

STAY THIRSTY, MY FRIENDS: DRIVING CURIOSITY IN THE DISTRIBUTION ORGANIZATION

BY JASON BADER, PRINCIPAL - THE DISTRIBUTION TEAM



I was recently speaking with one of my coaching clients and the subject of professional curiosity came up. As has happened over the span of my career, my conversations with clients and groups tend to run in themes. In the past, the topics might have been more tactical, like pricing optimization or sales compensation. Other times, the theme tends to lean toward the cerebral, such as mental health or inclusion. Today, the theme of curiosity has dominated these conversations. Rather than bore you with my current fascination with AI, I thought I would relay some thoughts on how to spark curiosity not only in the executive leadership, but in those that do the real heavy lifting.

Curiosity is the desire to explore, learn, and understand the world around us. It is a catalyst for creativity, problem solving, and continuous improvement. By creating a culture of curiosity, we can tap into the collective creativity of the people that work with us and for us. It stimulates critical thinking, encourages us to be open to possibilities, and leads us to explore a deeper understanding of customers, markets, developments in our chosen vertical. Innovation is a natural byproduct of curiosity.

Barriers to Curiosity

Fear of failure is one of the largest deterrents to developing curiosity in team members. If team members have been conditioned to believe that there will be negative consequences from trying something different, they will be less likely to seek alternatives. Business owners, especially second-generation owners, may have developed a risk adverse mentality born by the fear of sinking the family business.

Sometimes the rapid nature of our business can be a deterrent to creativity and innovation. Meeting customer deadlines and hitting performance goals may encourage associates to stick to what they know, rather than looking for new ways to solve problems. When teams fall into a routine, based on hitting certain goals and objectives, complacency tends to creep in. Business owners can also fall into this trap. The leader can also lose this creative spark, focusing on operational efficiencies rather than seeking new opportunities.

Inspiring Curiosity in the Associates

Business owners must lead by example. If the leader is constantly tinkering with the process, others will recognize this as a core value of the organization. Yes, several owners should add the title “Company Meddler” to their business card; but is that such a bad thing? Change can be exhausting, but it is infectious.

Inspiration doesn't always come from within. Those leaders that encourage the associates to explore educational opportunities, such as workshops and conferences, are often rewarded with new ways of tackling age-old distribution challenges. Peer collaboration is one of the best ways to get unstuck.

Create a safe environment for challenging the status quo. Encourage associates to break down processes and question why we are doing things a certain way. Sometimes these new ideas aren't going to work. Heck, many of these ideas will fail; but we should foster a culture that encourages learning from these missteps. As I look

back on my life, the biggest growth opportunities came from getting my teeth kicked in a few times.

Rekindling Curiosity in the Business Owner

Business owners need to reflect on the journey. We all get bogged down in the present challenges and the machine that we have created. For those of you who have listened to my podcast (shameless plug), I always start the interview off by asking the guest to share their professional journey with the audience. How did you get here? This often leads to a reflection of the struggles and subsequent breakthroughs that brought them the success they now enjoy. This isn't just a time filler. I find that reflection on that journey will help the guest remember what was really important to them when they started their business or took over the reigns from another. This is where passion resides, and I can often hear it in their voices. This reflection can be the spark that ignites their desire to be creative and innovative.

While personal reflection may be the spark, engagement with their industry is the fuel. Again, sometimes business owners get mired down in the day-to-day operations, or short-term goals. When they are hyper focused on their entity, they can become oblivious to the world around them. This is where I would encourage business owners to stay up to date with current industry trends, new concepts, and emerging technologies. Take time to read trade publications (not so subtle nod to those that publish my opinions) because this is where you find the gold. The folks that produce the publication that you

are reading right now spend countless hours curating industry information with the hope that their work will make your organization just a little bit better.

Seek fresh perspectives. Beyond the plethora of online and print-based information, business owners need to get out of the office and mingle with their peers. Many years ago, when I was a distributor, I used to love one particular segment of my industry trade show – the rap session. Essentially, this was where distributors, manufacturers, and their representative agencies would sit at round tables to discuss some predetermined questions. I didn't care if I was sitting with a competitor or a manufacturer we didn't carry, I always walked away from that table with some nugget of wisdom. I was always baffled, and a bit disappointed, that these sessions were not better attended. One friend of mine used to say that the ninety minutes he spent in the rap session would pay for the cost of attending the show 10 times over.

It is really easy to fall into predictive patterns of thought and action. This is not uncommon for both business owners and business associates. The trick is to recognize when we are falling into a mode of professional complacency and find ways to steer out of the rut. Give yourself the space to be spontaneous and curious. When you find that spark, share it. Innovation and passion will be soon to follow. Stay curious, my friends, and know that I am always here to help.

Distribution Team. He is a holistic distribution advisor who is passionate about helping business owners solve challenges, generate wealth and achieve personal goals. He can be found speaking at several industry events throughout the year, providing executive coaching services to private clients and letting his thoughts be known in an industry publication or two. Last year, he launched his first podcast, Distribution Talk. Episodes can be found at www.distributiontalk.com and most podcast applications. He can be reached at (503) 282-2333 or via email at jason@distributionteam.com. You can find additional resources on his website: www.thedistributionteam.com

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