

On curiosity

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On curiosity...

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A CURIOUS NATURE CAN LEAD ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE, DRIVE SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES AND INNOVATE A PROFESSION.

At the mid-year Australian College of Pharmacy (ACP) conference in Brisbane, co-chair of the Victorian Chapter of the ACP Andrew Rewell made the following remark in a conference address: 'The pharmacists who are the most successful in the future will be the ones who dream up something that a customer wants that no one's ever thought about yet.'¹

Statements similar to this have probably been declared at virtually every pharmacy conference over the past 30 years. What sustains the repetition is its underlying and obvious truth. But while truths are nice and hard to argue with, they can often be rather unhelpful. It's like saying to the obese patient: 'You are too heavy and you need to lose weight'.

Truthful statements often fail to progress 'understanding' which is the vital precursor for transformative action. So how do we get past an obvious truth to something that creates meaning, and where understanding is advanced?

If we break down Mr Rewell's truth, it is easy to focus on the bit: '... something that a customer wants that no one's ever thought about yet.' But my instincts, informed by my research, tell me that the more important bit has something to do with: '... the ones who dream up something...'

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

For years I have been intrigued by how some people (usually managers),

albeit a minority, are able to meet a changing business environment with actions and strategic changes that continually put them in the 'next right spot'. Casual observation makes it look like they just seem to 'know what to do'. But closer examination reveals that their 'knowing' is not a static thing—it is in constant change, through a continuous learning approach to running their business.

But while the 'learning' concept is easy enough to grasp, it is the 'continuous' nature of their learning that appears to be the vital mechanism. Learning continuously seems to be a

driver for some managers' ability to continuously 'dream up something'. So how is it that some managers are natural continuous learners?

THE CURIOSITY 'HUNGER'

Curiosity, or having a naturally curious nature, is suggested in the literature as an important state of being for starting the learning and knowledge-gaining process. The researcher Akin, in researching varieties of managerial learning in top-managers, noted that the learning processes commenced invariably with one or both of two conditions, '... which seemed to dispose the managers to treat situations in terms of learning something...'

The first of these conditions is termed 'the need to know' which Akin reports '... as rather like a thirst or a hunger, gnawing at them (the managers), sometimes dominating their attention until satisfied'.²

The management literature has much to say about 'curiosity' and its importance in individual and organisational learning. It appears that curiosity is either a permanent motivational state or a personality trait, but either way, curiosity motivates exploratory behaviour. Curiosity, it seems, doesn't necessarily need a 'stimulus' or 'crisis' to start it off.

Curious individuals are usually curious all the time—about almost anything! This places them in a state of continuous knowledge-

organisations both 'harvest' curiosity by actively recruiting for it in the individuals they employ, and nurture it by developing an organisational attitude and culture that is conducive to (lots of) alternate ideas and fresh ways of looking at things.

AN ASSET DURING CHANGE

Pharmacy owners and managers would do well to reflect more about curiosity and the people who possess it. This behaviour may have high value in times where the status-quo is changing. Seeking out curious individuals in the recruitment process may be a good place to start, but only if the pharmacy organisation's culture can be geared toward valuing new ideas (beyond just rhetoric). Curious individuals need to be in a culture where curiosity is viewed as an appreciating asset, and not as a threatening cause of procedural breaches.

Pharmacy peak bodies could do more to 'nurture the naturally curious' who are already in the profession, by offering more activities such as national and international study tours (not holidays) and opportunities for creative networking. While it is probable that you can't make the non-curious, curious, it is definitely possible to help the already-curious find new menus of inquiry.

Everybody knows the old misquotation 'Curiosity killed the cat', but a better version contains the rejoinder: 'If curiosity killed the cat, it was satisfaction that brought it back'. ■

PHARMACY OWNERS AND MANAGERS WOULD DO WELL TO REFLECT MORE ABOUT CURIOSITY AND THE PEOPLE WHO POSSESS IT

gathering—some of which might solve an immediate and sticky problem, but much of which may not have any apparent use... yet! But at some time in the future, a great benefit may well arise from the continuous habit of curiosity, because of the great store of understanding and knowledge this behaviour accumulates. Perhaps 'knowing what to do' or 'dream(ing) up something' is not so mysterious after all in these individuals.

The literature on curiosity points out that the creative potential which curious individuals can bring to an organisation is not overlooked by progressive businesses and corporations. Progressive

1. Reported in Pharmacy News, September 2012, p53.

2. Akin, G. Varieties of managerial learning. *Organizational Dynamics* 1987; 16 (1): 36-48