Curiosity is key to companies' survival

Executives should ask more questions and give free rein to their staff's inventiveness

Ikea has a big fan community – not counting the exasperated customers who, defeated by the notorious assembly instructions, give up trying to build their new piece of furniture after hours of fiddling around. The brand has one particularly ardent group of enthusiasts known as Ikea hackers, who use its conventional products as a basis for designing their own creations. A Billy shelving unit is transformed into a robot toy cupboard, a dresser into a stylish office desk, and two Ikea stools into a bike.

There are virtually no limits to the ingenuity at play here, as demonstrated by the website of Malaysian Jules Yap, who began specialising in the customisation of Ikea furniture back in 2006. On Ikeahackers.net, hobbyists from across the globe share their ideas for all the incredible things that can be done with Ikea products.

Lawyers against Ikea hackers

This was, however, a thorn in the Swedish furniture brand's side: the management saw it as an infringement of the company's trademark rights, spoke of damage to its reputation and feared it could face liability claims due to improper handling of the products. In 2014, Yap received a cease and desist letter from Ikea's lawyers: she was either supposed to transfer her domain name Ikeahackers.net to Ikea or convert her blog into a non-commercial site – which would have meant the end of the website. But the lawyers underestimated the power of the internet and the small but strong fan community of Ikea hackers. There was a major outcry, coupled with a lot of media interest in the story. Ikea had to give in, and Yap was allowed to keep her website up and running.

"A missed opportunity," believes Spencer Harrison, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at top French business school Insead. By threatening legal action, he explains, Ikea angered a loyal community instead of strengthening the bond through cooperation. Nevertheless, Harrison continues, Ikea learned from its mistake. For the first time, the company's leadership asked itself: "Do we actually know what our customers do with our products?"

To help it gain a better understanding of its customers' designer preferences and living habits, the company generated its first Curiosity Report. Since 2016, Ikea has been publishing an annual Live at Home Report, based on surveys of thousands of households. In its latest report, for instance, the furniture company addresses the consequences of the pandemic: "What happens when the home becomes a gym, a school, a miniature zoo and an entertainment centre as well?" it asks.

"Curiosity has become part of the Ikea culture," says Harrison. As a result, the way the firm looks at its customers has changed too. In 2018 the company even proudly announced: "We hacked ourselves" – and has been taking inspiration for its creations from the Ikea hack scene ever since.

The basis of all creativity

According to Harrison, curiosity is vital for companies: "It's what drives us to look for patterns, information and new insights." It's what enables firms to identify changes in the competitive situation or their customers' behaviour and respond accordingly. Curiosity, the Insead researcher believes, is the basis of all creativity. And he maintains that constant change will result in companies being doomed to fail without it.

And yet firms and executives still struggle to create an environment that stimulates their staff's curiosity: they're afraid that kind of culture will encourage risk-taking and lead to inefficiency – in other words, that it will result in expensive chaos. In a survey of 3,000 employees from a wide range of different sectors by Francesca Gino, a professor at Harvard Business School, only one in four respondents stated that they regularly felt curiosity in the course of their professional activities. In contrast, 70% felt inhibited about asking additional questions at work.

Question the status quo

"Managers believe that firms are more difficult to run when employees can pursue their own interests," concludes Professor Gino. The reasons for this widespread scepticism are understandable, she says: inquisitiveness and creative ideas often call the status quo into question, and don't always produce useful information.

At the same time, it takes courage and self-confidence to question your own standpoint and allow yourself to be swayed by other opinions. "For many people in governance positions there's something scary about curiosity because the consequences aren't predictable," says Raoul Nacke, CEO of Eric Salmon & Partners, who advises top executives on establishing and developing leadership teams. "They rely on linearity, predictability and rigid strategies – just as they've often learned at the elite universities they attended."

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As a result, curiosity is suppressed – a worrying state of affairs, especially because, as Nacke explains, curiosity is the foundation for renewal and contemporary, successful leadership. Curiosity has a lot to do with willingness to change and transformation intelligence, both things that companies need to encourage.

It's a misconception that curiosity is only relevant to knowledge-intensive occupations. According to Professor Harrison of Insead, for example, experiments show that workers in factories where curiosity is encouraged achieve much higher productivity. "That's when employees start asking themselves what would happen if they did this step or that activity differently. And even little experiments like that can increase productivity," says Harrison on the basis of his findings.

"When we're curious, we look at situations in a more creative way. We look for alternatives," agrees Gino. "We're also more willing to empathise with others and explore different ideas rather than only seeing things from our own perspective." The researchers also say that curiosity can be learned. Even by implementing small changes in the structure of the organisation and their leadership style, executives can encourage curiosity and make their company more successful. The following measures can be helpful:

> **Hire curious employees:** Gino points to the example of tech company Google, which has more or less declared curiosity its corporate philosophy. Its previous CEO and board member Eric Schmidt once said: "We run this company on questions, not answers." The company attracts curious candidates by posing riddles, for instance, which prospective employees have to solve before they can even hand their application in. And the job interview is said to include questions like: "Have you ever found yourself unable to stop trying to get to the bottom of something that was completely new to you?", or "What keeps you persistent?"

Palo Alto-based design and consulting firm Ideo expects employees to have not just in-depth knowledge but the ability to collaborate across disciplines as well – a quality that calls for empathy and curiosity, as Gino explains. Empathy enables staff to listen attentively and see problems or decisions from somebody else's perspective. And Ideo is certainly known for its creative product design: the company is behind products such as the first industrially manufactured computer mouse for Apple and the first insulin pen for pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly.

> **Encourage experimentation within the company:** Companies like Google, 3M and Hewlett Packard give their staff the opportunity to pursue projects beyond their jobs. The aim is to trigger curiosity and creativity, and the approach has resulted in such famous products as email service Gmail and Post-it notes.

There are numerous inventions that can be credited to employees' ingenuity. But even so, companies who give their workforce the necessary freedom tend to be the exception. Even at the model companies mentioned, staff are subject to short-term targets that challenge them and inhibit creativity. And yet even creating casual meeting zones at a company can help ensure that employees from different departments are more likely to run into one another, swap ideas and come up with creative brainwaves.

> **Adopt the beginner's perspective and look at things with the inquisitiveness of a child:** Children aged between three and five ask an average of 300 questions per day. But that changes as they get older. "We become more self-conscious, want to appear more self-confident and demonstrate our expertise. We're afraid people will think we're incompetent, indecisive or stupid," says Gino. A lot of bosses, she says, think they're expected to talk and provide answers rather than asking questions. But such concerns are unfounded, explains the Harvard Business School researcher, because questions are how we cultivate closer contacts and arrive at more creative results.

Childlike curiosity played a role in the genesis of the Polaroid instant camera, for instance. The idea was born when founder Edwin Land's little daughter asked him a simple question: "Why do we have to wait for photos?" And at design and consulting firm Ideo too, they always try to adopt the beginner's perspective – for example by deliberately bringing men onto the team when they're testing new makeup products.

> **Question assumptions:** "Here at Ideo, there are two questions we ask ourselves when we're stuck," explains president and co-CEO Tim Brown: "'Why?' and 'What if ...?'" Asking why, he says, helps gain a better understanding of the convictions or rules behind earlier decisions and encourages people to question assumptions. The second question serves to identify and eliminate potential hurdles. "Challenge your team to refute your ideas and make it clear that you're genuinely interested in their views," Brown advises executives.

Similarly, Toyota's "5 whys" method involves asking employees to get to the bottom of problems by asking "why" questions – a brainstorming technique developed by founder Sakichi Toyoda. It is based on the assumption that it takes several "why" questions to determine the cause of a defect or problem. The goal is to keep digging deeper until the process step responsible for the error has been clearly identified.

Ask "how" and "if" questions

> **Lead by example and leave your comfort zone:** Admitting that they don't know the answer to a question doesn't just make executives seem human, it encourages the people around them to look for answers as well. Possible questions to ask the team include: "How could we ...?", "How would that change if ...?" or "What's your experience with ….?" Questions such as these are an invitation to the group to participate, create space for surprising ideas and discover the unexpected, as Ideo boss Brown explains. Being able to explore with curiosity means you have to be willing to venture out of your comfort zone as well. "When one of our teams was working to redesign the voting system in Los Angeles County, they took salsa lessons in Spanish to help them understand what it feels like to operate in a language you don't speak."

Leaving its comfort zone would have helped Ikea too – without antagonising its fan community. The right questions would have been: "Why are Ikea hackers so popular?", "How do our customers use our products?", and "What could we do to strengthen the bond between us and this community?" But at least Ikea started asking itself those questions eventually – and they have played a key role in the furniture company's evolution.