

**Creativity**

**Research: 83% of Executives  
Say They Encourage Curiosity.  
Just 52% of Employees Agree.**

by Spencer Harrison, Erin Pinkus, and Jon Cohen

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Danas Jurgelevicius/Getty Images

**Summary.** Curiosity is incredibly important for organizations, yet leaders assume —mistakenly for the most part—that their employees feel empowered to be curious. They see few barriers themselves to asking questions and assume the same is true for their employees. But... [more](#)

Curiosity is experiencing a “Gold Rush” moment. Books, university classes, and research are popularizing the power of curiosity.

Not surprisingly, organizations are increasingly, explicitly looking for curious employees. Consider these job descriptions pulled from several job listing websites:

- “If you have a passion and curiosity for what is possible and enjoy people, we invite you to join us on this mission” (posting for a retail sales position);
- “We are counting on you to bring a genuine curiosity about how consumers search for information” (posting for a data analyst role);
- “Because our world is continuously evolving, you’ll need to possess curiosity and a love of learning” (posting for a digital content writer role).

Given the importance of curiosity for organizations, our research sheds light on an astounding conundrum that most organizations face. Leaders assume—mistakenly for the most part—that their employees feel empowered to be curious. They see few barriers themselves to asking questions and assume the same is true for their employees. But employees describe a very different reality.

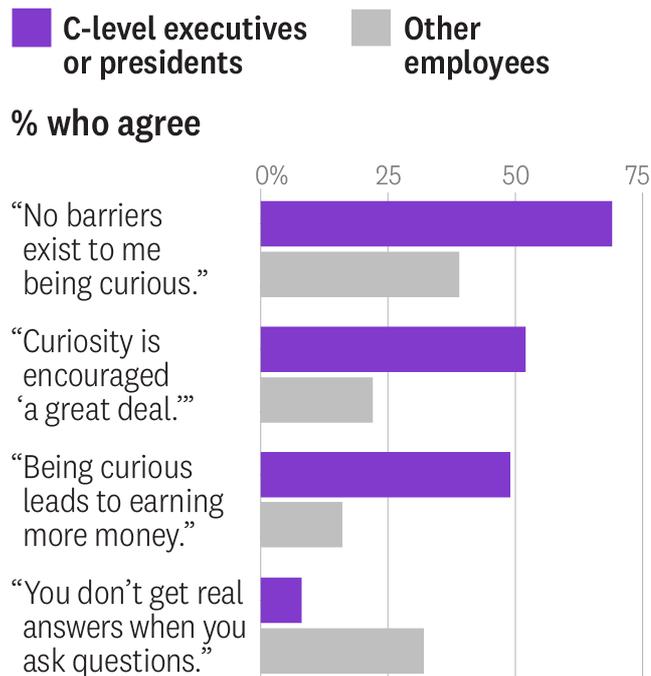
We surveyed more than 23,000 people, including 16,000 employees and over 1,500 C-suite leaders, to understand how they view the role of curiosity at their organizations, across industries and at various levels of leadership.

83% of C-level or president-level executives say curiosity is encouraged “a great deal” or “a good amount” at their company. Just 52% of individual contributors say the same. This gap seems to be driven in part by *perceptions of the value* of curiosity.

While about half (49%) of the C-level believes curiosity is rewarded by salary growth, only 16% of individual contributors agree. A staggering 81% of individual contributors are convinced curiosity makes no material difference in their compensation.

## Who Gets to Be Curious at Work?

There's a gap between how executives and other employees view curiosity.



Source: Survey of 23,000 people in the U.S. by SurveyMonkey HBR

This is an enormous problem for businesses because if lower-level contributors don't see the value of curiosity then they are less likely to act as a source of new information for the organization.

So, if curiosity is so coveted and valuable, what's happening to individual contributors who feel their curiosity is stifled at work?

What's an employer

to do? Our research shows there is hope for curiosity. In working with organizations, we've discovered one lynchpin for leveraging curiosity—identity.

Identity can influence curiosity in two ways:

First, an individual's identity is not monolithic, instead it is a collection of varied interests. For example, a computer programmer may also identify as an "outdoor enthusiast," "parent," or "community volunteer" outside of work. Each interest carries with it a different willingness to explore, so the same person will be in a more or less of a curious mindset depending on which interest they are engaging. The "computer programmer" might have a single job to execute with little room to ask questions and be curious. In contrast, the same person's "outdoor enthusiast" identity might have a rhythm of exploration that includes hikes to new destinations. Leaders can leverage this

insight by encouraging individuals to bring their interests with them to work. After all, the word curiosity derives from the Latin “to care;” if people don’t care, they don’t ask.

Second, identity can authorize curiosity. Nobel laureates’ biographies often include moments when a teacher, a parent, or a respected leader authorized their curiosity. For example, Mae Jemison, the first African American female astronaut, noted that she was constantly curious as a child. She observed that her curiosity didn’t “lose [its] energy” in part because it was reinforced by a summer internship at Bell Laboratories: “You get this reinforcement, and that’s the kind of role that companies and corporations can play,” she said. Once curiosity becomes a part of an individual’s identity then they feel authorized to ask questions that might upset the status quo.

Our data strongly suggest that curiosity helps employees engage more deeply in their work, generate new ideas, and share those ideas with others. When feeling curious at work, 73% of individual contributors report “sharing ideas more” and “generating new ideas for their organizations.”

Successful organizations are rooted in curiosity. To generate new ideas and add value to their organizations, employees at all levels need an environment where they can be curious, seek and absorb new information, and make new connections. A disconnect between leaders’ and employees’ assumptions about the value of curiosity within an organization prevents new information from flowing into the organization. Unless leaders can see the barriers to curiosity throughout their organizations and create systems for it to flourish, they will remain in a prison of their own construction: believing themselves free to be curious and therefore believing everyone else is equally curious and unimpeded.

## SH

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