

Stay Curious Amid Uncertainty

By: Sue Bethanis, Ed.D., CEO/Founder of Mariposa Leadership, Inc.
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"Stay curious, my friends!" is my new favorite slogan, what I envision the "most-interesting-man-in-the-world" saying if he wasn't selling beer. I sure love those Dos Equis' ads, even though I am not a big beer drinker. Perhaps it is because I secretly want to be the "most-interesting-woman-in-the-world." Or maybe it is because when I hear the latest version of these ads, I literally laugh out loud — even though I am alone in my car. Dos Equis' ad agency deserves an award for their creativity; and I appreciate that they are putting a magnifier on curiosity!

Curiosity is free! Curiosity is a mindset! And curiosity is the antidote to the unrelenting uncertainty that has become the norm in business today. Curiosity increases our ability to be empathetic in a variety of situations and open to others' ideas. Think of being a stranger in a foreign country. Our ability to flex, adapt, and see things differently in a foreign country is analogous to dealing with uncertain times in this new strange world of business.

How can managers and coaches focus on their own curiosity quotient? How do we encourage people to be curious? How do we teach it?

I believe we can coach curiosity in ourselves and others. Here are two distinctions that might help raise your curiosity quotient. One: be more "T-shaped"; and two: increase your "influenceability."

When I talk with executives, I often bring up the importance of bringing *both* horizontal and vertical thinking to the table as a way to add the most value in their organizations. I started using the horizontal/vertical metaphor way before I realized that McKinsey had coined the term "T-shaped leaders."

One of my curiosity-heroes -- IDEO Founder Tim Brown -- has popularized "T-shaped" in his writings about Design Thinking. "T-shaped" leaders are deeply skilled in an area that is beneficial to the creative process (that's the vertical stroke of the T). The vertical axis is typically what we have been trained in (in college and on-the-job), like accounting, psychology, industrial engineering, mechanical engineering, graphic design, or marketing. The horizontal axis portrays our ability to both empathize with and master disciplines other than our primary one. Thus, an optimal T-shaper is one who has both a strength discipline and takes the time to understand and apply other disciplines. For example, a General Manager of a game studio may have a vertical background as a product manager and be trained in and terrific at getting product features out the door; a highly successful GM of a entire game studio, however, also understands and applies knowledge in business analytics, user/customer experience, and organizational development. In other words, part MBAer, part designer, part anthropologist, and part coach.

It is hard to become truly interdisciplinary, to become more "T-shaped," because of the pure time it takes. However, having various points of view and the willingness to listen to various points of you view allows us to face uncertainty more smoothly and with less stress. Our confidence rises because we know we can see intractable problems from various points of view. This starts with curiosity! At the least, we need to be able to ask good questions and show we are curious. Demonstrating empathy allows you to view a

situation, a topic, or another functional area from another person's perspective, through their eyes; and it gives them the opening to be curious and empathetic with you, too. Through this type of active listening, you can establish an environment for innovation, one where it is encouraged to ask many questions, regardless of whether they're the right questions, in order to build on ideas and create something totally new.

Another way to look at curiosity is through the lens of "influenceability." I talk about the "influenceable factor" in *Leadership Chronicles of a Corporate Sage* (Kaplan Publishing, 2004, p. 72-73). So many books address the topic of influencing as: how we influence our peers, boss, other stakeholders to get what we want. It is the number one skill executives want to work on. But influencing has two sides: influencing others to your point of view and how open you are to being influenced by others. Here is an excerpt from the book, a real life conversation between an executive and his coach:

Coach: "The more you are open to being influenced -- your influenceable factor -- the more likely you will be able to influence others. Let's use a 1-10 scale. One being not influenceable at all, and ten being influenceable, where do you stand?"

Leader: "I'm really stubborn, probably a two or three."

Coach: "Ok, where do you want to get to?"

Leader: "Probably a six or seven. I mean, I don't want to be milk toast and back down all the time."

Coach: "A ten isn't milk toast. A ten means you are open to hearing other's points of view and welcome other's question; it doesn't mean you cave."

Leader: "Ok, I want to get to an eight, let's say, in four months."

Coach: "You are on. That's a good goal. Here's another way to look at it. You would rather be pulled through a dark room or a crowded concert than pushed, right?"

Leader: "I would rather lead!" (Smiling).

Coach: "Not if you didn't know the way and the other person did."

Leader: "Yeah, I guess."

Coach: "You would be even more influential if you pulled people through a decision than pushed them."

Leader: "Yes, got it. I am with you."

Pull rather than push. Ask about and learn various view points and disciplines. In a nutshell: Stay curious. Albert Einstein was famous for saying, "I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious." Sage advice for uncertain times.