

Curiosity Is Not a Personality Trait

*Why intelligent organisations treat curiosity as a strategic capability,
not a personality type.*

Author: Emilio van Doorn · **Date:** May 16, 2024 · **Topic:** Governance / Risk / Human Factors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Curiosity is usually treated as something people either do or do not have — a personality trait to recruit for with the hope it survives contact with the org chart. This article argues that is backwards. Organisational curiosity rarely develops by accident; it develops by design: through the questions leaders reward and the ones they let die. The organisations that consistently notice change before their competitors are not smarter. They have simply built curiosity into how decisions get made.

1. Introduction

There have been enough governance meetings to notice a pattern in the questions that get asked. Are we compliant? Are we on budget? Have we completed the action? Are the controls operating? All good questions. All necessary. And all, on their own, strangely incomplete — because none of them asks what the organisation is not yet seeing.

Curiosity gets treated, in most places, as a personality trait. Some people ask questions. Others simply get on with the work, and that is considered a fair division of labour. I do not think that is fair, or accurate. The organisations that notice change earliest are not staffed by more curious individuals. They have built curiosity into the system itself.

Curiosity is not a personality trait. It's a strategic capability.

Traditional governance asks one question, over and over: are we complying? Curious organisations ask a second one alongside it: what patterns have emerged since our last review? That second question, in my experience, changes the quality of everything that follows it.

2. Curiosity Changes the Questions

Every organisation constantly asks questions, and the quality of those questions determines the quality of every decision that follows. Compliance questions matter, and they should never disappear — but they confirm what is already known rather than surfacing what isn't. Intelligent organisations ask a different set alongside them: what assumptions are we making? What has changed since we last looked? Who sees this differently to how we do? What evidence would actually change our minds?

I think that last one is the most revealing question an organisation can ask itself, mostly because so very few ever do.

3. Curiosity Creates Awareness

Awareness does not arrive suddenly. It builds through repeated observation, repeated questioning, and — this is the part people underestimate — repeated willingness to be told they are wrong.

Curiosity is what keeps organisations looking past routine long enough to notice when routine has stopped working.

NASA's own history offers a sobering illustration of what happens when it does not. In the lead-up to the Columbia disaster in 2003, engineers had real concerns about foam debris striking the shuttle's wing and raised them through the proper channels. Those concerns were narrowed, downgraded, and eventually let go — not out of malice, but because the organisation had, over time, stopped treating that kind of question as worthy of pursuit. The information existed. The curiosity to keep chasing it had been engineered out of the culture.

4. Curiosity Is a Leadership Responsibility

Most organisations do not suppress curiosity on purpose. They suppress it culturally, one meeting at a time. People learn quickly which questions get a thoughtful answer, which ones get a polite deflection, and which ones have more limiting consequences. So, they adjust accordingly. Nobody decides to stop being curious. The organisation simply stops rewarding it, and behaviour follows the incentive, as it always does.

Leadership is where this gets decided, whether leaders realise it or not. A leader who welcomes a respectful challenge is, without necessarily meaning to, strengthening the organisation's awareness. A leader who treats the same challenge as a nuisance is, one dismissed question at a time, doing the opposite.

5. Curiosity Before Certainty

There is real comfort in certainty. It simplifies decisions, reduces ambiguity, and lets everyone move on to the next item on the agenda. The trouble is that certainty tends to arrive after the window to actually influence events has already closed.

Toyota built its production system around the opposite instinct. Any worker on the line has long had the authority to pull the Andon cord and stop production the moment something looks even slightly wrong — not once they are certain there is a fault, but the moment they are curious enough to check. It is a small piece of engineering, but it encodes a large idea: that the organisation would rather absorb the cost of investigating a false alarm than the cost of a real one nobody flagged early.

6. Building Curious Organisations

None of this requires expensive technology. It requires a small number of intentional habits: leaders who ask questions before they offer conclusions, meetings that spend a few minutes probing assumptions instead of only confirming progress, projects that go looking for a dissenting view rather than waiting for one to show up uninvited. None of these behaviours looks remarkable on its own. Together, I think they fundamentally change what an organisation is capable of noticing.

Conclusion

Curiosity gets mistaken for creativity quite often, and I think that undersells it. It is something more foundational than that — the discipline of staying open to the possibility that something important has already changed, before anyone is prepared to admit it. Without curiosity, organisations get remarkably efficient at repeating yesterday. With it, they become capable of recognising tomorrow while there is still time to do something about it.

Intelligence, at the organisational level, begins with a decision simpler than any framework or system: the willingness to ask one more question than feels comfortable.

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