

DISINTERESTEDNESS, CURIOSITY¹, AND DISTRACTEDNESS STORIES²

How to Use These Stories

Leadership begins when people exhibit virtues with excellence. Virtues are standards of moral behavior, such as courage, integrity, kindness, and humility. This document focuses on the virtue of curiosity. When we lead with exceptional curiosity, we feel deeper satisfaction over what we accomplish, we help and benefit others, and we improve the world around us.

Like all virtues, too much or too little of a virtue is a vice. Thus, when leaders are not curious enough, people may become bored of their work and frustrated with their leaders. When leaders are too curious, people may become inefficient and feel their leaders lack focus.

Leading with exceptional curiosity is often difficult. It is difficult to find the optimal expression of curiosity between disinterestedness and distractedness. It is difficult because a curious action in one situation is not a curious action in another situation. It is difficult because the people who care about a situation often disagree about the best way to exhibit curious, and in many of these cases each person—including you—will be partially right and partially wrong, and we need to learn from each other and work through conflict to sort this out. Even when you figure out how to exhibit exceptional curiosity, it is also important to communicate what you are doing to others so that they will understand what you are doing.

This document contains stories of people being curious and of failing to be curious. (The titles next to people's names are their titles at the time the story occurred and may not be their title currently.) Discussing diverse situations in which people failed or succeeded to live up to their values often helps people to recognize and act on other opportunities when they arise. By discussing these stories in meetings, on teams, over internet or intranet forums, or in classrooms, groups can come up with ideas for leading with exceptional curiosity, learn each other's perspectives, work through disagreements, and generate ideas. For example, you might read and discuss one story at the beginning of a weekly meeting, post a story on a team forum and ask people to share their thoughts, begin a work shift by discussing a story, use a story in a town hall meeting, or use the stories as fodder for discussion in classroom settings. The following questions may be helpful in discussing the stories. Choose whichever questions are most helpful for your group.

¹ In addition to being used to foster discussions about the virtue of curiosity, these stories may also be used for discussions about inquisitiveness.

² The stories in this document were written or told by the protagonists. Garrett Kasey edited them and added the reflection questions, with assistance from Ryan Quinn. The stories are to be used as the basis for class discussion, and not to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of a particular situation. Some protagonists agreed to use their real name, others asked for us to use a pseudonym. The goal of the case study includes becoming aware of issues, identifying the benefits and drawbacks of taking different approaches, assessing their impact on outcome(s), and learning ways of addressing situations you may encounter in the future.

1. What, if anything, did people do in this story that was curious?
2. How could the people in this story have been more curious? How could they have been exceptionally curious?
3. How might some experiences from your own life be similar to this story?
4. What inspires or elevates you about this story?
5. What disappoints or angers you about this story?
6. What might you have done in this story to overcome your disappointment or anger and help the person who disappointed or angered you to do better?
7. What caused the people in this story to behave the way they did?
8. Who in this discussion disagrees with you? What could you do to understand this person's point of view?
9. How might your perspective on this story be wrong?
10. What ideas can you take from this story and discussion to apply in your own life?

Story #1: Paul Jones, Manager

John was one of my direct reports. He is a psychologist who has a kind heart, but his kind heart sometimes gets him into trouble. He had no previous formal performance or conduct problems, but he did have a tendency to overcommit.

One of John's ancillary duties was to serve as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor for employees in the organization. This program has strict policies to protect both the employee and the firm from liability. I recently learned that John had ignored those policies with an employee, and that his decision to ignore these policies could lead to disastrous results for the employee, clinically, and for the firm, legally. As his supervisor, it was my responsibility to address this problem with John. I needed to correct the problem and also develop a plan to ensure that there would not be a repeat performance.

As I prepared for my meeting with John, I realized that even though I needed John to take corrective action, and I needed to ensure that John did not violate policy again, I also wanted something more for John. I wanted to help him develop a perspective that was broader than the needs of the person immediately in front of him. I also realized I was feeling impatient. I saw John as an interruption and an irritation, not as a friend, colleague and human being. I was too concerned about whether my bosses would see me as a good manager, and not concerned enough about John. If I were to approach John while I was feeling that way toward him, I was unlikely to have a successful conversation with him. Next, I remembered that the reason I pursued a career in management was because I care about process and people. I wanted to create an environment in our department where people could be extraordinary. That means that John was not an interruption; John was the mission. Finally, I knew that John was passionate about our core values of integrity, commitment, advocacy, respect, and excellence. Therefore, something else must be going on here. I needed to ask more questions because I didn't have all the information.

As I came to these realizations, it became clear that I would need to schedule sufficient time to really talk this through with John. I set aside two hours to talk with him at a place and time of his choosing and adjusted my schedule accordingly. I wanted John to feel safe and as open as possible.

When John and I sat down in his office, he was nervous. He asked if he was in trouble. I asked why he was concerned. He explained that he knew we were meeting to discuss the EAP client and that it was unusual for us to schedule a formal conversation. I asked John to explain his perspective on the EAP client. He told me a story of a caring provider who wanted the best for an employee that he clearly saw as his client and his priority.

John explained the ethical dilemmas he struggled with as he provided this in-house service, the contradictions he sometimes feels when he is torn between policy and doing what he believes he is right. I was careful to listen intently and not interrupt. As I did, I felt my impatience melt away and I had a much greater appreciation for the complexity of the situation. I learned that the firm's policy was woefully inadequate and did not address many of the legitimate concerns John found. Because John is so careful and meticulous (part of the reason he had continued to see this client longer than he probably should have), he had uncovered a number of issues with the structure of the EAP program.

This “problem” that I had wanted to go away—John’s handling of his EAP client—actually turned out to be a catalyst for developing excellence and building a program with much higher integrity. I thanked John for helping me find these flaws. Together, he and I mapped out a strategy to limit further liability, to correct errors in the present case, and to go forward with a much more robust systemic solution. We began discussing a number of ways he could creatively add value to many of our services. As we spoke, John’s energy grew. He smiled and took notes. He thanked me for the conversation and commented that he had never had such an experience with a supervisor. He wanted me to know that he trusted me and would never forget this conversation. Neither would I. I also knew John would never make the mistake again that brought us to this conversation. Compared to the strategic initiatives we were now undertaking, the original corrective action seemed petty and inconsequential.

I was pleased with this outcome. If I had it to do over again, I think I would have been bolder with my superiors who wanted an immediate solution and were flaunting a “there he goes again!” attitude regarding John. I might have asked them questions to help them see their own assumptions, managing upward as well as down.

Story #2: Andrea Goulet, Co-Founder and Chief Strategy Officer

We went on a trade mission to London. The trip was fun, and there were many opportunities. We made the best use of our time there. We met all sorts of CEOs. We had excellent meetings, wonderful conversations, and I learned about the market. I even got to speak

with a software group there, which was a new experience. We gained several good business leads that could potentially give us some business in London.

Even so, it was a big distraction. One of the things that we learned was that if we expanded into London, we would have to open up an office in the city. We would have had to have a lot of face time with people there, because that is the cultural norm. That was not a possibility at that time. A move of that sort would have been a big distraction for the company. I focus too much on “shiny objects.” Rather than spending all of the money that we did to go to London, we should have focused closer to home. I think our company would have been better served if we would have just stayed put and focused on delivering in our current market. It’s tempting sometimes because when you can do something, you feel compelled to do everything. Saying no, not right now, or it’s not the right time is hard. We are finally starting to do that.

Story #3: Achmad Hidayatullah, Manufacturing Manager

Kathryn, a production team member, was trained within our product quality inspection group. This group inspected products produced by the four production teams. When products did not meet quality standards, they were rejected by the inspection group and given to the production team to correct the issue. Typically, the rejects are quickly re-worked to produce quality parts. However, at one point, when there was a pile-up of rejected parts to be re-worked, I asked the members of the production teams why there was a large stack-up. They all said that they had a difficult time dealing with Kathryn’s attitude when parts were rejected.

Working in a small company makes it even more urgent for us to address matters of discipline quickly. Otherwise, it upsets the balance of productivity and work satisfaction among the production team. My gut response was to tell Kathryn to alert only the team leader of the appropriate production when parts needed to be re-worked, which is standard procedure. This would lower the likelihood that she would interact with other team members. However, as I thought further, I realized that I wanted Kathryn to feel like she could reject a part without feeling angry, and I wanted team members of the production groups to not feel animosity when having to re-work rejected products. I wanted to know why this was not happening.

I sat down with Kathryn to review her performance on the inspection team. Without any prompting, she told me that she was frustrated with the teams because she did not think that the teams fixed the nonconforming products quickly enough. That is why she took it upon herself to find the person who made the mistake to try to get it resolved as soon as possible.

Once I heard this explanation, I understood that Kathryn did not mean to “stir the pot” or to put people down. She just wanted products to be assembled at the highest quality and in the shortest time possible. I also realized that I had not helped Kathryn to see the whole picture with regards to the inspection process. If it were me, I would want a more complete picture how my job impacts other areas in the company.

I explained to her that she has to bring up mistakes to the team leader so that the team leader can input the mistakes in our quality log system and have a chance in solving the root cause of the nonconformity. This is slightly slower than going directly to the team member responsible for mistakes, but it gives the team a chance to make long-term changes that prevent the mistakes from happening in the future. Once she saw a more holistic picture of her role in the company, she began to go directly to the team leaders. Now she seems more relaxed, and team members are more supportive of her.

At the end of the day, Kathryn wanted what was best for the company. Though her attitude towards production team members was unsatisfactory, she thought it necessary to behave in that manner to produce the best products. I am fortunate to work with hardworking people like Kathryn, but her true strength was being able to adapt to the new information that was provided to her.

Story #4: Rich Berens, Account Manager, then Vice President of Services, then Chief Executive Officer

When our company, Root, Inc., began, we specialized in building strategy maps for organizations that helped them to simplify, clarify, and communicate their strategies to all employees. As we grew, we added other products and services, including the facilitation of strategic conversations for senior executive teams. Initially, I was pretty uncomfortable facilitating these conversations because I knew people's egos would be involved and that I would not have the answer to every issue that would come up. I thought, "I do not know if I can do this. They are all twenty years older than me. How can I tell them how good their thinking is?" As a result, I was pretty reluctant, but I ultimately forced myself to do it.

The key to success was to stretch myself, but not too far. A couple of clients said yes when I offered to facilitate for them. If I could go back and observe my first few experiences, I am sure that I would not think that they were my best work. However, as I shook their hands at the end of those first sessions and knew that they had made progress and my confidence really increased. I had an enormous high, and I thought, "Holy Cow! I cannot believe I pulled this off!" I had to get over my desire to be perfect and allow myself to learn.

This experience became a guiding philosophy for me, which I still use today. At least once a quarter I have to put myself in a position where I'm really uncomfortable, because it forces different thinking or creates empathy for a job that others might be doing.

In contrast, a number of years ago, I was running the consultant side of our business. Suddenly, on very quick notice, we lost our head of sales. I took the head of sales responsibility on myself. I was not set up well to do that job effectively. I had no previous experience running a sales team or a sales function. Even more important, however, was the fact that I had no passion for learning the sales process or running sales. When I learned senior executive facilitation, I wanted to get really good at it, but I did not care that much about getting good at sales. I just took

over sales because it was the right thing to do at the time. It was a favor. Someone needed to step in, so I said, “Sure, I’ll take on more responsibility,” only to find that it was not a great fit. A few months later, the CEO took the sales responsibility away from me because I was not doing a good enough of a job at it.

Now, I am the CEO, there are a whole bunch of things for which I am responsible, and for which I will never again be the “right guy” or be the “best guy in the business” at doing that thing. Instead, of taking things on and becoming the best at doing those things, I need to achieve clarity around who I should have around me to do those things. What are the complementary skills and desires I need people around me to have, especially to make up for the skills and desires that I do not have?