

## Skill-building: Handling Conflict Effectively

### Curiosity

Doubt—not only willingness to doubt, but the active cultivation of it—is key in being effective across differences. Doubt is key to developing curiosity. Curiosity is vital to minimizing the gap between people, and across differences.

Curiosity is about being *childlike* -- not *childish*. It's about having a sense of wonder ... or *wondering*. It's about giving up the belief that we know, or that nothing is new. After having been alive for a few decades, gathering information constantly, it's easy to assume we know, or that nothing is new. Otherwise, it might be extra challenging to function, make decisions, or navigate the world. However, being in this state constantly and unconsciously gets in the way of new possibilities, creativity, innovation, problem solving, and conflict management.



But how do we develop curiosity?

The first step is to lean in closer, like the guy in the graphic above, instead of leaning away or running away. Being confronted with something strange or uncomfortable can trigger us and make our “downstairs brain” want to flee, but we can bring our “upstairs brain” online and hang in there.

Think about what might motivate you to pause or “lean in closer.” What might you gain? Perhaps it's a desire to understand. A belief that you might learn something from the other person, or the situation. An inkling that there might be something interesting going on.

I had a huge breakthrough as an undergraduate at UCLA due to curiosity. My political beliefs were pretty conservative then, and while I was passionate about racial justice, I was very anti-Affirmative Action. I clearly remember reading over some articles for one of my sociology

classes on race. As I read, I decided I was going to pretend "they" were right. I decided to assume the pro-Affirmative Action folks were intelligent, caring people with something important to say.

In my case, something unexpected happened—I became convinced Affirmative Action was good and right, and realized I had been operating under some mistaken assumptions! I think sometimes the fear of change, or of losing one's identity and long-held beliefs, is what keeps many of us from being curious. Being curious means being open to change and new information, so being open can feel risky or vulnerable. But not only does having curiosity not necessarily means you will (or should) change as I did in this case, the process itself of practicing curiosity can help you build empathy for others, develop a better appreciation for other viewpoints, and new insights.

And would you agree our workplaces could use more empathy, appreciation and new insights?

Curiosity is a “critical internal skill” which helps us avoid conflict in the first place, and also to manage it once it’s happening. Approaching a sensitive topic, delicate situation, or conflict with curiosity is *efficient*! Exploring others’ perspectives, ideas, feelings, and values clears away assumptions, builds understanding and gets to solutions more quickly, especially when interacting across some dimension of human difference!

**Here are some questions to guide your exploration of curiosity:**

- What am I noticing right now (with my eyes, ears, body, heart, mind)?
- (From Sharon Strand Ellison): If I were truly curious right now, what would I want to know?
- If [person I disagree with] were as intelligent and caring as me, what might have lead him/her to think or behave that way?
- What could this (situation, action, behavior) be about, at its core?

Savor your newfound curiosity and the surprises it will bring!

**Let’s talk about how to set you up for success! [susana@susantarinderle.com](mailto:susana@susantarinderle.com)**