

Cracking the Curiosity Code

*The Key to Unlocking Human
Potential*

Diane Hamilton, PhD

Chapter 12

Curiosity and Fear

Curiosity is what draws you out of your comfort zone; fear is what draws you back in.

Marc Jacobs

Fear, the first and most prominent of the four factors of FATE, is fully capable of blocking our curiosity, our pursuit of innovation, and our competitive advantage. Fear takes many different forms: dislikes, biases, opinions, and even bravado. But don't be confused; each of these is a variation of fear, and each can bring us to a paralyzing halt. That "deer in the headlights" sensation affects more than just deer.

A part of our brain, the amygdala, signals any signs of threat or danger we may encounter. Such detection triggers the release into our bodies of large doses of chemicals such as adrenaline and cortisol. While this function is essential to our survival, the amygdala has no ability to distinguish a real threat from an imaginary one. It doesn't know if we've confronted a bear or misplaced our iPhone. As Jason Ma, founder, CEO, and chief mentor of ThreeEQ, said when he was on my show, "It just knows our thought was negative, which provokes a fight-or-flight reaction within us."

For example, your amygdala remembers and stores in your brain the reaction you experienced in the third grade when you failed to answer the teacher's question. It remembers how your colleagues looked at you when you made an off-the-wall suggestion, and it reminds you that the last time you attempted a three-point shot at the buzzer you missed.

Whereas your amygdala may be essential in warning you that spiders and snakes can be a threat, it can also put a damper on your curiosity and desire to explore new things.

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.
Franklin D. Roosevelt

Fear, at its core, is a reluctance to delve into the unknown. The reasons for that can range from the sublimely ridiculous to the deadly serious. They include fear of failure, fear of making life-altering mistakes, fear of looking stupid or ignorant, and even fear of re-experiencing something negative from our childhood.

To this day, I resist certain vegetables because as a child I found them to be disgusting. The script in my head goes something like this, “I ate cooked carrots as a kid and remember them tasting mushy and nasty; hence, I no longer want to try new vegetables.” If you asked if I’d be interested in learning a new way to cook carrots, I must confess the answer would most likely be no.

Sally Helgesen, a noted consultant and author of *The Female Vision*,ⁱ noted recently on my show, “A big fear that women, especially, share is that you’ll disappoint the expectations people have of you and that they’ll say, “That’s so unlike her.”

The fact is, any fear, however ridiculous it seems, is completely capable of impeding our curiosity and innovation. Fortunately, most of our fears aren’t an impenetrable wall but are often like fragile panes of glass that can be shattered or overcome with a single action.

The term “fear” is defined as being overly cautious or reluctant to act to avoid consequences. In many instances, our fears are imaginary, something we anticipate could happen or might happen as opposed to what likely will happen. Insurance companies hire actuarial analysts to calculate the risks and probabilities of potential threats or occurrences. If something seems too risky, we tend to shy away from it.

Behavioral scientists and leadership coaches suggest the opposite. They encourage us to move toward the risk, not shy away. They

remind us that a key difference between exceptional leaders and others is their high comfort level with delving into the unknown, exploring the uncomfortable.

Fear, in evolution, has a special prominence: perhaps more than any other emotion it is crucial for survival.

Daniel Goleman

Recently, I was swimming laps at my gym. By the side of the pool was a woman with her toddler. As small children tend to do, the child kept tugging at her mom to go toward the pool, only to be held back by her protective mother.

Eventually, the mother decided to let the child experience the water. Jumping in, she extended her arms to the child, urging her to jump. Repeatedly, the child excitedly ran up to the edge of the pool, but each time, she stopped just short of leaping into her mother's arms. After several aborted attempts, the exasperated mother got out of the pool and led her daughter away.

The infant was clearly curious to experience the sensation of being in the water, but her fear of the unknown overcame her curiosity.

How many times have we, too, been curious to experience something unknown or to explore a new opportunity yet were too fearful of what might result if we followed through? Generally, we don't fear physical harm, but rather we fear the risk of other kinds of discomfort.

To determine if fear is holding you back from discovering areas you might otherwise want to explore, ask yourself exactly what you fear. Is it the process or the outcome? Do you not believe you're capable of doing a particular task or job? Do you need more

information to make a decision? What's at stake if you make a decision?

If you're considering writing a book, do you fear having it scrutinized or judged? What if you consider doing something but are told it's risky or scary? Would you accept this input at face value or explore what you want to do anyway?

What if you tried something and failed? Do you think you would look bad from someone else's viewpoint? Are you worried about being overwhelmed with too much to do? Or worried you'd be putting all your eggs into one basket?

Our fear of failure tends to grind off our enthusiasm for risk taking and for entrepreneurship. We should be more in touch with what we get from our failures.

Tom Kolditz

Consider how you would deal with your answers to all these questions. Perhaps once you answer them, whatever is holding you back will become clearer, and you can address solving that problem directly.

Jay Samit, a leading Hollywood media executive, author of the book *Disrupt You*, and one of my favorite TED speakers, draws the distinction between fear of failing and fear of failure.

Fear of failing, he explained, means giving up; whereas fear of failure is more about learning how it won't work. Failing is worse because it means you give up. Failure means you have found a way that something didn't work, and you'll continue to seek new ways.ⁱⁱ

It seems we live in a time of extreme scrutiny and judgment. Just ask people how much they care about how many "likes" they get on social media. If someone writes a critical comment about us

online, we can be devastated. Perhaps we see what other people do on their social media sites and think we can't compete with them, so why try? The reality is that most people post only the very best aspects of their lives online. If we try to compete with that, we're setting ourselves up for failure.

Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice.

Steve Jobs

One of my relatives is highly creative. When I asked him why he hadn't submitted his work for publication, he told me he didn't want to be successful. I didn't know how to react to that.

Assuming he would be successful, I asked him why that would be a problem for him. He said he didn't want to deal with having to talk with people about his success. It sounded to me like he thought dealing with being successful would be a lot of work.

It seems that a lot of people talk themselves out of doing things because they're afraid it would involve too much work, or it might be too hard. How do they know if they don't try? Some people work so hard at not working, that if they spent that much time and energy working, they would have a lot more to show for it.

I once interviewed Lolly Daskal, a woman described as one of the most influential leadership coaches of our time. She's the author of *The Leadership Gap: What Gets Between You and Your Greatness*. During our interview,ⁱⁱⁱ she told me that leaders often fear people will discover they're not as smart as they appear to be or fear being exposed in some other way.

In one of her blogs,^{iv} she lists fears that many of us in the professional world have confronted at one time or another. They are fears we must overcome to move forward in our careers or our lives. The list includes fear of:

- Being criticized
- Being a failure
- Being a bad communicator
- Making hard decisions
- Not taking responsibility
- Not getting it done

They say curiosity killed the cat. Conversely, our fears may not kill our curiosity, but they can certainly wound it. Fear resulting from our curiosity is as common as curiosity itself. That said, how is it that some people can overcome that fear and go boldly into the realm of the unknown while others cannot? What enables them to say yes to the following questions when others hesitate?

Should I:

- Explore this new opportunity?
- Invest in this stock or start-up?
- Quit my job to pursue my lifelong dream?
- Consider a new career?
- Throw my hat in the ring for this new position?

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do . . . Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.
Mark Twain

One of my interviewees talked about continuing to be curious about what's on the other side. Yet, until we overcome any fear that's stopping us, it remains on the other side.

When I asked author, entrepreneur, and all-around maverick Yanik Silver about fear and curiosity, he told me, "Sometimes very traumatic things become alarm clocks, and other times they're quiet moments in which you hear a nagging little voice that says, 'There's something more.'

"If you're not feeling fully alive, if you're feeling a little depressed, if you're feeling frustrated, those are indications you're not truly following your path. Then it's up to you to do something about it. I believe following your heart is frequently scary, but it's never wrong. You can point to times when you said, 'I'm going to go do this.' Maybe you didn't even have a logical reason to do it, but in the end with an elevated viewpoint, you know it was the right move. Or it set up something else you never would have gotten to without going in that direction."

Researchers at the University of Cincinnati found that 85% of what we worry about never happens. Also, 30% of the things feared happened in the past and cannot be changed, and 90% are insignificant issues.

Adam Kirk Smith, *The Bravest You*^v

Overcoming Our Fears

So, how do we overcome our fears? You may be surprised at the answer. It's ironic, but according to scientists, the same curiosity that our fears can stymie is the antidote for overcoming our fears.

In short, they say, we need to be more childlike. As a child, researchers explain, curiosity is how we discover our world. It's how we learn. We're wide open to new experiences and unaware,

and therefore unafraid, of the potential consequences. By the time we reach adulthood, we've experienced many of those consequences, so we've become more guarded, more conservative, in what we're willing to explore or not explore. So, for example, how could I break through my fear of exploring vegetables and consider cooking carrots in a new way?

According to scientists, I need to start by accepting the possibility that not all vegetables are the same, and perhaps those mushy carrots I ate early in my childhood weren't cooked in the best way. That single act of acceptance may be enough to encourage me to engage my curiosity about this whole mushy carrots thing. If I can get over my fear of reliving a negative experience from my past, scientists say, I'm more likely to be open to considering new and interesting recipes.

My thoughts immediately take me to the Bill Murray movie *What About Bob?* and its memorable line "Baby steps," or the Nike slogan, *Just do it!*

The aforementioned Jay Samit stated in his TED talk,^{vi} "Fear can either immobilize you or push you to challenge your perceived limits." Fear of letting his children down was his only motivation. For example, he admitted that he talked about a pretend company to make him appear more successful. He also put an ad in the paper for a fake job that would attract résumés so he could see what people offered. His stories are found in his book, *Disrupt You!: Master Personal Transformation, Seize Opportunity, and Thrive in the Era of Endless Innovation.*^{vii}

But what if your fear is more substantive? What if your fear is closer to being an impenetrable wall than a pane of glass?

Author Elizabeth Gilbert^{viii} inspired millions to choose a path of curiosity over that of fear. She delved into “how to overcome the fears and suffering that inevitably arise when we push at boundaries, embrace our curiosity and let go of fear.”

Many of us talk ourselves into settling for how things have always been done because we fear the repercussions of making a change. Change is hard for most of us. If not change, sometimes choice. We fear other people’s judgments if we make certain choices. They might make fun of us for trying something no one else has tried or tell us that it can’t be done because they would be afraid to try it themselves.

What do we actually fear? Mostly, we fear change. However, embracing change can lead to some of the most innovative ideas. Warren Berger explained in *A More Beautiful Question* that there is “a direct connection between curious inquiry and many of today’s most innovative entrepreneurs and designers. Design breakthroughs such as the Square credit card reader, Pandora internet radio, the Nest thermostat, and the business model for Airbnb all began with curious people wondering why a particular problem or human need existed and how it might best be addressed.”

Brian Grazer is one of the most successful producers in Hollywood, with film credits that include *Splash*, *A Beautiful Mind*, and *Apollo 13*, along with TV hits such as ‘24,’ ‘Arrested Development,’ ‘Parenthood,’ and the currently red-hot ‘Empire.’ So, what has helped Grazer climb to the top in one of the most competitive industries? Clearly, he has strong creative instincts and a great collaborative partner in Ron Howard, with whom Grazer co-founded Imagine Entertainment. But as Grazer sees it, one of his greatest assets—one that has fueled his success at every stage of his career—is his insatiable curiosity. ‘Curiosity is what

gives energy and insight to everything else I do,' Grazer wrote in his new book, *A Curious Mind: The Secret to a Bigger Life*.^{ix}

When you take risks, you learn that there will be times when you succeed and there will be times when you fail, and both are equally important.
Ellen DeGeneres

As Deborah Bowie stated so simply, “The opposite of fear is not bravery, but curiosity. When we know more, we fear less. That is true in every part of life—personal and professional.”

Ellen Langer asked Harvard college students to give unprepared speeches to an audience. She wanted to see whether being open and curious could transform public speaking anxiety. How? By asking speakers to change their mindset about what constitutes a mistake.

Langer randomly assigned students to one of three conditions:

- 1) the “mistakes are bad” condition, in which they were told not to make a mistake;
- 2) the “forgiveness” condition, in which they were reassured that mistakes were fine and instructed to purposely make a mistake; and
- 3) the “openness to novelty” condition, in which they were told to incorporate any mistakes they made into the speech itself and instructed to purposely make a mistake.
- 4) Speakers in all three conditions gave a talk in front of a room full of people and were told they would be judged on how well they performed.

The results? Speakers in the “openness-to-novelty” condition judged themselves as more comfortable and rated their performance better than speakers in the other conditions.

Moreover, the audience also judged the speakers in the “openness-to-novelty” condition as being more composed, effective, creative, and intelligent than speakers in the other two conditions.

In another experiment, a Japanese company wanted to train its employees to be more effective in doing business with their American counterparts. Japanese people can be innately shy and reluctant to assert themselves, especially in strange situations. Therefore, the CEO embarked on an interesting project to train his employees to overcome their shyness. Leaders of the firm were directed to go out into the streets of Tokyo during the busiest time of the day and sing their favorite song to unsuspecting crowds as if they were street performers. The employees were told that to overcome their fears, they must confront them head-on. Within months, the CEO began to see a more comfortable, more assertive workforce when interacting with foreign customers.

When asked why it’s so important that we use curiosity to combat our fears, Richard Bandler, a leading author and self-help coach, said simply, “Because it beats the alternative! Curiosity is our means of survival. If we’re not curious, we don’t discover the world in which we live. We don’t discover solutions to our problems. We don’t improve. Like all organisms on planet earth, the fittest organisms are the ones that are able to adapt, and curiosity is the cornerstone of adaptation.”^x

In an interview with Brené Brown, who wrote the wonderful book *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*^{xi} and others, she called fear a good thing, if we allow it. She described fear as “a sensation of vulnerability, which we tend to avoid.” However, she advised, “We’ve got to be vulnerable. The three most powerful words I ever learned in my life were, ‘I don’t know.’ Once I got comfortable with saying ‘I

don't know,' remarkable things happened. It's amazing how much you learn when you actually admit you don't know."

She added, "Courage starts with showing up—when we let ourselves be seen."^{xii}

Fear is the absolute opposite of curiosity. You don't look at things. You don't discover what works. You don't find out what's dangerous, and ultimately you don't progress or even survive.

Constantly seek criticism. A well thought out critique of whatever you're doing is as valuable as gold.

Elon Musk

I once had the opportunity to interview CEO and co-founder of FiREapps, Wolfgang Koester.^{xiii} His company helps corporations improve efficiencies, reduce costs, and reduce currency effects. He has over thirty years of extensive experience in currency markets and working with numerous global Fortune 1000 companies as well as government entities. He's steeped in such topics as interest before taxes and depreciation analysis, and he suggested we talk about the latest bitcoin issues.

I was simply not in the same league regarding financial matters. I knew that if I were to conduct the interview, I'd have to be a lot smarter about those issues. I had three options. I could:

- 1) not conduct the interview (fear of being exposed),
- 2) interview the man, feeling clearly uninformed about complex currency and tax matters (and be exposed), or
- 3) pursue my curiosity to know more about such things as blockchain and cryptocurrency.

Fortunately, my curiosity was the antidote to my fear.

Behaviorists and business coaches alike encourage us not to shrink from the fear of the unknown or to allow our fears to shut down our curiosity. Instead, we're told to embrace our fears, to become curious about them, to examine them, to study their origins, and to learn what the unknown provokes in us and why.

We cannot change what we are not aware of, and once we are aware, we cannot help but change.
Sheryl Sandberg

As noted in previous chapters, highly successful leaders become comfortable exploring what makes them uncomfortable. This is the key to overcoming the first and mightiest of FATE.

As so many of my interviewees, leaders, and entrepreneurs have reminded me, to get closer to innovation means that we must get comfortable being uncomfortable.

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