

THE TRAP OF CERTAINTY: WHY CURIOSITY SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD



In both the workplace and interpersonal relationships, a significant source of conflict stems from a mental trap we all fall into: the tendency to prioritize certainty over curiosity. This behaviour is deeply ingrained in our brain's primal programming, which seeks to create a sense of safety by predicting and controlling potential threats. However, when we let this instinct dominate, it can lead to misunderstandings, unnecessary conflicts, and even self-fulfilling prophecies.

Certainty: The Brain's Survival Instinct

Our primal brain craves certainty because it equates predictability with safety. This evolutionary mechanism ensures survival by identifying threats and preparing us for worst-case scenarios. When faced with incomplete information, the brain fills in the gaps with imagined possibilities, often erring on the side of caution. While this instinct might have been vital for our ancestors navigating dangerous environments, it can backfire in modern settings where social and relational nuances are more complex.

The problem arises when we mistake these imagined scenarios for facts. The more we ruminate on these assumptions, the more real they feel. Without realizing it, we begin narrating a story based on these false certainties, leading to reactive behaviours that escalate conflict.

A Workplace Example: When Assumptions Take Over

During a recent workplace situation, this trap played out in a way that underscores its impact. I was interviewing a young professional seeking a career change. She was transitioning from her original field, leaving behind her qualifications and registrations. My maternal instincts kicked in, and I suggested a solution: she could take on minimal hours in her previous profession to keep her credentials current while exploring her new role.

She appreciated the offer and decided to proceed. However, when this decision was communicated to her future team, they interpreted it as a sign that their jobs were at risk. Without seeking clarification, the team began assuming the worst-case scenario—that someone would be replaced. This certainty fuelled feelings of unfairness and resentment, creating a tense atmosphere.

When I finally uncovered the source of their distress, it became clear that their assumptions were based entirely on imagined fears rather than reality. No one had paused to ask questions or clarify the situation. They were trapped in their certainty, which led to reactionary behaviour and a self-created drama.

Why Curiosity Matters

This example illustrates why curiosity is such a powerful antidote to the pitfalls of certainty. When we approach situations with an open, investigative mindset, we create space for understanding and connection. Instead of jumping to conclusions, we can:

- Pause and resist the urge to assign meaning.
- Ask questions to understand the other person's perspective.
- Explore the underlying values and fears driving their behaviour.

Curiosity allows us to uncover the truth rather than reacting to imagined scenarios. By adopting a neutral, "student" mindset, we can approach situations like scientists—gathering facts and peeling back layers to discover the root cause of misunderstandings.

The Power of Inquiry

Experts in communication estimate that nonverbal cues account for 70% of our interactions, with words making up only 30%. This complex mix of signals is being filtered through our beliefs, biases, insecurities, and past experiences, which accounts for 70% of the content used in our messaging and communications. When we assign meaning to others' words or actions, we're often projecting our own fears and assumptions onto them.

By shifting from accusation to inquiry, we can avoid turning situations into unnecessary drama. Instead of scripting a narrative based on assumptions, we can investigate with genuine curiosity. This approach not only softens our responses but also helps us build stronger, more understanding relationships.

Conclusion: Choosing Curiosity Over Certainty

Our brain's need for certainty is natural, but it doesn't always serve us well in today's relationally complex world. By choosing curiosity, we can break free from the traps of assumption and conflict. The next time you find yourself jumping to conclusions, pause and ask: "What don't I know here?" or "How can I better understand the other person's perspective?"

Embracing curiosity over certainty is not just a practice for better communication—it's a path to healthier, more meaningful interactions in all areas of life.

[Listen to Podcast 49 - The Trap of Getting Stuck in Certainty Over Curiosity](#)