



Timely Information for Personal Success

The One Habit All CEOs Share

By Adam Bryant

Over the past decade, I interviewed 525 chief executives and other leaders for *The New York Times*' "Corner Office" column. The simple idea for the feature was to set aside the usual questions about the CEOs' companies and ask them instead about the most important leadership lessons they had learned, how they lead their employees, how they hire, and their best career and life advice for new college grads.

A recent career change – I joined Merryck & Co., a leadership development and executive mentoring firm – gave me an opportunity to reflect on all I had learned from the executives, and to wrestle with a question that had long intrigued me: What is the single most important quality, beyond obvious ones like hard work and perseverance, that explains why all these people became CEOs?

What is Applied Curiosity?

My best answer for describing this X-factor is "applied curiosity." Why "applied curiosity?" It captures the relentless habit of mind these CEOs have to understand and make sense of the world around them.

It means trying to understand how things work, and then trying to understand how they can be made to work better. It means being curious about people and their backstories. It means using insights to build deceptively simple frameworks

and models in their minds to make sense of their industry – and all the other disruptive forces shaping our world – so they can explain it to others. Then they continue asking questions about those models, and it's those questions that often lead to breakthrough ideas.

A Recurring Theme

This theme has come up often in my interviews over the years.

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Healthy Recipe: Buttermilk Griddle Cakes

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2/3 cup buttermilk
- 1 large egg
- 2 tablespoons melted butter
- 2 tablespoons honey

NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION:

- Number of servings: 5
- Calories per serving: 185
- Sodium: 508 mg.
- Carbohydrates: 28 g.
- Fat: 6 g.
- Saturated fat: 3 g.

DIRECTIONS:

- 1 Mix flour, baking soda, and salt in a bowl.
 - 2 Lightly beat the buttermilk, egg, butter, and honey together.
 - 3 Add the liquid ingredients all at once to the flour mixture. Stir with wooden spoon until moist. Do not overmix. A few lumps are fine.
 - 4 Warm lightly-greased griddle plan over medium heat.
 - 5 Pour batter onto griddle – 1/8 cup for small or ¼ cup for larger pancakes.
- Serve with a low-fat jam.
- Serving size:** 3 small cakes.

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Questions and Answers

‘Modern Elders’ are Important

Q: *It seems that in today’s workplaces, young people get all of the credit, raises, and promotions just because they are more tech-savvy than their older co-workers. Doesn’t experience count for anything anymore?*

A: It’s no secret that employers tend to favor youth over age and experience. The problem, according to an article that appeared recently in *Forbes* magazine, is that Millennials simply do not have the work experiences of their older brethren. And if Millennials are not ready to lead, that is setting them up for failure, according to the article.

The idea of an older mentor passing their experiences and wisdom along to the young is not new, but it needs to be revisited to reflect today’s workplaces, says Chip Conley, a 56-year-old veteran entrepreneur. Conley refers to this individual as a “modern elder,” a slightly different role than the normal mentor because as well as passing along experiences from the old to the young, the “modern elder” also learns from his or her younger counterpart.

“You must be both mentor and intern, teacher and learner, sage and student,” Conley told *Forbes*.

Conley serves in a modern elder role himself at Airbnb, and can point to others who do, too. A workplace in which everyone learns from each other regardless of age is a win-win.

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“You learn from everybody,” said Alan R. Mulally, the former chief executive of Ford Motor Company. “I’ve always just wanted to learn everything, to understand anybody that I was around — why they thought what they did, why they did what they did, what worked for them, what didn’t work.”

Michael Dowling, the chief executive of Northwell Health, said that the qualities he looks for in job candidates include relationship skills and a positive attitude, but also a third quality:

“Instead of their I.Q., I want to know their C.Q. — their curiosity quotient,” he said. “To what extent are you focused on figuring out how to improve whatever it is you’re going to be doing? Nothing is perfect, so you should always be trying to figure out how to make it better.”

Summary

Do you see this quality in leaders you admire? And do you think people are born with this kind of curiosity or is it a habit of mind that can be learned over time?

Adam Bryant is managing director of Merryck & Co., a leadership development and executive mentoring firm. A veteran journalist, he interviewed more than 500 CEOs and other leaders for the Corner Office column in The New York Times. He is the author of two books, including “Quick & Nimble: Lessons from Leading CEOs on How to Create a Culture of Innovation.”