Cracking the Curiosity Code

The Key to Unlocking Human Potential

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Chapter 11

What Holds Us Back?

Those with less curiosity or ambition just mumble that God works in mysterious ways. I intend to catch him in the act.
Damien Echols

Now we get to the heart of what I've wanted to know about curiosity: what holds us back? Why do some people retain their curiosity to solve perplexing problems, invent new technologies, or discover new worlds while others become less curious? Answering that question is my mission.

We usually recognize incurious people when we encounter them, much the same way we recognize the immature or unintelligent. They may be our children, our students, our fellow workers, or even ourselves. But how do we confront them? Do we simply tell them that they're incurious and to snap out of it?

When confronted with motivating the seemingly unmotivated, psychologists and behavioral scientists suggest a first step. First, break the concept down into specific behaviors. Then, rather than correct the person, correct the behavior.

When I looked up the word incurious in the dictionary, I found a variety of synonyms I expected, such as apathetic, casual, complacent, and disinterested. So far so good. However, I also found two words that had completely escaped my vocabulary up until then: insouciant and pococurante. Like the punchline of a joke or the ending of a story, the meanings of these two words made me—guess what—curious.

"Insouciant," according to Webster's, is an adjective that means being "free from concern" or "anxiety free." Hmm, I remember my children being insouciant about math, which led to grades that were not their best.

"Pococurante," I discovered, is an adopted Italian word meaning "a careless or indifferent person." When I was an MBA Program Chair, I never realized I had pococurantes (or pococuranti)

enrolled in the program. Neither did I know that pococurantism was so prevalent among high schoolers.

Other definitions describing the incurious are more familiar, such as nonchalant, perfunctory (another good one, meaning lacking interest or enthusiasm), unconcerned, indifferent, or uninterested.

Beyond expanding our vocabularies, we can now better determine the specific behaviors associated with the incurious by learning its various definitions. For example, what do people do or not do when they are apathetic or uninterested? Remember, experts say that once we know the behaviors associated with being incurious, we're better equipped to change their state.

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To further this quest, let's go back to the basics of curiosity discussed in Chapter 1. We discussed how curiosity is innate to all of us and grounded in the notion of survival or finding food and shelter and being protected from predators.

Scientists tell us that all mammals have a limbic system within our brains. Designed to trigger memory, emotions, and arousal, the limbic system is the basis of our survival instinct. Before we continue our analysis of the incurious in humans, let's briefly examine curiosity where it's more vividly displayed, as in a few of our favorite creatures, beginning with cats.

Cats are in a continual state of curiosity. Even domestic cats maintain this inherent trait based on survival instinct. Felines aren't necessarily more curious than other animals. They just tend to exhibit their curiosity more visibly and in a more entertaining fashion. If you're a cat lover or study the behaviors of cats, you know what I mean.

Cats live in a constant state between curiosity and caution, exploring the territory but always remaining vigilant. It's like our own feeling of caution and impending danger when we almost fall over backwards in a chair. That's the world of cats, at least when they're not napping.

Dogs are just as curious as cats for the same survivalist reasons, but they cultivate and display their curiosity in different ways. Long possessing the title "man's best friend," dogs, like cats, are what zoologists call an altricial species. That means they're born blind and deaf and therefore totally depend on their mothers for their early survival. The opposite of altricial is precocial, which refers to animals that are largely independent and mobile at birth, such as horses or cows. (No charge for the extra lesson in zoology.)

The state of being altricial tends to enhance animals' curiosity. From the moment they're born, unable to see or hear, they almost immediately search for their sustenance and protection. This helpless condition appears to serve as an early catalyst for their curiosity and survival.

Ever watch dogs during a walk in the woods or the park? They sniff everything, whether it's humans, plants, or other dogs. Their highly developed sense of smell and their equally keen sense of hearing are their primary means of satisfying their never-ending curiosity.

Have you ever subjected your pet to a laser pointer and watched it madly chase the dot of red light? That's another behavior of dogs and cats that's not only entertaining but an example of their strong curiosity. Does this behavior mimic that of trying to catch prey? What seems like mindless fun to us is an element of the survival instinct they possess.

Monkeys display similar entertaining and curious behaviors. Cats, dogs, and monkeys all exhibit the innate nature of curiosity, grounded in the instinct to survive. There's no such thing as an incurious cat or dog or monkey. They retain their survivalist instincts even when they're domesticated.

That incurious distinction belongs to us humans. Why? When we evolve beyond the state of survival, we allow our curiosity to diminish.

You can't just give someone a creativity injection. You have to create an environment for curiosity and a way to encourage people and get the best out of them.
Sir Ken Robinson

But it doesn't start out that way. Babies are born learners with a natural curiosity to figure out how they can survive and how the world works. Curiosity is the desire to learn, an eagerness to explore, discover, and figure things out.

Parents and caregivers don't have to make infants curious or push their toddlers to learn. In fact, research shows that it's an internal desire to learn and not external pressure that motivates them to seek out new environments to explore.

Watch babies as they follow sounds, faces, and interesting objects with their eyes. Notice as they shake a rattle and then put it into their mouth to see what this object can do and what it tastes like.

As babies age and figure out more and more of how the world works, their curiosity fades or becomes more focused or directed. Somewhere along the line, however, some people remain curious and others do not.

Why is that?

Beyond any physical or health-related factors that can dampen our curiosity, such as stress, dementia, or drugs, research leads to four major factors that impede or diminish this quality in humans. I've labeled these factors FATE (fear, assumptions, technology, and environment).

#1 Fear

Based on testing, fear is the most predominant factor that influences our curiosity. It may be fear of the unknown, fear of what we might find, fear of the uncomfortable, or fear that the results of our exploration might challenge our current beliefs.

Fears are sometimes disguised as false bravado or ego. Fear of failure tends to be major. How many times have we threatened to quit our jobs or wanted to start a business fearing what will happen if it doesn't work out?

Our curiosity rarely gets the chance to explore the options of a new job or how to start a new business before the dreaded "yeah, buts" shut it down. Our fear overtakes our courage and curiosity.

The desire to try something new or different is fruitful only when our determination or motivation to explore further or learn more mitigates the risks we feel anxious about.

The more curious we are, the more we come to know. The more we know, the less fearful we become. The inverse of that is also true. The less we know, the more fearful we are and the less we come to know.

How does fear inhibit your curiosity?

#2 Assumptions (The Way Things Have Always Been Done)

Another common reason we become averse to trying something new, or even wondering about it, is that we get comfortable doing things the way we've always done them, or we consider the issue already solved. If we assume something already works, why explore something new or different?

In the business world, for example, speed is a virtue, and innovation is risky and expensive. Therefore, it's common for leaders to push for a fast and safe solution rather than a new, untried one.

One of the biggest paradoxes in industry today consists of holding on to tried-and-true solutions yet yearning for innovation. We might tell ourselves that we don't have time to exercise our curiosity and explore new ideas. However, as the world progresses and becomes more innovative, those who don't proactively seek new information won't keep pace. It's important to reward people for exploring new ideas and asking questions.

In our personal lives, we might select jobs based on what we assume is expected of us. Perhaps people in our family have always been engineers, lawyers, doctors, and the like. Therefore, we might think that we should pursue the same kind of path. Perhaps we tell ourselves that we must be good at a particular career or a certain line of work because that's what our lineage did.

Traditionally, we gravitate to the assumption that "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." However, the pace of innovation and entrepreneurship today suggests a new version of that expression: "If it ain't broke, break it!" Then, fix it and make it better than it was before.

What assumptions do you hold that might be preventing curiosity and innovation?

#3 Technology

The third major factor that affects our curiosity is technology.

Technology has offered us so many answers and made it so much easier to access those answers, yet as generations become more and more technology dependent, curiosity can actually be squelched. If computers can answer our questions, we may not see the need to discover the why behind those answers.

So, technology can, in fact, dissuade us from learning new things. If learning something requires first trying out technology to discover answers, people can feel overwhelmed. For example, those who want to learn more about writing but have little knowledge about computers and online documents might be stymied. Thus, they might not pursue their writing interest due to the sheer number of steps required.

Then there's artificial intelligence (AI). As it becomes more popular, we'll have more devices doing more things for us, requiring us to do less. Scientists have reminded us that the more we're given answers, the less likely we are to ask questions.

Thus, we have another of the paradoxes regarding curiosity as it relates to the emergence of technology: how do we sustain our desire to ask questions in a world more and more dominated by answers?

Can you look past answers to find more questions that may lead to breakthroughs?

#4 Parental, Family, Teacher, and Peer Influence (Our Environment)

The fourth major category of factors that tend to suppress our curiosity is the environment in which we live or were raised. Social pressures can stifle our instincts to be curious.

Our families and friends might inadvertently put ideas in our heads that something isn't appropriate or is even bad because they fear the unknown. Sometimes having a friend join you in a curious endeavor can help alleviate that tendency to judge.

Social media have caused a lot of people to share only things that will be "liked" by other people. They might subconsciously worry that showing interest in something other than what everyone else has interest in will make them look bad.

Regarding education, it's a widely held belief that children are born curious and become discouraged in school. Sir Ken Robinson's widely popular TED talk asks the question: Do Schools Kill Creativity?[i]

As we age, we're told to act certain ways, which can inhibit curiosity and creativity. Learning environments can have a dampening effect. Teachers might inadvertently confine students to the curriculum, stifling a natural form of curiosity that might lead in a completely different direction. Researchers have even found that curiosity can be diminished if opposite-sex siblings occupy the same room.

Younger generations have begun to feel even more pressure to conform than other generations. Research indicates that Millennials are the most stressed-out generation. They lack risk tolerance when it comes to financial decisions and have less distress tolerance in the workplace. Because they worry about what others think of them more than other generations do, they're less likely to propose new ideas and speak up in meetings.

The lessons we learn from our parents, teachers, professors, and bosses are the same lessons that can stifle our curiosity later in life.

Were you taught only answers or also taught to question?

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Boundless research on curiosity assures us that we are born with it, and it serves to acclimate us to the world around us.

We know that our curiosity leads to better performance and creativity and is essential to motivation and innovation. Curiosity is seen by entrepreneurs and business leaders around the world as making the fundamental difference between being good and being excellent. It's a key difference between surviving and thriving and between mediocre employees and outstanding employees.

To know how to instill curiosity, we must first know what gets in the way. We do know several factors that tend to curtail our curiosity, ranging from mental or physical impairments to laziness. We've added more clarity and specifics regarding those inhibiting factors of FATE.

In the following chapters, we'll explore the barriers within each of those four categories and how companies can remove them to unleash the potential of their workforce, which is our ultimate goal.

[i] https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity?language=en