

Six Kinds of Curiosity

And How You Can Use Them to Change Your Life

Brian Grazer & Charles Fishman

What's curiosity done for you lately? Probably not enough.

Curiosity has been the most important quality in giving me the life I've always wanted as a movie and TV producer in Hollywood. In fact, curiosity is so important to me that for 35 years I've done something that I've never heard of anyone else doing—in Hollywood, or anywhere else.

Every week or two, I have conversations with people who have nothing to do with show business. I invented a discipline for myself that I call “curiosity conversations.” I ask accomplished people from all kinds of fields—diplomacy, physics, sports, music, politics, business, literature—to sit down and talk for an hour or two about their work and their world.

I've been doing this since well before I had made any movies like *A Beautiful Mind* or *Apollo 13*—since well before I had made movies anyone had heard of.

The curiosity conversations have this wonderful contradiction at their heart. When I have them, I am not looking for movie or TV ideas. I literally tell the people I'm hoping to talk to that I'm not interested in doing a movie on them or their work—whether that's being a counter-intelligence agent or a super-model. I tell them I'm just interested in them and their world.

I'm just curious.

It is that very quality of having a relaxed, open-ended conversation that allows all kinds of new ideas, new connections, and fresh perspectives to percolate.

The fact that I'm not looking for ideas is what creates the space and the freedom to see new ideas.

At this point, I've had more than 470 curiosity conversations—with four presidents of the United States, four CIA directors, seven Nobel Laureates, at least a dozen hip-hop musicians.

That lifelong habit of one-on-one curiosity inspired me to dig deeper into the power of curiosity, to write a book with the journalist and author Charles Fishman. We've spent two years talking about and researching curiosity—hours of conversation each week analyzing the value of curiosity, what snuffs it out and what ignites it, the mysteries of why some people seem so open-heartedly curious.

Remarkably, we stumbled into the most useful and most interesting quality of curiosity in the very first conversation we had, literally within 20 minutes of starting to talk about it. It's a characteristic we don't seem to notice, let alone discuss and teach...

There are many different kinds of curiosity.

Curiosity comes in a whole variety of qualities and wavelengths, flavors and intensities.

The curiosity of a couple on their first date—emotional curiosity, what’s this person like, do we connect?—is very different from the curiosity of a real estate agent meeting with a family to figure out what kind of house they need to buy. A homicide detective and an advertising executive are both trying to solve puzzles, but using very different kinds of questions.

When you start to tease apart the kinds of curiosity, you quickly realize that there are different kinds of curiosity because there are very different ways of using it.

The questions and answers you exchange with a fellow guest at a friend’s wedding, someone who just happens to be seated next to you at lunch, are very different from the kinds of questions and answers you exchange with a job candidate, or with your doctor before you undergo your first colonoscopy.

Curiosity is an incredible tool. But what I realized, what really inspired my desire to write *A Curious Mind* with Charles Fishman, is that most people don’t use their curiosity with a sense of purpose and understanding—with insight about curiosity itself.

Curiosity is the key to understanding people's personalities and motivations.

Curiosity is a vital storytelling tool—and storytelling is the best way to engage and persuade other people, in your work life and your personal life.

Curiosity is a fantastic source of courage.

Curiosity is the best, most under-used management tool—a great way to create engagement in your fellow works, but also a great way to transmit values and priorities.

Curiosity is the spark for creativity and innovation, the best long-term investment you can make.

Curiosity is the best way to stay connected to those who are most important to you.

“Curiosity is the spark for creativity and innovation, the best long-term investment you can make.”

Curiosity, in fact, turns out to be a quiet superpower that all of us have. You don't need an Ivy League education to use it, you don't need a high-speed Internet connection.

What's curiosity done for you lately? We're betting it hasn't done enough.

The Curiosity of Making Connections

I usually refer to this as “The Curiosity of Leaning Out the Window.” When I was first starting out in the movie business, I had a third-floor office at Paramount Studios, with windows overlooking the walkways crisscrossing the Paramount campus, and I would lean on the window sill and shout down to people walking by—Howard Koch, who co-wrote *Casablanca*, Michael Eisner, who went on to be CEO of Disney, Barry Diller, who was CEO of Paramount.

I had made a rule for myself that, for three months, I was going to meet one new person in show business every day, as a way of creating my own network, of broadening my experience. One day, leaning on the windowsill, I spotted Ron Howard walking by.

After a childhood and adolescence as a renowned actor, Ron was at Paramount trying to become a director—in exactly the way I was trying to become a producer. I didn't shout down to Ron (which was probably smart), but I did call him up that afternoon and persuade him to come by and talk movie ideas.

As soon as Ron walked into my office, I was struck by this aura around him. I could tell he made good decisions, he had a strong moral compass, a conscience.

We connected so well that Ron directed the first two theatrical movies I produced—Night Shift and Splash. We worked so well on those movies that we became business partners, artistic partners, and close friends of 30 years. Outside of my children, Ron has been the most important person in my adult life—and curiosity led me to Ron.

That may seem simplistic: Meeting someone new in your own business every day for a month or two or three. It's simple, but it's not simplistic.

First, imagine if you did what I did: Met a new person in your own line of work, every day, for 8 weeks, 40 new people. If only 15 percent of those people turned out to be allies, well, just a few weeks from now, you'd have six people you could call on for guidance or support or insight, people you don't even know now.

Second, that kind of curiosity becomes a habit, an instinct. You realize how easy it is to meet new people, and how valuable.

I'd argue that, in terms of the benefit weighed against the almost trivial "cost," introducing yourself to people you don't know who work in your company or your industry, and having a brief curiosity conversation, is about the best investment of 10 minutes you can make each day.

My life would have been much different if I hadn't spotted Ron Howard crossing the quad at Paramount, and determined that he was the person I was going to meet that day.

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Emotional Curiosity (or, the Curiosity of What's Inside the Mind of Others)

For me, this has literally been the curiosity of what's inside the mind of a police chief or a hip-hop artist. I saw Eminem perform one year at the Video Music Awards (VMA), and I found his hip-hop performance fascinating. I asked him to have a conversation with me—and he did. But he spent the first 40 minutes sitting on one of the couches in my office, glowering at me, refusing to speak. When he finally decided to talk, the harrowing story of his own childhood and effort to become a musician was as hypnotic as his performance had been.

In terms of personalities, you couldn't get much more opposite to Eminem than Daryl Gates, the police chief of the city of Los Angeles for 14 years, the man who helped invent and popularize SWAT-style policing, the man in charge during the police beating of Rodney King in 1991, and the riots of 1992. Gates was such a powerful figure in Los Angeles, I worked for months to get some time with him. As it turned out, I met Gates as the Rodney King riots exploded across the city. We had tuna fish sandwiches in his office in police headquarters as the city burned and his officers struggled to restore order.

I'm not a hip-hop musician. Far from it.

I'm not a police commander. Far from that, too.

But I am a storyteller. After meeting Eminem, I was determined to capture the emotional core of his story in a movie, and the result is 8 Mile—which of course stars Eminem.

Long after meeting Daryl Gates, I produced the movie J. Edgar, about the man who created the modern FBI. The mindset of Hoover was almost identical, from what I could tell, to the mindset of Gates.

The kind of curiosity I use most often is what I call emotional curiosity. When I meet people—and that's what I do all day long, have meetings with people—I'm paying attention to what they say, of course. But I'm paying just as close attention to how they say it, to their body language, to how they respond to my questions, how they respond to the people around them.

Paying attention to people's emotional tone has been one of the key values of the curiosity conversations—I remember people's personalities more vividly than the specifics of the genomics or geopolitics we discuss. The maturity and sophistication of the music theory conversation I had with Michael Jackson. The patient explanations Nobel physicist Sheldon Glashow provided of string theory.

And, of course, the relentless glower of Eminem, the self-assured paranoia of Daryl Gates.

Emotional curiosity does something vital I think people too often overlook. It lets you imagine the world from inside the head of other people. It disrupts your own point of view.

I couldn't do a credible movie about hip-hop music from inside my own experience—I've never been a struggling musician with a dream. I couldn't do a credible movie about someone who commands a powerful, hierarchical law enforcement organization—I don't like giving orders at my own company.

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To tell persuasive, compelling stories, you have to be able to imagine how the world looks from other people's perspectives. Otherwise, the stories aren't authentic. That's why I pay so much attention to people's emotional tone—not just in those formally arranged conversations, but all day, in every meeting in my office.

But here's the thing: Most people could make much more use of emotional curiosity. We're all storytellers. Every line of work requires understanding the people we work with, the people who are our customers. If you're a doctor, or a software coder, or a hair stylist—every interaction should begin with understanding the patient, the person you're coding for, the person sitting in the styling chair. The same is true for our colleagues. Understand where people are coming from isn't optional—it's how we can be most effective.

And it starts with being curious.

The Curiosity of Confidence

I don't want to produce the same movies everyone else is making. I don't want to produce the same movies I've already made. I want the work we do at Imagine to be compelling, but also to be distinctive. As I say at the office, I think we should be doing movies we love.

But, ironically, many creative communities are risk-averse. Movies and TV shows involve a lot of money, and people are always looking for a sure bet. The safest thing to do looks like something that has already been done, and succeeded.

That's understandable, but it doesn't make for exciting movie-making, and I don't think it makes for the best movies or TV shows.

I want the opportunity to be different.

The question is, how do you find the courage to take creative risks?

At Imagine, we've done *Friday Night Lights*, a movie in which the football team loses the climactic game.

We've done *A Beautiful Mind*, a movie whose central character John Nash is a Nobel Prize winning mathematician and economist — not the most cinematic set up. And Nash is also a schizophrenic, adding to the challenge of capturing him.

We made *8 Mile*, a movie about a struggling hip-hop artist in down-and-out Detroit.

None of those are conventional movie ideas, or have conventional “success” elements. But they are all great movies, and also successful movies. We made movies we loved, and audiences loved them too—even though they weren't predictable.

That's what curiosity does for me every day—it gives me confidence to chase the unconventional, to champion the unconventional.

Talking to people across a wide range of communities and disciplines—outside of Hollywood—gives me this incredible base of knowledge about what’s percolating in the rest of the world.

I’m not an expert on hip-hop or mental illness, but I pay close attention. That gives me ideas I wouldn’t otherwise have. And it also means that when I see a wonderful idea—when I first read an excerpt of the book *A Beautiful Mind*, when I first watched Eminem and then heard the story of his life—I have the confidence that the idea is relevant. That it will resonate with people if we can bring the characters to life on screen.

What’s so clear is that, again, it doesn’t matter what you do for a living—curiosity can give you confidence in exactly the same way. Smart architects aren’t just doing their work, eyes to the CAD display all day—they are paying attention what’s happening in the world of buildings, materials, taste, design, and to how people move through and live in existing buildings. Smart sales people are paying attention not just to their own products, but to the products of their competitors, to the ways people avoid using their products. Smart people in the world of show business—of course—are paying attention to the increasing separation between TV-watching and the old-fashioned TV schedule.

Curiosity gives you the information, the insight, to have confidence in ideas that are a little unconventional, a little risky. That's how you keep yourself fresh, it's how you keep your work interesting, relevant and cutting edge.

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The Curiosity Of Fear

What makes you nervous?

Flying?

Being slid into a CAT scanner?

Giving a talk or a work presentation?

When I have a fear of something, I put the fear aside for a bit and try to get inside what's making me nervous. I ask questions. The questions do two things: they distract me from the queasy feeling, and I learn some facts about what I'm worried about.

I'm a nervous public speaker. I give a good speech, I do a good TV interview—but I don't enjoy getting ready for either. I don't even necessarily enjoy giving a speech—I enjoy having given it. The fun part for me is talking to people about the speech (or the interview) after it's done.

For me, every time is a test. Here's how I keep the nervousness at bay: I get curious.

First, I don't start preparing too far in advance, because that just opens up the box of worry. If I start writing the speech three weeks in advance, then I just worry every day for three weeks. So I start with enough time to research, write and rehearse — but not too much time.

Then, I ask questions:

What's this talk supposed to be about?

What's the best possible version of this talk?

What do people coming to this event expect to hear?

What do they want to hear from me?

Who is in the audience?

What do I hope to leave them with?

The answer to each of those questions helps me create a framework for what I'm supposed to talk about. And the answers immediately spark ideas, anecdotes, points I want to make. All of which I keep track of.

I typically make sure I have a handful of stories to make my points—people like stories, stories are sticky, and also, if they are my stories, I can't forget them while I'm giving the speech, even if I am nervous.

If you have a fear of giving a speech, you can be so distracted or put off by the anxiety that you avoid getting ready, instead of plunging in. That prolongs the anxiety—and it undermines the speech or presentation you ultimately want to give.

The speech won't write itself, of course, and the way to stop being nervous about it is to work on it. To be curious about it.

The same technique works with flying, of course. Understanding how a plane works, and why it can't fall out of the sky, dramatically reduces the anxiety of nervous flyers. But you can't learn that until you put aside the fear to ask some questions about how an airplane flies.

When I'm nervous about something, I purposefully get curious about it. I'm nervous about police officers—that's one of the reasons I was determined to have a curiosity conversation with LA's police chief, Daryl Gates.

In our brains, we all know curiosity is a great way to reduce our fears. But anxiety is about emotions, and sometimes we need to remind ourselves that the best way to dispel a fear is to face it, to be curious about it.

The Curiosity of Being Boss

I love being a movie producer, I love having great colleagues, and I love having a production company, which I run with Ron Howard.

As part of all that, I'm a boss. But I don't love being a boss, because I don't love bossing people, I don't really want to tell people what to do. But I love the curiosity of being a boss.

So I often manage people with curiosity—by asking questions instead of giving orders. I think questions are the most under-used management tool we've got.

I especially think questions are a great management tool when I think someone isn't doing what I would hope they would, or when I think something isn't going in the direction I want it to go.

People often imagine that if there's going to be conflict, they need to start with a firm hand, they need to remind people of the chain of command.

I'm never worried about who is in charge.

I'm worried about making sure we get the best possible decision, the best possible casting, script, movie trailer, financing deal—the best possible movie.

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Asking questions at work elicits information, of course.

Asking questions creates a space for people to raise issues they are worried about, or to give the boss information he or she might not know, and might not be expecting.

Most important, asking questions gives people the chance to make the case for the way they want a decision to go. And vice-versa.

Back in 1991, we shot the movie *Far and Away*, starring Tom Cruise. Tom was at the top of his career. He was only twenty-nine years old, but he had already made *Top Gun*, *The Color of Money*, *Rain Man*, and *Born on the Fourth of July*.

Tom isn't difficult to work with. But *Far and Away* was a challenging movie to make. It was an old-fashioned epic, a story of two immigrants leaving Ireland for America at the turn of the last century. We shot in Ireland and the western United States. It got expensive, but it wasn't overtly commercial. When we figured out what it was going to cost, the studio told me to find ways of cutting the budget.

I went to Tom on the set. We talked. I said, "Look, you're not the producer of this movie. But we all want to make it, we all have this vision of a movie we're doing as artists, a story we care about.

It's going to be expensive, but we can't spend as much money as it looks like we're going to. We need to hold the line."

I said to Tom, "Can you be the team leader here with the cast and crew? Can you be the guy that sets an example?"

He looked at me. "I'm one hundred percent that guy!" he said. "When I have to go to the bathroom, I'm going to run to the trailer and run back to the set. I'm going to set the pace for excellence, and respect, and tightening up."

And that's exactly what he did. He led. He was motivated. He motivated other people.

I didn't walk in and tell Tom what to do. I didn't order everybody to work harder, to make do with less. I explained where we were. And I went to the key player, the person other people would respect, and I asked that a question: "Can you be the leader here?"

I think asking for people's help—rather than directing it—is almost always the smart way of doing things, regardless of the stakes. It creates engagement rather than resistance.

And it also confers responsibility. Asking questions implies that the person you're talking to has both the authority to come up with the ideas, the answers, the solutions—and some of the responsibility to as well.

Curiosity as a boss, curiosity at work, isn't a matter of style. It's much more important than that. If you're a boss, and you manage by asking questions, you're laying a foundation for the culture of your company or your group.

You're letting people know the boss is willing to listen—even to information that's unpleasant or unexpected.

You're letting people know you value a diversity of perspectives—and that you appreciate that in the modern world or high-speed commerce, there may be a diversity of “right” answers to a work problem or a product problem.

Questions at work—delivered not like a prosecutor on a cross-exam, of course, but with a genuine spirit of curiosity—are an apparently simple tool that changes the whole dynamic with the people you work with, and the results you get.

But you do have to listen to the answers.

The Curiosity of Intimacy

We've been talking about curiosity as a remarkable tool to give you a competitive, and creative, edge at work—no matter what work you do.

But the biggest surprise for me in writing about curiosity was the power of curiosity close to home, something that's easy to overlook.

The most important element of our daily lives is our connection to other people—our colleagues, of course, but really to our romantic partners, to our children, to our parents and our friends.

And when you stop to think about it, the most important element in having a vital connection to other people—to the people who matter most to us—is curiosity.

Curiosity is what keeps those relationships fresh, interesting, and surprising. It's the key to staying connected.

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Curiosity creates interest. It can also create excitement.

A good first date is filled with a tumble of questions and answers, the fizz of discovering someone new, of learning how they connect to you, and of how they are different. You can't decide whether it's more fun to ask questions of your date, or to answer your date's questions about you.

But what happens months or years later is that your boyfriend or girlfriend, your husband or wife, feels familiar. That's the beauty and safety of an intimate relationship: you feel like you know the person, like you can rely on the person and their responses, that you can, perhaps, even predict them.

But familiarity is the enemy of curiosity.

And when our curiosity about those closest to us fades, that's the moment when our connection begins to fray. It frays silently, almost invisibly. But when we stop asking genuine questions of those around us—and most important, when we stop really listening to the answers—that's when we start to lose our connection.

It's a little simplistic, of course, but the quickest way to restore energy and excitement to your relationships is to bring some real curiosity back to them. Ask questions about your spouse's day, and pay attention to the answers. Ask questions about your kids' friends, about their classes, about what's exciting them at school, and pay attention to the answers.

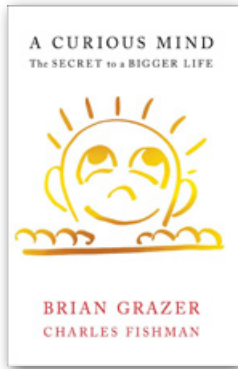
Ask questions like you would have on a first date—ask about their feelings, their reactions.

You need questions that can't be answered with a single muttered word.

How many marriages that drift into disconnection and boredom could be helped by a revival of genuine curiosity on both sides? We need these daily reminders that although I live with this person, I don't actually know her today—unless I ask about her today.

That's part of the fun of curiosity, and part of the value of curiosity: it creates the moment of surprise, even with people we think we know the best. 📖

Info



BUY THE BOOK | For more about the power of curiosity—in Hollywood, and in your own life—read Brian Grazer’s new book, [A Curious Mind: The Secret to a Bigger Life](#), co-authored with journalist Charles Fishman.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS | Brian Grazer is the Oscar-winning producer of such movies and TV shows as *A Beautiful Mind*, *Apollo 13*, *8 Mile*, *Arrested Development*, and *Empire*. Charles Fishman is a journalist and New York Times bestselling author of *The Big Thirst* and *The Wal-Mart Effect*.

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