



The Role Curiosity Plays in Improving Performance

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One of the core qualities of a performance improvement professional is (or should be) curiosity. Indeed, in my career, curiosity has been at the heart of many an improvement. Here are some illustrative cases in point.

How much time are they spending at their workstations?

While leading a small team of consultants that was working to develop job aids for a group of examiners – people who processed claims for lost and stolen travelers' checks – I noticed that all their work was performed at a computer workstation. Clearly, "time on station" was a meaningful measure of productivity. Curious about the amount of time examiners spent at and away from their workstations, I asked my associates to make and record some observations over a period of two weeks. The result was surprising. Examiners were spending about 40 percent of their time away from their workstations. In turn, that 40 percent was about equally divided



between time spent (1) walking back and forth to the supervisor's desk to obtain approval for a proposed resolution of a claim and (2) standing in line at a large, high-speed copy machine that had replaced numerous small copy machines previously scattered about the work area. Further investigation revealed that supervisor approval was required because the claim in question involved an amount exceeding examiner authority. It also revealed that no resolution ever proposed by an examiner had been disapproved. This same investigation turned up the fact that the small copy machines were still around, stored in a nearby storeroom. The solutions were easy to see and easily sold. The authorization level for the examiners was increased to accommodate all but the largest claims and the small copy machines were once again scattered about the work area. The time on station measure climbed to more than 90 percent. Curiosity paid off in increased productivity.

Just how far did those rounds go?



While my ship was providing gunfire support to troops ashore in Viet Nam, the overhead spotter asked if the ship could fire a round "as far down the gun target line as possible." The request was relayed to me as the Chief Petty Officer in charge of the plotting room. I thought about the spotter's request for a moment. I knew that, theoretically, maximum range would be realized if the gun elevation angle was 45 degrees. The Gulf of Tonkin was calm that day; there was little or no roll or pitch so I manually

set the gun elevation order at 45 degrees and fired a round. Moments later the spotter's response was to exclaim, "Hot, damn! Secondaries!" (meaning that secondary explosions had occurred as a result of the single round that had been fired). The spotter then requested six more rounds and then six more after that. Satisfied with the damage done, the spotter headed home and my destroyer headed back

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out into the Gulf of Tonkin, away from the shore line. Curious, I asked the Fire Control Officer in the ship's Combat Information Center (CIC) to check the coordinates of the target and the ship's position at the time of the firing to see just how far those rounds had traveled. As it turns out, the rounds had gone 6,000 yards farther than the supposed useful range of the guns and 3,000 yards farther than the supposed maximum range of that particular gun. Curious again, I set about determining why. After an all-night session, I found the answer. The range tables for the guns were in error. That had resulted in a huge design flaw in the weapons system. All was written up and submitted. A temporary workaround was put in place and several months later a modification to the weapons system was issued and put in place. Once again, curiosity paid off.

Why do you refer to that binder?

Based on a recommendation from a large consulting firm, I had been brought in to a company to "improve productivity through training" in a large, seasonal forms processing operation. Completely ignorant of the company's business or operations but willing to explore possibilities, I agreed to a site visit to "poke around" the operation in question to see what might be done.



The operation in question was a typical part of forms processing operations in those days: paper forms filled out by applicants were received, the information on them was keyed in by a data entry function and the data were then subjected to computer-based processing. Part of the computer-based processing involved edits of the data and when the edits failed to satisfy certain criteria, the form in question was flagged for manual review and correction. The computer printed out a correction document containing numbers that identified the item(s) on the form for which edits had failed. The correction document was matched with the original form and both were batched and sent to the resolution operation. This was the operation in which I was to "improve productivity through training."

As I strolled about the resolution work area, I noticed that one of the clerical workers would periodically refer to a black, three-ring binder. Curious, I waited until the worker opened the binder again and then asked the worker, "Would you mind telling me what you use the binder for?" "No problem," answered the worker. "See this error?" pointing to a number on the correction document that tied to an item on the form. "That item is subjected to five different edits and I could have gotten this error for any one of five different reasons. So the first thing I have to do is figure out which of the five edits the item failed. What I have in this binder are the edits the computer uses." "Thanks," I answered and headed off to my meeting with the client.

"It seems," I began, "that the first thing people have to do is manually rerun the edits that were run by the computer. It also seems to me that the computer could tell them which edits an item failed and all this rework could be avoided." I went on to explain how resolution work of the kind being done can be significantly improved through the use of algorithmic job aids instead of relying on lengthy classroom

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training. This would be particularly valuable, I added, in a seasonal operation such as this in which large numbers of temporary employees had to be hired and trained. Subsequently, the computer programs were modified to add an identifying number indicating which edit an item had failed, algorithmic job aids were developed, classroom training was significantly reduced, the trainee failure rate was also reduced and fewer temporary employees had to be hired. Productivity was indeed improved through training. Just as before, curiosity paid off.

You wouldn't want me to train 'em to do dumb things would you?

Last, but not least, I had been brought in to handle the training associated with the roll out of a new, automated health insurance claims processing system. In addition to tackling my primary charge, I also began asking questions about the system itself. Having done this kind of work once before, I knew there was the potential for what I called “rat race loops” – cases in which a claim was rejected for one reason and the resolution for that reason led to the same claim later rejecting for a different reason and the resolution of that second reject resulting in the claim rejecting once again for the original reason. Thus it was that claims literally disappeared inside the computer system, cycling back and forth from edit A to edit B and back to A again. Sure enough, after poking around a bit I found a couple of instances of rat race resolution loops. These were brought to the attention of the systems staff and subsequently corrected. The head of systems collared me one day and said, “I thought we were paying you to train the examiners, not ask questions about the system.” Smiling, I replied, “That’s right, but you wouldn’t want me to train ‘em to do dumb things would you?” Still smiling, I walked away, curious about something else I had encountered that day. Curiosity had just paid off and it was about to pay off again.

Summary

“Curiosity killed the cat” holds an old saying. “Satisfaction brought it back” is a common retort. Idle curiosity is perhaps a risky stance in some organizations but curiosity about why things are the way they are or what accounts for this or that set of circumstances is not simply justifiable, it is frequently the precursor to improvements in performance and productivity. Exercising your curiosity entails getting out of the box in which your role, profession, job or the expectations of others places you.

When I was working on job aids for the travelers’ check claims examiners, I hadn’t been asked to improve examiner productivity or time on station, but that factor was relevant to the work my team was doing and I was in a position to check it out. As the Chief in the plotting room, I wasn’t charged with figuring out why my weapons system was performing far in excess of its stated design capabilities but I viewed it as problematic and I viewed it as well within my authority to investigate why and to do something about it. When I was brought in to “improve productivity through training” I was probably well within my charter to inquire about the use of the black binder but it was simple curiosity that prompted me to do so. And when I went in search of rat race loops in my client’s computer system, I was no doubt “out of bounds” in the view of the head of systems but, as my retort indicates, doing so was clearly related to my basic charge and just as clearly driven by curiosity.

In all these cases, “curiosity” has a very definite meaning that goes well beyond simple nosiness. In all these cases “curiosity” refers to *wanting to know or acquire information relevant to the task at hand*. In that regard, all performance improvement professionals should be continuously curious – they should

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want to acquire information relevant to the task at hand. Equally important, anyone who discourages such curiosity is an impediment or obstacle to improvement.

Finally, my wife, an extremely competent manager in her own right, points out that bringing to bear a set of “fresh eyes” has the built-in advantage of introducing someone who is not familiar with the situation and who is therefore naturally curious and wanting to understand how things work and why they work that way. People who have been in their jobs for any length of time tend to become so familiar with things that they lose the natural curiosity of a newcomer. Bringing in outsiders and periodically rotating those in charge are good ways of introducing curiosity, asking lots of so-called “dumb questions” and consequently bringing about improvements. This is especially true when you bring in a performance improvement professional – provided he or she is appropriately curious.

About the Author

Fred Nickols spent 20 years as a technician in the United States Navy. As a technician, he developed an appreciation for schematics, hence his continued reliance on diagrams of the systems on which he works, including processes and organizations. The Navy trained Fred not just as a technician but also as a classroom instructor, a writer of programmed instructional materials, an instructional systems developer and an internal organization development (OD) consultant. Upon retiring from the Navy, Fred took up a career in consulting, first in training and management development then in general management consulting. He also held senior positions with two client companies: Monarch Financial Services and Educational Testing Service. All along the way his curiosity has served him well. He has published more than 100 articles and book chapters in a wide variety of professional publications. Currently, he is Managing Partner at Distance Consulting LLC, a firm he founded in 2001. He writes as his Muse moves him and he consults as the Fates decree.