



By: [Kellie J. McCoy](#)

Across the branches of the military and in business worldwide, leaders ascend through the proverbial ranks based on two primary factors: they deliver results and they demonstrate an ability to extend their influence over increasingly larger numbers of people. Results are quantifiable and, for the most part, easy to measure. Battles are won or lost, profits are up or down. But assessing influence, that covert means of achieving results, is much more nebulous. Leaders who are effective at the top of an organization must possess some extraordinary means of influence, some quality that propels them past their equally successful middle management peers. Curiosity is this driving force.

Curiosity, the strong desire to know or learn something, must not be confused with its equally undervalued intangible cousin - creativity. Whereas creativity is essential to developing innovative solutions, curiosity is what brings us to the question in the first place. To be fair, military leaders are neither commonly praised nor criticized for their level of curiosity. Yet, curiosity is the underlying trait that differentiates the most effective leaders from those who merely exhibit commonly accepted leadership fundamentals such as leading

by example, initiative, and interpersonal communication.

Most leaders who attain moderately high levels of responsibility within their organization have mastered the basic intangibles of leadership. They are team players who work hard and are willing to take on tasks that may seem beneath them to get the job done. They preserve their character and lead by example. They solve problems by improving systems. And they persevere through challenging times.

Successful leaders learn quickly to listen well, communicate, resolve friction points, and work hard. They are rewarded for meeting the objectives of their superiors who also typically evaluate performance. As they move up the ranks, their subordinate population grows and their ability to influence becomes more challenging than in the days when they could easily interact directly with each of their subordinates on a daily basis.

So what is it about some of these successful mid-level leaders that sets them apart and propels them to the highest level of their organization? The answer, or at least a good part of it, is a healthy dose of curiosity. This often overlooked trait that simultaneously connotes an unquenchable intellect and a seemingly less desirable childlike whimsy separates the ordinary leader from the extraordinary. Curiosity helps them connect with individuals - key to influence especially at lower levels.

As point-to-point communication becomes more unrealistic with larger numbers of subordinates, ascending organizational leaders often fall into one of three categories:

- **The Quasher.** Those who personally focus the majority of their time and energy on day-to-day activities. There is no detail too small for their interest. They like volumes of reports and statistics and may be quite talented at using these to demonstrate to their superiors the perceived exceptionalism of their organization. Their influence is likely to cause subordinate leaders to similarly apportion the vast majority of their time and

resources to satisfying this demand. The Quasher confuses micro-management (which most leaders in this group would say they vehemently oppose) with an insatiable thirst for knowledge. They are not incapable of envisioning organizational change, they just aren't interested. They spend their time reacting to their higher ups in an almost robotic fashion. They don't ask questions or think about how to change an organization for the better. And they don't want their subordinates to do so either. They can be toxic. They quash creativity, let alone curiosity.

- **The Indifferent Leader.** The Indifferent Leader cares about the success of the organization but is cautious not to “rock the boat.” They likely manage day-to-day activities systematically using data inputs to root out weak points in systems or processes and to spread effective systems across the organization. These leaders are likely well-liked by subordinates who see them as “hands off” and “not demanding.” They appreciate creative solutions but are still essentially focused on present performance. Their boss likes them because they don't make waves. They are happy to sustain the status quo. Their organizations perform well enough - often due to the effort of individual subordinate leaders - but they risk stagnation because curiosity is not particularly relevant from their limited perspective.
- **The Curious Leader.** Those who spend time thinking and envisioning the organization in the future. They pay attention to their subordinate organizations' performance, but take a more holistic view. They are willing to accept some areas of mediocrity to free up mental and physical effort to effect long term, transformational change. They use their time poking into the nooks and crannies of their organization and asking questions because they have an insatiable desire to learn and understand its inner workings. Curious Leaders who indulge their curiosity at the expense of forgoing guidance and direction from above put their organizations at risk. However, the Curious Leader who can activate his inner Quasher or Indifferent Leader when

necessary and can appropriately focus his curiosity can have lasting influence on an organization.

Any organization with a true learning culture would seemingly want to identify and grow Curious Leaders in their ranks. This is a tricky endeavor though since curiosity, an innate quality that is difficult to cultivate with any measure of authenticity, is exceedingly difficult to detect in junior leaders - unless you specifically look for it.

At a high enough level in any organization, talent is more or less a commonality. Leaders have accumulated technical proficiency and understanding of their organization from the ground up. Superiors certainly can detect influence's more overt contributors such as charisma. Yet many a young leader brimming with charisma, charm, and overall likeability find that their ability to influence peaks before they reach the highest ranks. This phenomenon occurs either due to a lack of ambition (unlikely) or a lack of authenticity. Curiosity is the prevailing indicator of authenticity and an imperative for sustaining effective leadership at the highest ranks of an organization.

The organization that values Curious Leaders should look for junior leaders who exhibit curiosity in two key ways:

They are interested in the world around them. They read widely. They ask questions...lots of questions. They separate themselves from their peers through innovation, creativity, and perspective.

Theodore Roosevelt racked up an impressive curriculum vitae: military hero, New York City Police Commissioner, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and President of the United States. He was also famously curious. There were few topics not of interest to this one-time house bound sickly child. A consummate traveler and explorer he was the first President to leave the United States. He did so in 1906 to visit the construction of the Panama Canal and see

the engineering feat in progress for himself. He climbed mountains, dragging his new bride to the Matterhorn on their honeymoon, and he wrote prolifically on everything from the naval war of 1812 to a biography of Oliver Cromwell. Roosevelt's inquisitive spirit made him an innovative, creative leader with an informed perspective.

They are genuinely interested in people and their individual stories. Because they know - really know - people, they assimilate the best, most productive teams. They are able to talk to people conversationally at all echelons and from all walks of life.

Howard Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks, built a multi-billion dollar company from a single store in Seattle's Pike Place Market. He often says that Starbucks is "a people company that sells coffee." Wherever he travels, he can be found standing in line at the local Starbucks, engaging the baristas and the occasional surprised store manager with ease. Curious Leaders are naturally charismatic. Mr. Schultz' personal curiosity has created a culture at Starbucks that values creativity and innovation and has made the company a pioneer in social entrepreneurship.

If the Curious Leader is identified early, and shown how to focus and temper their curious mind when needed, they can contribute immensely to the sort of strategic vision and positive climate that most organizations desire. Sure, curiosity can breed eccentricity, which is not appreciated in all organizations - particularly the military. But promoting those who never step out of line and simply "get results" without considering what drives their influence across the organization ultimately weakens it. Only the Curious Leader will ask, "Why are we doing this?" or "How can we do this better?" Only the Curious Leader is comfortable not knowing all the answers and genuinely interested in gathering input from a variety of sources. Only the Curious Leader conveys an authenticity that makes people want to follow them - they exert influence without even trying. Businesses and our military would be well-served to find, groom, and value their Curious Leaders.

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