

The nutrition facts of exponential curiosity

The future will always belong to curious leaders.

In an episode of *Mad Men*, Don Draper, creative director of the advertising firm Sterling Cooper, is pitching a new campaign idea to a marketing chief from Heinz. He shows a large picture of plain fries with no ketchup and explains, "It's clean, it's simple, and it's tantalizingly incomplete. What's missing? One thing: Pass the Heinz." (He then applies a transparent film over the top of the image that says "pass the Heinz.")

The Heinz team wanted to see their product in the ad. To that, Draper said: "The greatest thing you have working for you is not the photo you take or the picture you paint;

it's the imagination of the consumer. They have no budget, they have no time limit, and if you can get into that space, your ad can run all day." While the fictional Heinz executives weren't impressed, the real-life Heinz team ultimately turned Draper's pitch into [actual ads](#).

Draper's response to the Heinz team is perhaps the best explanation of curiosity. It exists in the minds of people, with no time limit and no boundaries. It is always on. The best intangible asset a company could possibly have are curious, imagination-driven leaders.

It's easy to forget that Walt Disney was fired from his job at a newspaper because he [lacked imagination](#). Of course, he then used his imagination to build the "happiest place on earth."

Curiosity is also key to understanding past events and to helping build our future.

UNDERSTANDING EXPONENTIAL CURIOSITY AS A NUTRITION LABEL

There are five elements of exponential curiosity. Thinking about it like a nutrition label, when you add each of the five elements together, you get 150% of your daily curiosity value. Here is the composition.

- So what? (Question everything): 35%

In an [article](#) on this site, the author questions what sound

otherwise silent electric cars should make and presents an opportunity to redefine how cars sound.

Too often, legacy thinking holds companies back from transformation. And legacy thinking isn't just an internal issue—it stems from deeply held industry beliefs or social norms.

- What's that? (Intentional ignorance): 25%

At the opening of the George W. Bush Presidential Library, President Clinton [spoke](#) about a debate he had with President Bush over healthcare, and specifically the German healthcare system. Clinton says Bush won the argument, despite admittedly not knowing anything about the German healthcare system.

Leaders have a wealth of access to information, sources, and experts to inform their opinions. But being disarmingly candid about not knowing everything encourages open inquiry. It also creates an opportunity to involve others in the brainstorming process.

- Who cares? (Try it): 30%

In this fast-paced digital world driven by platforms, most services you use are, at the end of the day, an algorithm. This environment enables leaders and companies to fail really fast. It also helps them think laterally across industry or customer segments. For example, in Southeast Asia, major ridesharing companies branched

out into food delivery, and then into banking and entertainment streaming services, all in pursuit of "[superapp supremacy](#)."

- Who are you? (Irreverence): 40%

Remember the very first time Dr. Watson meets Sherlock Holmes? Holmes greets Watson with irreverence, then begins to micro analyze him. That's what irreverence is about. It's not disrespect—it's a relentless focus on purpose and how everyone fits in.

Organizations struggle with the conflict between good ideas and personality politics. Leaders with exponential curiosity stay focused on the purpose and ignore the politics of personalities.

- Is that you, really? (Humor): 20%

Even polarizing figures like Elon Musk have moments that show off a sense of humor, whether it's his Tesla shorts, the flamethrower, Tesla's quiet electric [leaf blower](#), or the Baby Shark tweet that set off a market surge.

Exponential curiosity could lead to a rabbit hole of self-centered ideas. But a self-deprecating, edgy sense of humor can help you stay balanced in the pursuit of greatness.

IS EXPONENTIAL CURIOSITY TEACHABLE?

I believe that it is, but first you have to weed out unimaginative leaders at the top. They pose the greatest risk to the future of your company. The fact is, companies don't transform because they have a big idea. They transform because the curiosity of their people and their customers gives them a big idea. When your customers are more curious about the future of their world than your leaders, you know you have a problem.

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