

FROM CURIOUS TO COMPETENT

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For 30 years our executive search firm has been in the business of assessing leaders along two broad dimensions: potential and competence. One key conclusion? You can't have either without curiosity.

Although we have found that high potentials also need insight, engagement, and determination, curiosity—defined as a penchant for seeking new experiences, knowledge, and feedback and an openness to change—is perhaps most important. In fact, in analyzing exactly how leaders develop, we've found that curiosity—which we assess on a four-point scale, from emerging to extraordinary, using interviews and reference checks—is the best predictor of strength in *all seven* of the leadership competencies we measure (results orientation, strategic orientation, collaboration and influence, team leadership, developing organizational capabilities, change leadership, and market understanding).

We've also found that executives with extraordinary curiosity are usually able, with the right development, to advance to C-level roles. However, that development is critical.

Although a strong positive correlation exists between curiosity and competence, there is a significant spread—and a highly curious executive may score much lower on competence than less curious counterparts.

How can organizations help people make the leap from curious to competent? Studying our global database of information on executives' backgrounds, experiences, potential, and competence, we came up with an answer: by providing the right types of stretch assignments and job rotations.

Consider the cases of 20 actual general managers. All were rated as extraordinarily curious, yet only half reached the top level of competence; the other half were at the bottom. What separated the two groups was the complexity and breadth of the opportunities they'd been given, as shown in the first graph below. The top 10 executives had worked for more companies, been exposed to more diverse customers, worked abroad or with colleagues from other cultures, dealt with more business scenarios (start-ups, rapid growth, M&A, integration, downsizing, turnarounds), and managed more people. When curious people are given these experiences, they shine. When they aren't,

they either stagnate or jump ship. While most of the low-competence managers had worked for just one company, the outstanding ones had worked for more than three.

Note, too, that although our potential and competence models hold true around the world, not all cultures achieve the same competence return on curiosity, as depicted in the second graph below. For example, although the Japanese have lots of curiosity, their competence scores are barely average. The British, by contrast, are less curious but more competent. Why these differences? We believe that Japan's cultural norms limit people's development by rewarding tenure above all and by discouraging big job moves. Meanwhile, British firms embrace company and role changes along with coaching. This is yet more evidence that although curiosity is a necessary ingredient for executive success, in itself it's not enough. ☹

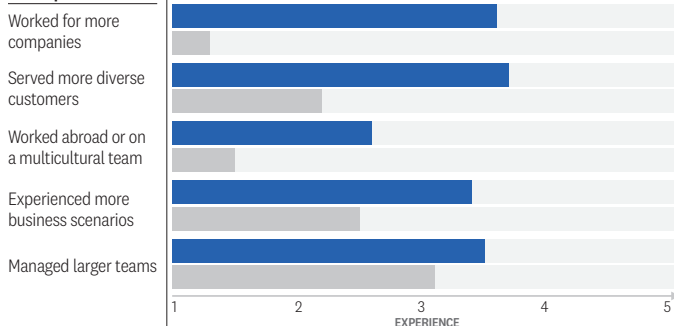
HBR Reprint R1805B

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Experiences That Transform Curiosity into Competence

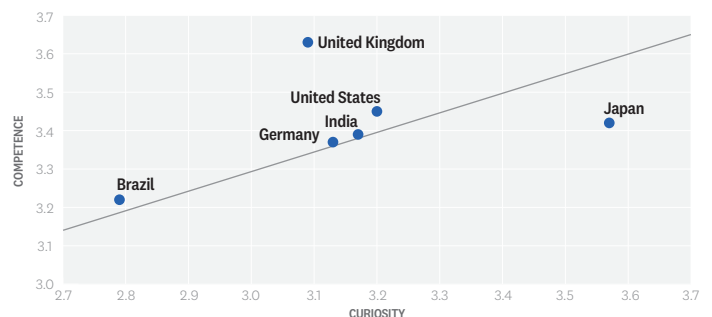
Consider 20 leaders, all rated as extraordinarily curious. Ten leveraged that into high competence scores (represented by blue bars); 10 did not (gray bars). What made the difference? The extent to which they were given the opportunities below.

The top 10 had:



The Curiosity-Competence Link Across Six National Cultures

In many countries, executives' average scores on curiosity (measured on a scale of one to four) and competence (one to seven) come in at similar levels. But Japan and the UK are outliers. In the former, high curiosity does not yield high competence. In the latter, low curiosity does not stop leaders from being highly competent. Cultural norms that prevent (Japan) or encourage (the UK) big job moves may be one reason.



Note: Egon Zehnder selected these countries because they were the only ones in its database with a statistically significant sample set.