



## LEARNING TO LEARN: FIVE STEPS TO CREATE A CURIOUS ORGANIZATION

By Louise Muhdi

Chemin de Bellerive 23  
PO Box 915,  
CH-1001 Lausanne  
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11  
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07  
info@imd.org  
www.imd.org

*As the world faces a rapid transformation in jobs, ways of working and skills, organizations must learn to embed a culture of curiosity to power ongoing learning that lies at the heart of future success.*

As companies rapidly transform their operations to adapt to the impact of the pandemic and the seismic shift towards digital, a big question mark hangs over whether their workforces can keep up.

The [World Economic Forum](#) has reported that around 40% of workers will need reskilling of up to six months, while 94% of business leaders expect employees to learn the skills they need for the future on the job. Critical thinking, analysis, problem solving, flexibility and active learning are seen as the skills most in demand.

Changing a business model or accelerating an organizational transformation are already steep mountains to climb, but how do we empower our people and teams to transform and open their minds for this new challenge – to learn how to continuously learn?

It calls for a change of culture for many companies, from rigid, refined processes and command and control to curiosity, collaboration and creativity.

Taking the following five steps to foster a culture of curiosity within your organization can spark the ongoing learning and experimentation needed to adapt to a rapidly changing world.

### **Ask more questions - questions are more powerful than answers**

Albert Einstein famously remarked, “Question everything.” Personal creativity and organizational innovation rely on a willingness to seek out novel information.

For business leaders, the pressure is always on to tell people what to do – to provide the right solutions and answers. Unlike in some other professions, such as medicine, we are not trained how to ask the right questions. Let’s be honest; in practice, it’s tempting to revert to the role of commander-in-chief because it saves time and means that things will probably get delivered the way you want them to. However, this approach kills curiosity and stifles learning, including your own. Instead, reverse the roles and ask more questions.

Encourage your teams to ask more questions of each other. The more questions you ask, the more you will challenge assumptions, inspire greater curiosity in others, trigger learning, and drive performance through innovation. Simply put, if you don’t ask questions, you won’t find the answers.

### **Ask more people – go beyond your comfort zone, organization or industry**

Copyright © 2006-2020 IMD - International Institute for Management Development. All rights, including copyright, pertaining to the content of this website/publication/document are owned or controlled for these purposes by IMD, except when expressly stated otherwise. None of the materials provided on/in this website/publication/document may be used, reproduced or transmitted, in whole or in part, in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or the use of any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from IMD. To request such permission and for further inquiries, please contact IMD at [pressroom@imd.org](mailto:pressroom@imd.org). Where it is stated that copyright to any part of the IMD website/publication/document is held by a third party, requests for permission to copy, modify, translate, publish or otherwise make available such part must be addressed directly to the third party concerned.

At the same time, the more people you ask, within and outside of your organization, the richer the tapestry of ideas available to you. Questions build relationships and engagement – and open our minds and the minds of those around us. This enables diverse perspectives from different stakeholders to be heard, which can open up new opportunities or flag up unseen risks.

Why is this important? Well, we know that no single organization has a monopoly on all the answers to the challenges we face. It's becoming essential to include a range of different stakeholders to improve our problem solving and to build valuable, robust ecosystems. Indeed, mastering the art of collaboration and open innovation is key to unlocking value creation, competitive advantage and long-term success.

### **Focus goals on learning, not just performance**

For too many companies, learning is still seen as an add-on activity or HR distraction, rather than a core skill. Under the banner of “Building an inspired, curious, unbossed culture”, pharma giant Novartis has introduced the idea of including personal impact and learning goals alongside performance for its employees. Similarly, by incentivising and institutionalising learning as a goal rather than an add-on, companies can motivate individuals to engage with learning on an ongoing basis. Performance matters, of course, but, today, it's becoming equally important to ensure that employees develop a mindset of continuous learning and improvement to keep your company competitive. Make curiosity a core value.

### **Hire for curiosity**

While emphasis must be placed on helping our existing teams to become more curious and to embrace learning at work, it is also necessary to hire the right talent. How can you find and attract more people who already possess a curious, creative and learning mindset? On the one hand, it means learning how to make your company more attractive to these curious minds through the way your brand is positioned as an employer and partner, including its values, purpose and approach to sustainability. On the other hand, it means engaging with diverse communities, for example, through engaging in open innovation crowdsourcing for problem solving and idea generation.

### **Exploration vs exploitation**

Some companies create an isolated “innovation lab” where all their experiments and ideation can take place, safely away from the “real” business, before those ideas are brought back into the core business to be exploited. This approach can work but, on its own, it will not inject the spirit of learning and curiosity into the rest of the organization, meaning the idea of innovation is seen as detached from “what we do” for many employees. Instead, consider creating a more holistic and inclusive space for exploration that feels open, accessible and relevant to all employees. This exploration space should

not be set against the exploitation phase either. It should be made clear that there is a time and place for each, so that team members understand when they should be in “curious” mode and when that curiosity turns into concrete action. Structured problem solving or innovation activities, founded on open innovation, can optimise and clarify these exploration and exploitation phases to help transform rigid, siloed employees into curious minds.

Remember, being a good leader is all about making good choices. Make a conscious choice today to be more curious and embrace learning. Do this every day and make it your new good habit. Start with yourself and become the role model for the change you want to see in the world. As leading business academic Clayton Christensen put it, “Questions are places in your mind where answers fit. If you haven’t asked the question, the answer has nowhere to go. You have to want to know in order to open up the space for the answer to fit.”