Why curiosity may be one of leadership's most overlooked capabilities

By Dr Sandy Geyer
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One of the questions I find myself returning to again and again is this:

How often do we respond to people as they are, rather than to the stories we have quietly created about them?

Most of us like to believe we judge situations objectively. Yet our minds are constantly filling in missing information. We attach meaning to conversations and reach conclusions before we have enough evidence to do so.

Those interpretations often become the foundation for our decisions, our relationships and our leadership.

I was reminded of this recently during what seemed like an ordinary business interaction.

Our businesses are currently reviewing a number of professional partnerships as we prepare for the next stage of growth. One response to an enquiry came from someone at the beginning of their professional career rather than from a senior leader at the firm.

Almost instinctively, I found myself attaching meaning to that decision. I wondered whether our enquiry had been delegated because it wasn't considered particularly important. I questioned whether we would receive the level of engagement we were hoping for.

I realised I had created a story from very little information. Then I asked myself a different question.

What if none of those assumptions were true?

That single question created enough space for curiosity to replace judgement. Instead of allowing my assumptions to shape my decision, I replied to the email, and we began exploring whether the firm might be the right fit for our business.

As our conversations unfolded, I discovered someone who listened carefully, asked thoughtful questions, followed through consistently and demonstrated genuine curiosity about our business. What began as an ordinary professional engagement became an unexpected reminder that leadership qualities are often visible long before leadership titles appear.

It also reminded me that curiosity is far more than an attractive personality trait. I have come to see it as one of the disciplines of leadership.

Curiosity encourages us to suspend judgement long enough to understand another person's perspective. It creates space for learning rather than certainty and, perhaps most importantly, helps us become aware of our own thinking.

That awareness sits at the heart of everything I have come to understand about leadership development.

Throughout my work with teachers, students, entrepreneurs and organisational leaders, one pattern has remained remarkably consistent. Leadership rarely begins with learning how to influence others. It begins with learning to understand ourselves.

Before we can manage conflict well, we need to recognise how we interpret conflict. Before we can communicate effectively, we need to become aware of the assumptions we bring into conversations. Before we can lead others well, we need to recognise that people may genuinely experience the same situation differently from us.

This is why I believe leadership development begins much earlier than many people imagine.

Every classroom provides opportunities for young people to question assumptions, consider different perspectives, work with people whose thinking differs from their own and reflect on the decisions they make. These everyday learning experiences are quietly developing habits that will one day shape the way they lead families, organisations and communities.

The same is true for teachers. Every interaction with a learner offers an opportunity to model curiosity before judgement and reflection before reaction. Leadership is often formed through the accumulation of these everyday moments.

Looking back, I am grateful that I noticed my assumptions before they became conclusions.

The lesson had very little to do with business. It reminded me that leadership is shaped as much by the conversations we have with ourselves as the conversations we have with others.

Perhaps that is one of the most valuable habits we can continue developing throughout our lives: remaining curious enough to question our own stories before we allow them to shape someone else's.

About Dr Sandy Geyer

Dr Sandy Geyer is a South African-born educator, leadership researcher, entrepreneur and author. She holds a Doctorate of Professional Practice focused on the preparation of future leaders and leadership self-identity formation, is co-founder of educational publishing companies Allcopy Publishers and Mind Action Series, and founder of EnQPractice.