

Curiosity and Leadership

I recently heard an executive being interviewed about his organisation's problems and the lack of leadership. The top team was criticised for lacking "any curiosity about the situation".

The ability to remain *curious* about what surrounds you is, I believe, a key aspect of excellence in leadership and is a mindset that coaching can help bring out and expand in leaders.



One of the problems of senior leadership – particularly in a traditionally hierarchical culture - is the isolation that can creep in; junior staff tell you what they think you want to hear, and leaders can lose touch with their "curiosity" about things, finding it all too easy to close down their awareness and look for what confirms their own point of view. This "confirmatory bias" as it's sometimes called, can blunt leaders' perceptions and disable their organisation's surefooted response to signs that a nudge in a new direction is needed.

In more recent coaching conversations with leaders, I am finding a new appetite to address this. I sense that this is partly due to a realisation that they need to question how they have led their organisations in the past, and that a lack of curiosity and a tendency to "groupthink" was part of the root cause of problems in many financial services' Boardrooms during the financial crisis¹.

Leaders are increasingly aware that they need to challenge their own leadership and find a different and more "curious" way of engaging with the wider organisation.

I was coaching a senior manager recently, who makes it his business to invite Execs and Non Exec Directors out with him on regular site visits. These visits had opened the Directors' eyes to day-to-day realities and kept them close-up and curious about the sharp end of the business.

Here are some questions that Directors can ask themselves about their own leadership and are good "curiosity stimulants":

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| ■ How easy do I make it for subordinates to challenge me? | ■ Ask for and keep asking others for their point of view. Be wary of listening out for confirmation of your opinion. |
| ■ How well do I listen to points of view that run counter to my own? | ■ Hold back from slipping into judgemental inner dialogue; "s/he sounds hesitant. I don't think that approach would work". Instead; ask another question to seek more information before reaching a decision. |
| ■ What is my sense of my identity as a leader? | ■ Be honest now; "do I at some level feel I should have all of the answers?" |
| | ■ Reassure yourself – having all the answers would be frankly boring as well as unlikely. Stop the heroics and recognise that asking good questions is an important aspect of leadership. |
| ■ Can I hold back from judgement (the opposite of curiosity) for a moment longer to find out more about this situation? | ■ Hold back from stating your point of view – yet. Find out more first. |
| ■ How can I remain really curious about a person from a different culture or background to me – I don't want to say the wrong thing. | ■ Practise just being extraordinarily curious; "that sounds interesting – tell me more about that". |

When these "curiosity questions" are used by leaders, this is good news for business, as it is likely to lead to a more inclusive style of leadership where alternative points of view are encouraged – and they add a dash of humility which is a good antidote to the damaging isolation of senior office.

For support and challenge to liven up your "curiosity" antennae, do get in touch.

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¹ See Sir David Walker's 2009 report on banking and governance