



Curiouser and Curiouser

I went to a party the other night. It was full of successful people in various lines of business. Many were a great deal younger than myself and had great career successes to look forward to. So they were a bright, privileged group, celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of a business they all admired.

And, because it was a big party, instead of hanging out with the friends I went with, I got to meet lots of new people. I like doing this – I like finding out what others are thinking, worrying about, hoping for. It's one of the ways I find out what's going on.

So what was so interesting about this particular party? The partygoers' striking absence of curiosity. I spent a lot of time asking them questions – about their work, their successes and frustration, changes in their industry, their career paths. I found out a lot. But they found out nothing – because they never asked a single question. Now don't get me wrong – I'm not sulking because my interest in them wasn't matched by their interest in me. I was just struck by how enthusiastically these bright young things talked about themselves – and how little enthusiasm they displayed for anything outside their immediate experience. Truly successful people are always curious – and business people absolutely have to be.

One Chief Executive I know takes seriously his obligation to mentor and groom rising talents. One particularly effective way he has of doing this is to introduce them to leading lights in their discipline. He conscientiously identifies leaders in their field who could challenge, stretch and inform his rising stars – and makes introductions for them. Most of them, he says, eagerly follow up the introduction and can be seen, visibly, to grow. But a few, while mouthing thanks, stick to operational duties. They somehow can never quite find or make the time to move beyond their immediate circle. And the Chief Executive, while not exactly seeing this as a test, nevertheless draws a conclusion: those who take advantage of the introduction may be future leaders; those who don't are not. Their world view is too small. He sees curiosity as a litmus test for ambition and achievement.

Why does he take curiosity so seriously? Because it indicates at least two things: ambition and a productive level of insecurity. Ambition because those who want more will almost always strive to know more. This tends to make them more interesting people, of course. But it also ensures that they keep gathering information all the time. For entrepreneurs, this is an essential characteristic. There's never enough time or money for market research that is deep, thorough, illuminating enough. Your market intelligence depends crucially on every single person in your company absorbing market data every day – in every visit to the newsagent, the pub, the train station and the supermarket. Curiosity is one simple way to stay smart.

Curiosity also suggests that you aren't complacent about what you know. While paranoia's unproductive, a certain level of insecurity is not. You *should* be worried

about not knowing enough – about missing out on important trends, market changes, new technologies, new consumer patterns or problems in search of solutions. You *should* be worried that some one has solved a problem better, faster, cheaper than you have. And you *should* want to know more about all of these things, all the time. Otherwise you run the risk not only of appearing unbearably smug; you run the risk of falling behind.

My favourite business book of 2004 wasn't a business book at all. It was a book called *The Collective Wisdom of Crowds*, by James Surowiecki. In it, Surowiecki argues persuasively that groups of people make smarter decisions than expert individuals – but only insofar as those groups are, and are allowed to be, genuinely diverse. The collective wisdom of crowds delivers its value because each member of the crowd brings different insight, information and experience to the decision-making. With a wider range of inputs, you can identify a wider range of solutions and consequences. In other words, the reason we all network like mad these days is not (or should not be) to lay the path for the next job or sale – but to collect the information and insight we need to make smarter decisions. Or, as my husband once laughingly remarked, “of course Margaret doesn't know everything – she just knows everyone who knows everything.”

Knowing lots of people who know lots of things is a fantastic advantage in business. But it only works when you ask questions, when you are actively curious, when you take dynamic advantage of access to all those smart people. Just being in the same room with them, even exchanging business cards with them, doesn't do the trick. Groups of people can certainly make you smarter – but only when you take the initiative to ask questions. Don't be shy about this. For one thing, as my partygoing colleagues clearly demonstrated, people absolutely love talking about themselves. And when they do, you're the one that gets smarter.