



THE POWER OF CURIOSITY (AND OF CURIOUS LEADERS)

Neal Schore

I've been preaching the gospel of the clarifying question for years now.

Scientific research confirms that asking questions and adopting a posture of curiosity is a helpful action in relationships. Seeking out information about others—what scientists call “interpersonal curiosity”—can leave people in a relationship feeling more positive and connected.¹ The relationship can seem like a safer place in which to express oneself. Based on studies of romantic relationships, consistently showing curiosity seems to lower the odds of being targeted for an aggressive response.²

FROM ORDINARY TO EXCEPTIONAL

But quite often in life, something happens that throws us off balance. We receive bad news, a colleague utters a disparaging comment, our child talks back to us, our spouse forgets to do the dishes. It's *Ordinary* in such situations to react, allowing our emotions to dictate our actions, often in ways that hurt us and cost us time. Scientists refer to this quick gut response as “amygdala hijacking.” The amygdala is an evolutionarily primitive part of our brains associated with our emotional functioning, including our fear response. When we're under stress and experience a perceived threat, our amygdala activates, bypassing parts of the brain responsible for a more reasoned, thoughtful response, and leading us to behave impulsively.

To have an *Exceptional* mindset is to become ever more aware of our emotions, managing them well in the moment, avoiding fear-based responses, and behaving in unexpected and counterintuitive ways that truly reflect our values and advance our goals. Exceptional action does involve a certain amount of risk, but it's self-empowering in that it allows us to break our ingrained patterns and let our individuality shine through. Ordinary action, by contrast, is self-limiting, leaving us stuck and swirling.

When we take time to ask someone else to explain themselves, we can understand them better and open ourselves to feeling more empathy. They feel more validated and heard. Our listening skills become stronger. The potential for conflict decreases.

Working with clients, I've often found that asking not one but a *series* of clarifying questions leads to far more positive outcomes. I once coached two business partners who were struggling to get along. When I say "struggling," I mean they massively distrusted each other and could barely be in the same room without the conversation growing tense. One of the partners felt such overwhelming distrust and anger that the mere mention of the other's name prompted a flurry of angry or bitter comments. He was thinking of leaving the business entirely, even though that would have cost him dearly in financial terms.

My role was to help the partners act more professionally with each other, teaching them tools such as understanding the intent and asking clarifying questions. I also served as a mediator between the partners, hoping to prevent their emotional and distrusting mindsets from destroying the company. Progress was torturously slow. On a weekly basis, seemingly simple business matters would spark a conflict, and I would have to talk one or the other of the partners off a cliff or convince them to be more reasonable.

I went into those conversations knowing that I couldn't accuse the partner I happened to be advising of behaving poorly. I needed to model rational behavior, showcasing how to stay focused and professional so that they could learn to do it themselves. I did so by starting with a basic clarifying question—some version of “Why do you care so much about the issue at hand?”—and working from there.

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Let's say that Partner A had decided unilaterally to fire the company's biggest customer because they'd concluded that that piece of business was unprofitable. And let's say that Partner B vehemently disagreed with that decision and asked me to get Partner A to change their mind. When speaking with Partner A, I'd say something such as “I heard that you made a decision to part ways with your biggest customer. I'd love to understand: Why would you want to do that?”

Partner A would reply, “I bet you're asking since Partner B told you about it.

Instead of denying it, I'd answer with a question: “I'm genuinely interested to know: Why would you think that?”

“Well, I think you’re judging me,” he’d say.

I’d respond by saying, “Interesting. I’m not judging you or your business acumen. I’m genuinely curious why you’d want to take that action.”

Partner A would list any number of reasons. I’d pose follow-up questions to dig deeper. If he said he was “fed up with dealing with the customer,” I’d ask him how often he engaged with the client himself. He’d answer in an emotional way, lacking actual data. I’d follow up with similar questions that pushed him to back up his emotional statements with fact. After he struggled to answer several of these questions, Partner A’s stubborn posture would finally break. He’d say something such as “You want to know why I’m parting ways with our biggest customer? Because Partner B is tiring me out. I’m exhausted.”

I’d respond by saying, “Ahh. I appreciate that candor, and now this makes more sense to me. Thank you for the honesty.” I’d then ask why he was exhausted, since he generally has a lot of energy.

In many cases, a line of questioning such as that would lead Partner A to acknowledge that he’d behaved in an Ordinary way—he’d acted reactively, out of emotion, falling prey to his ingrained but unhelpful patterns. That realization allowed us to resolve the dispute while helping us avoid subsequent conflicts. Once we’d clarified a distracting and counterproductive behavior pattern, Partner A would send me texts proudly announcing that he’d used his tools, focused on the data points that mattered, and behaved in an Exceptional way. Seeking to support that behavior, I’d ask him to calculate how much time he’d saved himself, his spouse (he frequently complained to her), and his partner. It was, of course, a significant amount.

Sometimes I'd go back to Partner B to probe why he was upset and see if we could use the same tools to make further progress. My curiosity became a magical mediation tool, one that calmed down the partners and allowed us all to gain more information and insight. Eventually, the partners were able to communicate more civilly with each other and even build some measure of mutual trust and respect. Because they'd stuck it out and managed to work through their issues, they were able to successfully exit the company as they'd long hoped, selling it for a significant sum of money.

Episodes such as those have made "Ask Clarifying Questions" a cornerstone tool of mine. People who've used the tool have seen results across all areas of their lives, not just at work. One of my clients, Ellie, had a daughter in her twenties who was attending nursing school and who had strong beliefs about health care issues, especially pertaining to women. Ellie had her own ideas about health care policy, and she tried sharing them with her daughter as a way of showing interest in her life and sparking conversation. Unfortunately, her well-intended statements led to arguments, which were stressful for both of them.

Drawing on the coaching I'd given her in her professional life, Ellie stopped making statements and instead began posing questions out of genuine curiosity: What did her daughter think about a particular issue? Why had she come to see it that way? What had influenced her viewpoint? Instead of indulging her motherly urge to talk and advise, Ellie focused more on listening. She found that she started to understand her daughter better and that she listened more thoughtfully than she had in the past. Whereas before she had tended to multitask while her daughter expressed herself, now she really tuned in. Conflict between Ellie and her daughter eased, and her daughter became more open, less defensive, and more communicative. It was a massive win for them both!

THE CURIOUS LEADER

People at any age or level of seniority can benefit from asking more clarifying questions, but if you're a senior leader, you *really* need to start doing it. Research suggests that asking questions and showing curiosity is a powerful leadership tool, one that most leaders tend to ignore, perhaps because it's not part of their training. Trial lawyers and reporters learn how to pose questions, but young people taking business courses in college or pursuing their MBAs generally don't. Many people in business think that they and their organizations are more curious than they really are. As one survey found, 83 percent of senior leaders reported believing that their companies foster curiosity, while just over half of employees agreed.³

Two professors at Harvard Business School, Alison Wood Brooks and Leslie K. John, have argued forcefully that leaders would benefit from posing more questions. "Questioning is a uniquely powerful tool for unlocking value in organizations," they wrote. "It spurs learning and the exchange of ideas, it fuels innovation and performance improvement, it builds rapport and trust among team members. And it can mitigate business risk by uncovering unforeseen pitfalls and hazards."⁴

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The claim that something as simple as asking a question unlocks economic value might seem excessive, but I can tell you firsthand that it does. At one company where I served as chairman, our team established a training program for the young analysts the company hires. One day at the office, I passed by a conference room where a group of four new analysts were sitting together. Poking my head in, I made a lighthearted remark about their recent arrival at the company and told them how happy I was to see them. I often do this kind of thing with employees, since I know that engaging personally with the team, especially younger workers, makes a big difference.

I was about to continue on my way, but I decided to spend another minute or two with them by asking a clarifying question. "Excuse me," I said, "I'd love to understand what you're doing right now."

The room fell silent. Panic flashed across their faces. Here they were, the newest and most junior members of the team, being questioned by the chairman. After a long pause, one of them shot me an anxious look and said, "Well, I . . . I was a little concerned that I'm not contributing fast enough, so since we're the four newest people, I asked if we could all get together and compare notes about what we've been learning and how we can help one another."

Wow! Most analysts simply plod through the program, doing what managers tell them. That's Ordinary behavior. Not those folks; they weren't satisfied with how quickly they were contributing, so they took the initiative and collaborated independently to enhance their development. They were behaving in a distinctly Exceptional way, which was awesome. "I love that you are doing this," I told them. "You all are going to be rock stars."

At a company offsite the following week, I asked those four to stand up in front of the whole company and announced how proud I was that they were taking the initiative, innovating and accelerating their onboarding pace, and getting up to speed by learning from one another. They were floored. I assure you that they will not soon forget that I noticed them and stopped by the conference room that day, let alone showcased them to the entire company.

In that case, asking a clarifying question turned up a valuable and unforeseen opportunity for me to add value as a leader. I rewarded the four analysts for their proactive behavior, and I held them up as an example for everyone else to follow.

If I hadn't asked the question, I wouldn't have understood how great those four analysts were. Nothing terrible would have happened. But nothing good would have happened, either. Over time, our bolder, more innovative culture will create more economic value. Because I'd asked a question, I helped reinforce and advance that kind of culture.

I also saved time, albeit in ways that are difficult to quantify. Many organizations dedicate time and resources to building culture, and that's a good idea. Posing a clarifying question enabled me to do some valuable culture building without having to allot time and resources specifically to that task. I spent a minute chatting with the four analysts and another minute or two recognizing them publicly. The impact of those three minutes on the organization was far greater than if I'd spent a half hour with a PowerPoint deck lecturing people about our desired culture.

There are many kinds of beneficial questions that leaders might ask, but posing a simple, open-ended query such as “I’d love to understand your thoughts” or “I’d love to understand why that matters to you” might be one of the most powerful leadership tactics out there. Reflecting back on my own three decades as a leader, I can’t think of a single instance when asking such questions and possibly some similar follow-up queries wasn’t productive in some way. The vast majority of the time, it helped surface useful knowledge or insights or prompted someone to articulate a truth about themselves or the organization.

SOME SAMPLE CLARIFYING QUERIES

- Please help me understand why that concerns you.
- I’m wondering why you’re so focused on that project.
- How do you think that person intended for the situation to play out?
- I would love to understand the specific part of the situation that you found offensive.
- How or where do you think you fit into this scenario?
- I would love to understand the exact reason you’re distracted.
- In fifteen seconds or less, can you please summarize the main point you’re making so I can fully understand it?

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Often, asking a clarifying question helps us lead and manage a situation—and save time—because it prompts others around us to offer clues about their intent. It's one thing to wonder internally about a colleague's intent; it can be better to prompt them to reveal it to you, particularly when they come to you upset about something. "It feels to me that this could be an emotional situation for you," you might say. "I would love to know more. Can you please help me understand why this situation is so important to you?"

In responding, they might reveal their intent: "Well, it's not that important—I just want to vent to you about it."

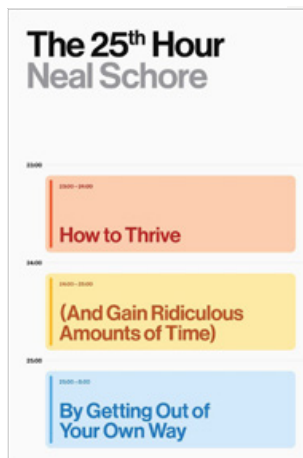
You now know how you can best help, and you avoid wasting time you might have spent giving advice, say, if all they want is someone to listen.

Regardless of where we are in our careers or lives, posing more clarifying questions makes our daily experience easier. Our egos lead us to feel that we must always talk, direct others, tell them what we think. When someone speaks aggressively to us, we become insulted and feel compelled to respond. That takes effort, energy, and time.

We wind up falling into our own patterns, making the situation more difficult than it needs to be. **We can accomplish so much when we pause, prompt someone else to speak, and *listen* to what they're saying. As anyone who has spent time in organizations knows, this is unusual behavior. But that's all the more reason why you need to do it. 📖**



Info



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Endnotes

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