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INTRODUCTION

“Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when one 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.”

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

When I was twelve, my sister made fun of me because I wanted to learn Sanskrit and was reading too many books. At fifteen, I took evening classes in modern Greek. When I was seventeen, I solo-hitched from my native Belgium to Greece and Turkey for two and a half months. I worked and lived in Hong Kong, China, France, Finland, Belgium, the Netherlands, India, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom. I think I have always been a very curious person.

I started my professional career in investment consulting, then set up the executive education arm of a new business school in Shanghai. Subsequently, I set up corporate universities for Agfa, Nokia, Philips, Aramco, and Flipkart and was also the

chief learning officer for Flipkart and Cognizant. In my last job at Cognizant, my team and I oversaw the growth and development of three hundred thousand employees globally. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I left my corporate role and founded the Global Curiosity Institute.

During my career, I had the privilege of working with many people. What struck me was, regardless of seniority, gender, background, religion, or any other differentiator, some people ask more questions than others. Such people are more interested in the world, others, and themselves. They consume more information, whether it is reading books or articles, viewing YouTube, or listening to podcasts or audiobooks. They also tend to spend more time getting to know new members of the team. They are not afraid to say they don't know something. I ended up calling these people “A-players.” I only realized later their biggest differentiator was curiosity.

A-players differ from “B-players.” B-players, too, want to grow and develop into a better version of themselves, only they have lost something along the way from early childhood until the present, something preventing them from going full out. B-players need someone or something to help them get going. In most organizations, A-players are in the minority.

This book is about curious people and the way they think, behave, act, and communicate. Though all of us are born curious, some have maintained stronger capacity for curiosity than others.

Curiosity is a muscle, just like any muscle in the physical body. The more we use it, the bigger and stronger it gets. Stop using

it, and it atrophies, becomes weak, and is prone to damage. With the right insight about how to change and the right level of discipline and focus, we can all learn to become A-players.

We all have the power to show up curiously and even create curious environments. Curiosity thrives on intentionality. As such, it is more a verb than a noun; it requires intent, motivation, action, and perseverance. Those individuals and companies who embrace it proactively get results; those who take it for granted and leave it to chance don't reach their full potential.

The beauty is: we can stand on the shoulders of giants who have shown us the way. We only need to know how and where to look.

Curiosity is a powerful force. It is no wonder the World Economic Forum has placed curiosity on the top of their twenty-first century character traits list (Luo 2016). Curiosity is also a fragile thing. It needs both an intrinsic agent as well as a nurturing environment. In addition, it is fragile because the human species prefers predictability and the stability of the known world more than venturing out into the uncertain world of the unknown.

A crucial misconception is: curiosity will naturally occur in any reasonably healthy workplace. In fact, curious work environments are rare. They require deliberate and consistent action.

This book is a guide for anyone who wants to see what more they can do. Whether you are involved in operations,

innovation, the people function, learning and development, marketing, or strategy, you will find inspiration in this book. Whether you are an executive or an individual contributor, you'll discover how to start questioning your underlying premises and how to take steps to move on the path of curiosity.

The Workplace Curiosity Manifesto is written for those curious minds who realize our lives, our teams, and our organizations (and ultimately our societies and planet) need the right adjustments to keep thriving.

You'll discover the stories of leaders, teams, and even organizations who naturally embody curiosity. Indeed, curiosity works at all these levels. Here are three short stories to get warmed up.

(1)

Jeltje Peletier is fifty-five years old and a Dutch citizen. Earlier in life, she studied Chinese in university, working for many years in international trading in Beijing and Guangzhou. When she and her husband started a family, she decided to quit her job and stay home.

When her children started to leave the parental nest, Jeltje decided to go back to work. At the age of forty-five, she went back to school to get a degree in psychotherapy. On top of that, she took extra courses to become a yoga therapist and a coach, which gave her extra tools to help the customers in her care.

What characterizes her after hundreds of hours of working with clients is she still carries with her a rare humility. She spends extra time studying the specifics of her clients' cases and goes out of her way to call fellow psychologists to discuss her cases. Her curiosity is driven from a place of thinking she can always do better; she does not know everything, yet wants to, and she puts in the time and energy in the pursuit of excellence.

(2)

A good engineer is someone who thrives on finding and solving difficult problems. Yet, how does one recruit the best of the best in a market where it is hard to tell good from average engineers, and where are there more job openings than engineers to fill them? The recruiting team at Google in Silicon Valley were asking themselves these specific questions. They needed to come up with something new, a new approach to recruit the best of the best.

To recruit the best—the most curious and problem-solving—engineers, they had to think of a radically new recruitment strategy. What they did was startling: they booked a large billboard on Highway 101 in Silicon Valley to display only this simple text:

{first ten-digit prime found in consecutive digits of
e}.com

The billboard had no company listed. Those who were curious and driven enough to find an answer to this puzzle would find themselves accessing the following URL: 7427466391.

com. Once they accessed the site, they would see yet another puzzle. Once they solved this second puzzle, they would get an invitation to fast track their application to problem-solver@google.com.

(3)

Fujifilm was hit equally hard as their competitor, Eastman Kodak, at the end of the twentieth century with declining sales. Both were supplying the entire world with photography film before digital cameras were invented. Both were very successful. As long as the market was stable and growing for most of the twentieth century, both Kodak and Fujifilm felt they were kings of the photography jungle. Once the crisis hit, their reactions in how to deal with it was, however, radically different from each other.

Even though Kodak had invented digital photography, their management failed to embrace this new technology. Deep down, they did not have the right mental models, humility, openness, and culture to let go of their lucrative legacy to reinvent themselves. Unbeknownst to them, while sitting on their cushy throne, they had gradually lost the initial impetus of their founder and became risk-averse, lost their capacity of listening to new market forces, were overconfident when faced with changes, and overall had lost their exploration mindset.

They were comfortable with the world they knew; anything beyond this known world was shielded from their radar.

Eastman Kodak's biggest rival was Fujifilm. They had also become big in the world of analogue photography and saw

their sales drop drastically with the advent of digital cameras. Different from Eastman Kodak, they explored the application of their technology in radically different industries and listened to trends in not only the Japanese home market, but also other markets.

Fujifilm is thriving today because they faced their crisis with openness and curiosity. They also acted on their curiosity. Eastman Kodak, on the other hand, has virtually disappeared from the planet. Few people remember the power of a “Kodak moment.” Eastman Kodak was punished for being incurious.

There are curious professionals, teams, and organizations, and then there are incurious ones. The three curious actors we just described benefited from high levels of openness and curiosity. They share a drive to action, an urge to explore the unknown, a hunger so big it overrides the desire for the coziness and conformity of their familiar world. They also had leaders, boards, corporate cultures, processes, and practices around them that allowed them to leave the beaten path and take the roads less known.

Their stories, mental models, systems, and processes are easy to replicate. With the right focus every professional, team, and organization can invite more curiosity and thrive.

Why Curiosity? Why Now?

All the businesspeople, academics, entrepreneurs, and corporate executives I interviewed for this book agreed curiosity is needed now more than ever. Old questions require

new answers considering the changes we experienced in our industries and society. I would go one step further.

We are in dire need of asking different questions.

The industrial management models and theories we adopted worked well, for the most part, in the twentieth century. It worked well as long as the competitive landscapes and markets were stable and predictable. The downside of this model was: industrial stability leads to stagnation. Innovation was something that did not fit squarely in this model, as it represented change and some level of rupture with the past.

Companies open to uncertainty and willing to embrace curious employees will thrive if they aren't already. I call these curious companies. In curious companies, innovation and experimentation is proactively pursued. These companies adopt the right organizational mindsets, values, and culture and translate these in conducive processes and practices. Curious companies value, train, and reinforce curious leaders, attract the best talent, and can outpace competition. We can find curious companies in new and old industries, start-ups, scale-ups, traditional organizations, and small and big companies.

Congratulations if you are a curious professional and your organization supports curiosity! Beware, however, if your curiosity comes from a mindset of overconfidence: arrogance leads to a state of incuriosity. Ditto for organizations. Hubris leads to downfall.

The Harvard Business School professor Francesca Gino has written specifically about workplace curiosity in her *Harvard*

Business Review featured article in the September issue of 2018 titled: “The Business Case for Curiosity.” We can distill three insights from her research into workplace curiosity:

1. Curiosity is more important to an enterprise’s performance than was previously thought.
2. By making small changes to the design of the organization and the ways they manage employees, leaders can encourage curiosity and improve their companies.
3. Although leaders might say they treasure inquisitive minds, most in fact stifle curiosity.

We—including leaders—often attribute the positive effects of curiosity to ourselves, yet we tend to consider others in a more negative light.

At a societal level, there is indeed a love-hate relationship with curiosity. We link curiosity to scientific discovery, the joyous exploration of children, entrepreneurship, and success. At the same time, we also associate curiosity with inefficiency, gossip, and deviant, unruly behavior.

In my work with executives, 90 percent agree with this general statement: investing in curiosity to spark innovation is positive. When I zoom into their own teams, only 50 percent of these executives favor innovation. They worry curiosity leads to inefficiency and might distract the team from their focus.

Though workplace curiosity is hot these days, it is fragile and experiences many obstacles. The biggest hurdles to curiosity

are stress and routine. It is not unexpected that the French existential philosopher Albert Camus cried,

“Routine and pressure exhaust one’s faculty of discovery and admiration.”

The benefits of curiosity in the workplace are numerous. Curious employees are more engaged, more motivated, more open to changes, and volunteer novel ideas at work. Curious individuals also have greater willingness to try new things and see things from different perspectives. When the team is curious, we see reduced group conflict, less groupthink, fewer decision errors, and higher performance levels. Curious organizations see trends before others do and listen more deeply to market dynamics, customer needs, and the ideas of their employees. They innovate faster and are intentional about curiosity in their culture, processes, and practices. Curious organizations create the right environment for people to thrive. Curious companies are also magnets for the best talent.

Jeltje Peletier, Google, and Fujifilm are just three examples. Novartis, McKinsey, and PepsiCo are three more. Sber from Russia, Grundfos from Denmark, and Baobab Express from Africa are yet three more we will cover in this book. I could—and will—come up with lots more examples, yet I realize these individuals and companies are still the minority. No matter from where they hail, they all have something in common: curiosity about the world, others, and themselves.

And they are the opposite of their less curious peers.

What if we could all learn to be like those who inspire? I am confident we are at the brink of an era when the ability to inspire is practiced not just by the few, but by the majority. Studies show only a minority of our workforce shows up engaged at work. If more people knew how to improve themselves intentionally and how to build organizations that inspire curiosity, we would live in a world where the majority instead of the minority would be engaged and where companies would be more resilient in times of stress, more productive, and more creative. In such a system, employees also go home happier and build happier families.

This book is a tribute to all these professionals, teams, and organizations who are already showing up curiously. It is not designed to tell you what to do or how to do it. It attempts to offer you frameworks, inspiration, and a mental model for deciding to take action.

This book is a manifesto and, as such, calls for action in response to a challenge.

I offer you one now. From now on, don't be simply curious, be intentionally curious.

Before we dive in, I want to leave you with some initial questions to reflect on:

- Who is your role model when it comes to curiosity?
- When was the last time you learned something new to the point you could teach it to someone else?

- What is your definition of curiosity?
- To what degree do your colleagues consider you to be someone who is interested in novel things?
- To what extent is curiosity stimulated by your organization, your manager, your team, or your customers?