

THE CHANGE CHALLENGE.....A Newsletter About Leadership

June 1, 2013

Issue: 58



Welcome to the June 2013 issue of *The Change Challenge*. Curiosity pushes people to learn, to explore, and to create. Successful leaders are innately curious about how the world works - and that curiosity propels business, technological and social progress. That is the subject of this month's feature article titled "**Leadership Curiosity.**"

The *Leading Change* article titled "**Even Great Leaders Don't Have All the Answers**" says that your success as a leader will depend in large part on how you deal with periods of uncertainty and self-doubt. Being curious and asking questions helps you to navigate those periods. The *Personal Change* article "**Listening**" recommends that you absorb conversations in stereo: the words, emotions, body language, and voice tones; and asserts that true listening is a rare skill among executives.

As always, your feedback and recommendations to improve this newsletter would be appreciated via return email or through *The Change Blog* at www.dickstieglitz.com.

Dick Stieglitz

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This Month's Articles

[Priorities: A Leader's Most Essential Choice](#)

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Feature Article LEADERSHIP CURIOSITY

"If a manager is willing to listen, he will find that the average employee is loaded with ideas. So the first step in innovation is listening. The second is letting employees work in different ways."

- Tom Peters

Would you characterize yourself as a curious person? Most people do since opposite traits like close-mindedness and apathy are not flattering. Curiosity pushes people to learn, to explore and to create. You have been curious since the day you were born - although you had more time to be curious as a child than you do as an executive. Even still, great leaders are innately curious about how the world works - and that curiosity propels business, technological and social progress.

Replace Judgments with Curiosity. The manager of a billion-dollar program proudly proclaimed that open-mindedness and innovation were core values in his program. He encouraged his staff to be open and honest with him, with each other, and with strategic partners. One day he asked his coach: *"My people aren't suggesting as many ideas as they once did. Sometimes I feel they aren't telling me the whole story. Why?"* Uncomfortably the coach replied: *"Remember last week's workshop when you said the new approach that Ian suggested was the dumbest thing you'd ever heard."* The manager responded: *"Yes. But you didn't think it was a viable option either."* The coach continued: *"True. As presented it was unworkable. But judgments stifle creativity. I was very curious why an experienced engineer like Ian would think it was a good idea. If we had asked questions, we might have discovered a golden nugget behind his idea."* Lack of curiosity had turned the manager's conversations into soliloquies instead of the vigorous discussions of bold, new strategies that he wanted.

Same Old Stuff. Similarly, lack of curiosity is contributing to the budget stalemate in Congress. Rather than examining fresh ideas, the same old politicians are redrawing the same old lines in the sand, and justifying them with the same old exaggerated claims. It's time to ask new questions and be curious about other side's perspectives. If growth in entitlements and spending must be contained as projections clearly show, and the government needs more revenue as most experts contend, and it is reasonable for high-income people to bear a larger tax burden as most Americans agree; then lots of possibilities are available. But instead of being curious about the options, crusaders on the left and right continue their silly contest to denigrate rather than understand each other. The potential for progress lies in reframing the debate by asking new questions and reinterpreting interests.

Listen to the Market. By no means does Congress have a monopoly on stubborn thinking. Business executives can be equally oblivious to market shifts with disastrous results. It's not that companies like Zerox, RIM, Nokia, Kodak, Circuit City, Blockbuster and Best Buy failed to see market shifts. In most cases their staff had developed next-generation devices and business models, but senior executives were reluctant to introduce concepts that competed with current success. Unfortunately, their market share plummeted when others introduced those concepts. What is sobering is the degree to which these companies dominated their markets before their rapid and unexpected decline. While Apple, Google and Amazon emerged

Organizational Change

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Whether you are newly-promoted, a veteran of the C-suite or somewhere in between, your most powerful tool is the ability to touch the hearts and minds of people through effective conversations. Rich with real-world examples and useful ideas, *Leadership Conversations* is a must-read for high-achieving managers looking to reach the next level and leaders striving to develop others.

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Stuart H. Sorokin, JD, LL.M., CPA

big winners, they are no less vulnerable to such a decline - and neither is your organization.

The Take-Away Lesson. In "*Good to Great to Gone*" Alan Wurtzel, Circuit City's former CEO, tells how his company rose to stardom and subsequently went bankrupt. His core message is the danger successful organizations face when they get stuck in a comfort zone - when they slow innovation because what they are doing is working well. Rapidly evolving technology is a shared link among the companies listed above. It's difficult to project the direction of new technology, and even harder to guess how people will adapt it in their lives. The key to success in today's fast-changing business world is not finding a crystal ball. Rather it is pursuing multiple possibilities, testing potentially conflicting strategies, and embracing one of them when the time seems right. Over the next decade there are likely to be more Kodaks, RIMs and Circuit Cities. You can avoid that fate by being curious about why things are going differently than you expect.

Institutionalize Curiosity. To institutionalize curiosity in your organization, focus attention - yours and your team's - on asking thoughtful questions. Practice curiosity in conversations until it becomes second nature for everyone. You will need to:

- Replace judgmental statements with open-ended questions
- Listen carefully to the perspectives imbedded in the answers
- Tell your team what is expected and allow them to innovate
- Embrace failure - be curious about why a good idea didn't work
- Be transparent about the logic and priorities behind your decisions.

When you consider multiple alternatives, craft your questions to explore the strengths and weaknesses of each one - usually no single alternative offers an ideal solution. Question everyone in the room including the most junior people. Rather than accepting one idea and rejecting others, ask curious questions that reveal the thinking behind an approach, the data that supports that approach, and any gaps in the reasoning.

Be Curious about Curiosity. Great leaders are curious about curiosity itself. They explore ways to be more curious themselves and to promote curiosity in their organizations. Paradoxically, what you already know can become an obstacle to curiosity. The so-called experts make decisions instantly because unconsciously they assume they know everything they need to know. Effective leaders see the fallacy in that thinking and escape the knowing trap by habitually asking questions. That's how they avoid having their organizations go from good to great to gone.

Leading Change

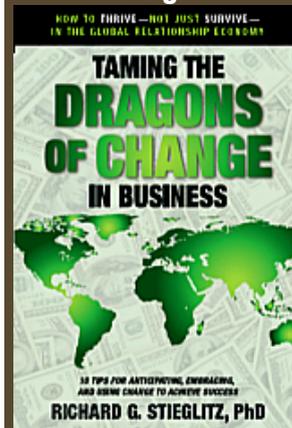
EVEN GREAT LEADERS DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS

Many people think that great leaders simply have a knack for

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knowing the right answers because they were born with superior intuition, aptitude and magnetism. Charismatic leaders are viewed as an exclusive class of people who are immune to uncertainty and doubt, and have an uncanny ability to succeed. In short, they conclude that leaders are not ordinary people. While this image may appeal to those who aspire to become great leaders, the reality of leadership is more complex.

Most leaders experience periods when they are discouraged, pessimistic, or unsure of the future. They search for answers even as they maintain an outward façade of confidence. Your success as a leader will depend in large part on how you deal with periods of self-doubt. The key is to acknowledge the doubts and involve trusted partners in the decision-making process. Take time to ask questions that define the objectives, diagnose the problems, and set action plans in place for your organization and yourself. Asking questions enables you to focus on the future rather than on an unrealistic standard for how great leaders are supposed to feel.

Have you made significant business decisions without discussing alternatives and consequences with your people? When you think you know the answer and don't ask questions, they may think you aren't listening - or worse, that you don't care about their ideas. At each higher step on the leadership ladder, you will know a smaller part of what you need to know. Examine the questions you ask - or do not ask - in your conversations. Do they explore possibilities for tomorrow or focus on getting today's job done quickly? Do they stimulate creativity or put boundaries on the options? If the former, you are operating in the leadership mindset; in the latter, a management one. Both are appropriate - at the right time.

Personal Change **LISTENING**

Leaders hold the right conversations, with the right people, at the right time in order to create alignment and connection. The most challenging part of conversations is the rare skill of listening. Great leaders listen until it hurts. Listening doesn't mean: (1) impatiently waiting for your turn to speak (2) preparing your counter argument, or (3) interrupting with a story that you feel is relevant. Since more than two thirds of communication is non-verbal, listen in stereo to the words, emotions, body language, and voice tones.

When I first began executive coaching, I thought I was intuitive and perceptive. I was trained to understand and evaluate the answers that executives gave. Yet in those early days I now see that I was guessing what clients would say. My guesses were often wrong and by not paying close attention I sometimes missed what they were really saying. Those experiences revealed the key to productive conversations: listen to what people say (and do not say), reflect on the information they provide, ask questions, and then prepare a response.

The conversations going on inside your head often get in the way of listening. You mull over an issue for hours or days in your car, in the shower, or other places where you have a moment to think. You mentally solve the problem without benefit of the perspectives of others. An effective conversation requires at least two people - and they both must share their ideas and intuitions. Use your internal reflections as the basis for conversations with others. Having real conversations will keep you from making mistakes because you assumed you knew what people were thinking. Instead ask questions and listen.

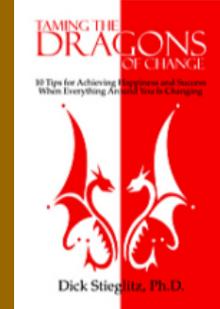
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