



# What is Curiosity?

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"Choosing to be curious is choosing to be vulnerable because it requires us to surrender to uncertainty. We have to ask questions, admit to not knowing, risk being told that we shouldn't be asking, and, sometimes, make discoveries that lead to discomfort." - **Brene Brown**

"Curiosity is big and it is badass. At its weakest, it keeps our minds open so they don't shrink. At its strongest, it whips us into a frenzy of unstoppable learning...Nothing busts through the walls. We've built between us like a question so genuine and perceptive it cannot be denied. Nothing." - **Monica Guzman**

"Being curious is better than being smart." - **James Clear**

Curiosity is generally described in positive terms. What is it though? This paper provides a brief survey of research and opinions on different ways to think about curiosity, how to identify it, the current state of curiosity in the workplace, and its benefits.

## How is curiosity defined?

Curiosity is a complex construct that has been defined and conceptualized in different ways. Different disciplines, like psychology, education, and neuroscience, have approached the research of curiosity from their unique perspectives, from which many definitions of curiosity have been produced. It has been described as an emotional state, as a personality trait, and the “intrinsic motivation to learn”<sup>1</sup> [Uljana Kalinova](#) wrote, “there is no one common definition of curiosity and the discussions on what curiosity is and what it is not are ongoing.”<sup>2</sup>

Under the definition of curiosity as an intrinsic motivation to learn, once our interest is activated, we engage in activities to explore and learn which leads to internal satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> In line with this theory, neuroscience has found evidence that curiosity is a basic human drive that is associated with reward and pleasure centers in the brain.<sup>4</sup> A study from UC Davis found that “when our curiosity is piqued, changes in the brain ready us to learn not only about the subject at hand, but incidental information, too.”<sup>5</sup> In this sense, curiosity is what enables learning as it plays a critical role in human exploration.

While some definitions of curiosity focus on “intellectual curiosity” or the desire to learn, others think of it more as an “openness to experience”. “Openness reflects a person’s degree of intellectual curiosity, creativity, and a preference to try new things instead of sticking with what’s familiar.”<sup>6</sup> Openness is one of the big 5 personality traits.

In the world of professional development, curiosity is thought of as a mindset or skill that is essential for any leader and can be cultivated through openness and intentional practice. We at [CuriosityBased](#) describe curiosity more as a practice, likening it to meditation – it looks easy by nature, but it is hard to focus one's mind to it for a period of time. This practice comprises three elements: self-awareness, relationship building, and clear communication.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthias J. Gruber, Bernard D. Gelman, Charan Ranganath, “States of Curiosity Modulate Hippocampus-Dependent Learning via the Dopaminergic Circuit” *Neuron*, Vol. 84, Issue 2, p. 486-496, Oct 22, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> “Developing Curiosity: A Research Paper” By Uljana Kalinova, Life Coach, Career Coach, LATVIA (2022/11/15)

<sup>3</sup> Kashdan, T. B., DeWall, C. N., Pond, R. S., Silva, C., Lambert, N. M., Fincham, F. D., & Keller, P. S. (2018). Curiosity protects against interpersonal aggression: Cross-sectional, daily process, and behavioral evidence. *Journal of Personality*, 86(2), 305-318.

<sup>4</sup> Gruber, M. J., Gelman, B. D., & Ranganath, C. (2014). States of curiosity modulate hippocampus-dependent learning via the dopaminergic circuit. *Neuron*, 84(2), 486-496.;

Kang, M. J., Hsu, M., Krajbich, I. M., Loewenstein, G., McClure, S. M., Wang, J. T., & Camerer, C. F. (2009). The wick in the candle of learning: Epistemic curiosity activates reward circuitry and enhances memory. *Psychological Science*, 20(8), 963-973.

<sup>5</sup> “Curiosity Prepares the Brain for Better Learning” By Daisy Yuhas. *Scientific American*. (2014/10/2).

<sup>6</sup> “Openness: Signs You Have This Personality Trait and Why It’s Important” By Erica Gordon. *Circle Magazine*. Oct. 4, 2021

## How to identify curiosity in the workplace?

There are different ways to identify curiosity in the workplace, depending on the context.

One effective way to identify curiosity happens at the time of the interview through a series of interview questions that helps the interviewer assess curiosity.

Ruma Batheja described how interviewers try to screen for curiosity by:

- Giving interviewees problem to solve
- Asking about hobbies/interests/what podcasts they listen to for people who haven't had an opportunity to practice curiosity at work
- Asking what new things they've learned in the past year
- Giving a scenario and seeing what questions they ask<sup>7</sup>

Kelsey Meyer suggested, "Tell me something you have taught yourself in the last six months. How did you go about teaching yourself this new skill or idea, and what was the result?"<sup>8</sup>

Drew Fortin wrote about interview questions to screen for curiosity:

- "Interview Tip #1: Look for instances in their career where they admittedly made a mistake (not their team, not their product...their own humbling mistake) and how they learned from it. This will allow you to evaluate a growth vs fixed mindset."
- "Interview Tip #2: Before interviewing candidates, determine how much change you want the candidate to have in a given role. Do you think the most optimized processes are already in place? Do you expect them to act well on their own or simply take direction from others? Having clear answers to these questions beforehand could save a cat's life."
- "Interview Tip #3: Have them tell you what they do for fun or what they are passionate about outside of work. Curious people will be confident in their knowledge on a certain topic and will likely have tried to modify a process or method to make something better."
- "Interview Tip #4: Program objections into your interviews, maybe by challenging a decision they made at a prior job, and see if they make an attempt to proactively overcome them."
- "Interview Tip #5: Take them on an office tour. Show them around and give them opportunities to ask questions about décor, signage, what projects teams are working on, current initiatives, etc."
- "Interview Tip #6: Ask questions like "tell me about a time where you had to complete a project but were not given all of the details." How much, or how little, context they provide will be a good curiosity indicator."
- "Interview Tip #7: Ask them how they do their research when they have to learn about something they have little prior knowledge in."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ruma Batheja, "Here's how you can hire curious talent" , <https://www.peoplesmattersglobal.com/article/performance-management/are-you-measuring-the-right-metrics-23320>

<sup>8</sup> Kelsey Meyer, "How To Hire Curious People And Keep Curiosity Alive," Forbes, Feb. 6, 2014. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/85broads/2014/02/06/how-to-hire-curious-people-and-keep-curiosity-alive/?sh=d8ec8c694e3e>

<sup>9</sup> Drew Fortin, "7 Interview Tips | How to Find Curiosity in Job Candidates" Oct. 25, 2016, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/7-interview-tips-how-find-curiosity-job-candidates-drew-fortin/>

Another effective way to identify curiosity in the workplace is through use of tools and assessments. [Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic](#) wrote about a curiosity assessment in Harvard Business Review, “Assessment: What’s Your Curiosity Profile?” which you can take [here](#).<sup>10</sup> Psychologist [Todd Kashdan](#) developed a Five-Dimensional Curiosity Scale, which you can view [here](#).<sup>11</sup>

## What is the state of curiosity in the workforce?

Even though curiosity is considered positive, there is a discrepancy between valuing it and actualizing it in the workplace. While humans are born curious, researchers have shown that curiosity decreases with age from age 5 onward.<sup>12</sup> This is reflected in recent research on how curiosity shows up at work.

[Francesca Gino](#) of the [Harvard Business School](#) has done extensive research on why curiosity matters. Here are her key findings from a survey of 3000+ employees from a wide range of firms and industries:

- “only about 24% reported feeling curious in their jobs on a regular basis, and about 70% said they face barriers to asking more questions at work”
- “83% of C-level or president-level executives say curiosity is encouraged “a great deal” or “a good amount” at their company. Just 52% of individual contributors say the same. This gap seems to be driven in part by perceptions of the value of curiosity.”<sup>13</sup>

In a different survey of 23,000 employees, researchers found “While about half (49%) of the C-level believes curiosity is rewarded by salary growth, only 16% of individual contributors agree. A staggering 81% of individual contributors are convinced curiosity makes no material difference in their compensation.”<sup>14</sup>

## What are the benefits to curiosity?

Based on CuriosityBased’s community building experience, we discovered those who practice curiosity are resilient, resourceful, creative, adaptive, and have the most fun when faced with challenges and obstacles. Researchers have also found evidence that curiosity is correlated with creativity, intelligence, improved learning and memory, and problem solving.<sup>15</sup> Their curiosity can also be contagious, and their learn-it-all attitude can uplift the morale of others.

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<sup>10</sup> Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, “Assessment: What’s Your Curiosity Profile?” Harvard Business Review, Dec. 3, 2015, <https://hbr.org/2015/12/assessment-whats-your-curiosity-profile>

<sup>11</sup> Todd Kashdan | Kashdan, T.B., Stikma, M.C., Disabato, D., McKnight, P.E., Bekier, J., Kaji, J., & Lazarus, R. (in press). The five-dimensional curiosity scale: Capturing the bandwidth of curiosity and identifying four unique subgroups of curious people. *Journal of Research in Personality*

<sup>12</sup> Oleksandr S Chernyshenko, Miloš Kankaraš, and Fritz Drasgow

“Social and emotional skills for student success and wellbeing: Conceptual framework for the OECD study on social and emotional skills” April 2018, Research Gate, [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Estimated-levels-of-creativity-curiosity-and-intellect-from-age-2-to-17\\_fig22\\_324862628](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Estimated-levels-of-creativity-curiosity-and-intellect-from-age-2-to-17_fig22_324862628)

<sup>13</sup> Francesca Gino, “The Business Case for Curiosity,” Harvard Business Review, September-October 2018, <https://hbr.org/2018/09/the-business-case-for-curiosity>

<sup>14</sup> Spencer Harrison, Erin Pinkus, and Jon Cohen, “Research: 83% of Executives Say They Encourage Curiosity. Just 52% of Employees Agree.” Sept. 20, 2018, <https://hbr.org/2018/09/research-83-of-executives-say-they-encourage-curiosity-just-52-of-employees-agree>

<sup>15</sup> Brene Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* (2018). Random House.

When a critical mass of people, especially those in leadership, practice curiosity on a team and/or organization, they start informal grassroots efforts to connect and build a sense of community. A Korn Ferry study shows that “inquisitiveness” (which includes openness to differences, curiosity, and empathy) was rated the highest in extremely important and very important traits for inclusive leaders- more so than authenticity, emotional resilience, self-assurance, and flexibility.<sup>16</sup>

“If we want to create a world in which conflict and trauma aren’t the center of our collective existence, we have to practice something new, ask different questions, and access our curiosity about each other as a species.” (adrienne marie brown)<sup>17</sup>

## What can leaders do to promote curiosity?

While recent research shows that there is a discrepancy between the value of curiosity and its practice in the workplace, there is still hope. Leaders can engage in a number of ways to promote the company-wide practice of curiosity, leading to innovation, creativity, and ongoing learning.

1. **Screen for curiosity at the point of interview:** Take some tips from the pros and design your interview to help you identify the presence of curiosity in your candidates.<sup>18</sup>
2. **Pay attention to new ideas:** By giving employees autonomy to explore and experiment with new ideas and approaches, leaders help cultivate a culture of curiosity. This involves risk-taking and trying new things.<sup>19</sup>
3. **Create a culture of inquiry:** Creating an environment for employees to ask questions and challenge assumptions enables the practice of curiosity.<sup>20</sup>
4. **Provide learning experiences:** Offering team and company-wide learning experience can help to set a culture of curiosity by allowing employees to slow down and develop new skills in their practice of curiosity. CuriosityBased offers a number of learning experiences designed to do just this.
5. **Model your own practice of curiosity:** Leaders set the tone for their organizations and by practicing curiosity with your team, employees will feel empowered to do so as well.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

While curiosity is widely regarded as positive, there are differing definitions for what curiosity actually is. Much of this has to do with the different approaches to defining curiosity that are taken by varied disciplines. While some view it as intrinsic motivation, others see it as openness to learning, a personality trait, and skill or mindset. It is widely agreed that curiosity leads to greater learning. There are some activities that companies can engage in to screen for curiosity,

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<sup>16</sup> Andrés Tapia, Alina Polonskaia, *The 5 Disciplines of Inclusive Leaders: Unleashing the Power of All of Us* (2020). Wiley.

<sup>17</sup> adrienne marie brown, *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*. (2021). AK Press.

<sup>18</sup> Drew Fortin, “7 Interview Tips | How to Find Curiosity in Job Candidates” Oct. 25, 2016, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/7-interview-tips-how-find-curiosity-job-candidates-drew-fortin/>

<sup>19</sup> Frank V. Cespedes and Neil Hoyne | “How Managers Can Build a Culture of Experimentation” February 15, 2022 <https://hbr.org/2022/02/how-managers-can-build-a-culture-of-experimentation>

<sup>20</sup> Warren Berger “Become a Company that Questions Everything” April 30, 2014. <https://hbr.org/2014/04/become-a-company-that-questions-everything>

<sup>21</sup> Julie Pham, PhD “7 ways team leaders can practice curiosity” August 23, 2022. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/7-ways-team-leaders-can-practice-curiosity-julie-pham-phd>

including designing interview questions to assess curiosity and administering assessments and other tools. While curiosity is regarded as an asset in companies and on teams due to its association with employees who are resilient, resourceful, creative, adaptive, there is some discrepancy between its value and actualization in the workplace. Through intentional action, leaders can promote curiosity within their company to lead to greater innovation, creativity, and ongoing learning.