

# FROM Troublemaker *TO* Changemaker

HOW TO HARNESS CURIOSITY TO  
BUILD RESILIENCE & INNOVATION

— A BOX OF CRAYONS WHITEPAPER —





FROM OUR CEO

# We're all in on curiosity

## **Advice and assumptions are killing your company.**

This might not be immediately obvious to you (and apologies for stating it in such stark terms), but let that sink in for a moment. Because even if it's exaggerated, we at Box of Crayons maintain that if your organizational culture is more advice-driven than curiosity-led, then you are missing valuable opportunities to be more innovative, resilient and successful.

No one would ever admit to being an incurious person. There's something noble about curiosity, and I'd guess that most people would consider themselves to be curious by nature. What's interesting is that curiosity — this thing that is cultivated in most of us as children and admired by most of us in adulthood — is actually a lot harder to practice and to encourage in our adult lives. How many open-ended questions do we really ask these days? How often do we embrace (rather than deny) the really tough questions that might not have definitive answers?

From Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Maria Montessori and beyond, the value of curiosity has primarily been determined by childhood educators and adolescent researchers, who have theorized how curiosity increases our potential and

ability to learn. What is curious (see what I did there?) is that both our individual capacity for curious behaviours and our institutional commitment to its flourishing seem to drop off in adulthood with the severity of a coastal shelf.

Given that we spend more of our lives as employees in organizations than as pupils in schools, this seems like a gap worth exploring further. **This is not about demeaning people, but about asking: Why don't adults apply the same attention to nurturing our curiosity as we do when we're children?** As any list of the most sought-after capabilities of the future shows, the ability to develop and see learning as a lifelong endeavour reminds us how important it is to keep paying attention to what drives human curiosity and the desire to learn.

## What's at stake?

Let's think about the consequences of this in terms of organizational and business success. We invest in other forms of learning and development for our people, and we know that curiosity supports humility, empathy and resilience, which unlock a number of enviable organizational outcomes. So why not invest in these capabilities?

The work of Harvard's Francesca Gino and others shows us that organizations have come around to thinking about the role of curiosity in driving sought-after capabilities for their people and increased potential for their business.<sup>1</sup> **What the smartest organizations have realized is that curiosity has the power to reinvigorate learning, drive innovation and support human connection.** What they have also realized is that the work is not to recruit and promote curious people, but rather, much like some educators and parents have done, to create an environment in which curiosity is encouraged and supported — not diminished.

In short, they have come to the important conclusion that **curiosity is a *state*, not a *trait*.** That is, it is a human tendency that will either expand or diminish based on the degree to which it is nurtured or supported in the broader environment. From an organizational development perspective, this is not a matter of hiring for curiosity, but of transforming to a curiosity-led culture.

## Why curiosity now?

We're all being tried right now. As we navigate a new world struck by a global health crisis, we find ourselves in an "in-between" space that is uncomfortable, a discomfort that for some of us has been recently compounded by

systemic injustices that the pandemic, in part, has further illuminated. What we're facing is a long-needed reckoning that includes allowing the ways in which our thoughts and actions (often or even unwittingly) contribute to the sustainment of structures that privilege our own safety and flourishing at the expense of others'. This is an inventory, which if done honestly, is uncomfortable. And so a lot of us have found ourselves sitting in this threshold space. It's not easy, but at least it holds the promise of movement, of entry into or onto another place.

The way we change, adapt and do this important work is by **starting with curiosity**: Asking good questions (of ourselves and others), holding a space for people to be inspired by their inquisitiveness and seeing the gaps in our understanding as opportunities to learn.

**Curiosity holds us in a liminal space.** Like a threshold or a doorframe, its liminality is a feature of it being a vessel to another way of being.

How can Box of Crayons help your organization unleash the power of curiosity? Read on to learn more.

## Are you curious? So are we. Let's talk.

**Dr. Shannon Minifie**  
**CEO, Box of Crayons**

“  
Although leaders might  
say they treasure  
inquisitive minds, in  
fact most stifle curiosity,  
fearing it will increase  
risk and inefficiency.”<sup>†</sup>

— Francesca Gino

# Curiosity's bad reputation

Nobody sticks up their hand and says, “I’m against curiosity.” But the truth is: they’re suspicious of it.

They don’t think about it as a powerful way to build individual or organizational capacities. And even as their leaders might pay lip service to the idea of having a “learning culture” or encouraging “innovation,” most businesses are skeptical of curiosity as an integral capability.

Some of this skepticism comes from the narrow way in which curiosity is typically defined: as a kind of **Troublemaker** tendency. Fuelled by mischief and sparked

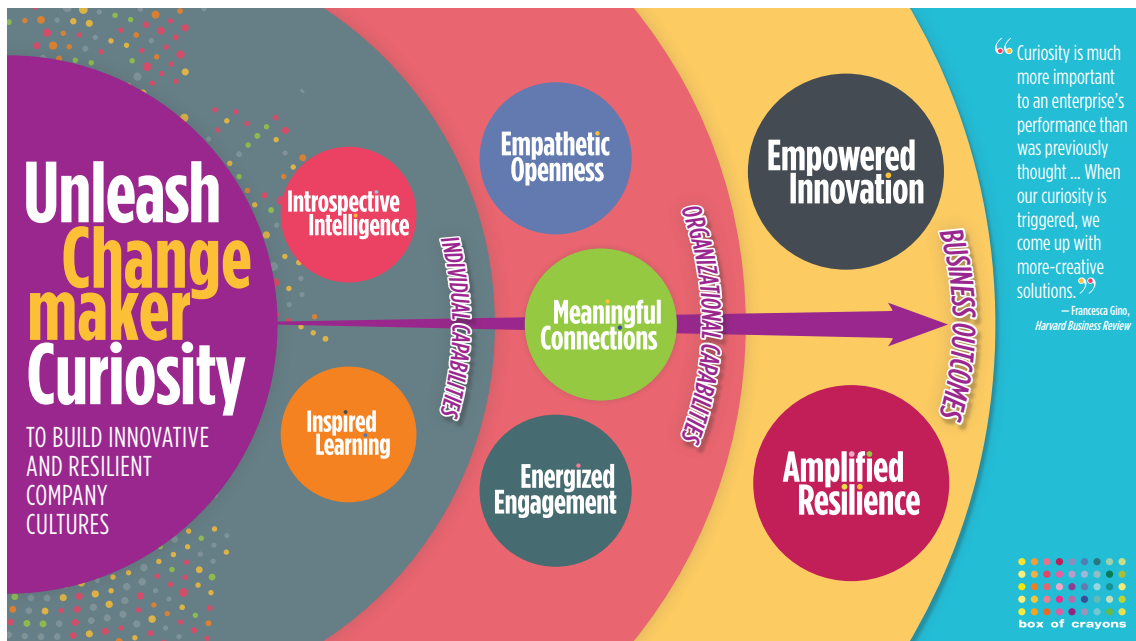
by prohibition, this is the kind of curiosity that killed the so-called cat. It’s counterproductive in an organization, and even when it *is* seen as potentially fruitful, it’s singled out as both a distinctly *different* way of approaching work (something that gets its own 20% time), and as a luxury employees ought not take for granted. When you put a stopwatch and a singular stock on it, and distinguish it from the usual business of getting things done, it’s no wonder curiosity comes to be regarded with suspicion.

## Curiosity's good side

But curiosity, the right type of curiosity unleashed, is a leadership strength. It drives the flywheel of results through innovation, engagement and resilience. This is **Changemaker** curiosity. It weaves together seven distinct outcomes to drive organizational success.

“If folks aren’t failing, they’re not asking hard enough questions or taking big enough risks.”<sup>††</sup>

— Zander Lurie



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# Individual Capabilities

## Introspective Intelligence

**Based in humility, self-awareness and self-management, Introspective Intelligence**

slows down the rush to advice-giving, models the values of curiosity and accountability and examines biases while defusing tensions.

Leadership expert, Peter Bregman, highlights that “before *demonstrating* my understanding, I have to *develop* it. I need to ask questions and be open and listen and learn. Which takes humility.”<sup>2</sup> Curiosity is a catalyst for this introspection, which transforms thinking of *our* perspective as *the* perspective. Entering this realm, we open ourselves up to the wonder and delight of discovering the unknown — even if it is counter to our knowledge and beliefs.

## Unleash Change maker Curiosity

## Inspired Learning

**Inspired Learning is nurtured when participants value the learning journey:** the inherent risk of failure that comes with experimentation, the willingness and desire to learn and recognizing the collective wisdom needed for successful outcomes. Gino writes, “When we have chances to expand our interests, research has found, we not only remain curious but also become more confident about what we can accomplish and more successful at work.”<sup>3</sup> This learning leads to resilient adaptability.

Encourage your people to trust themselves and take ownership of problems. Curiosity will help get to the root of the real challenge. That can happen only in an environment where people feel comfortable exploring and expressing curiosity.



# Organizational Capabilities

## Empathetic Openness

**Empathetic Openness establishes psychological safety, encourages acceptance, flexibility and understanding of others** and allows asking questions with confidence to gain new perspectives.

Rachel Bellack writes that, “Openness is the ability to receive, without judgment, another’s thoughts, feelings, beliefs and behavior. It’s not about agreeing, it is about inquiry: How can I learn more about a perspective I don’t yet understand?”<sup>4</sup> Curiosity slows down the rush to judgement in favour of listening, appreciating diversity and understanding perspectives and approaches different from our own.

**Through Meaningful Connections, organizations establish a supportive network**, build trust through social curiosity and assume best intentions in adult-to-adult relationships.

When leaders are curious about their employees, they increase psychological safety in their teams, which in turn promotes creativity and collaboration. Todd Kashdan et al. say “socially curious employees are better than others at resolving conflicts with colleagues, more likely to receive social support, and more effective at building connections, trust, and commitment on their teams.”<sup>5</sup> Curiosity fosters the ability to network across teams and functions, which develops a cohesive company culture.

## Meaningful Connections

**Energized Engagement results in individuals moving out of organizational silos and subcultures**, engaging in more collaboration and discovering the root of real challenges.

Employees recognize the impact of curiosity on engagement. “In a survey of more than 3,000 employees, 92% credited curious people with bringing new ideas into teams and organizations and viewed curiosity as a catalyst for job satisfaction, motivation, innovation and high performance.”<sup>6</sup> An engaged organization is a focused and productive one, in which individuals and teams demonstrate more initiative and thrive.

## Energized Engagement

Unleash  
Change  
maker  
Curiosity



# Business Outcomes

## Empowered Innovation

**Empowered Innovation occurs when participants challenge expectations and perceived boundaries**, are able to pinpoint the real challenge, identify needs, make decisions and expand on possibilities to spark action.

Adi Ignatius emphasizes that curiosity “is the spark that can lead to breakthrough innovation ... So encourage your employees to ask questions. Your future may depend on it.”<sup>7</sup> And Diane Franklin says, “Curiosity helps ensure a mix of ideas coming from all levels of the organization — leaders and employees alike. And this is a good thing.”<sup>8</sup>

Innovation empowered by curiosity expresses creativity, exhibits ingenuity, generates new ideas and takes risks. Questions are prioritized within the organizational culture. At Box of Crayons, we start with curiosity and value great questions *even over* good answers.

**Amplified Resilience is especially critical *now*, when the future is so uncertain.**

Curiosity widely encouraged across an organization is the best way to create possibilities that help everyone respond to change.

John Boitnott says research “shows that when organizations and entrepreneurs encourage curiosity at all levels, it makes the organization much more adaptable to sudden shifts and economic crises. This leads to greater flexibility, an enhanced ability to pivot and take advantage of new contexts, and a sturdier, longer-lasting company.”<sup>9</sup> Curiosity boosts well-being because curious organizations are undaunted by uncertainty. They embrace it as an opportunity to engage in a process of discovery, learning and growth.

## Amplified Resilience

Unleash  
Change  
maker  
Curiosity



# The wonder and awe of Changemaker curiosity

**Changemaker** curiosity starts with a desire to know something, but rather than being satisfied by getting answers, it creates a virtuous cycle because it is driven by questions. Author Ian Leslie contends, “What do I want to learn?” is one of the most important questions of our lives.”<sup>10</sup>

This type of curiosity results in an intellectual humility that allows us to imagine the possibility of explanations beyond what we think. It may involve inquiring about what the asker finds intriguing or of interest, or what it might take to solve a mystery.

A series of studies covered in *Scientific American* found that wonder and awe are commonly “the emotional signatures” of curiosity — and wonder and awe are also typically humbling experiences that involve understanding the perspectives and reactions of others.<sup>11</sup> This kind of curious exploration embraces holding space and asking questions that don’t necessarily serve the asker’s own interests.

This is because when we’re exploring in a curious capacity, we aren’t looking to confirm an already-held belief, and we’re not looking to possess knowledge in order to exert control. And if it’s the case (and it *is*) that when “low-curiosity” individuals are given the choice they opt for familiar evidence consistent with what they already believe, then it is not difficult to imagine the shortcomings for leaders. For example, when we think about how leaders (and everyone, really) go about making decisions about what’s true, what’s most important, what’s the real challenge and how to best solve those challenges ... it’s not difficult to see why being “low-curiosity” is problematic for organizations.

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Leaders assume — mistakenly for the most part — that their employees feel empowered to be curious ... But employees describe a very different reality.”<sup>111</sup>

— Spencer Harrison, Erin Pinkus & Jon Cohen



# The four enemies that block Changemaker curiosity

**There are a number of barriers to curious thinking.** Despite good intentions, individual and collective behaviours, along with organizational maturity and processes, can work to undermine the maintenance and/or cultivation of a truly curiosity-led culture.

## 1 Complacency

As smaller companies grow into bigger corporations, they tend to relax their efforts (does that sound like your own personal growth trajectory?). Satya Nadella's reinvigoration of the culture at Microsoft is a perfect example of this: a "company man," Nadella saw the issues born from growth and control from the inside, and saw also that what had become a form of incuriosity about their market became a real threat to the business. There are endless resources for hearing Nadella's story of Microsoft's journey to being more curiosity-led, as they transform from a "know-it-all" to a "learn-it-all" culture.

In 2019, American business executive and CEO of SurveyMonkey Zander Lurie wrote about his company's chief research officer's TEDx talk on the subject. He called curiosity a "superpower," saying that, **"When curiosity ebbs, people lapse into routine and complacency, which exposes a company to disruption. To prevent that, managers should continually emphasize how important curiosity is — and reward people for developing it."**<sup>12</sup> Complacency effectively dampens the spark that curiosity needs to develop.

## 2 Delusion

**Most senior leaders think they have a curious culture already.** Indeed, "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,"<sup>13</sup> according to a study. In other words, most leaders believe that their organizational state supports curiosity, but opening up this question to the rest of the organization quickly challenges this position. It turns out that where you sit in an organization profoundly affects how you view the culture.

Plus, while researchers have found learning environments to be conducive to and catalysts for curiosity, **most organizations (even as they embrace the value of having a growth mindset) continue to prioritize performance over learning.** That is, rather than foster a culture in which failure is part of the process of growth and discovery, most organizations are focused on performance to the detriment of real learning, which almost always comes with failure. Relatedly, we know that a **lack of psychological safety** (and physical and/or financial safety, for that matter) will dry up curious behaviours if not eliminating the instinct entirely.

“

There is now a premium on intellectual curiosity and learnability... Knowing the answer to questions is less critical than having the ability to ask the right questions in the first place.”<sup>14</sup>

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic  
& Josh Bersin

## Environment

This discrepancy between what is said and what is actually *done* is likely because while an organization might officially encourage people to be curious, **there are a number of practical barriers to asking questions.**

These include **fear of losing face** (or conversely: the need to maintain the status we associate with knowing good answers rather than asking great questions), plain old **busyness** (it's faster to just skip the inquiry part, right?) and **a learned inability to ask questions.** As Ian Leslie points out, the abundance of information at our fingertips and the quick access to easy answers means that we're forgetting how to ask questions.<sup>14</sup>

Since we know that curiosity is a *state* and not simply a trait, organizations have a duty to not only encourage curiosity in individuals, but also (and perhaps more importantly) to foster an open learning culture that we know supports and fuels curiosity in the first place. And just as educators work to cultivate learning and teaching practices that encourage curiosity and persistence in their students, so too should organizations create environments that attract, nurture and reward insatiable learners who energetically respond and adapt to change and who are collaborative and optimistic about what their forms of inquiry will unravel.

## The Advice Monster

While there are real benefits to cultivating curiosity in our organizations, at the individual level, there is seemingly **a real dark side to curiosity.** It's just really hard to stay curious because there are a lot of short-term benefits to giving advice, making assumptions and to skipping the time (and humility) it takes to sit in mystery a little longer. In acknowledging our relationship to what is unknown, curiosity is singularly disarming: It betrays our imperfect reasoning, it makes us vulnerable to others (in this way, it's also revealing) and it reminds us that we're in a state of exploration. It's a way of giving up power, and of acknowledging the unknown ... which is admittedly terrifying.

We know that one of the primary things that gets in the way of curiosity is the ingrained and seemingly rewarding habit of advice-giving. At Box of Crayons, we teach the value of setting aside the impulses that drive advice- and assumption-driven behaviours, and instead help people in organizations to develop the capacity to hold the space for various forms of inquiry because we believe **curiosity-led cultures are more resilient, innovative and successful.**

## Why curiosity today?

**Now more than ever, organizations need curiosity in the workplace** to build new problem-solving muscles, reach longer-term solutions and achieve enterprise goals.

For organizational partners already committed to providing a supportive space for cultural transformation, **we help motivate and teach the skills needed so teams can harness the power of curiosity, innovate and succeed.**

## Evidence of curiosity unleashed

**To learn more about our approach in action** and how we are able to scale across companies and teams, access our most recent case studies:

**[Transforming a Worldwide Leader in Cloud Solutions from Advice-Driven to Curiosity-Led](#)**

**[Unleash the Power of Curiosity to Activate Culture Change](#)**

# How does Box of Crayons unleash Changemaker curiosity?

At Box of Crayons, we provide our clients with **practical frameworks** that drive behaviour so that being curiosity-led becomes an **organizational capability** that creates **connected and engaged company cultures**.

## Our programs

- 1** Teach simple and effective practices that encourage curiosity.
- 2** Outline the best questions to ask so real challenges become clear.
- 3** Spark action resulting in genuine connection and change.

**Our approach is unique.** It is practical, easy to apply, accessible and more engaging than “beige” corporate training. Rather than relying on models that are easily forgotten outside of the classroom, we get participants **practicing and experiencing** the benefits of developing their curiosity quickly. This helps them feel it in their bones and understand how it will help them in their roles at work, which helps with buy-in and behaviour change.

## Why Box of Crayons programs?

Our programs have impact because **we’re committed to our design principles**. This “curious” approach differs from a command-and-control, top-down style of leadership, and we believe **this switch is essential** for growth and success in a complex and uncertain business climate.

We even have **post-workshop support** involving micro-learning that helps participants recall and re-engage with the key content.

## And what else?

**Over the past 17 years**, we’ve had more than **100,000 participants** in our programs and have facilitated the development of coach-like curiosity in learners. We’ve helped over 150 companies **transform from stuck and siloed teams to connected and engaged company cultures**.

**Curious to learn more about Box of Crayons’ programs? Visit us at [BoxOfCrayons.com](https://BoxOfCrayons.com).**

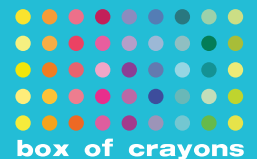
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Only about 24%  
[of employees] reported  
feeling curious in their  
jobs on a regular basis,  
and about 70% said they  
face barriers to asking  
more questions at  
work.” +++++

— Francesca Gino

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