

LEADERSHIP

Why Curious People Are Destined for the C-Suite

by Warren Berger

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When asked recently to name the one attribute CEOs will need most to succeed in the turbulent times ahead, Michael Dell, the chief executive of Dell, Inc., replied, “I would place my bet on curiosity.”

Dell was responding to a 2015 PwC survey of more than a thousand CEOs, a number of whom cited “curiosity” and “open-mindedness” as leadership traits that are becoming increasingly critical in challenging times. Another of the respondents, McCormick & Company CEO Alan D. Wilson, noted that business leaders who “are always expanding their perspective and what they know—and have that natural curiosity—are the people that are going to be successful.”

Welcome to the era of the curious leader, where success may be less about having all the answers and more about wondering and questioning. As Dell noted, curiosity can inspire leaders to continually seek out the fresh ideas and approaches needed to keep pace with change and stay ahead of competitors.

A curious, inquisitive leader also can set an example that inspires creative thinking throughout the company, according to Hollywood producer Brian Grazer. “If you’re the boss, and you manage by asking questions, you’re laying the foundation for the culture of your company or your group,” Grazer writes in his book, *A Curious Mind*. Grazer and others maintain that leading-by-curiosity can help generate more ideas from all areas of an organization, while also helping to raise employee engagement levels.

The notion that curiosity can be good for business is not entirely new, of course. Decades ago, Walt Disney declared that his company managed to keep innovating “because we’re curious, and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.” But having that desire to keep exploring “new paths” becomes even more important in today’s fast-changing, innovation-driven marketplace.

In my own research for my book, *A More Beautiful Question*, I found numerous examples of current-day entrepreneurs and innovators—including Netflix’s Reed Hastings, Square’s Jack Dorsey, and the team behind Airbnb—who relied on curious inquiry as a starting point to reinventing entire industries. Dorsey, for example, was puzzled when an artist friend lost a big sale to a potential customer simply because the artist couldn’t accept a credit card. Dorsey

wondered why only established businesses, and not smaller entrepreneurs, were able to conduct credit card transactions; his search for an answer resulted in Square, a more accessible credit card reader.

While curiosity has ignited numerous startup ventures, it also plays an important role at more established companies, where leaders are having to contend with disruptive change in the marketplace. “These days, a leader’s primary occupation must be to discover the future,” Panera Bread CEO Ron Shaich told me. It’s “a continual search,” Shaich says, requiring that today’s leader keep exploring new ideas—including ideas from other industries or even from outside the business world.

Advising business leaders to “be more curious” sounds simple enough, but it may require a change in leadership style. In many cases, managers and top executives have risen through the ranks by providing fixes and solutions, not by asking questions. And once they’ve attained a position of leadership, they may feel the need to project confident expertise.

To acknowledge uncertainty by wondering aloud and asking deep questions carries a risk: the leader may be perceived as lacking knowledge. In their book *The Innovator’s DNA*, authors Clayton Christensen, Hal Gregersen and Jeff Dyer observed that the curious, questioning leaders they studied seemed to overcome this risk because they had a rare blend of humility and confidence: They were humble enough to acknowledge to themselves that they didn’t have all the answers, and confident enough to be able to admit that in front of everyone else.

While we may tend to think of curiosity as a hardwired personality trait—meaning, one either is blessed with “a curious mind” or not—according to Ian Leslie, author of the book *Curious*, curiosity is actually “more of a state than a trait.” We all have the potential to be curious, given the right conditions.

Leslie notes that curiosity seems to bubble up when we are exposed to new information and then find ourselves wanting to know more. Hence, the would-be curious leader should endeavor to get “out of the bubble” when possible; to seek out new influences, ideas, and

experiences that may fire up the desire to learn more and dig deeper.

Even when operating within familiar confines, curious leaders tend to try to see things from a fresh perspective. The ones I studied in my research seemed to have a penchant for bringing a “beginner’s mind” approach to old problems and stubborn challenges. They continually examined and re-examined their own assumptions and practices, asking deep, penetrating “Why” questions, as well as speculative “What if” and “How” questions.

Such leaders sometimes also evangelize about curiosity, urging people in their organizations to “Question Everything.” This can serve to model the behavior for others, though leaders may have to go much further—providing sufficient freedom and incentives—in order to actually create the conditions for curiosity to flourish company-wide.

In the end, it isn’t necessarily easy for a leader to foster curiosity on an individual or organizational level—but it may be well worth the effort. “With curiosity comes learning and new ideas,” says Dell. “If you’re not doing that, you’re going to have a real problem.”

Warren Berger (@GlimmerGuy) is author of the new book *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas* (Bloomsbury).

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