

How We Lead

A monthly e-column for change agents in business, politics, & society

July 2004

By Amiel Handelsman

Dear friends and colleagues,

The last issue of *How We Lead*, which described the power of indignation, was long and fiery. This one, which explores the added power of curiosity, is short and closer to room temperature. I personally have not cooled significantly in the past four weeks, so it must be the mighty San Francisco fog that fills the air outside and makes July feel like November.

Or maybe knowing that you see things differently from me creates a reminder that the indignation I feel is but one of many truths. The world is much larger and more magnificent than words on any page, the fingers that type them, and the eyes that read them. But please don't let this stop you from reading on!

Warmly,
Amiel

When Indignation Meets Curiosity

In the spring of 2000 when I named my website curiousleader.com, many people commented that they had never heard curiosity and leadership uttered in the same breath. It was an unusual combination. Powerful, perhaps, but strange.

Four years later, the connection between these two concepts is less opaque, particularly in the political sphere. Dozens of newspaper and magazine articles have referred to President Bush as "incurious" and his approach to making decisions as one "lacking curiosity." This is not meant as a personal slander, but instead an assessment of the relative balance in his decision making between certainty and curiosity, one that his supporters share. Have you ever heard a Republican defend Bush as "a man of great curiosity?" Ann Coulter does in her book *Slander*, but the evidence she provides is that he is

strong and decisive. That may be true, but it strikes me as one of the oddest proofs of curiosity I've ever heard.

These articles about Bush's incurious nature contrast it with the boundless curiosity of his predecessor, Bill Clinton. Of course, Clinton's style had its own well-documented pitfalls, particularly during his first term, like endless meetings, protracted decision making, and late night bull sessions that wore out his staff.

The upshot of this contrast between Bush and Clinton is that the relationship between curiosity and leadership has eased its way into public consciousness.

The meaning of "curious"

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines curiosity as "desire to know" and "interest leading to inquiry." The first definition implies that we don't already know everything, and the second that we can do something about it: ask questions.

The reason I invented the term "curious leader" is because the leaders who had most impressed me shared two important attributes (among others):

1. They realized that they didn't know everything
2. They responded to this by asking really good questions

There was the community foundation president who wanted to support urban entrepreneurship and acknowledged there was much about this she didn't know. She commissioned a study that I led and asked incisive questions each step of the way. What she brought was great curiosity.

There was also the candidate for governor committed to running a campaign characterized by both shrewdness and integrity. He brought together the finest political minds in the state, people loyal both to winning and to taking the high road. In one meeting I attended, he asked this kitchen cabinet a series of questions that led to a most remarkable and spirited debate. I felt like I was in the middle of *The Making of the President*, Theodore White's famous chronicle of the 1960 presidential campaign. It was electrifying. And all of this was possible because the man leading the way created a space of curiosity.

Curiosity and indignation

In my last column, I made the case that indignation is an essential part of being a human being and central to leadership. It energizes us, warms the blood, and allows us to take a stand for the things that matter most. When we suppress it, we do so at great cost to the causes we champion and to our own vitality. Many readers wrote back saying, "I know exactly what you mean."

I also wrote briefly about the limits of indignation, such as the times when it is not accompanied by humility. This is an important point worth exploring more. In doing so, I want to substitute "curiosity" for "humility." What happens when we taken action while indignant but not curious?

What happens is that we do stupid things that harm others and ourselves.

- Within organizations, we attack people behind their backs because they have fired someone we respect, twisted numbers in misleading ways at budget time, or argued for strategies we consider dangerous.
- In our communities, we make mean personal remarks about people we consider too rich, too poor, the wrong color, or from a neighborhood we have learned to dislike.
- In government and politics, we invade the wrong country because "someone's gotta pay." Or, on the other hand, we demonize the President and insult his humanity in a way that fouls public discourse rather than focus on the stupidity of his policies and the reality that he has done his best in a job he is astonishingly unqualified to perform *[Editor note in August 2006: Soon after publishing this column I realized that I had written the previous sentence with far more indignation than curiosity!]*

The reason these things happen is that the moments when we feel indignation fully are the worst possible moments to take action with the assumption we know everything. Let me be clear. It's OK to act. And it's OK to assume we know everything. But the two together are a lethal combination. Particularly when indignation is present.

Think about it for a moment. You see an injustice. Your blood is boiling. Your body is filled with an energy so fierce it has to have an outlet. You are ready to pounce. Is this the time to take action with

the assumption that you know everything, that your experience and the truth are one in the same – in short, that no one else’s perspective matters? I cast my vote for “no.”

Spaciousness and curiosity

At these moments, I think it’s wise to do four things, and in this order:

1. Fully embrace our indignation to the point where it feels like the only truth there is and – this is the important part - take no action. No decisions, no statements, no emails, no phone calls, and no physical interaction with others. In short, a timeout.
2. Pause, breathe, walk, and sit until we feel a spaciousness arise around our indignation. We can recognize this happening because the indignation remains very real yet is not the only reality. It still lives in the body but does not own the body.
3. Allow our curiosity to take hold by asking, “What other perspectives exist?” and “How do other people feel about this?”
4. Through words and action, take a stand for what we see and, not long after, ask others for their perspective. Advocate...and then inquire. Say what we know...and then reveal what we don’t know.

This isn’t easy to do – indeed, it can take a lifetime to learn - but the rewards are immense. We can remain true to what matters most while also continuing to learn. We can be fierce and open, courageous and humble.

This is the path of the indignant leader learning to be curious and the curious leader learning to be indignant. It is the path our organizations, communities, and politics need now more than ever. Shall we give it a try?

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About the author

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