

## I'm Curious: Can We Teach Curiosity?

*Chris Guthrie\**

***Editors' Note:** Guthrie's curiosity was aroused by a peculiar lack of convincing theory, well-designed research, or consistent conceptualization of curiosity, even though the negotiation literature is replete with glib references to the need for curiosity on all sides. In this chapter he analyzes techniques which trigger curiosity and recommends curiosity-enhancing teaching strategies.*

### Introduction

Good negotiators must understand their counterparts' perspectives, interests, and arguments to do well at the bargaining table. As Roger Fisher and his colleagues observe in *Getting to Yes*, "[t]he ability to see the situation as the other side sees it...is one of the most important skills a negotiator can possess" (Fisher, Ury and Patton 1991: 23).

To understand one's counterpart, a negotiator needs to be curious about what her counterpart has to say. In other words, a negotiator should cultivate a "stance of curiosity" (Stone, Patton, and Heen 1999: 167) or develop "relentless curiosity about what is really motivating the other side" (Shell 2006: 87). Elaborating on this advice, Robert Mnookin and his collaborators explain:

What *is* the other side's story, anyway? What is he telling his colleagues or friends about you and your situation? We all tell ourselves stories all the time, and the other side will undoubtedly have one about your negotiation. As you pre-

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\* **Chris Guthrie** is professor of law at Vanderbilt University Law School. His e-mail address is [chris.guthrie@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:chris.guthrie@vanderbilt.edu).

pare, if you can't imagine how the situation makes sense from his point of view, that means you still need to acquire more information from him. Consider the best way to elicit this information. What questions can you ask? How can you frame these questions so that you sound genuinely interested and not accusatory?

Don't assume you know the other side's story. If you think you do, you're probably wrong. Even if you turn out to be substantially right, you will still be more effective if you begin with an attitude of curiosity about how the other side sees the world (Mnookin, Peppet, and Tulumello 2000: 58).

The negotiation literature's advice to "be curious" makes sense. A curious negotiator is likely to use the listening, questioning, and restating skills necessary to understand her counterpart (Banks 2007). But can a negotiator who isn't naturally curious about her counterpart become that way?

In a companion article published in the *Negotiation Journal*, I argue, based on a review of the empirical research on curiosity and interest, that negotiators can enhance their curiosity (Guthrie 2009). More specifically, I identify three curiosity-enhancing strategies that negotiators can employ at the bargaining table (Guthrie 2009; Sansone, Weir, Harpster, and Morgan 1992; Green-Demers, Pelletier, Stewart, and Gushue 1998; Werner and Makela 1998; Kashdan and Fincham 2004).

In this chapter, I turn my attention from negotiators themselves to those who teach them, and argue that negotiation teachers can help their students learn how to employ these curiosity-enhancing strategies in negotiation. To develop this argument, this chapter proceeds in three parts. First, the chapter provides a brief primer on curiosity. Second, the chapter identifies three curiosity-enhancing strategies that negotiators can use to heighten their curiosity about their counterparts. Third, the chapter identifies three ways that negotiation teachers can teach their students to implement these curiosity-enhancing strategies.

### **A Very Brief Primer on Curiosity**

From Plato to Aquinas to Dewey to Einstein, scholars from any number of disciplines have identified curiosity as a subject of interest. The scientific study of the subject owes its start to Daniel Berlyne, who, in the 1950s, began his path-breaking research on the topic (Berlyne 1954a, 1954b; Silvia 2006). Since then, research on curiosity has proceeded in fits and starts (Loewenstein 1994). Today,

curiosity remains under-theorized, “understudied,” and subject to “conflicting conceptualizations” (Schraw and Lehman 2001; Kashdan and Fincham 2004: 482; Reio et al. 2006: 121).

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, there is no agreed-upon definition of the concept. Some scholars define it as “the volitional recognition, pursuit, and self-regulation of novel and challenging opportunities” (Kashdan and Fincham 2004: 483); others define it as “a desire to know, to see, or to experience that motivates exploratory behaviour” (Litman 2005: 793); and still others define it more simply as “an appetite for knowledge” akin to “the appetites of hunger and thirst as well as the appetite for sex” (Schmitt and Lahroodi 2008: 127). Given that scholars disagree about the definition of curiosity, it is unsurprising that they also disagree about how to measure it; indeed, researchers have developed at least a half dozen different scales that purport to assess curiosity. (Naylor 1981; Kashdan, Rose, and Fincham 2004; Reio et al. 2006). Nor is it surprising that scholars disagree about the relationship between curiosity and similar concepts like interest, attention, and intrinsic motivation. Some researchers contend that there are meaningful distinctions among these terms; others use some or all them interchangeably to refer to the same phenomenon (Silvia 2006). As Thomas Reio and his colleagues observe, “psychological and educational researchers have developed numerous definitions and descriptions, together with a wide range of terms to describe curiosity” (Reio et al. 2006: 121-22). Unfortunately, this has led to “redundant and isolated research” which has “imped[ed] scientific progress” (Kashdan and Fincham 2004: 482). In short, the research literature on curiosity is a bit messy.

Despite this messiness, most scholars would probably agree that curiosity can be loosely defined as a desire to know or to explore and that there are, more-or-less, two types, variously referred to as “dispositional” curiosity and “situational” curiosity. Dispositional curiosity – also called “individual” or “trait” curiosity – refers to a general tendency to experience interest or curiosity (Loewenstein 1994; Kashdan and Fincham 2004). Situational curiosity, on the other hand, refers to a transitory feeling of curiosity that arises in a particular situation (Loewenstein 1994; Kashdan and Fincham 2004). Also called “state” or “task” curiosity, it “is a temporary state evoked by an ongoing internal or external activity, implying a transaction between the person and environment” (Kashdan and Fincham 2004: 483).

For purposes of this chapter, the latter type of curiosity is of greater interest than the former, because of its pliability (Kashdan and Fincham 2004). By understanding how situational curiosity op-

erates, we “ha[ve] the potential to suggest practical methods of stimulating curiosity...” (Loewenstein 1994: 80). Moreover, “if trait differences reflect the cumulative effect of situational factors, effective situational interventions to stimulate state curiosity might ultimately serve to enhance trait curiosity” (Loewenstein 1994: 80). Indeed, psychologists have proposed a “four-phase model” of interest development according to which situational curiosity can ultimately lead to a more general dispositional curiosity (Hidi and Renninger 2006: 111).

### Enhancing Curiosity

Researchers have identified several factors that appear to trigger curiosity naturally. People appear to become more curious when they are in a good mood (Murray et al. 1990; Hirt et al. 1996), when working with others (Isaac, Sansone, and Smith 1999; Sansone and Thoman 2005), and when participating in novel or complex activities that they nonetheless find comprehensible (Silvia 2005; Silvia 2006; Silvia 2008).

More significantly, researchers have also found that people can consciously adopt and implement curiosity- or interest-enhancing strategies to heighten their situational curiosity. The three most promising strategies, each of which I describe briefly below and at greater length in my companion article, are the challenge strategy, purpose strategy, and variety strategy.<sup>1</sup>

First, negotiators who find themselves insufficiently curious at the bargaining table should set listening goals, because researchers have found that people are more likely to be curious if they are trying to meet a challenge or goal (the challenge strategy). In one study, Carol Sansone and her collaborators asked subjects to perform one of three tasks: solving a hidden-word puzzle, performing a copying task, or completing a lettering task. The researchers asked the subjects to indicate what they would do to make these tasks more interesting, and then coded their responses. They found that the second most common response among the subjects in their study was to take steps to make the task more challenging (Sansone et al. 1992). Similarly, in a follow-up study of interest-enhancing strategies used by ice skaters, Isabelle Green-Demers and her collaborators found that subjects who employed the challenge strategy (e.g., “I set goals for improvement during each training session”) experienced higher levels of interest in skating tasks (Green-Demers et al. 1998: 256, 258).

Second, negotiators who find themselves uninterested in their counterparts should remind themselves of the reasons for trying to listen, because researchers have found that people are more likely to

remain interested in a task when they focus on the purposes served by performing it (the purpose strategy). In their study of ice skaters, for example, Green-Demers and colleagues found that subjects who employed the purpose strategy (e.g., "As long as I have a good reason for performing the task, it doesn't matter if it's not that interesting") experienced higher levels of interest in skating tasks (Green-Demers et al. 1998: 256, 258).

Third, negotiators who find themselves insufficiently curious about their counterparts' interests and motivations should vary the way they go about eliciting information, because researchers have found that people are more likely to remain interested and engaged in a task if they vary the way they perform it (the variety strategy). For example, Sansone and her collaborators found that subjects participating in their study mentioned varying the task more often than any other strategy (Sansone et al. 1992). Likewise, Green-Demers and her collaborators found that subjects who varied their skating tasks (e.g., "I try to vary the way I approach the task") experienced higher levels of engagement in training (Green-Demers et al. 1998: 256, 258).

### Teaching Curiosity-Enhancing Strategies

Negotiation teachers recognize that each negotiator should try to understand her counterpart. Negotiation teachers also recognize that this can be difficult, particularly where one party isn't particularly interested in learning about the other. To help their students overcome this difficulty, negotiation teachers should train their students to implement the curiosity-enhancing strategies identified above.

To encourage their students to implement the challenge strategy, negotiation teachers should instruct them to identify concrete listening or understanding goals prior to participating in negotiation simulations or listening exercises. For example, a student might aspire to understand the other side's perspective fully before she shares her own. Or, a student might aspire to identify every interest motivating the other side. Following completion of a simulation, negotiation teachers should debrief by asking not only about substantive outcomes but also about listening and information-gathering; they should focus, in particular, on the listening goals students set and their efforts to meet those goals.

Also prior to a negotiation simulation or exercise, negotiation teachers should encourage their students to implement the purpose strategy. To do so, negotiation teachers should instruct students to identify, ideally in writing, the purposes they think listening carefully will serve. A student might note, for example, that she is more likely to reach agreement if she understands what the other side

wants. Or, a student might note that she is likely to get a better deal if she listens carefully to her counterpart and makes her feel understood. Or, a student might note that by listening carefully, she can elicit information that might facilitate the creation of joint gains, benefiting both negotiators (Galinsky et al. 2008). By focusing students' attention on the purposes served by listening, negotiation teachers can help students enhance their curiosity and engagement at the bargaining table.

Finally, negotiation teachers should acknowledge that even if negotiators set listening goals, and even if they remind themselves of the purposes that listening to the other side will serve, they might still find their curiosity waning at the bargaining table. Thus, negotiation teachers should advise their students to vary the way they elicit information from the other side. For example, a student might break the negotiation into sessions, eliciting some information at one session and additional information later. Or, a negotiator might alter the way she listens and demonstrates understanding at the bargaining table, perhaps varying her information-gathering approaches and note-taking practices.

## Conclusion

Try as they might, it's inevitable that all students, from time to time, will find that they are uninterested in their counterparts in negotiation. To help heighten their curiosity at the bargaining table, negotiation teachers should encourage their students to set concrete listening and information-gathering goals (challenge strategy); remind themselves of the important reasons why they should listen carefully (purpose strategy); and encourage them, where necessary, to introduce some variety into their listening and information-gathering practices (variety strategy).

The research on curiosity is limited and somewhat messy, so I do not want to claim too much for it. Still, it suggests that negotiators uninterested in their counterparts are likely to become more curious about them if they implement these strategies. And by encouraging them to implement these strategies, perhaps we, as negotiation teachers, will also enhance our own curiosity. In so doing, we might become better negotiators (and better teachers), and we might enjoy the many other benefits associated with heightened curiosity, including intimacy and relationship-building (Kashdan and Roberts 2004; Kashdan and Roberts 2006); a sense of well-being and meaning (Kashdan and Steger 2007; Gallagher and Lopez 2007); positive health outcomes (Richman et al. 2005); and even greater life expectancy (Swan and Carmelli 1996).

## Note

<sup>1</sup> A related trio of recommendations comes from Elizabeth Svoboda. To “flex your curiosity muscle,” she asserts: 1) “Reframe ‘boring’ situations”; 2) “Don’t let fear stop you from trying something new”; and 3) “Let your true passions shine” (Svoboda 2006).

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