

# Cultivate Careers Through Curiosity

Julie Winkle Giulioni and Beverly Kaye - 11/23/12

*This column was adapted from the authors' new book, [Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go: Career Conversations Employees Want](#).*

There's a lot of talk about conversation in business today, and everyone has a favorite type. Some like it fierce; others prefer crucial.

We are particularly fond of career conversations. After 30 years of working with managers and employees alike, we are more convinced than ever that people don't grow because of beautifully completed forms, well-followed processes, gleaming checklists or annual individual development plan deadlines. Instead, careers are developed one conversation at a time, over time. At its core, career development is all about conversations that:

- Are regular, frequent and embedded in the flow of work.
- Keep people focused, energized, striving and moving forward.
- Reinforce the organization's commitment to employees and their desire to learn, grow and progress.

The problem is too few leaders understand the most critical element of conversation. They attend to the mechanics, but in many cases lose the spirit that should guide them. They ask good open-ended questions, demonstrate all the right non-verbal cues that telegraph interest, paraphrase, show empathy and even take notes. From the outside, it might look like a fine conversation; but on the inside, it is frequently missing the most important, results-driving dimension of all: genuine curiosity.



Curiosity is an emotion — nothing more and nothing less. But it's an emotion that drives a range of human behaviors. It causes us to investigate, explore and learn. The emotional charge associated with curiosity is felt by those who possess it and by everyone in their presence.

As a result, curiosity has the power to transform an exchange of mere words into discovery and insight. It fills even a brief chat with possibilities, opportunities and hope. It leaves others feeling strong, capable and like they have something valuable to contribute. It allows a career conversation to unlock deep understanding, activate motivation, spark drive and focus action.

Think about your own experience. You've spent time with others who approach you, their work and the world with a sincere sense of interest, openness to new ideas and different people, and a spirit of inquiry. You've also spent time with those who don't. If you're like most people, door No. 1 is more inspiring, engaging and fulfilling.

You might be able to fake listening, but not curiosity. People feel it when you're able to suspend judgment during a conversation. Their comfort is greater when you're really comfortable entering a conversation not knowing or forcing the outcome. They sense your sincere interest in who they are and what they have to say. They love it when you admit you don't understand or know because it lets them help and add value.

People appreciate when your perception or insight cause you to stop, notice a cue and ask for more information; they like being in the conversational driver's seat. They tap into so much more of what they know or can do when they feel like they don't have to come up with a "right" answer to your questions. People thrive in an environment filled with curiosity.

Curiosity might be the most under-the-radar, undervalued leadership competency in business today. Think about it; what could you accomplish if you practiced passionate, curious listening — really listening with intention and a true sense of purpose to learn and understand? What could others accomplish if you engaged with them in a way that communicated how fascinating and capable they truly were?

Developing the ability to approach individuals, situations and conversations with curiosity and a sense of wonder can affect your own energy and enthusiasm, relationships with others, performance and hard business results — not to mention the quality of your career conversations.

Just remember this: Quality questions asked without curiosity let employees know you've just come back from training. Ask quality questions with the spirit of curiosity and you'll facilitate conversations that will help others change their lives as they grow.

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