

# Reflections on Leadership



## Curious Leadership

September 2015

Many years ago my wife, Rhonda and I were on vacation in Italy and visited the Pantheon in Rome. It was in the summer tourist season, and the place was packed with so many people that it was hard to move around freely. In the middle of this extraordinary environment, an older gentleman walked by wearing an Altoona Curve baseball hat. My first thought, was “Wow, isn’t that interesting. Altoona is less than 150 miles from where we live.” Rhonda, who has an inclination to talk to almost anyone, took the initiative and struck up a conversation. Much to my surprise, the man was there with his daughter and son-in-law, who soon joined in the conversation. It turned out that the son-in-law’s father was John Martin, the former Executive Director of the Presbyterian Homes of the Presbytery of Huntingdon (PHPH), an organization that had merged with Presbyterian Senior Living a couple of years earlier. As one of the patriarchs of PHPH, his portrait can be found in buildings that I frequent in my work.

Even being thousands of miles from home there was someone literally right next to us with whom we had a connection.

This experience, and others like it, has changed the way I look at life – specifically a better appreciation of the power of curiosity. Left to my own devices, the story would have ended with – “Imagine seeing an Altoona Curve baseball hat in Rome?” It was a curious mind engaging in further conversation that uncovered the rest of the story. Now, whenever I enter a room full of people, I expect to find people with whom I have something in common, and I try to discover the connections.

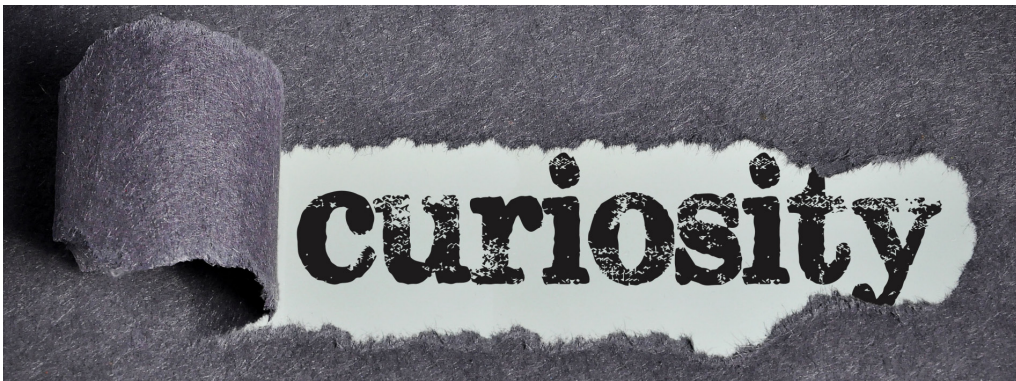
In his book *Curious, the Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends On It*, Ian Lesley tells the story of John Lloyd, the creator of the British program *QI* (short for *Quite Interesting*) a BBC comedy panel game television show that began in 2003. In his pitch to get BBC to produce this program, Lloyd observed that all primates have three

basic drives - food, sex, and shelter. Only human beings have a 4th drive – curiosity. *“Pure Curiosity is unique to human beings. When animals snuffle around in the bushes, they are looking for the three other things. It’s only people, as far as we know, who look up at the stars and wonder what they are.”*

But curiosity is not a single impulse or trait. Leslie defines curiosity as having three distinct expressions: *Diversive*, *Epistemic*, and *Empathic*:

- **Diversive Curiosity** – The curiosity that is exhibited by the very young – an attraction to everything novel. This type of curiosity is immature, and can become a waste of time and energy. I have heard this kind of curiosity referred to as the pursuit of the next shiny object.
- **Epistemic Curiosity** is a deeper, more disciplined, and effortful curiosity. When curiosity is transformed into a sustained, cognitive effort it becomes a quest for knowledge and understanding.
- **Empathic Curiosity** – Curiosity about the thoughts and feelings of others, looking at the world from their perspective. *Diversive* curiosity asks what a person does for a living. *Empathic* curiosity wonders why they do it.

How is *Epistemic* and *Empathic* curiosity useful in terms of organizational life and leadership?



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**Innovation.** The most obvious application of curiosity is a fascination related to how things work and exploring the art of the possible. Albert Einstein, one of the truly creative minds in human history observed, *“I know quite certainly that I myself have no special talent; curiosity, obsession, and a dogged endurance, combined with self-criticism have brought me to my ideas.”* In his book, *The Medici Effect*, Frans Johansson credits the breaking down the barriers between fields – which he refers to as “Intersections” as a key to innovation and discovery. A wide ranging curiosity about things that may appear on the surface to be unrelated is a foundation of Johansson’s theory. The stories of innovation and invention through the ages are marked by an insatiable curiosity.

**Organizational Benefits of Curiosity.** There is a connection between curiosity and respect. Einstein also said that *“When you approach a situation, person, or project with curiosity, you engage with openness, marvel, and respect...”* Using curiosity to foster understanding sends a message that you value the input of others, establishes common ground between individuals within an organization, and sets the tone of an organizational culture that is open to criticism and to new ideas. There is also a clear connection between curiosity and humility. The underlying assumption is that the curious leader does not regard himself or herself as the smartest person in the room. Authentic curiosity is demonstrated by withholding judgment in the desire to find out more, and better information ultimately results in better decision making. Finally, curiosity contributes

to growing future leaders within an organization. Asking questions instead of giving answers is the best way to develop a deeper bench of leadership talent. Minds that are stretched by wrestling with questions become stronger and more flexible.

**Curiosity and Experience.** While children are naturally curious, adults can frequently suffer from a lack of curiosity. Experience is an important teacher, but when experience blinds us to the ability to see the unexpected, failure is just around the corner. Leaders that rely on experience at the expense of curiosity are like motorists driving with their eyes closed with a belief that the road is exactly as they remember it, and their memory of the road ahead is sufficient to reach their destination. It is not hard to imagine a catastrophic outcome. Jesus observation in 6th chapter of the Book of Luke comes to mind. *“Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they both not fall into a pit?”*

Many years ago I had a conversation with a highly respected CEO at an educational conference. She remarked that it was tougher for her to attend educational conferences after so many years. *“When you have heard as many educational presentations as I have, you realize that there is not much left to learn.”* When does a groove become a rut? It happens whenever experience overpowers curiosity.

**Reflective curiosity.** In addition to Diverisive, Epistemic, and Empathic curiosity that were described earlier, I would like to suggest that leaders need something more – a reflective curiosity rooted in the need to understand themselves and their

place in the world. In his book *The Road to Character*, David Brooks identifies something he calls the Humility Code which connects curiosity and humility by seeking answers to penetrating questions. *“Toward what should I orient my life? Who am I and what is my nature? How do I mold my nature to make it gradually better day by day? What virtues are the most important to cultivate and what weaknesses should I fear the most? How can I raise my children with a true sense of who they are and a practical set of ideas about how to travel the long road to character?”*



Other more specific reflective questions might include – Why is this important to me? What am I giving up in order to do this thing? Why am I blind to this concern?

**Final thoughts.** There are those who portray a strong leader as one who has everything figured out. But the mind that is certain of all of the answers has no room for curiosity. Great leaders give themselves permission to be curious, but do not use curiosity as a reason to avoid or delay making a decision. The transition from curious exploration to action requires the most precious and elusive of all leadership virtues – wisdom.

