confidence to admit they don't know everything.** As Ralph W. Sockman said: "the larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder."





## Democratise Learning

Curious leaders are broad learners themselves and encourage their team to explore knowledge and learning, even when it is outside of the immediate job-scope. **Creating a modern culture of learning and curiosity assumes always-on learning.** In such a culture, learning is increasingly mobile giving employees and leaders continuous access to inspirational, easily digestible, skill-specific resources and courses. Technologies rising today such as cloud, VR/AR and gamification are facilitating this process and helps leaders and teams reach their learning goals.

Creating a curious culture also assumes that learning is seen as bidirectional: everybody is not only invited to consume learning, but also to actively take part in sharing their experience, knowledge and thoughts for the benefit of their peers and the wider organisation.

Democratizing learning also means enabling employees with tools to act curiously. While your star performers might be doing this naturally, many employees will need to be eased into this new way of self-propelled learning and growing. This could be done for instance by organising information-sessions about curiosity and growth mindset, by creating resource portals to complement courses, by encouraging employees to share their learning progress with their managers and by baselining both the individual curiosity levels of the employees as well as prevalent curiosity culture in the organisation. **By empowering employees, companies often see a doubling of the overall learning hours as a result.**

**The biggest result yet is achieved when – on top – the leader role models behaviour.** We have found a direct correlation between the intensity with which a leader learns and the responding behaviour of the team i.e. the more the leader engages in learning, reading, ..., the more the team will engage in learning.



## 5

## Self-awareness through intensive self-reflection

No good leader will endure if she/he does not come from a place of authenticity. The Danish Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote: 'don't forget to love yourself.' Like love, curiosity about the world and about others really starts with curiosity about oneself: about why we say the things we say, why we do the things we do and why we think the things we think. It is about being in tune with our inner self: our values, individual purpose, strengths and beliefs, yet also our limiting beliefs, our unconscious triggers and our biases. The more a leader is open to exploring self-aware-

ness, the more she/he will be in tune with her/his strengths, what is important for her/him and how she/he can impact others. **By putting curiosity at the heart of your leadership, you continually pay attention to yourself and your mindset, so you exemplify curiosity to those around you.**

At the same time, we see that the most curious leaders are also the ones who are developing the fastest: they have more self-insights, more self-awareness, more self-leadership. By being a curious leader yourself, you act as curious role model to others.

“ *Only 20% of manager is asking for reverse feedback from their team, 80% don't.* ”

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Few people however are good at observing themselves for who they really are through the layers of dust of years of living. Some professionals use mindfulness to sharpen their muscle of self-reflection, others use coaches to get to the bottom

of things. Some teams and organisations are baselining their climate of curiosity through a diagnostic to create a picture of their individual and collective curiosity profile.



## Hire for curiosity

Just like the World Economic Forum, every year, LinkedIn publishes the most in-demand hard and soft skills. The 2020 research indicated blockchain and cloud computing to be the most wanted hard skills. The top listed soft skills were creativity and persuasion.

As mentioned, the shelf-life for skills deplete in only a few years. We do however believe there is a difference between the shelf-life of hard skills and soft skills. We could say skills like creativity and curiosity are or should always be present and add value. They are not dependent on a certain programming language or are not linked to a certain generation of people. **Yet most companies when hiring for new talent are still over indexing hard competencies over those who will be in higher demand over time.**

A recent Harvard Business Review survey revealed three focus areas for organisation to successfully fill in their digital talent requirements:

- focus on soft skills as much as technical skills;
- focus on potential, as much as past experience;
- focus on incentivising growth in their people.

This shows that it is important for companies and recruiting executives to balance short term needs vs. longer term needed capabilities such as learnability, curiosity, creativity and growth mindset. **Putting these golden skills in your hiring strategy makes you stay on top of the war for talent and therefore the company's competitiveness.**

## Conclusion

We have made the case that curiosity is more important to the performance of an organisation than was previously thought. Indeed, by making small changes to the design of their organisation, leaders can encourage curiosity and improve their companies. Yet saying that you treasure curiosity does not make it so and in fact many leaders stifle unconsciously curiosity. A significant part stands or falls with leadership to create the right recipe for a climate which encourages curiosity vs. one which stifles it.

Scanning through the leadership lessons we highlighted in this article, we can summarise curiosity is linked to so many daily and “back to basic” leadership behaviours: inquisitiveness, empathy & emotional IQ, asking stimulating and open-ended questions, being more interested instead of interesting yet be a role model, authorise people to be creative by instilling psychological safety, questioning and not interfering, focus on potential of people and continuous learning postponing own judgement, avoiding defensive behaviour, regulation of own emotions and intense self-leadership. Curiosity has an impact on all of these behaviours, that is why curiosity is a golden skill, the fundament and leverage of many other skills.

# Writers

**Maxim Swinnen** is an Executive Search Consultant at Mercuri Urval, based in Brussels. He started his career working with an international professional services firm, specializing in services based on practical innovation, creativity research and real-life application. He can leverage the insights he acquired at Mercuri Urval, helping companies acquire and develop the right leadership to improve their results.

**Stefaan van Hooydonk** founded the Global Curiosity institute in 2020. The purpose of the Institute is to do research in the area of workplace curiosity and help organizations foster a mindset of curiosity to inspire them to keep discovering and innovating. Prior to setting up the Institute, he built a distinguished career as senior learning leader, innovator and strategist for companies like Cognizant, Philips, Agfa, Nokia, Aramco, CEIBS and Flipkart. He has lived and worked in Hong Kong, China, France, Finland, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, India, the Netherlands and Belgium.

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