

Want to instantly up your leadership credibility? Start with curiosity

September 2026 Leadership Brief



The case for asking more questions.

In your leadership roles, do you ever feel like you're supposed to know the answers to things that... you just don't? Beyond the internet-searchable things: big, hairy questions or ongoing, sustainability-threatening problems that just don't have an obvious answer? Twofold good news!

First, you're not alone, every honest leader feels that way, at least sometimes.

Second, the most effective leaders prioritize curiosity. They cultivate question-asking, insight-seeking, and exploration in their teams by modeling curiosity and establishing it as a normal practice in day-to-day work.

The Big Takeaway



We're more nimble, effective, and engaged when we make curiosity and learning a cornerstone of our leadership practices.

Ask more questions If you're doing it right, being curious leads to asking more questions. Questions help you explore ideas, challenge assumptions, and get to the root cause of issues faster; they also lead to stronger interpersonal connections, deeper trust, and better conflict management. In fact, the [most effective communicators](#) ask, on average, 10 to 20 times more questions. Incorporate asking questions (and, just as important, listening) into your everyday leadership tasks, and make sure your questions are [directed at other humans](#) most of the time.

Make space for exploration [Harvard Business School](#), [SAS](#), and [SurveyMonkey](#) have found, more and more, companies worldwide value curiosity as a crucial leadership skill. However, about [40% of managers](#) don't feel their organizations are doing enough to foster curiosity, and only [30% of employees](#) feel their organizations reward curiosity. It's important for leaders to show they value curiosity; put it on a meeting agenda, praise a colleague for asking why.

Celebrate all learning One reason experts believe curiosity is tough is because we're all so damn [busy](#). The fuller the plates get, the more likely workplaces are to focus on efficiency, often decreasing tolerance for error and investment in development along the way. The opposite approach is actually more effective; the busier we get, the more curious we should become. Focusing on learning and [development](#) (over blaming), especially when something goes wrong, [creates psychological safety](#), [builds team trust](#), and yields more productive, engaged, and skilled teams.



Zoom In: Applying the Skills as an IDD Sector Leader



Ask more, better questions

To shift from being a leader who tries to know all the answers to being a leader who asks great questions may feel uncomfortable at first. But, our field is full of decades-long unknowns; how do we address workforce shortages? How do we scale up inclusive supports for all people with disabilities? What we do know is that the best answers don't generally come from one person. Asking more and better questions creates space for dedicated people to think together.

Be clear about what you don't know, and don't pretend you know what you don't, especially when you have the most authority in the room. A recent SurveyMonkey report offers concerning insights into the pressure to feel like we, as leaders, have all the answers. They found that around 40% of workers even pretend to understand something when they don't, just to seem credible. Yet, it's transparency—saying I don't know when we don't—that builds trust. And when only [21% of employees report](#) full trust in their organization's leadership, encouraging curiosity requires us to be clear and transparent about what we don't know, so we can ask the right questions to find out who does.

Model curiosity by making questions a meaningful part of your interactions. Show people you value curiosity by becoming curious yourself. At your next supervision meeting, ask a colleague to share what they're excited about coming up at work. Use [project management tools](#) to inform questions in team meetings. *Why is this part of the project on track? What can we learn from this success to apply elsewhere?* Of course, when you ask questions, you need to listen. Research shows that the best communicators ask meaningful follow-up questions that demonstrate deep listening, understanding, and engagement.

Ask deeper questions. Questions are not all weighted equally; open-ended questions that invite [longer, more vulnerable responses](#) foster curiosity much more effectively than yes/no or quick-answer questions. Instead of asking if a project is on track (typical answer: yes/no), ask about the top drivers and barriers to progress.

Stick with Humans. SurveyMonkey's recent [State of Curiosity](#) report found that 60% of people believe a conversation with a colleague is more reliable, but almost a quarter rely solely on AI as their go-to method of inquiry. While AI is an incredible tool for information seeking, it also hinders creativity. A [study from Wharton Business School](#) recently showed that humans generate more diverse and innovative ideas than ChatGPT alone. The [Center for Creative Leadership](#) calls this AI erosion—the gradual weakening of independent and collaborative judgment, attention, and skill due to an overdependence on AI to do our critical thinking for us. There's no doubt AI can provide an incredible depth and breadth of information, but nothing beats the sound judgment of a trusted colleague.

Make space for curiosity

Curiosity in the workplace is a [hot topic](#). About ¾ of the workforce believes curiosity is a critical trait for leaders, and half believe it's more important today than it was five years ago. However, the data also clearly shows that [leaders struggle to find time for curiosity](#). Disability sector leaders today are busier than ever; our experience at NLCDD shows that busy schedules push curiosity and innovation to the back burner. Making space for yourself and coworkers is critical to making curiosity happen.

Schedule it. Writing something down in a calendar, agenda, or to-do list increases the chances we'll do it by [42%](#). Make regular space in your calendar to explore a topic, dig deeper into an ongoing challenge, or think through something overwhelming you've been putting off. Do the same for your teams. Add time in a regular agenda for exploration and asking questions. Francesca Gino, a researcher at Harvard Business School, suggests scheduling [“Why?” “What if...?” and “How might we...?”](#) days that guide teams to become curious about strategic plans, looming challenges, and more. A similar tool, [Odyssey Planning](#) from the book [Designing Your Life](#), can help when curiosity is needed to inform plans and future thinking.

Reward it. If you want to meaningfully embed a culture of curiosity in your team, reward curiosity when you see it. When colleagues challenge long-standing practices and traditions, leaders often respond defensively. Instead, leaders need to reward those questions. When a colleague asks a question that challenges an assumption, process, or norm, praise their thoughtfulness and make time for a meaningful conversation with them and others. It may feel a bit weird to highlight to the team why asking the question matters, but doing so shows others that curiosity is appreciated, not punished.

Don't let efficiency kill curiosity. [SurveyMonkey](#) found that one key reason organizations and teams struggle to stay curious is the ever-increasing demand for efficiency. When organizations place too much value on efficiency, they create cultures where getting the work done becomes more important than the quality of the work. Curiosity takes time; it isn't usually linear, and its benefits aren't always immediately apparent; it's easy to drop when our plates get too full. As leaders, our role is to recognize when taking a step back to explore is more effective than moving forward as fast as possible, especially when quality, dignity, and wellbeing are at risk.

Have a question or need help accessing a resource referenced in this leadership brief?

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Celebrate all learning

In her highly respected [research](#), Carol Dweck found that people who have a growth mindset, or believe that their talent can be developed rather than being innate, tend to put more energy into learning and see failure as an opportunity for growth. Her research on people has held true when applied to organizations as well; [organizations that embrace a growth mindset](#) are more innovative, collaborative, and resilient, while organizations that embrace a fixed mindset report more deception and lower [psychological safety](#). Despite our commitment to self-determination and supportive approaches that facilitate learning and growth for people with disabilities, our fields' [workforce challenges](#), [high levels of stress](#), and [challenging relationships](#) within the workplace indicate that the values that drive services do not always match the values that drive operations. Curiosity thrives when organizations adopt a growth mindset, because they tend to embrace all types of learning.

When mistakes happen, get curious. It's counterintuitive to only embrace curiosity when we succeed, but that's the norm in many organizations. Individual mistakes and failures lead to a performance improvement plan, and organizational mistakes lead to blame. Eventually, this deteriorates [psychological safety](#) and [squashes innovation and collaboration](#) because people lead from fear rather than [curiosity](#). When leaders not only tolerate, but [celebrate failure](#), by naming it, exploring it, and figuring out what can be learned from it, they create mechanisms for learning, improvement, and future growth. In a neutral time (before something goes wrong), [create a curiosity process](#) with your team that includes an objective assessment of impact, time for brainstorming short- and long-term resolutions, and a root cause analysis to identify what triggered the issue.

Invest in development, not just training. Curiosity leads to learning, leads to growth, leads to success. When [organizations invest in employee development](#) beyond task- and role-related training, they build a stronger, more dedicated workforce. As leaders, we can [encourage our colleagues' growth](#) both on the job (think stretch assignments, committee appointments, peer mentoring) and through external development opportunities, outside of work (e.g., appointment to a local board, continuing education, leadership development). Don't have a robust development budget? Find free ways to grow together by listening to a podcast on emotional intelligence and facilitating a conversation, or by carving out time for coworkers to take a free online course through open online learning.

Find your curiosity style. We don't all approach curiosity the same way. Tolerance for stress, styles of social interaction, and preference for exploration all impact how curiosity shows up in our work and lives. Researchers who have studied the dimensions of curiosity have [found](#) that understanding your and your colleagues' curiosity styles helps you curate opportunities for curiosity that engage you and others most effectively. You can start with [this](#) research-backed assessment.