

Curiosity as an approach to leadership and learning for Senior Leaders

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Introduction

What is curiosity?

The notion of curiosity is a thread that runs through everyday workplace interaction and project planning. Curiosity is the ability to apply knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) within the workplace that can be both intuitive and learned. Being curious can be considered both a personal trait and a leadership tool for innovation and entrepreneurship.

For senior practitioners the concept of curiosity may be a familiar one that they use on a daily basis. Curiosity evokes active questioning and the use of inquiry is key to finding solutions to problem-solving and forecasting. It is the ‘act of vulnerability and courage’ (Brown, 2018, p. 170). The application of curiosity gives senior leaders the ability to use active psychology within their job role and to create a coaching culture within their organisation. It is no surprise that the main behaviour assessment for the Senior Leader Apprenticeship (SLA) is about curiosity.

This chapter presents some ways to think about and articulate your use of curiosity in the Senior Leader Apprenticeship (SLA) with some practical explanations and questions that might give you a competitive edge as a SLA practitioner.

The scholarship of curiosity

According to research done in this field, people are naturally curious. Van Hooydonk (2022, p. 44) defines the term as ‘the intentional mindset to challenge the status quo, explore, discover, and learn.’ The application of curiosity bridges concepts that range from neuroscience to learning (Kidd and Hayden, 2015). Some individuals just *need to know* to reduce their ignorance about something they are not sure of or they might really enjoy learning something new. Based on this scholarship, Kushtan et. al. (2018, p. 59) have suggested a five-dimensional model for curiosity that includes the range of prevailing theories about curiosity: 1. deprivation sensitivity 2. joyous exploration 3. social curiosity 4. stress tolerance and 5. thrill seeking. Horstmeyer (2020) has made several interesting points that involve sustaining curiosity in a post-covid VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) world as it has come to represent the challenging environment in which we are now working, Horstmeyer suggests that curiosity can help with the related strategies and soft skills required in a new landscape of practice (2020). Lievens et al. (2022). have investigated the wide range of literature which forms the basis for understanding the dynamic interpersonal and organisational conceptual qualities of curiosity at work.

Cultivating curiosity as an approach to leadership

What does a curious leader look like?

Whatever style of leadership that is adopted, it plays a part in the application of situated knowledge acquisition. In business studies curiosity is linked to performance and the way

that projects are initiated and managed. As Ibarra, Hildebrand and Vinck set out in *The Leadership Odyssey* (2023, p. 109) ‘Asking good questions, listening, empathizing, and empowering.... These skills allow leaders to draw wisdom, insight, and creativity out of their people, solve problems collectively, and foster a sense of psychological safety.’

For managers and leaders in the workplace, the use of intuition may be their clearest indicator that curiosity is being used. Asking the right questions at the right time is an essential skill for effective leadership and critical problem-solving. Curiosity is often considered a requirement for leadership as it shows the need to acquire information (perceptual) and the need to know (epistemic) (Kidd and Hayden, 2015). As Sinek (2019) points out, curious leaders start with asking *why* before asking about the *what* and the *how*.



- *Why do you do what you do - are you a curious leader?*

Cultivating curiosity assumes that leaders, and other interested stakeholders, possess the ability to be able to listen to the views and experiences of others and to respond with enquiring questions that can lead to new insights. Figure one presents some of the aptitudes that might be valuable for cultivating curiosity.



Figure 1: Cultivating Curiosity for Leadership

Leading in your practice requires cultivating your curiosity and the curiosity of others. Brown speaks about the delta between experience and truth that allows leaders to discuss meaning and wisdom (2018). Curiosity is often linked to leadership attributes, such as agility. Silva-Martinez (2023) identified four leadership categories from agile teams that characterised and enabled agile leadership: empowerment, a clear definition of success, communication and feedback, and being comfortable with uncertainty. The findings of their study indicated that agile teams need to be willing to continuously learn and be encouraged to have a growth mindset (Silva-Martinez, 2023). Akers (2018) discusses how leadership traits and personal belief systems, like core values, add to a leader's ability to develop the next generation of leaders.

For those undertaking work-based studies, it is important to actively acknowledge how and what practices are being considered. Nicolini (2012) says that practice involves the agency of those taking part, and it is agency that is used for new perspectives that 'leave space for initiative, creativity, and individual performance.' (Nicolini, 2012, pp. 4-5).

Goleman (2017) in his book *Working with Emotional Intelligence* discusses the use of intuition, what he calls the inner rudder (self-awareness) when discussing performance on projects in order to invigorate motivation and to avoid self-sabotage. Social intelligence relates to the ability to read the context of the work environment and develop strategies to engage with the internal culture and politics within organisations. Senior leaders should be adept at reading reactions and feelings, handling disputes that are a part of human activity (Goleman, 2017).

Often cultivating curiosity can be a part of the coaching culture. The still popular GROW (goal, reality, options, will) coaching mindset Whitmore (2010) explained as adopting an optimistic view of the dormant capability of all people while focusing on your own, and others' self-belief. Ashley-Timms and Ashley-Timms (2022) have presented their thinking as the Notion's STAR (Stop, Think Ask and Result) operational coaching model that says asking question is an important way to facilitate behavioural change within organisations.

Kairos is regarded in leadership as a practice. Its practice is thought to lead to *metis* that is practical intelligence - the right action at the right moment (Balyan, 2023; Galvani, 2020); this makes sense in leadership. Leaders and in particular as Senior Leaders, respond to an environment of rapid change, often without prior notice meaning there is no rehearsal, we never know what is going to arise today or any day. It embodies a phenomenological approach, that is rooted in experience by asking *why* did you do this, not *how*. Kairos allows us to think freely and curiously, learning from the moment.

Curiosity as an approach to learning and innovation

Curiosity and creativity are closely related, a creative professional analyses workplace trends and patterns to determine where innovation is needed. Delivering work that demonstrates curiosity is key to research aligned projects at work. Hardy, Ness and Mecca (2017) looked at curiosity and performance and concluded that new employees could be selected using measures of trait curiosity for jobs that had high levels of novelty and complexity. Leaders

are now living in a work context that has recently experienced a world-wide pandemic that changed the way that we think about our work. Leaders have consciously and unconsciously changed the way that they do things as they adapted to different globalised world circumstances. Horstmeyer (2020) has associated the generative and action-oriented role of curiosity to develop soft skills in the VUCA-aligned workplace, and explored how behaviours associated with curiosity could lead to deeper work engagement, a growth mindset and more stress tolerance.



- *Do you have an inventory of your practice that shows that you are using the notion of curiosity, asking questions, and engaging learning and innovation in your team as a senior leader?*
 - *Make a list and think about which of these activities led to change.*
 - *Which included social or emotional intelligence?*
 - *Which led to a new mindset?*
 - *How did you develop curiosity in your thinking?*

Presenting curiosity aligned with impact at the End Point Assessment

At the End Point Assessment (EPA) you need to present a strategic business proposal and take questions from independent assessors to show that you are ‘B3 Curious and innovative - exploring areas of ambiguity and complexity and finding creative solutions’ (IfATE, 2021, p. 25). Part of your preparation might be thinking about and presenting curiosity in a different way through storytelling and case studies.

Case study: questions along the way – discovery through reflection

Lack of Curiosity ‘killed the Customer’
Trustworthy Improvements Ltd

Last month JP Partnership employed Trustworthy Improvements to carry out some remedial work on their premises to ensure compliance with current safety standards. At the same time they request two further quotes for other work that needs undertaking within the next 6 months.

Once the initial work is completed satisfactorily JP request a payment link to be sent. No link arrives. They request on two further occasions. Eventually it arrives 14 days later. They pay the bill. Shortly afterwards they receive a request for feedback. JP respond, ‘great craftsmanship, slow on paperwork’ with a rating of 3*. The next day JP receive a telephone call from an agitated lady from Trustworthy, she reveals she is a director. She protests as the feedback given by JP stating that a number of payment links had been sent. She continues saying the feedback is unfair and that they are not at fault.

JP try to explain, saying they had made requests and that they use a different format when requesting payments, that sends an SMS to clients so they are aware of when documents or links are being sent and should arrive. They also give a contact number in case of problems. The lady dismisses the feedback saying she is disappointed by JP’s reaction and explanation. JP decide to seek quotes from other companies for the remaining work.

Points for consideration:-

What behaviours are exhibited here?

To make the most of using curiosity and questioning in preparation for your EPA, you could consider rehearsing the following for your EPA.



Think of 3 scenarios for work that you could relate as a ‘story’ and develop your own rationale about why they did or did not use curiosity.

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Preparing for the EPA using this example:

- See feedback as an opportunity for curiosity rather than a closed mindset - in this case from a customer but this could also be from staff or other stakeholders.
- Be curious about transdisciplinary relationships or practices – communication, internal processes and complexities, stakeholder engagement, staff development (emotional, social intelligence, agility).
- Be curious about stakeholders and competitors and their practices as a way to eliminate ignorance.
- Be curious as a way of streamlining or identifying needs to update operations.
- In this case, reflections on lack of curiosity might result in a change of leadership behaviours, or for a greater awareness to remain relevant in a 21st century environment.
- Loop back to the critical context for your EPA and talk trends, theories into practice, leadership models that include curiosity, agility and so on. Make sure to add this Level 7 thinking to explain what you do.

Conclusion

By cultivating your curiosity, you can demonstrate your value as a SLA professional and agent of change. Communicate what you have discovered about your experience while taking the senior apprenticeship and apply new models and theories to your leadership practice. Explain your use of creative solutions to bring others along in the organisation to demonstrate and evidence your core messages. Instilling intra and entrepreneurial curiosity for you and your team is fundamental for growth and prosperity.

Remember, your EPA assessors are similarly motivated by curiosity and interest. They might ask prearranged questions about various aspects of the work, about your choices within the project, how you analysed and interpreted certain aspects of the proposal, the successes and challenges along the way and the issues your project raises for yourself as a professional and for your organisation. Assessors are also curious to know about your views on what you have gained from learning about leadership and why this has cultivated curiosity in your proposed business plan.



- *Think about what you could have done differently. What do you know now that you did not know before?*
- *How could you include your own examples in your EPA proposal to talk about 'exploring areas of ambiguity and complexity and finding creative solutions' (IfA, 2021)?*
- *What does this mean for you going forward?*

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