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# Active Curiosity in the Coaching Process

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Coaching skills are enhanced and potentially of greater value to the client if informed by an actively curious mindset. In turn, a curious client can increase self-awareness, discover areas in which they can be even more effective and try new approaches and behaviours which will align intention more closely with desired outcomes. Conversations between two curious individuals, client and coach, can raise discussions to becoming part of an exciting and valuable 'learning community'.

A further positive outcome of an actively-curious approach is the opportunity it provides to both client and coach to see connections that might not otherwise be surfaced. Clients will invariably know whether the connections are relevant and how they might inform their development and/or provide important insights where they are focused on better alignment between intention and actual impact.

Real examples of both the coach being curious and the client being actively curious are a key part of this piece along with some observations of when over-reliance on curiosity may be less-helpful to both client and coach.

## Context

The topic of curiosity as it relates to leadership, personal and professional development and learning is not new. What has changed, however, in my experience is the openness (and increasingly, the encouragement) for using curiosity as a way to unleash new ideas and innovative approaches to organization challenges. As well, being curious in today's complex environment requires that we move beyond a passive approach to applying curiosity. In other words, there appears to be a move from a mindset of "curiosity if necessary" to one of "curiosity as necessary". A recent article in Harvard Business Review is a prime example of the role curiosity plays in addressing important and questions which are connected to improving outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

One further dimension around an actively-curious mindset comes from a well-respected coach and consultant who has been assisting clients for decades. Ed Schein is well-known in the area of leadership and has written extensively about leadership. Most recently his books have introduced the common thread of humility to link his ideas on inquiry, coaching and leadership. In *Humble Leadership*, Schein develops a framework with three distinctive attributes which a consultant needs to bring to generate highest value for the client: A commitment to the client, *a willingness to be curious* and a duty to care about the client.<sup>2</sup> It is the centrality of curiosity in his framework that in my view enables Schein to support the client

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<sup>1</sup> Gino, F., (2018, September-October). Why Curiosity Matters. Retrieved July 24, 2019, from <https://hbr.org/2018/09/curiosity>.

<sup>2</sup> Schein, E. H. (2016). *Humble consulting: How to provide real help faster*. Oakland: Berrett Koehler.

most completely with a focus on the real need rather than what I think of as ‘presenting symptoms’.

## Coaching and Change

Coaching is of course about change, especially as it relates to supporting a client in making desired shifts in behaviours and creating new helpful habits. Some time ago, Dave Jamieson wrote an insightful piece entitled ‘You are the Instrument’. Jamieson focuses on the self-awareness we bring to our work and concludes with this paragraph:

Being an instrument of change is exciting, challenging, scary, fulfilling, engaging, intense and rewarding. Through our work we help others and grow ourselves. Because it is through self-insight, feedback, stretching encounters, and humility that we really learn how the instrument works and how it can be developed and used to make beautiful music!<sup>3</sup>

Jamieson highlights ‘humility’ explicitly and I believe two additional aspects of mindset implicitly: non-judgment and safety.

Being curious in my experience has its broadest potential when the conversations are ‘safe’ for the Client to explore and when those conversations are judgement-free. Openness allows for full exploration of ideas and ‘what if’ options but only, I think, if accompanied by the active will to be curious. And to go back to Schein, the Coach grounds his or her part of the dialogue in humility and a commitment to bring respectful challenge and focused questioning to the Client as required.

I’ll make a final observation from my experience before I describe some real examples of curiosity at work. Active listening and being fully ‘in-the-moment’ is of course essential for both the Client and the Coach. Curiosity in my experience, however, depends directly and ‘heavily’ on these conditions if it is to be of most value. When we become interested in something that is said or pay attention to something we notice in tone and/or body language, the more likely we are to see and hear things that we can choose to become curious about.

## Examples of Applied Curiosity from Clients

I’ll begin with the client and three examples where their commitment to adopting a mindset of curiosity opened them to insights and developmental options which might not otherwise have emerged.

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<sup>3</sup> Jamieson, D. (1991). You are the instrument. OD Practitioner, 23(1), p. 20.

The first client is a woman I will call Marie. She is a senior leader in health care and part of a large teaching hospital in Ontario. She has a realistic ambition to grow further and be strongly positioned for consideration for more senior roles.

Marie is a leader with an active commitment to learning and development. She leads a team of professionals and represents the institution in professional bodies and partnerships which focus on specific areas of hospital operations.

Marie was curious about what she might be missing as she thought about where she might benefit from further development as a leader. She was fairly clear---and rightfully so in my experience---that the real opportunity was not so much in the area of subject matter depth, but rather in heightening her self-awareness in the area of impact on others. To that end, she became curious about her own level of emotional intelligence (EI) and that was where we first began to work together.

From there we implicitly informed our coaching sessions with curiosity: she initially wondered how her EI profile compared with other leaders across North America. From there, Marie explored how her insights from the EI tool might relate to other hospital-wide approaches to learning and development. As a result, she was able to align earlier insights from a broadly-used instrument with specific points of awareness from the EI tool. This application of curiosity led to a highly-productive meeting with her immediate boss and the VP of HR, as they discussed her concrete action plan for leadership development.

The second client example of applied curiosity comes from work with 'Adam', a senior technology partner in a large global consultancy. Adam was the key sponsor of my work with one member of his team. That individual was one of his high-potential senior managers who was under consideration for partnership, but who had experienced some challenges in developing consistent and strong 'followership'; again, becoming more emotionally intelligent was one aspect of the work but not the central focus as was the case of Marie discussed earlier.

Adam became very curious as to what insights the EI work had generated for his senior manager. By nature Adam is an inquisitive man, one who, while deeply committed to learning, is also very sceptical of anything that is not grounded in logic and science. Hearing his colleague's experience, coupled with my comments on both the reliability and the validity of the EI tool, Adam asked whether he might complete the on-line assessment for himself and have me de-brief the findings with him.

Following his completion of the questions, we de-briefed the resulting report. At that point Adam allowed his curiosity about one dimension in particular---emotional self-awareness---to drive our conversation. From there, he decided to share his results with two other partners who

knew him well and in whom he had great trust. His curiosity centred on whether this particular behaviour might not be serving him well.

The third and final representative client example is that of 'Paul', a VP of Operations in a financial Services organization. Paul had completed a major 'turnaround' of the operations group and was looking at how his leadership could further inspire his large team as they continued to work on cross-group collaboration and further enhancements to the quality of their contributions.

From the outset of our coaching work Paul had been very interested in styles of leadership and in particular whether various styles are more helpful (or better-suited) to one type of organization more than to another. We have made this discussion point part of our core agenda at the same time as we focus on specific developmental behaviours in his current role.

Recently Paul had pressed me for my suggestions on books, articles or other sources which might bring together a range of perspectives on leadership styles. I suggested a recent book entitled 'Scaling Leadership' by Bob Anderson and Bill Adams [Footnote] as of potential interest, based on my reading and its thoughtful integration of a variety of perspectives and approaches to leadership.

Paul looked into it and then his curiosity 'kicked in'. An on-line assessment is available which when completed generates a report on the balance between creative and reactive leadership traits. Having completed the questionnaire and received his profile, curiosity led to some insights which furthered Paul's deepening awareness of both his style and its impact on the team. In particular, he became curious as to where his behaviours and style might be limiting his full effectiveness, with a view to incorporating these into discussions with the team so as to learn more about how he could be the leader they required at this point in the organization's lifecycle.

The client experiences are each unique of course but some common themes do emerge. In each example the client, through an actively curious mindset, enlarged his or her awareness of where 'blindspots' had existed and how they might be limiting personal effectiveness. As well, in each case, the client took the insights from active curiosity out to colleagues for testing and exploring their experience of his or her behaviours. And as will be obvious, the results of being actively curious reinforced the power of knowing oneself as an important factor in enhancing the ability to lead effectively and further develop 'followership'.

## Examples of Applied Curiosity as a Coach

Now I want to turn the conversation to the coach and curiosity as a powerful approach to supporting clients and getting at real issues, or in some cases moving beyond 'symptoms'.

As a first example, I was approached by a former colleague who is now in a global consulting firm. He had been asked by one of his partners to recommend a coach and consultant who could assist with a very difficult professional relationship and my name was put forward.

The organization is relatively young, in the biomedical field and at a critical point in its evolution. Clinical trials are underway, investor support is a major emphasis and the next several months will determine its potential to grow significantly. A positive working relationship of a decade's duration between the CEO and the head of R&D had been altered and the ensuing tension between the two had come to the attention of the Board.

My initial point of contact was with the CEO and I had been told that a strong and longstanding collaborative relationship had become toxic in his view. Without any further background and with only the CEO's perspective as one of the principals in the situation (and not yet having had a conversation with the Chair), I had little other than an actively curious mindset with which to explore the current reality and its underlying causes.

In this case, my curiosity was focused on what was missing that might account for the apparent sudden change in a strong, lengthy working relationship. Logic and the facts I was made aware of were not sufficient. Probing further — staying curious! — was going to be more helpful I thought. That path led to identifying when the situation changed and what was happening at that time within the organization. What surfaced was that the two had actually fallen out over what had been a deep personal friendship which complemented the professional relationship. That breach very quickly impacted their ability to collaborate in the workplace and put the growth of the company at risk. What surfaced through my curious probing was that even the most solid professional relationships can be fundamentally damaged when emotion and personal feelings, generally left out of business conversations, overtake strategy and professional commitments.

With the insights which my 'curiosity stance' provided, I became an advisor to the Chair as my primary client. Together we explored options as to how to support the re-building of a central and essential relationship. Together we determined that rather than launching into culture change, teambuilding or other initiatives suggested by the CEO, the primary work was to address the core relationship to determine if it could be repaired. Mediation by a third-party presented itself as the strongest option, leaving me free — if required — to guide the subsequent work around team and culture.

A second example of the coach consciously using an actively- curious mindset to support a client was work I was asked to do with an experienced General Counsel in a large regulatory organization. Asked to attend one of his team meetings, I was struck by the lack of conversation and exchange between and among a talented group of lawyers.

Each was an experienced professional with deep subject matter depth in a range of legal areas. They worked autonomously for the most part and were valued by the wider organization for their legal acumen.

There was very limited engagement with any of the seemingly relevant agenda items and otherwise thoughtful and accomplished professionals sat in silence throughout; seldom can I recall a more awkward session when there was much to be discussed and their work was clearly important to the organization.

Afterwards, I met with my client in his office and noted my surprise at the dynamic within the meeting. He met my surprise with his own---he had not expected anything very different. Now I was curious!

I asked how long this behaviour had been in place and he replied that it had been a consistent pattern since his arrival some several months earlier. Then I asked if he knew its causes or where it originated. He had to think but surmised that because of the formal reporting structure—he had a deputy through whom the team reported—that that might account for some of the behaviours.

Then curiosity on my part ‘kicked into a higher gear’. I asked a bit about her background and how their relationship had evolved since his arrival into the senior role. It turned out that she had applied for the role he was chosen for and had a significant tenure within the organization. She could not see why the organization had selected an outside candidate and did not see that the Legal Services function required any new direction from what had been their traditional role. Moreover, her leadership style required that she operate with a significant measure of control and the legal team knew that; accordingly, they were reluctant to provide their perspective without her input.

Those moments of curiosity were in part responsible for the General Counsel becoming clear in a few important areas that served to frame the general coaching agenda from that point on:

- He needed to have his deputy and the entire team understand why he was selected for the role and what his mandate was;

- He also needed to convey to the deputy her ongoing value to and role in the changing organization while also balancing that commitment by him with her need to accept and engage with the changes required within Legal Services offerings. Their new mandate was to become a business partner and not be solely a source of legal opinion; and
- With the clarity and understanding that emerged from the points above, the client recognized the need to fundamentally re-think the blend of skills and competencies required across the team, where gaps existed, an evolving role for his deputy and how all of that might be expressed organizationally. As an important first step, client became consultant as he met with members of the Executive Team to determine what they as clients expected from a renewed Legal Services function.

My third and final story of the coach using curiosity as a valuable tool in supporting the growth and development of clients comes from a recent engagement with a large and complex Canadian professional association. Queen's IRC had developed a deep and longstanding relationship with the organization and over time had introduced a number of facilitators to the client to address important aspects of senior leadership; a colleague and I were involved in learning programs at specific points over an elapsed period of some eighteen months.

In this case, however, curiosity did not emerge directly within the formal learning sessions nor did it happen overnight; rather, it was at the close of the most recent session that an opportunity to become curious presented itself. As I reflect on the occasion and the rich conversation that ensued it strikes me that being curious carried some risk in that my observations might have been perceived as being intrusive and not directly anchored in the curriculum.

I had been observing one of the senior leaders over time and came to quickly appreciate her insights, her solid professionalism, some of her workplace reality, her deep subject matter knowledge and her overall acumen. She was always one of the most challenging participants and seldom accepted what colleagues might see as generally-accepted perspectives. So learning was active and engagement with her always generated ideas.

My sense over time was that she was at something of an 'inflection point' in terms of learning and career growth but I dismissed it as just a hunch. At the social time which followed our last learning forum, again that hunch was in my mind. As she was saying her goodbyes to all of us, I decided to make an observation along the lines of the following:

"It has been great working with you and you brought a great deal to your colleagues and the overall learning community. And I have paid attention to your questions and how you 'showed



up' in conversations. So I hope you will allow me to leave you with an observation which might be helpful in some way that I can't identify but you might."

She was intrigued and said that she would like to hear my thoughts.

With that permission, I simply told her that I had become curious as to where her next step in developing as an even more effective leader might lie. I shared that my perception had been throughout that she was in her own internal conversation of what she wanted by way of a next career step or options for further development.

She smiled and said that I had indeed seen or sensed something and that she was in the process of thinking about these questions and others. With that, she thanked me and said my observations that stemmed from simple curiosity would become part of the 'mix' as she continued both on her personal as well as her leadership journey.

I have no idea of what has occurred after our exchange and that is not relevant to this story. I am, however, very glad that in that brief conversation my curiosity converged with a modest (but essential) moment of courage to potentially help an incredible leader on her journey.

To this point I have shared a number of examples of clients becoming curious and being well-served by it and by my own experience of my curiosity as a coach contributing to supporting my clients. By way of summary, I would say a few things that run through each example implicitly or in a more overt way:

- Accessing curiosity is enhanced by the belief that it has the potential to surface useful insights and be of value to the client; this is in contrast to seeing curiosity as a risk in terms of losing focus or straying from organization priorities;
- Using a 'curious stance' does not replace sound analysis, deepening self-awareness or clarity and confirmation around strengths which help;
- Curiosity can enhance the overall ability of the client to examine the match or mismatch between intention and impact. At times, the client has what he or she believes is a complete understanding of a situation while the coach is not so certain that that is the case. New information can be tabled and with that the client can incorporate that deeper knowledge and test what they believed to be an accurate and complete sense of the alignment between intention and impact; and
- One of the many discussions of curiosity is found on the Co-Active Training Institute website (formerly the Coaches Training Institute). There we find a discussion of

curiosity as one among a number of coaching skills, one they characterize as a 'childlike' approach: "Look what I found!"<sup>4</sup> Building on that theme, I am reminded of some work undertaken with a colleague who has taught me the power of the question 'why?' Again, think about the toddler who can exhaust with as many 'how' questions as you have time to hear!

If curiosity is a mindset and a competency for coaches, then asking 'why' deliberately and intentionally is a key pathway to insight and motivation for the client.

## Limitations of Applied Curiosity

Before concluding our discussion of curiosity as a technique, it is important to talk about situations or circumstances in which curiosity is not helpful as a way to enhance awareness, heighten the potential for insights and support the development of options for focused action. Below are a few observations based on experience where a curious nature is not necessarily a helpful one:

- At times, curiosity can take a conversation away from the priorities the client has identified as being most valuable to his or her development as a leader. Such 'rabbit holes' are often intensely interesting but at the same time less helpful. A wise practice is to ensure that client and coach are always able to articulate why being curious in the circumstance has the potential to be useful;
- Assuming a curious mindset has the potential to 'startle'. Best practice suggests that both client and coach talk about what a curious stance is and how it might be most helpful at the outset of their work together; they are then better-positioned to agree that it will be among the approaches used in the coaching relationship; and
- At all times the client and the coach need to bring active awareness to the application of a curious mindset. Both have a responsibility for ensuring that being actively curious is a shared and conscious approach to surfacing important insights. Being conscious as to why active curiosity is being applied does much to ensure that assumptions or biases are not present. A curious stance is just that, a legitimate and open shared commitment to reveal potentially helpful insights which the client can use in his or her development as an "even more effective" leader.

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<sup>4</sup> Moss, S. (2018, January 1). Curiosity. Retrieved July 26, 2019, from <https://coactive.com/blog/curiosity/>

I'll close with a short story. In an earlier part of my career, I recall being in a session with a senior partner whose specialty was corporate finance. He had a reputation of being rough and rugged, a 'cowboy' in behaviour and driven by numbers first and last. Our audience included a couple of hundred newly-qualified professionals at a learning conference.

As the partner completed his remarks, he said to the group that his approach and style should not be the model for them. What he shared was that the 'hard skills', while necessary, were no longer 'sufficient'. He summarized by saying that he had come to realize that the 'soft skills were actually the hard skills'.

So it is with active curiosity. It is not a 'soft skill', but rather a strategic tool which when used deliberately and thoughtfully, can accelerate personal growth and development in leaders.

## About the Author



Ross Roxburgh, CMC, MCEC, is a senior consultant, with a strong record of accomplishment in executive coaching and leadership development. His focus on coaching leaders is complemented by his continuing work in the design, development and facilitation of a variety of practical learning programs, across many client groups. He is strong proponent of action learning as he supports clients in “turning strategy into results”. Ross was a member of the Deloitte Consulting practice for nearly twenty-one years. He worked in both the Ottawa and Toronto offices and was a Consulting Partner for fourteen years. During that time, his clients included major organizations in the para-public, public and private sectors. In 2000, he left the Firm to establish his own practice with a primary focus on Executive Coaching, Leadership, Culture Shift and Organization Development. Ross has co-facilitated custom programs for Queen’s IRC on Board Governance and Leadership.

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