

How Curiosity Can Make Your Meetings — and Team — Better

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January 29, 2024



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Summary. Do you find meetings with your team disintegrate into dysfunction and chaos, resulting in ineffective decision-making, inadequate solutions, and team members — including yourself — with deflated morale? “Team” is a misnomer for these bodies; “group” is more... [more](#)

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Sufia, a new head of engineering, left staff meetings feeling frustrated. Instead of listening to fully understand her issues, team members were quick to jump in with off-the-rack solutions and suggestions that Sufia had already tried or considered. Alternatively, they would sidetrack the conversation with concerns of their own, often beginning these diversions with, “Building on what Sufia said,” while not addressing her issue at all. When immediate solutions weren’t available, their fallback

was to generically reassure her that things would get better. Sufia was annoyed that the team didn't try to understand what she really needed, what she'd already tried, or how she was doing.

During a coaching session, I asked Sufia how she could confront this team's dysfunction. "What's the point?" Sufia huffed, "They'll all just nod their heads, argue around each other, and fill the room with platitudes."

Sufia's team meeting experience is common. "Team" is a misnomer for these bodies; "group" is more accurate. Group members are accountable to the boss but not to each other; they often work in individual silos, oblivious to the bigger picture. At best, groups are inefficient and ungratifying; at the far end of the spectrum, they slop along in a soup of cultural toxicity making consequential mistakes through poor communication and the bad decision-making that results.

This challenge can't be tackled by a single team member. Sufia discussed the situation with her boss, Janik, and the three of us then devised six strategies for a "less is more" path to effective cross-functional conversations that will stick. The key ingredient in successful meetings? Curiosity. Curiosity invites colleagues to contribute their honest perspective, filling our knowledge gaps about each other's work to create a holistic picture of what needs to be done to achieve our shared objectives. Curiosity brings people together across the barriers of their discrete purposes.

Here is how you can use curiosity to purposefully pause before problem solving and engage your team members in productive conversation.

Dig First

Almost everyone is too ready to provide solutions. But a solutions-first, ask-questions-later approach rarely works. People feel unheard and unseen. Instead, we need to dig first to discover the degree, severity, or extent of a problem and clarify the challenge.

When gathering everyone's perspective, watch for these sentence starters that are indicators of our hair-trigger inclination to solve: "You should," "Have you thought about," "What about," "How about," and "We could." If you find yourself wanting to use these phrases, write them down instead of expressing them. This allows you to work on solutions in the privacy of your page while still listening — and throw away costly mistakes before committing them. If you hear others ready to jump headfirst into solving, rein the group in by stating, "Before we solve, can we step back and fully define the problem? I'm curious how each of us would frame the problem in a sentence."

Let Your Colleague Own the Story

Thinking we're being empathetic, we often jump in with our own story and point of view. Instead of the speaker and their issue being the focus, our attention pivots to our own challenges and issues. Even if your situation is identical (a rare occurrence), refrain from saying, "Me too." Instead, try, "I have encountered a similar situation. Happy to share that later. For now, I'd love to learn more about your specific thoughts." By turning the spotlight back on our colleagues, we enable them to own their narrative and share their unique perspective while also making a deposit in the bank of relationship goodwill.

Defer Judgment

Criticism and praise, when offered constructively, both have their place at work. But they are also forms of judgment, especially when we rush into them. Feedback is important — but judgment is the opposite of curiosity.

Instead, pause. Withhold your initial feedback (positive or negative), and remain open to learning, hearing other possibilities, and allowing the other person to feel seen and understood. This will allow you to hear what's truly on their minds. Doing this creates "judgment free" zones, so people can more safely express their true sentiments.

Two simple words can help with this: “Say more.” I use “Say more” in two cases: when I’m genuinely curious and when I’m feeling judgmental. You can tap into your higher nature by deferring judgment and asking more questions. Others are then more likely to share what’s truly on their mind rather than give us what many refer to in the business world as a watermelon: green (all good) on the outside and red (festering) on the inside.

Note Your Emotions

Carelessly expressing our unfiltered emotions can close a conversation or inhibit it greatly. Suppressing them can frustrate us. Instead of bubbling up with emotions that can impede good communication — anger, frustration, sarcasm, even humor — simply take note of how you feel and give it a number on a 1-10 scale, where 10 is high anger: “It angers me that they don’t take accountability. 7 out of 10.”

Sarcasm and humor are often masks for discomfort. If we want to be curious, we need to avoid hiding behind these masks. Ask yourself what positive end will be served by your humor before you quip. Avoid sarcastic phrases like “You think?” “You don’t say!” and “I’ve never heard that before.” When the problem is managing our emotions instead of managing the room, keeping unfiltered emotions out of the room allows us to remain curious and tackle the real problems.

Make Space for Other’s Feelings

This may seem counterintuitive to the previous point, but even as we seek to make our communications non-emotional, not everyone will. Try to avoid minimizing the concerns of others.

Nothing signals our lack of curiosity more clearly than saying, “At least....” When we use this phrase, we signal that their viewpoint isn’t important. If someone in Janik’s meeting said, “We don’t listen to each other and repeat questions that have already been asked,” responses along the lines of, “At least we’re curious and ask questions,” or “At least we’re not political like other teams I’ve been on,” place you in the position of arbitrating whether challenges are worthy of space. Alternatively, saying, “Sounds like

that's frustrating for you. Am I right?" your coworker feels heard and free to provide specifics on the impact of the behavior. Once we understand the consequences of the problem someone else raises, we're better able to address it.

Listen to Learn

Focus on your own need to learn about the concerns and insights of others, rather than immediate solutions or soothing. It takes time and effort to make good decisions and solve real problems. Wanting immediate feel-good results frustrates more often than it reassures. Reassurances often boomerang in the opposite direction of their intended goal by raising the speaker's anxiety as they feel unheard and not understood. For example, "Don't worry, we've solved this problem before," boomerangs into: "This is a long-standing problem that doesn't go away with their tried-and-true methods" or even "You're worrying over nothing. It'll be fine." Instead of reassurances, ensure you hear and understand the message with an aim to learn more. Acknowledge what is said and conclude with curiosity. Try, "I'd like to make sure I understood all three points you made," then paraphrase and end with, "Is there more?"

With these approaches, the goal was for each person to first share their experience of what it was like being a part of Janik's group. They were surprised to learn that everyone was feeling frustrated but for different reasons. Some didn't like the busy work that often resulted from their weekly meetings. Others thought sharing informational updates didn't require meetings and could be done online. Still others believed difficult topics were skirted and festered — finding an outlet in unhealthy side conversations outside the room, not directly with the pertinent people, leading to eroded trust.

These common traps for teams come from a place of good intent — a desire to be helpful, efficient, empathetic — but generate negative impact. By tuning into each other with curiosity and curbing our desire to immediately solve, our conversations don't devolve into the same-old-same-old pattern. With a newfound understanding of our collective and individual frustrations, we

can empathize with each other, learn to work better together, and shift from being a group to a team invested in a shared outcome rather than individual agendas.

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