

ISSUE #9

Realizing

# LEADERSHIP

Everyday Leaders Changing Our World

# LEAD

A CONVERSATION

# FROM

WITH LOLLY DASKAL

# WITHIN

MAILE TOPLIFF  
CURIOSITY  
AND LEADERSHIP

PATTY AZZARELLO  
THREE TRAITS  
OF THE BEST LEADERS

*There are many traits and characteristics that, when combined, create a highly effective leader. Some come to mind more quickly than others, and some essential ones are, surprisingly, hardly even considered at all. Maile Topliff puts forward, and tells us how to achieve, an excellent characteristic that has a profound effect on a leader's impact and success.*

## CURIOSITY AND LEADERSHIP

by Maile Topliff

*Curiosity is a quality related to inquisitive thinking such as exploration, investigation, and learning, evident by observation in human and many animal species. The term can also be used to denote the behavior itself being caused by the emotion of curiosity. As this emotion represents a thirst for knowledge, curiosity is a major driving force behind scientific research and other disciplines of human study.*

*~ Wikipedia*

So, how does curiosity relate to being a leader?

Curiosity is a differentiator for leaders who seek to lead authentically. Curiosity is tied to Emotional Intelligence (ability to identify, assess, and control the emotions of oneself, of others, and of groups) Social Intelligence (navigating and negotiating human relations), cognitive skills (like memory, the ability to learn new information, speech, and understanding of written material), problem solving skills, and greater analytical applicability. Curiosity is a foundational corollary of the key attributes of a strong and effective leader.



*A former executive recruiter, Lars Leafblad stated in a tweet on May 1, 2013:  
 “5 traits my former executive search clients always sought in candidates:  
 Mental agility. Integrity. Empathy. Curiosity. Viral Energy.”*

### **HOW DO I DEVELOP CURIOSITY?**

The good news is that we are born curious. As babies we learn at the most rapid rate in our lives, by interacting and engaging with our surroundings. In our formative years our hallmark question is, “Why?” We learn very quickly, from those around us, if we should continue being curious and exploring our understanding by asking Why, or if that behavior and question is discouraged. We then move into formal/standardized education, where curiosity and inquisitiveness tend to fade back as there is a strong emphasis on the right answer(s) or the right way to problem solve, and so we may stop practicing or leveraging our natural curiosity.

As a leader, we can rediscover our curiosity and improve our ability to use it through practice in our leadership application. Rediscovering our curiosity allows us to notice things, to be present, and to work with uncertainty, which is a given for all of us in this time of extraordinary change. The strengths of a curious leader are that he/she is reflective, receptive, perceptive, and open. As a leader, we may think that we are supposed to provide all the answers, that we are supposed to know everything; and if we are willing to practice and take risks, we discover that asking questions and being curious increases the power of our influence, and makes us a more effective leader.

*The cure for boredom is curiosity.  
 There is no cure for curiosity.*

*~ Dorothy Parker*

Curiosity is triggered when we know a little something about the topic or the person, but there is an information gap (Information Gap Theory - George Loewenstein, Carnegie-Mellon) where we aren't sure of the answer. That gap creates a need for us to solve for that space “between what we know and what we want to know.” That is when we can start channeling our inner Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot.

### **PRACTICE: BEING A BEGINNER**

When we were a kid, we were a beginner at so many things. We spent days (and unlimited hours) practicing the pogo stick, jumping rope, shooting hoops, doing cartwheels, or mastering a tricky skateboard trick. As adults, we have a tendency to not take on new challenges where we would be a beginner. As we advance in our leadership careers, we may forget what it feels like to be a beginner. So the challenge is to try something new today that you've never done before. It can be an uncomfortable space to be in - and yet when we can activate our curiosity in something new, we become more able to deal with the uncertainty, we ask questions, and we seek to understand the why. That allows us to practice staying open, and learning.



*A man should look for what is, and not for what he thinks should be.*

*~ Albert Einstein*

Another way to practice a beginner mind is to do something that you dislike and notice three unexpected things about it. When we engage and look for something new, we are tapping into our openness and willingness, and that allows us to have a new experience of a task. When we are paying attention we are more present and engaged in the now. We may find that we appreciate something about the task that we hadn't valued or noticed previously.

A third way to practice is to change up your routine. Simple things like changing the route you drive to work; networking and connecting with new people; listening to a new podcast

or new music; writing with your opposite hand, putting your watch on your opposite wrist and/or trying a new author that is from another time and place, to get beyond current day thinking. Notice what you experience when you do break away from your routine.

### **PRACTICE: OPEN WITH CURIOSITY**

It's a good practice to open meetings or trainings with an activity or a question that will spark curiosity and openness. A few weeks ago, I was working with a team that thought they knew each other fairly well. When we are operating from a place of "knowing the person" already, we are more closed, and also not present or focused on listening to understand. In order to work on the big work for the team, we needed to start from a place of openness and curiosity. We

started with an exercise where each person shares a few pieces of personal information (that they hadn't shared previously) about themselves. This exercise was the activation of curiosity about teammates and fellow leaders, as it created space for, "I wonder what Sue will share?" or "I didn't know that Sue liked to mountain climb." It is always fascinating to see the realization of the information gap and the spark of curiosity flash. In those moments of curiosity, we are open, we are learning, we are looking for connection, and oftentimes, we are interested to investigate further and learn about our teammate (or the topic at hand).

### **PRACTICE: SEEK TO UNDERSTAND**

In the words of Stephen Covey: "Seek first to understand, and then to be understood." Keeping a curious mindset allows us more opportunities to stay out of judgment with our employees or with someone who we are negotiating with.

*The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.*

*~ Albert Einstein*

When we approach to understand and with curiosity - we might open with the question: "David, could you please take me through your thought process on the xyz project?" By seeking to understand, and by asking a question(s), it provides the opportunity to get the other person's perspective, to get data/facts, and invites the other person to engage. Allowing that space to learn and explore in, curiosity can help resolve conflict in a way that values and preserves the relationship between the two parties.



Ridge Associates, a company with deep expertise in communication effectiveness, describes a pragmatic way to approach listening for and identifying a need: "As you listen for the need, ask yourself, why does this matter so much to that person? Be curious. That's hard to do in conflict. We're more likely to be impatient or exasperated than curious. Being curious will help you listen for needs. Treat the situation like a puzzle to be solved. Expect the needs to unfold rather than to be immediately apparent. Listening with the right intent, will bring you quickly to the needs."

The ability to listen for and understand the need(s) of the other party is critical in being highly effective in negotiations - and increases the likelihood of achieving win/win agreements.



*Curiosity will conquer fear even more than bravery will.*

*~ James Stephens*

### **PRACTICE: ASKING QUESTIONS**

A practice, which has been in use since 1 century BC, is the usage of some form of the Five Ws in information gathering. Using these questions and the answers obtained can provide a full story:

- Who is it about?
- What happened?
- When did it take place?
- Where did it take place?
- Why did it happen?

In addition to the Five Ws, here are a few of my other favorite curious questions:

- How might we?
- What if there was another possibility?
- What else is available for you to choose... that you haven't chosen?
  - What skills, tools, relationships or other resources do you have or want for achieving your goals?

When we build upon our capacity to question and to test our assumptions, we are again seeking to understand and creating an opportunity to learn. When we are open to learning, we are more open to innovation. If we are in a situation, where we aren't curious,

and are focused on being right - we create limitations and shut down possibilities. One of the other ways that we can create limitations is when our focus isn't on the questions, or on actively listening, and we are just ready to jump in and offer a fix.

A good way to challenge that behavior is to have two people come to a conversation. One of the individuals is the person that has the problem, can discuss the problem, and is responsible for solving the problem. The second individual is the coach and can only ask open-ended questions of the individual with the problem. I have generally found that the person with the issue is pleasantly surprised when they solve the problem and were only asked questions; and the person

who is asking the questions is surprised at how difficult it was to stay in question mode.

*I know quite certainly that I myself have no special talent; curiosity, obsession and dogged endurance, combined with self-criticism, have brought me to my ideas.*

*~ Albert Einstein*

By practicing curiosity, you will discover new things about yourself, about the people and processes around you, and how you can lead differently. When our curiosity is activated, brain scans show that three areas of the brain show activity. Curiosity literally fires up our brains in our quest for knowledge and understanding. Curiosity is an essential tool for today's effective and authentic leader. **RL**



### **Maile Topliff**

Maile Topliff is the President of [Maile Topliff International, LLC](#). Maile is a former C-level executive, now solopreneur. She is an expert in leadership and executive coaching, and in

organizational development and Human Resource solutions. Maile brings deep curiosity, smarts and a bit of magic to supporting her clients in making intentional choices about the lives they want to lead, and how to carve reflective space out from the busyness. She delivers practical solutions that align leaders, teams and individuals to deliver optimal

business results, and to create a work environment that brings out the best in people, and allows them to be most effective. She has worked across multiple industry sectors including: professional services, financial services, telecommunications, health care, retail, and secondary education. She also has experience living and working internationally. Maile is a Master Certified Coach and a member of the International Coaching Federation. For more information or to contact Maile go to her website at [Maile Topliff International, LLC](#), connect with her on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter \(@MTopliff\)](#), [Facebook](#) or send her an email at [maile@mailetopliff.com](mailto:maile@mailetopliff.com).