

Required Reading for Growing Companies



caskey's corner

By Wayne Caskey
for Smart CEO

The Curious CEO

*How can you find the hidden capabilities within your company?
Remember to wonder.*

Suppose you as a CEO adopt a curious attitude? I'm not talking about adult "idle curiosity". I mean really curious about everything, like a two or three year old!

What does it cost you? What does it gain you?

You, as the CEO, say "Well, there's one thing it costs me right away. I'm the one around here who is supposed to be knowledgeable - knowledgeable about this business, about our industry, about our people. If I'm cocking my head and asking questions from a "don't know" perspective, like a two or three year-old does, some people will wonder what I'm doing heading this enterprise."

True enough. So you lose your image. What do you gain?

You may see hidden possibilities for growth in your business, or hidden threats to your business, neither of which you would realize without this curious attitude. There may be embryonic developments in your industry revealing themselves in response to "don't know" questions, which otherwise

might pass you by. And finally, how many critical hidden capabilities in your people will a curious attitude reveal, perhaps saving many recruiting or consulting dollars?

And it's not just about those recruiting or consulting dollars. Much has been written about celebrating the unsung heroes of a business, and how doing this rejuvenates the spirit of all in the business, not just the celebrated. But with a consistently curious CEO, there's a continual celebration and all the heroes are "sung" heroes. Acknowledgment and recognition, many employee attitude surveys have shown, are the prime employee motivators in good and bad times.

It's not just about motivation, either. When you, as the leader,

begin to inject this new value into your company's culture, it goes far beyond the old saw that "there is no such thing as a stupid question". Respect for curious attitudes

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s p r e a d s throughout the company, and inquiry, advocacy and dialogue (as opposed to the old one-upmanship and turf wars of discussion and debate) begin to emerge as values of the company.

"Management By Walking Around" is a style designed to show "the troops" that the CEO has interest in what they're doing. It's a nice idea, but by itself can become largely ceremonial, and may, after a while, come to be seen by employees as insincere. However, if true curiosity consistently appears in the walk-around, the CEO can become "one of us", "a

regular person", and "really interested in us".

You say, "Well, that's all nice but we can't stand around like two-year-olds all day looking at our navels and wondering how they got there!" You're right, but as action plans proceed in your company, think where they proceed from. Not from dependence solely on views limited to what you as the CEO "know" about the business, the industry, and your people. Not even from what your people "know" about these topics. Instead, your actions likely proceed from the following:

- There's freshness about the perceptions, because what we know, we now know "anew".
- There is a resulting increased clarity in outlook and direction, not just for you, but for everyone.
- Easy caricatures and glib one-line descriptions of people are exploded, and radiant spirits, who would otherwise be overlooked, are brought to light.
- People's true values and loves emerge.
- Tremendous variety, diversity and virtuosity are revealed.

- Real “aliveness” occurs where none was observed before.

- Engagement with others, heartfelt and sustained, results in affection for others.

- The CEO’s inner weight of “my responsibility” is truly shared with many others from the organization.

You say, “So it’s heaven on earth!” No, it’s not. But think of the resources available to you that were not there before, when the business operated on what you “knew”. Your people become interested---in you, in the Company and it’s gripping interest. In fact, they become significantly more creative and resourceful. What’s

that worth?

“But” you say, “you’re advocating I do it all the time.” That’s right. “I can’t do that.” Well, what does it gain you if you don’t do it? You sink back into your familiar mentality of “Alone at the Top”, “Heavy is the Head That Wears the Crown”, and “Nobody Knows The Trouble I’ve Seen”. What kind of a life has to cover itself with platitudes of inevitable loneliness, heaviness and trouble? Isn’t it just one or two steps from “You Can Take This Job and Shove It” or “Well, the money’s pretty good”, which often covers a lot of ills?

On the other hand, what does it cost you to abandon the familiar platitudes and become consistently curious? There may be some pain,

for you and for others, as all of you realize that things are not as rosy with your business, your industry, and your people as they might otherwise seem. And it may be uncomfortable to challenge mental models of what you and others “know” to be true.

Are you willing to endure the pain and the discomfort for the benefits?

So, maybe you are saying “It’s worth a try.” Hurray! I’d like to acknowledge you for being willing to make the effort. Are you willing to commit to it? Pick out an imaginary line. Make your commitment as you walk over it.

Then hold yourself to it. There’s no more rewarding shift in attitude you’ll ever make.

As Buddhist abbess Pema Chodron writes: “ There’s a common misunderstanding among all the human beings who have ever been born on earth that the best way to live is to try to avoid pain and just try to get comfortable...A much more interesting, kind, adventurous and joyful approach to life is to begin to develop our curiosity, not caring whether the object of our inquisitiveness is bitter or sweet...We must realize that we can endure a lot of pain and pleasure for the sake of finding out who we are and what the world is...”

Wayne Caskey is an executive coach. www.waynecaskey.com.