

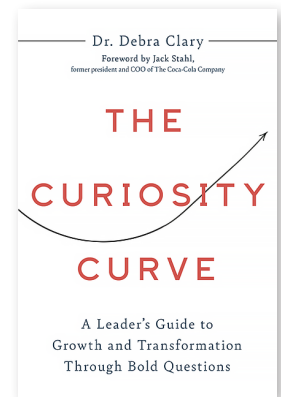


Executive Book Summaries[®]

The Curiosity Curve

A Leader's Guide to Growth and Transformation Through Bold Questions

by **Dr. Debra Clary**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

The Curiosity Curve: A Leader's Guide to Growth and Transformation Through Bold Questions examines curiosity as a practical leadership capability and an organizational asset rather than an innate personal trait. Drawing on professional experience and research, Dr. Debra Clary frames a central problem facing modern organizations: despite curiosity's role in innovation, learning, and adaptability, many workplace cultures suppress it through norms that favor compliance, efficiency, and certainty.

The core argument is that curiosity can be intentionally cultivated and calibrated to support performance, engagement, and resilience—provided leaders understand how it operates across individuals, teams, and organizations. The concept of an optimal curiosity setpoint highlights the risks of both too little and too much curiosity, underscoring the need for balance.

Building on this foundation, *The Curiosity Curve* offers a practical framework for diagnosing cultural barriers and guiding leadership behavior, treating curiosity as a learnable discipline embedded in daily practices, decision-making, and organizational systems that shape how people question, collaborate, and respond to change.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

- Understand how curiosity functions as a leadership capability that drives performance, engagement, and organizational resilience
- Learn how to calibrate curiosity to avoid stagnation on one end and distraction on the other
- Explore a practical framework for diagnosing and strengthening curiosity across individuals, teams, and organizations
- Discover concrete practices leaders can use to embed curiosity into daily decisions, behaviors, and systems

INTRODUCTION

Are You Curious?

It was the late 1980s, and I had just been promoted to regional sales manager at Frito-Lay. I was determined to prove that real leadership isn't just about strategy—it's about understanding the business from every angle. Our global marketing team wanted to expand beyond their signature salty snacks and venture into a new category: sweet treats.

My biggest challenge was winning over the route drivers—a critical group. They were already stretched thin, and I had to convince them that adding a new line of cookies to their deliveries wouldn't just mean extra work; it could mean extra income in the form of commissions.

Determined to avoid a standoff, I decided that instead of simply telling them how things would go, I'd ask questions. I would listen to what they had to say. Immediately, the objections poured in, but I didn't argue. I wrote down all they said, and what began as a wall of resistance turned into a collaborative brainstorming session.

The result? We achieved one of the biggest route sales averages across the country.

That's the transformative power of curiosity. It's not just about solving problems; it's about empowering others to think differently, to collaborate, and to discover solutions together. It uncovers hidden potential and reframes challenges as opportunities.

Leadership has evolved beyond simply making decisions and issuing directives; it now demands fostering a culture where questioning, innovation, and collaboration are not just encouraged but embedded into the fabric of the organization. Without the capacity for employees to embrace and act on their curiosity, an organization risks losing its competitive edge. Yet, while the importance of curiosity is acknowledged, sustaining it presents significant challenges.

Many, particularly those under forty years old, refuse to commit to workplaces where curiosity is stifled. They seek environments that encourage their creative input and exploration, signaling that the future of work will favor organizations that make room for curiosity, engagement, and active participation.

While this may be the case, sustaining curiosity within a company culture presents significant challenges. Too often, employees suppress their curiosity, feeling constrained by a lack of time and support or by a culture that values compliance over innovation.

Curiosity is one of the most powerful yet underestimated forces in the world. It is the spark that has driven every major breakthrough, the instinct that compels us to seek out new experiences, and the unseen force shaping how we navigate challenges. Despite this, we often suppress this urge in people—especially in professional settings, where efficiency, predictability, and expertise are prized over exploration, questioning, and discovery.

CHAPTER 1

The Nature of Curiosity

Curiosity is more than just asking obvious questions; it means probing deeper and seeking out what isn't immediately visible. Yet surprisingly, we often lose this instinct in both our personal and professional lives. The result? We become less engaged and more prone to boredom and frustration.

Too often, we're led to believe that curiosity is an innate talent reserved for scientists, artists, or entrepreneurs. The rest of us might see ourselves as less curious and, by extension, less creative or innovative. But this perception overlooks a critical point: curiosity is deeply intertwined with creativity.

When curiosity is curtailed, so is the creative process, leading to stagnation and a lack of meaningful progress. This affects not just individuals but entire teams and organizations, where innovation and problem-solving are essential for success.

By reframing curiosity as a skill, we can recognize its potential to drive progress and foster meaningful change. When we acknowledge that curiosity compels us to take risks—switch roles, change companies, move to new places, seek out new challenges, or even embark on new personal journeys—we start to see it as an essential part of our growth.

The good news is that levels of curiosity can be measured. It's possible to discern an individual's level of curious behavior, as well as an organization's context for curiosity. There are seven tell-tale signs of curiosity that you can spot in yourself and others. To notice these clues, focus on:

- the words people use
- the questions they ask
- the empathy they feel
- the irritation they tolerate
- the disruption they cause
- the jokes they tell
- the ways they reflect on their own thoughts and assumptions

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The bad news is that, in most parts of the world, and certainly in business, there is a growing gap between the curiosity we need and the curiosity we have. The impact is profound as people have fewer innovative ideas, more rigid thinking, and missed opportunities for meaningful change. While curiosity is a natural human impulse, social conditioning and educational systems often discourage persistent questioning, gradually eroding this instinct over time.

What is the takeaway? Curiosity is contagious. By modeling curiosity, whether as a leader, teammate, or friend, we inspire others to do the same.

It's never too late to reverse direction if you find yourself exercising less curiosity than you would hope to. Curiosity isn't like a fine wine that disappears if you didn't bottle it early—it's more like a random houseplant you forgot to water for years. A little attention, some sunlight, and it'll start sprouting again.

Start small by carving out moments in your day to ask *what if* instead of assuming *it is what it is*. Seek out experiences that challenge your comfort zone. Celebrate the discoveries you make, big or small. Every step you take to rekindle curiosity is an investment in your own potential and the future of those around you.

CHAPTER 2

The Neuroscience of Curiosity

Five years ago, I set out to explore the link between curiosity and business performance. I believed then—and still do—that curiosity is a superpower. It ignites creativity, offers a new lens for problem-solving, and serves as inner fuel for personal and professional growth.

For hundreds of years, great minds like Plato, Socrates, and Descartes have searched for the secret of achievement. What makes one person achieve success and another not? The answer may involve optimal curiosity.

Curiosity exists on a delicate continuum: too much, and we're overwhelmed; too little, and innovation grinds to a halt. Striking the right balance is what drives progress and keeps teams thriving.

In business context, decision-makers must calibrate their curiosity carefully. Too little leads to stagnation, while too much results in distraction and frustration. The right balance varies from one company to the next and may also differ by individual or across the course of a career.

CHAPTER 3

Curiosity Is Good Business

I wasn't surprised to find that curiosity is good for business. Every person in a company is a link in a chain of intrigue. At least, that's the way it's supposed to be. In real life, even the most innovative companies, like Frito-Lay, don't fully know how to cultivate the curiosity they need all the way through the hierarchy.

Something I've seen time and again in my career is that questions shape the course of conversations, decisions, and even reputations. They can reveal hidden truths, build bridges, and open doors to unexpected insights. But they also hold the power to unravel carefully constructed moments when they're not asked.

In leadership, the power of a question is invaluable. The best leaders I've known use questions as their most powerful tool—not because they lack answers, but because they value others' perspectives. They know that one good question can unlock an idea that transforms a project, sparks a connection that strengthens a team, or prevents a misstep that could cost time, resources, or credibility.

In contrast, not asking the right question or jumping to conclusions often builds walls instead of bridges. For anyone who wants to influence, inspire, or connect, questions remain one of the most effective tools available.

Innovation is the ability to put forth new ideas and turn them into successful products, services, and practices that drive growth and profitability. Organizations with curious cultures tend to attract and retain curious individuals, creating a virtuous cycle in which ideas build on one another and experimentation is encouraged. When employees feel empowered to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and propose new ideas, they are more likely to uncover novel solutions and develop new offerings. This dynamic is especially effective

when teams bring together divergent thinkers who are curious about one another's backgrounds and knowledge.

Curious cultures foster collaboration and knowledge-sharing among employees. When individuals are curious about each other's experiences and expertise, they are more likely to reach out, connect, and work together toward common goals. Over time, this mutual engagement reinforces participation and commitment, as employees feel valued for their contributions and are inspired to give their best work.

Curiosity also strengthens resilience. Individuals and teams who remain genuinely curious about changing circumstances and market conditions are more likely to find ways to manage them.

The message is clear: If companies want to unlock the full potential of their workforce, it's not enough to hire curious individuals. They must also create a culture that values and rewards exploration, learning, and innovation. Doing so requires commitment. Employees need room to ask questions, explore new ideas, and challenge conventional wisdom, and organizations must promote leaders who embody and champion those behaviors.

CHAPTER 4

The Four Factors of Curious Companies

Curiosity is a matter of strategic choice. The decisions we make as leaders, team members, and visionaries don't just shape our own behavior—they create ripples that affect the culture of curiosity throughout an organization.

In our research, we found that a company's curiosity level can be understood through four specific dimensions that reflect its cultural attitude toward curiosity. We call these *curiosity growth factors* because of the ways they influence both individual performance and collective success.

To better understand and measure an organization's level of curiosity, four core factors provide a practical framework for assessing the broader culture of curiosity within a company. Each factor influences curiosity in a distinct way, revealing how it can be nurtured to support growth and achievement. Those four factors are:

1. Exploration
2. Focused engagement
3. Inspirational creativity
4. Openness to new ideas

The first two factors, exploration and focused engagement, are often driven by individual actions and affect the ways people seek out, process, and implement new information.

Exploration refers to the drive to look beyond the familiar, to discover what lies beyond the conventional, and to investigate new areas that might unlock opportunities for growth and innovation. Individuals with high levels of exploration are energized by novelty and demonstrate a willingness to take calculated risks. They're the ones digging into new technologies, challenging assumptions, or identifying emerging trends that might benefit the organization in the long term.

Focused engagement, on the other hand, is about channeling curiosity into purposeful action. It's not enough to merely explore possibilities; this approach requires that people bring their insights back to the core mission and goals of the organization. This factor ensures that curiosity doesn't dissipate into distraction but instead becomes a catalyst for problem-solving, enhanced productivity, and strategic advancement.

The remaining two factors—inspirational creativity and openness to new ideas—operate on a broader, more collective level. These elements shape the organization's cultural backbone and influence the ways teams collaborate, share insights, and spark innovation together.

Inspirational creativity is about fostering an environment where imaginative thinking is encouraged and where creative problem-solving is not only accepted but celebrated. Organizations that embrace this factor give their people the space to experiment, ideate, and connect the dots in novel ways. Inspirational creativity is often driven by leaders who encourage unconventional approaches, which can energize teams and bring diverse perspectives to the table.

Openness to new ideas is the final, vital component of a culture of curiosity. It reflects an organization's collective willingness to receive, consider, and integrate new perspectives. When an organization prioritizes openness, it signals to employees that their voices and ideas matter, and it nurtures an environment where everyone feels empowered to contribute. This factor is especially important for fostering inclusivity, as it allows organizations to embrace a range of viewpoints and adapt swiftly to shifting markets, technologies, and customer expectations.

These four factors become visible in leadership behavior—particularly at the executive level. The following questions help illustrate how each factor shows up in practice:

1. **Exploration:** When new opportunities or challenges are raised that seem promising, does the CEO pay attention? Is there a potential budget allocated to learn-

The best leaders I've known rely on questions—not because they lack answers, but because they value others' perspectives.

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ing about the implications? Does the CEO express interest in the results of that initial exploration?

2. **Focused engagement:** Does the CEO lose interest in projects before they are completed? Are there clear priorities set for the company, with curiosity channeled down those paths? Does the CEO build strong working relationships with key people throughout the enterprise, particularly in the innovation and production domains?
3. **Inspirational creativity:** Does the CEO take pleasure in product launches and new offerings? Is it easy to raise questions and collaborate at the top levels of the company? Do people recognize the CEO's priorities and feel interested in taking part?
4. **Openness to new ideas:** Does the CEO express interest in concepts from outside the strict domains of the company? Are there diverse teams, with people who have different backgrounds and ways of thinking, at the top of the organizational hierarchy? Is there always a sense that the CEO will pull an amazing new offering or idea seemingly out of thin air?

In curious cultures, managers, team leads, and even front-line supervisors play pivotal roles in fostering an environment where curiosity can flourish. These leaders often have a direct influence on their teams' daily experiences, guiding how curiosity is applied to specific projects, customer interactions, and problem-solving initiatives. When leaders at all levels ask questions, encourage exploration, and remain open to new ideas, they actively create the conditions for innovative thinking and continuous learning.

The good news is that just as curiosity can be cultivated as a personal skill, it can also be developed as a leadership approach. Anyone in a position of influence—whether leading a small team or a major division—can grow their ability to lead with curiosity.

Cultivating curiosity, however, requires intentional practice. There are several concrete ways leaders can begin embedding curiosity into their daily interactions and decision-making:

1. Ask open-ended questions

Asking open-ended questions requires genuine curiosity and a real desire to learn. It also means recognizing that others

may see things you do not and demonstrating compassion and kindness. At times, this may require setting aside your ego and showing a willingness to learn rather than prove a point.

2. Practice active listening

Active listening helps lay the groundwork for a culture of curiosity and helps employees feel valued. It enhances problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict-resolution by fostering a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. Practicing active listening requires being fully present—listening not only to words but also to nonverbal cues—and following up with clarifying questions or thoughtful paraphrasing to confirm understanding.

3. Embrace feedback

A positive relationship to feedback is a clear indicator of genuine curiosity and a hallmark of effective leadership. The ability to receive feedback without defensiveness is one of the strongest predictors of career trajectory, as it helps you understand how you're perceived, how your actions impact others, and where you may need to adjust your approach to lead more effectively.

4. Form and test hypothesis

In organizations with little regard for curiosity, problems are experienced as tension that must be resolved quickly. In curious companies, instead of jumping to a solution, groups form and test hypotheses on a small scale. If a solution works, it can be refined or expanded; if it does not, curiosity guides the group toward a new hypothesis.

5. Engage in unlearning

Self-curiosity begins with unlearning—letting go of limited beliefs, perceptions, and habits that no longer serve you. Through this process, you can reframe your perspective and absorb new skills and a new mindset. Reflective meditation can support unlearning by helping you examine the origins of your thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, feelings, and biases.

CHAPTER 5

Exploration

Exploration, the ability to actively seek out new ideas and challenges, is essential for personal growth and for organi-

zations that want to succeed. In an organizational context, exploration is active. Teams and companies deliberately seek out new experiences, ideas, and challenges. They pursue agility, adaptability, and robust leadership, understanding that these attributes strengthen with exposure to fresh perspectives and innovative ideas.

In companies that value exploration, when challenges arise, people welcome the chance to learn and solve problems creatively. Leaders cultivate environments where employees feel free to try new approaches without fear of blame. Failures are seen as learning opportunities, and rather than micromanaging, leaders trust their teams to find their own paths to success.

Exploration also extends to potential future opportunities. Employees are encouraged to network beyond their immediate teams and collaborate on joint projects, fostering connections that spark new ideas. Their voices matter, and their development is actively supported by leaders who recognize that diverse perspectives lead to stronger solutions. By creating an environment where differences are valued, the organization builds a foundation for innovation and resilience.

At the individual level, supporting exploration means creating space for employees to pursue ideas they are passionate about, even if these ideas seem outside their usual scope. This could include supporting side projects or encouraging attendance at cross-departmental meetings or external events.

When employees feel empowered to explore, they develop stronger problem-solving skills, adapt more readily to change, and bring fresh ideas back to their roles. Encouraging personal exploration also enhances engagement; employees who feel their curiosity is valued tend to be more invested and committed to their organization.

At the team level, you can encourage exploration by promoting collaboration and cross-functional projects. Consider creating opportunities for team members to shadow colleagues in different roles or to participate in idea exchanges, where employees from various teams come together to brainstorm. Team exploration not only broadens perspectives but also strengthens trust and cohesion, as individuals feel free to share insights without fear of judgment.

At the organizational level, fostering exploration involves embedding curiosity into your company's core values. This might mean formalizing initiations like innovation days, where employees dedicate time to pursuing their ideas, or implementing learning stipends that allow employees to attend conferences, courses, or training sessions. Building a

culture that values exploration means providing both the time and resources for employees to engage in continuous learning.

CHAPTER 6

Focused Engagement

Focused engagement goes beyond simply being busy or productive; it involves channeling curiosity into meaningful work with sustained attention. For individuals, this means developing habits that allow you to immerse yourself in tasks, explore challenges deeply, and maintain focus over time. This kind of engagement enhances personal performance and lays the groundwork for curiosity-driven innovation.

When people work with sustained focus, they experience greater purpose and satisfaction. It's the difference between going through the motions and being fully present in what you do. In a world filled with distractions, the ability to concentrate with intention, creativity, and clarity becomes increasingly valuable.

At its core, this approach amplifies curiosity by directing it toward problem-solving, skill development, and opportunities for growth. Research shows that people who are highly engaged in their work report higher job satisfaction and are more likely to achieve their goals.

Focused engagement leads to deeper understanding, stronger problem-solving, greater resilience, and personal growth. It does not occur by chance; it requires intentional effort and habits that support sustained attention. By developing those habits, you can channel curiosity into greater productivity and innovation.

The following strategies offer practical ways to strengthen your ability to engage fully in your work.

- Start with curiosity – approach every task with a sense of curiosity.
- Eliminate distractions – identify and remove common distractions that pull your attention away.
- Use time-blocking – schedule blocks of uninterrupted time for your most important tasks. During these periods, commit to deep work, resisting the urge to multitask or shift focus.
- Set clear intentions – begin every task with a clear understanding of your goal.
- Practice mindfulness – incorporate mindfulness techniques to stay present in the moment.

Curiosity isn't a luxury; it's a leadership necessity.



- Embrace flow state – aim to enter the flow state where you're fully immersed and energized by your work.
- Celebrate small wins – acknowledge and celebrate progress, even on small milestones.

CHAPTER 7

Inspirational Creativity

Inspirational creativity is the practice of fostering an environment where imagination, fresh perspectives, and resourcefulness are encouraged and actively supported. Unlike creativity that focuses solely on solving immediate problems, inspirational creativity invites people to think beyond the usual constraints, sparking innovative ideas, and energizing teams toward new possibilities. It involves creating a culture where employees feel empowered to ask *what if* questions, reimagine traditional approaches, and pursue ideas that may initially seem unconventional.

In a workplace with inspirational creativity, employees at all levels feel motivated to think expansively, knowing their ideas are valued and their contributions make a difference. Leaders play a key role in setting this tone by encouraging risk-taking, celebrating diverse perspectives, and creating space for exploration.

The result is a more engaged and dynamic team, capable of approaching challenges in inventive ways that fuel long-term organizational growth and adaptability. Inspirational creativity can transform ordinary tasks into powerful moments of insight and innovation, making work more meaningful and positioning an organization to thrive.

As a leader, supporting inspirational creativity in individuals means giving employees the space and encouragement to pursue their ideas. This builds confidence, resourcefulness, and capacity for innovative thinking.

At the team level, encouraging creativity requires creating an environment where collaboration, experimentation, and open-mindedness are valued. Team-based creativity strengthens problem-solving abilities and improves project outcomes.

At the organizational level, a culture of inspirational creativity supports long-term innovation, adaptability, and

resilience. When creativity is embedded as a core value, organizations are better positioned to adapt to change and seize new opportunities.

Inspirational creativity is the driving force behind organizational resilience and adaptability. By creating an environment where employees feel encouraged to think outside the box, leaders cultivate a culture where imagination and resourcefulness flourish. From individual exploration to team brainstorming sessions and organization-wide recognition programs, fostering creativity at every level also instills a sense of purpose and excitement in the workplace.

As a leader, encouraging inspirational creativity allows you to unlock your team's potential and steer your organization toward long-term success. In a culture that values creativity, employees are more motivated, engaged, and likely to bring innovative solutions to complex challenges. Inspirational creativity builds a legacy of growth and adaptability, positioning your organization to thrive well into the future.

There are numerous techniques leaders can use to cultivate inspirational creativity at the individual, team, and organizational levels. These practices help translate creative intent into everyday behaviors, including the following:

- Encourage creative skill development such as creative writing and storytelling
- Set up a curiosity corner for exploration of resources
- Celebrate individual achievements in innovation
- Encourage diverse learning experiences
- Conduct regular innovation workshops
- Use design thinking techniques
- Organize hackathons or innovation challenges
- Facilitate storytelling sessions
- Embrace a prototyping mindset
- Reward creative problem-solving
- Design flexible, inspiring workspaces
- Promote diversity and inclusion initiatives
- Support learning from failures with after-action reviews
- Launch an ideas portal
- Develop recognition programs for innovation

CHAPTER 8

Openness to New Ideas

The factors discussed so far can only succeed if an organization is genuinely open to new ideas and willing to act on them. Curiosity cannot be performative; it must be reflected in decisions, behaviors, and outcomes. Openness to new ideas may be the most high-leverage of the four factors because it determines whether curiosity translates into meaningful change.

Curiosity naturally drives people to seek out new experiences, ideas, and challenges. This willingness to expand knowledge and adapt to changing conditions is a defining trait of curious, agile individuals—and of organizations that remain competitive over time. In cultures that prioritize openness, people actively listen to perspectives that differ from their own, and ideas are evaluated on their merit rather than their conformity to existing norms.

When openness is embedded into the culture, curiosity fuels creative problem-solving and innovation. The most innovative organizations make room for disagreement, experimentation, and discovery, recognizing that progress often emerges from questioning assumptions rather than reinforcing them.

CONCLUSION

The Future of Curiosity

Each of the four curiosity factors—exploration, focused engagement, inspirational creativity, and openness to new ideas—supports growth, resilience, and adaptability. To-

gether, these qualities are essential in today's workplace. A culture of curiosity enables organizations to respond to rapid change with agility rather than cling to outdated practices.

Curiosity isn't a luxury; it's a leadership necessity. With deliberate conscious effort, leaders can nurture and develop curiosity, building a workplace culture where it thrives regardless of individual starting points.

The impact of fostering curiosity in the workplace, however, extends beyond individual jobs and daily tasks. It influences leadership styles, business strategies, and even the structural foundations of organizations. Leaders who embrace curiosity inspire their teams to seek knowledge, adapt to change, and approach problems with an open mind. This leads to a shift in leadership from directive to supportive, where leaders act as facilitators who nurture growth and innovation.

Curiosity-driven organizations also redefine their missions and values, embedding openness, adaptability, and continuous learning as pillars of their identity. This reshaping of organizational structure encourages collaboration across teams and departments, breaking down silos, and promoting a culture of inclusivity.

In conclusion, as you consider the role of curiosity in your life and work, think of this: each of us has the potential to be a catalyst for curiosity. In a world of 7.9 billion people, we are here because of the curiosity of those who came before us.

They dared to question, to try, to learn. They pushed boundaries, took risks, and persevered through challenges so that we might live in a world where exploration, innovation, and human connection are possible. Now it's our turn to honor that legacy by nurturing curiosity in ourselves and others.



Dr. Debra Clary is a narrative scientist and transformational leader with more than three decades of executive experience at Fortune 50 companies. She is the founder and CEO of The Clary Group, where she helps organizations cultivate curiosity-driven mindsets that accelerate growth, performance, and innovation. Clary has held senior leadership roles at globally recognized brands including Frito-Lay, Coca-Cola, Jack Daniel's, and Humana. A viral TEDx speaker, international keynote presenter, author, and award-winning film producer, she is known for compelling storytelling grounded in strategy. She earned her doctorate from The George Washington University and received the Ralph Stone Leadership Award there.

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