

Cracking the Curiosity Code

*The Key to Unlocking Human
Potential*

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Chapter 8

The Curiosity of the Successful

There is no better catalyst to success than curiosity.
Michael Dell

For decades, we have been hearing about the strong link between successful leaders and curiosity. I've had the privilege of interviewing many of those successful leaders on my radio talk show. All have extolled the virtues of curiosity as being integral to their success. Practitioners and scientists are at odds over many of the factors that contribute to success, but on this issue, they seem to agree.

Psychology Today stated that the top trait among those who succeed is curiosity. A common characteristic is that successful people read to satisfy their curiosity. They like to explore new things and are open to fresh ideas. They constantly ask questions and seek information to fulfill a voracious appetite for knowledge. They want to learn everything about everything.

Give people facts and you feed their minds for an hour. Awaken curiosity and they feed their own minds for a lifetime.

Ian Russell

When Warren Buffett was asked about the key to success, he pointed to a stack of books and said, "Read 500 pages of this every day. That's how knowledge works. It builds up, like compound interest. All of you can do it, but I guarantee not many of you will do it."ⁱ

Buffett reads between 600 and a thousand pages a day. Bill Gates reads fifty books a year, and most are about business, science, and engineering. Mark Zuckerberg claims to read a book every two weeks. Mark Cuban claimed that he will try to read three hours a day if he needs to learn something new. Elon Musk said he read the entire encyclopedia when he was only nine years old. Oprah reads so much, she created Oprah's Book Club.ⁱⁱ

Inc. magazine devoted an article to how many of these successful people dedicate five hours a week to deliberate learning, called the

five-hour rule. They see learning as being so crucial to success that not spending the time to learn leads to insidious long-term effects such as having an unhealthy lifestyle. The article states, “The CEO of AT&T makes this point loud and clear in an interview with *The New York Times*; he says that those who don’t spend at least five to ten hours a week learning online ‘will obsolete themselves with technology.’”

There are certain famous people who come to mind when we think of successful people who are curious. *The Irish Times* listed Sir Hans Sloane, a physician born in 1660, as the most curious man in the world, due to his interest in collecting objects from his worldly travels. Others who read to satisfy their curiosity include Einstein, Disney, Aldous Huxley, Madam Curie, Richard Feynman, and Malcolm X. The list is endless.

When I asked Marshall Goldsmith, a world-renowned business educator and coach, about how to leverage curiosity and success, his response was interesting. He said, “The nice thing about being around a hundred coaches is it’s just a great way to learn. To me, when you are around someone who does something that’s like what you do but not exactly like what you do, it’s very good because they are all so smart. You’re not competing in any way. You’re just helping each other.”

To cultivate curiosity, it’s important to recognize moments when the situation requires powerful open-ended questions to obtain meaningful information.

Unfortunately, many people hesitate to ask questions at work. A *Harvard Business Review* article found that sixty-five percent of employees do not believe they can ask questions at work, even though eighty-four percent of them said that their employers

encouraged curiosity.ⁱⁱⁱ That is a curious contradiction. Perhaps it's because sixty percent of them believed there were barriers to question asking in their workplace.

Michael Bungay Stanier, senior partner of Box of Crayons and author of *Do More Great Work*, has urged people to find a favorite opening question and practice it and practice it until it becomes a habit. He said his favorite go-to question is, "And what else?" because the first answer stated is never the only answer.

A common topic in the business courses I teach examines Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow popularized the term "self-actualization," which is the desire for self-fulfillment and realization of our full potential. He studied people he believed reached self-actualization, including Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Einstein.

Later in his career, Maslow regarded this actualization as less of a peak and more of a disciplined event that we teach ourselves through experience. He found that self-actualized people embraced both the unknown and the ambiguous.^{iv}

Everyone shines, given the right lighting.
Susan Cain, *Quiet*

Author Adam Bryant interviewed 700 CEOs for his book *The Corner Office: Indispensable and Unexpected Lessons from CEOs on How to Lead and Succeed*. He asked them, "What qualities do you see most often in those who succeed?" Their number one answer was passionate curiosity.^v

This characteristic, passionate curiosity, is seen as a survival mechanism because our involvement in life depends on our interest in it. Buddhists often call this willingness to cultivate a

sense of wonder a “beginner’s mind.” People with that mindset become lifelong learners.

As Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, said, “Curiosity-driven people bring the gift of cross-pollination to every space they occupy.”^{vi}

The more we begin to see what is possible, the more likely we are to figure out how to attain lifelong learning. What we strive to achieve can always be greater. As Steve Jobs said, “Those crazy enough to think they can change the world usually do.”

So, just what’s different about the curiosity of the successful business leaders we hold in high esteem and our own curiosity?

I asked that question of Jeff Hoffman, the billionaire entrepreneur instrumental in creating Priceline.com. He said, “I ask the same question. I ask what it is they’re doing that everybody else is not. What is common? What are the common traits and behaviors of those people?”

Jeff explained, “I love to be around people whose accomplishments I admire, as I did on a trip to the UK with Steve Wozniak (Woz), co-founder of Apple. The whole time Woz and I were traveling, I noticed the same trend, stopping to pick up shiny objects and asking, “What is that?” And you’re thinking, “Who cares? We’re in the middle of something.”

Yet the successful people do care. They wonder what something is and how it works. Then they want to take it apart and see what’s inside.

Theirs is a thirst for constant learning. They want to know more, they want to know why, and they want to know how. They’re likely

to be great innovators because they stumble upon things nobody else even looked at before.

There will always be someone who can't see your worth. Don't let it be you.

Mel Robbins, *The 5 Second Rule*

Todd Kashdan is an often-quoted professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, and leading researcher on the topic of curiosity. He stated, “On the surface, curiosity is nothing more than what we feel when we are struck by something novel.”^{vii}

Kashdan has published *Curious? Discover the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life*, in which he outlined the benefits of cultivating a curious outlook.^{viii} He explained how we tend to dismiss curiosity as a childish, naïve trait, though knowing it can actually give us profound advantages.

Curiosity is the trait that helps us approach uncertainty in our everyday lives with a positive attitude.

“Although you might believe that certainty and control over your circumstances bring you pleasure, it is often uncertainty and challenge that bring the longest-lasting benefits,” explained Kashdan. “In part, I think it’s because it’s easy to lose sight of what truly sustains us, and where the true meaning in our lives should come from.”^{ix}

But putting curiosity at the heart of everything means that we experience daily life by discovering the unfamiliar in the familiar, as Kashdan put it.

Discovering the unfamiliar in the familiar seems to be a major differentiator that separates moderately successful people from those who appear to enjoy success at an altogether higher level.

They not only appear to see things differently from the rest of us; they appear to see the same things differently every day.

Do the ultra-successful possess some form of super-curiosity? The answer is no. They just tend to find the unfamiliar within the familiar. As Louis Pasteur said, “Chance favors the curious mind.”

In the *Huffington Post*, Kira Callahan, an expert sales conversion coach in the financial industry, explained how successful sales people use their curiosity. He said, “Curiosity is the fuel behind the world’s great achievements and discoveries. Genuine curiosity lights a fire between people that is the foundation for mutual respect and lasting relationships.”^x

Be curious, not judgmental.
Walt Whitman

Discovering the Unfamiliar in the Familiar

While researchers and behavioral scientists pursue the Holy Grail of Curiosity and its variations and what differentiates the super successful from the rest of us, my research brings me back to this single concept: discovering the unfamiliar in the familiar.

I know the route from my home to the grocery store very well. I drive it several times each week. And each time, I take the same route. That’s the familiar. What if I occasionally took a different route? Might I find it to be shorter or more convenient? Might I discover interesting new people or new businesses worth exploring? What else might I notice taking a different path to that same old destination?

For anyone who has worked in the same job for a year or more, we are prone to fall into that rut of familiarity. We are susceptible to that dreaded disease called burnout.

What if, instead of answering those predictable phone calls with a predictable response, we changed it up?

What if, instead of going into that sales call on automatic pilot with the same proposition, we observed a customer's behavior we'd never noticed before and asked the person to explain it?

What if we observed that assembly line that we oversee every day from the perspective of a child and asked, "Why?"

To find the unfamiliar in the familiar, the examples are endless. For some, a particular idea may seem difficult to do, even a little ludicrous. To the super successful in the world, however, it's second nature.

ⁱ <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/15/warren-buffett-and-mark-cuban-agree-reading-is-key-to-success.html>

ⁱⁱ [Ibid.](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://hbr.org/2018/09/research-83-of-executives-say-they-encourage-curiosity-just-52-of-employees-agree>

^{iv} <https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/self-actualization/>

^v <https://www.amazon.com/Corner-Office-Indispensable-Unexpected-Lessons/dp/1250001749>

^{vi} <https://www.elizabethgilbert.com/video/>

^{vii} <https://www.amazon.com/Curious-Discover-Missing-Ingredient-Fulfilling/dp/0061661198>

^{viii} [Ibid.](#)

^{ix} [Ibid.](#)

^x https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-power-of-curiosity-to-increase-sales_us_5a57b5e6e4b0f5da618358b5