HOW TO BUILD INCLUSIVE TEAMS: PART 3 - BEING CURIOUS, NOT JUDGEMENTAL

What Prevents a Curious Mindset

Being curious rather than judgmental might sound simple, but it's much harder to consistently practice. Our brains aren't naturally wired for curiosity; instead, they often default to patterns that make it easier to stick with what we know. In many cases, it's more comfortable to dismiss new ideas or perspectives rather than explore them. This tendency can hinder our ability to be truly inclusive in how we interact and collaborate with our colleagues.

Here are some of the key reasons why we struggle to adopt a curious mindset, and how these barriers can impact our approach to working with others.

· **Time Pressure** - Time pressure is one of the most significant barriers to adopting a curious mindset. Let's be honest, curiosity takes time. Asking questions, exploring new ideas, and engaging with others' perspectives can slow down the immediate pace of work. In a fast-paced environment with looming deadlines, it's tempting to rush through conversations and stick to familiar approaches. The fear of missing deadlines often leads us to prioritize speed over curiosity. However, this haste can cause us to overlook important details, make mistakes, or miss out on innovative solutions. More importantly, it undermines inclusion. When we don't take the time to listen and explore diverse perspectives, we fail to make others feel valued and included. Just as I dismissed a colleague's ideas in the past, ignoring curiosity can stifle a sense of belonging and prevent us from leveraging the unique strengths of our team.

· **The Known vs. The Unknown** - People naturally prefer the known over the unknown, especially in the workplace. It's easier to rely on methods and approaches that have worked before—the ones you've seen succeed in your company. So, when someone with a different background or a new set of ideas comes along, it's easy to dismiss their perspective, not out of malice, but because it's simpler to stick with what you know. This tendency to value our own experiences over others' is a major barrier to inclusion. By defaulting to the familiar, we overlook the unique strengths and insights that others bring to the table. This not only limits our growth but also diminishes the sense of belonging and value that is essential for building an inclusive environment.

· **Fear of Being Wrong** - For some, the fear of being wrong is deeply ingrained. When you've invested significant time, energy, or even years into a particular way of thinking, the idea of being wrong can feel overwhelming. Admitting that there might be a better way can seem like admitting all that investment was for nothing. For others, this fear stems from a need to maintain an identity as the expert—the person who always has the answers. When their views are challenged, they become defensive, not out of a desire to shut others down, but because being wrong threatens their sense of self-worth. Instead of being curious and open to new ideas, they focus on finding flaws in those ideas to protect their own position. This defensiveness stifles dialogue and prevents genuine exploration of diverse perspectives that could lead to better solutions, thereby harming inclusion.

· **Upbringing & Naivety** - Your background can significantly shape your worldview, often limiting your exposure to different perspectives. This can lead to the assumption that others have had similar experiences to your own. When you've grown up in a particular environment, it's easy to believe your experiences are universal. I encountered this when I moved from California to Europe. I assumed that aspects of my upbringing, like the movies I watched and the cultural references I understood, were shared by most people my age. But I quickly realized that things weren't the same here. This naivety can lead to a lack of curiosity, as you assume others think and feel the same way you do. When we fail to recognize the diversity of experiences others bring, we miss opportunities to be curious and inclusive, limiting our understanding and connection with those who are different from us.

Critical Components of a Curious Mindset

Some of you may fall victim to all of the previous curiosity-limiting issues. Recognizing your level of a curious mindset is a great first step, but to truly foster an inclusive environment, you need to actively practice curiosity.

· **Slow Down** - One of the biggest roadblocks to curiosity is our desire to get things done quickly. It's tempting to rush through tasks when our usual approach seems effective. However, without different viewpoints, we can easily make unnoticed mistakes. In every leadership program I run, I emphasize the importance of slowing down to go fast. Slowing down allows you to fully understand discussions, problems, and perspectives. By taking the time to be curious about different viewpoints, you make better decisions, ultimately saving time and resources.

· **Adopt a Growth Mindset** - Being more curious can be helped or hindered by whether you have a Fixed or Growth Mindset. A Fixed Mindset is when you believe that your intelligence and abilities are set in stone. People with this type of mindset don't push themselves to try new things. They are who they are. On the other hand, people with a Growth Mindset believe that they can grow and develop themselves. They seek out new experiences and new perspectives, and they never stop learning. This Growth Mindset not only makes you more curious, but it will help you be more inclusive, as you will value the diverse strengths and experiences of others.

· **Ask Questions First** - A pivotal piece of advice I received from a leadership coach was to ask curious questions instead of jumping to conclusions. He helped me turn around the dysfunctional relationship I mentioned earlier by encouraging me to understand my direct report's perspective before passing judgment. When she proposed ideas, I initially disagreed with, I forced myself to ask questions: Did she have information I lacked? Was her idea based on valuable past experiences? This approach didn't mean I always agreed with her or that we became close, but it did create an inclusive environment where even colleagues I didn't particularly like felt their voices were heard.

· **Tap Into Childlike Wonder** - It is a sad fact of life that all of us get older, and unfortunately, with age comes a tendency to think we've seen it all before, and we know everything we need to know. We effectively lose the sense of wonder that can be found in most kids. But as adults, I think we need to add a little wonder back into our lives. We need to be open to the fact that mysteries and possibilities still exist in the world, and that we are not the experts in everything. So, the next time you're faced with something familiar—a routine meeting, a conversation with a colleague, or even just a walk outside—ask yourself a wonder question. "What if I approached this differently?" "What might I learn if I really listened?" "How does this connect to something I've never considered before?" These questions can reignite your curiosity and help you see the world with fresh eyes.

How to Become More Curious

Now that we've identified key focus areas to build a Curious mindset in yourself and others, let's put these concepts into action. Here are four activities I recommend. Two of these activities are designed to help build this mindset within your team. The other two activities are designed to help individuals (either yourself or one of your direct reports).

<u>Team Activities</u>

· **Curiosity Brainstorming with "What If?" Scenarios** - This activity encourages the team to think creatively and explore alternative possibilities for a significant project or initiative. By engaging in curiosity-driven brainstorming sessions, team members explore various "What if?" scenarios, pushing the boundaries of conventional thinking. The focus is on expanding perspectives and considering different angles, rather than sticking to familiar approaches. This exercise helps the team develop a more open-minded approach to problem-solving and decision-making.

· **Curiosity Challenges with Roundtables** - Curiosity Challenges engage the team in exploring new topics or areas related to their work, encouraging them to step outside their comfort zones. Each team member or small group selects a topic to investigate, and later shares their findings with the rest of the team in a roundtable discussion. This exercise fosters a culture of continuous learning and curiosity, while also providing opportunities for team members to gain insights from each other's explorations.

PROFESSIONAL CORNER

One on One Coaching Activities

· **"Why?" Laddering (5 Whys Technique)** - The "Why?" Laddering technique is a powerful tool for developing a curious mindset by digging deeper into understanding issues, problems, or ideas. This method involves repeatedly asking "Why?" to uncover the root cause or underlying factors. It's an effective exercise for both coaching and self-reflection, as it encourages continuous questioning until you reach a deeper level of insight. Whether used in one-on-one coaching sessions or by individuals on their own, this approach helps break down complex problems and encourages a habit of thorough exploration, much like the process of trying to understand a colleague's ideas by asking why they think a certain way.

· **Ask Three Curious Questions in Meetings** - Setting a goal to ask three curious questions in every meeting is a simple yet effective way to nurture a curious mindset. This practice encourages leaders and team members to engage more deeply with different perspectives by asking genuine, open-ended questions aimed at understanding rather than challenging. It's not about proving a point or exposing flaws, but about exploring new ideas and insights. This exercise can be easily tracked by noting down the three questions in your meeting notes, serving as a constant reminder to stay curious and open-minded during discussions.

I Became More Curious, and You Can Too!

In the earlier stages of my career, curiosity wasn't something I practiced much. I thought I had all the answers—I was confident, maybe even a bit cocky. I believed my ideas were always right, and I didn't see much value in exploring perspectives that differed from my own. This arrogance didn't just make me a poor leader; it also made me a less effective colleague. I wasn't interested in what others brought to the table because I was convinced that my way was the best way. It wasn't until I began working with a coach that I realized how much I was missing by not being curious. My coach encouraged me to start questioning my own perspectives and actively seek out the insights and experiences of others. This shift didn't mean I suddenly agreed with everyone, but it did open my eyes to the richness of ideas I had previously ignored. Becoming more curious made me a better leader and a more inclusive colleague.

If I can learn to be more curious, so can you. Cultivating curiosity allows you to see the world with fresh eyes, uncover connections you didn't know were there, and truly appreciate the diversity of thought around you. It's not about always agreeing with others, but about being open to what they have to offer. By embracing curiosity and rekindling that sense of wonder, you'll find that there's a vast world of insights, perspectives, and ideas just waiting to be explored. I encourage you to take the first step, ask more questions, seek out different viewpoints, and let curiosity guide you toward becoming a more inclusive and effective leader.

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