

# How to Increase Leadership Intelligence

By Kristiina Hiukka

During more than a decade as a certified professional coach I have seen how some attitudes and behaviors can be either detrimental or beneficial for a leader. I have witnessed how they have been able to increase the level of their performance and get better results by increasing their Leadership Intelligence. Leaders hire coaches and consultants to help them optimize the productivity in their organizations. They want to find efficiencies in the systems and maximize the output of all resources, human included.

Leadership Intelligence is one way to tackle the problem of wasted productivity. This waste is worth about \$300 billion per year in the U.S. according to The American Institute of Stress (Amy Cynkar, Monitor, March 2007). The waste of productivity is due to work related stress and depression that leads to underperformance of people, and therefore less productive organizations. When people are stressed they are susceptible to illness, accidents, disengagement and various forms of dysfunction. Stress claims are the fastest rising category of workers' compensation payouts. The number of people suffering from severe anxiety is rapidly increasing due to stress. About 25 million American adults currently suffer from stress. This bites into the profitability of businesses.

If you are interested in succeeding as a business leader and increasing your profitability, changing the course of direction begins with making educated choices. We need to get smart about this so that our businesses are profitable,

not wasteful. This is the reason why business leaders must consider developing their Leadership Intelligence.

In this article I will first define intelligence, leadership and Leadership Intelligence. I will also introduce the Leadership Intelligence Competencies (LICs), and finally I will discuss one key competency.

## **Intelligence**

Intelligence is fueled by one simple characteristic: curiosity. Once we lose our curiosity about life, our world, other people, human dynamics, we might as well be dead. Life becomes stagnant, uneventful, boring, a drag, and we find ourselves complaining, blaming and playing a victim.

Curiosity, however, propels us to learning, to questioning the status quo, to looking for a better way, searching for new territories, to discover and gain insights. It is a profoundly human characteristic. In the process of being curious we gain knowledge that is greater than just passing a test or learning a formula, we learn to make sense of our surroundings, how the world functions and how we play our role in it, and we learn ways to figure out what to do when we are faced with challenges. Even Albert Einstein – the icon of intelligence – said: *“I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious.”*

Curiosity builds our capacity to take in information from all kinds of sources; it is not just about knowing your numbers but more – it is also sensory. The fact is that if you are truly sensing you are also present because you are “in your senses”: you

hear, smell, see, feel and touch. When you are present, you also increase your ability to reach into deeper levels of “knowing” or your intuition to support your thinking capacity.

Based on this, I define intelligence as *an ability to harness our curiosity in service of making better decisions*. Decisions are made in regards to problems or challenges at hand, or choices we need to make in our lives, decisions about our businesses like hiring and firing... When you think of it, our lives seem to be a series of choices and decisions; so, why not be intelligent about them?

## **Leadership**

Most leaders understand the concepts of leadership – it is the practicing of their understanding of leadership that is a challenge. One reason why it can be challenging to practice “good” leadership is that a Leader can be seen as a Connector between the vision and the practical. Neither one of them is a trivial undertaking. Leaders always face high expectations. The expectation of a Leader to be a Connector is deeply rooted; it is archetypal to leadership. As a Connector, the leader is expected to hold the vision while connecting it to the practical - just like Moses or Martin Luther King.

Connectors build bridges between the dream of the better world and the practical management of things. They are both visionaries and managers. Where leaders settle on this continuum determines how they are viewed as leaders: too much of a visionary is going to be blamed for being a dreamer and those too tightly managerial become the dreaded micromanagers.

After years of observing and dealing with leaders of all sorts and studying the subject, this is how I've defined leadership: *Leadership is an ability to inspire others to move towards a shared vision while providing the conditions that facilitate that movement in the most effective ways.*

Great leaders are

- Effective when they communicate trust and respect while managing relationships in addition to managing tasks or functions.
- Actively developing a set of competencies that increase the chances of success of their group or team or organization to get where they aspire to. This puts the focus soundly back on relationships.
- Working to provide the conditions that facilitate the best performance of the employees or the members of their teams and groups.

The conditions at work need to provide a sense of security. The basic sense of security is achieved through reasonable pay that enables us to buy food and shelter. However, we know that a “good” job is not only about the paycheck. It is also important to us that our work is meaningful. Also, intuitively, we've known that the social aspect of the work place is vital for our sense of well-being at work, and now the science is proving us right in many ways.

For example, neuroscience now claims that the brain is a social organ – it is built to flourish through social connections with others (David Rock, *Your Brain at Work*, 2009). Thus, it can be concluded that a leader needs to understand that it is his or her responsibility to pay just as much attention to how the social or relationship need of employees is being satisfied as other basic survival needs (the need for food and shelter) which we reach with our paychecks.

## Culture

The social or relationship aspect of our workplaces is experienced in the culture of organizations. Culture manifests in the ways how we are with each other and how we treat each other. The ways we behave are guided by our values. We know what the organization values just by checking how the two most important resources, time and money, are being used.

Leaders are responsible for the environment where the work is being performed. Leaders define the cultures of their organizations, and that culture is mostly a reflection of the values of the leader or leaders of the organization. Interestingly, Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos, consciously created a so called “happiness culture” at Zappos after he found himself dreading to go to work in the company he himself founded! He ended up selling that company, LinkExchange, to Microsoft before founding Zappos on a new premise of a better, more fun work culture.

Zappos is a phenomenally successful company, and recently acquired by Amazon. According to Hsieh the contract with Amazon says that Zappos is to maintain its distinct culture, and not to integrate it with that of Amazon's. It was recognized that the value of Zappos lies in its culture: in the people who work there and how they are with each other, how they are hired, fired and valued.

## **Team spirit**

I've asserted above that the conditions that create the culture in which people are expected to perform are critical for productivity. And so is team spirit. I see team spirit as a subset of culture.

According to Steven Reinberg (HealthDay, April 9, 2009) researchers studied 3,347 Finnish workers, ages 30 to 64 about their workplace environment; and specifically about team spirit and the quality of communication and about how they felt about the demands of their jobs. They found that even if the workplace was prejudiced or quarrelsome this didn't correlate with alcohol abuse or anxiety. However, they did correlate with the lack of team spirit.

In fact, those who thought team spirit was poor were about 60 percent more likely to report being depressed and 50 percent more likely to take antidepressants than those who rated it high. When people "check out" and disengage or frequently fall ill, the productivity of the organizations they work in suffers remarkably. Though the study was done in Finland, findings apply to workers around the world. Team climate at work is an important factor for productivity everywhere. Furthermore, because most people spend the majority of their day at work, the contribution of the work environment to their overall well-being is substantial.

Leaders are in being challenged not only by managing their profits by applying more efficient systems and tighter budgeting but also by the requirement to actively deal with these intangibles that make up the culture and the spirit of their organizations.

## Leadership Intelligence

When we combine curiosity as the key element of intelligence with the ability to hold the vision and manage the practical we arrive at the definition of Leadership Intelligence: *Leadership Intelligence is knowledge and awareness put into practice of leadership.*

Leaders with Leadership Intelligence understand and practice their responsibility to

- Meet the expectations of their role as a Connector between the vision and the practical.
- Develop their intelligence for making better decisions in service of all the relationships they are involved in: on their teams, in their organizations, their partnerships, their families and communities.
- Create conditions for their followers and co-leaders to flourish and be the best they can.
- Keep growing and learning personally and professionally through being fascinated in all areas of life.

To be able to handle all this takes a leader who has great self awareness – one who has courage to be authentic, acknowledge what they know and don't know. This kind of leadership is not for the faint of heart.

Great leaders are those who never cease in their efforts to learn about themselves. Ancient people knew this. "*Know Thyself*" was an inscription at the

Temple of Apollo in Delphi. People who wanted to ask the Oracle of Delphi about their future saved themselves a visit inside the temple if they just adhered to the inscription outside. Unless leaders do this kind of self discovery work, their decisions will be marred by unnecessary blind spots that will result in more waste.

I have stressed the fact that leaders need to put their understanding and knowing into practice. Otherwise, they are just philosophers. Being a philosopher is just fine if they have set out to be philosophers. But if they want to succeed as leaders, they are expected to put their thinking into use.

## **Competencies**

So, what are the qualifications of intelligent leaders? How can we assess them whether they are competent in what they do? What are the core competencies that are required of a leader?

I define *competency as the ability to do what you know*. The less competent is the one who is incapable of performing at the level that is expected of him or her. I have identified a set of 14 competencies that increase the chances of success of any leader. You can use these 14 competencies for self reflection to assess how weak or strong you are in practicing them. They are critical, because by increasing your capacity to perform and practice each competency, you will increase your Leadership Intelligence.

These competencies are also available in a self assessment form that is downloadable from my website [www.BigAgendaCoaching.com](http://www.BigAgendaCoaching.com). Self assessments



are great little tools to give us a snapshot of the state of things in time; they stop us in our tracks and make us think.

(You can download the Leadership Intelligence Competency Profile from [www.BigAgendaCoaching.com](http://www.BigAgendaCoaching.com) and use it to show the gap between where you are and where you want to be. With a pen please mark a dot or O on each line next to a competency at the spot where you are on a scale from weak to strong. Once you have finished all 14, begin from the top again and use an X to mark the spot where you would like to be on that continuum. This will give you a concrete tool to compare your current profile to a desired one. The gap you have in your profile gives you an idea where your work is. The questions at the bottom of the page are designed to help you think through to your next step. Finally, it is up to you what you are going to do about them.)

The 14 competencies from a leader's perspective are:

1. To be immensely curious & ask questions
2. To actively solicit feedback
3. To make a point to learn something new every day
4. To be able to be fully present even amidst chaos
5. To hold myself accountable
6. People around me know my values, strengths and weaknesses
7. To put my attention, time and money in what I truly value
8. To explore opportunities when others are stumped by problems
9. To look for the best in people
10. People around me know I care about them

11. It's more important for me to serve than control
12. To create safe environments in which people trust each other
13. To treat people – even my opponents - with respect
14. To be consciously creating a culture of learning, fulfillment and resiliency

Now, the question is, how will you know how well you really practice these? The answer is in the second competency: ask for feedback. You need to ditch your assumptions about how you are doing and begin asking for feedback how you show up in regards to these competencies at your work place or with your colleagues. This is the work of those who are truly committed to developing their Leadership Intelligence. The way to measure the intangibles of Leadership Intelligence is to ask others to assess the results of your actions.

Receiving feedback, however, is not easy because it can be humbling and it can hurt our pride. We tend to avoid it just as we avoid any kind of pain. Asking for feedback can make us feel vulnerable because we dread what we might hear. Sadly, often the higher we climb in the hierarchy of an organization, the less truthful feedback we get. Therefore, it is even more crucial for leaders to cultivate their organizations' cultures by role modeling active solicitation for feedback. It takes some practice to learn to receive feedback skillfully. However, if you adopt the first rule of receiving feedback you will survive any feedback session! It is this: Listen and thank them for what you just heard – don't explain or defend!

## #1 Key Competency

I chose number one competency to be about curiosity and the skill of asking questions because I believe that fascination with life is the most critical competency of all. Our persistent need to be right about things is an obstacle to Leadership Intelligence because it denies us from being curious. However, just like Einstein, we need passion for curiosity. For you as a leader it's more critical than any other talent you might have. Einstein stressed this point by saying: *"The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing."* Adopting a mindset of Curious George can sometimes lead us into trouble because learning can be messy and it comes with a price. Fresh understanding of things can be costly because it pushes us to change. It can cost us not only in our personal lives but also in business. Changes draw from our resources, so resisting change is often based on our attempt to protect our resources. And sometimes is just plain denial.

I believe that the key discipline in developing Intelligence is to hone an inquisitive mind, the mind set of "not knowing", asking questions, being curious – actually, I would like to assert that truly intelligent leaders are fluent in being fascinated. They act fascinated - as if they were aliens from another universe learning about our ways. They are fascinated with the world, human dynamics, how we are with each other, what makes us tick. Humans are interesting and leaders should pay attention, because, at the end, all leadership challenges are people issues.

*Bill is a great leader. People on his team respect him for his quick math smarts and decades long experience. He considers himself the most jovial person in the company – one who is able to make friends out of his employees. He makes sure he remembers the names of their family members and key facts of their lives. He believes he connects with them and nurtures the relationships.*

*But why is it that the whole management team is frustrated with him?*

*He talks too much. He uses the meeting time to give unsolicited advice and makes himself the center of any discussion. When he refers to others, he makes up what's going on with them – he assumes he knows their situation, offers his ideas with a story about himself. There can be nuggets of great information and advice in the stories he tells but because he often cuts them off, they do not feel seen and heard. And since he is the Big Boss CEO, it's hard to tell him to stop. They know he's just trying to be nice and friendly but he is actually driving them nuts.*

What is the problem here?

Bill is holding the team from being the best they can be by not really listening and being open to what they have to say. He thinks he is nurturing relationships but his big ego is holding the relationship from developing authentically. He doesn't ask open ended questions. He finishes people's responses. He is only curious to the extent how their situations affect him. He assumes too much. He isn't really truly curious about others; he just enjoys having a stage for his stories.

## Questions

Curiosity is a mindset – it's an attitude. Asking questions is an activity, a practice. Leadership Intelligence depends on *how* you practice your curiosity. Curiosity is more than asking questions but let's focus on asking questions a little bit more. We can ask questions in many ways. And *how* you ask questions is just as important as *what* questions you ask.

A third degree questioning like an inquisitor is not the style we are talking about here. We are not talking about using questions to manipulate others to agree with our agendas. We are talking about increasing involvement and creativity, being fascinated with other people's experience in ways that encourage engagement.

We benefit from asking questions because they increase rapport and empathy in relationships, they help us uncover what is either "missing" or what we have overlooked or not seen or thought about before, we remove blind spots.

*Dave is "an old school" style boss who wanted to encourage more participation in his management team by organizing regular Round Table meetings on management topics that should be of interest to the team. He took it on himself to diligently prepare for these meetings so that they would produce the most value to everyone, be respectful of everyone's time, and he wanted to make sure they reach some objectives he thought about ahead of time.*

*So, Dave studied books on management, brought them to meetings and prepared a tight agenda and timeline for each meeting. He started the conversations by outlining all this and the highlights he had learned from the books and then gave the floor to the managers to add their perspectives. At the end of each round of comments, he summarized what was said by making statements as if they had come to a common understanding. He felt pretty good about himself but he was confused because the group ran out of energy after a couple of these meetings and less people showed up. And those who did, seemed not willing to take on more responsibility in running the meetings. He was disappointed and felt his effort was undervalued.*

Why was this masterfully crafted opportunity led by a good leader such a flop?  
What was going on?

- Dave was not really curious about others – he just picked pieces from others' opinions to assert his pre-conceived ideas
- They were held hostage to his controlled agenda and preset goals
- He never asked for input in the design of the process
- He made statements, and failed to ask open ended questions
- He didn't make it safe for the team to open up
- The participants didn't feel seen or heard and lost their interest in contributing

It is crucial – but not easy – for a leader to be observant of both his own intentions as well as his impact on others. The Bills and Daves in all sizes of organizations would benefit from working on their Leadership Intelligence. The first step would be to stop themselves from making statements on behalf of others and hone their skill of asking open ended questions. And listen.

A good summary of the most important question words is presented by Rudyard Kipling in the poem The Serving Men:

*I keep six honest serving men,  
They taught me all I know,  
Their names are What and Why and When,  
And How And Where And Who.*

I want to caution you about one of them, namely the tricky *why* and why it should be used cautiously in human relationships. *Why* is a powerful question word and while we use it to understand, more often than not, it is used as a disguise for manipulation. When somebody asks you: “Why did you do this?” it immediately puts you in an uncomfortable situation. You find yourself wanting to defend or explain, and you know you are being judged and the person who is asking knows better. The question *Why?* just killed your creativity and an opportunity to generate innovative solutions. When directed at a person, *Why?* shuts off the brain’s creativity in the fear of being punished or shamed.

As an intelligent leader you will need to find other ways of getting to the results you want if you want to know why they did what they did. You can ask your employee to describe his or her thought process and what was the primary reason for choosing something over something else, what affected their decision making... and so on. Questions are great tools and they can be abused for torture as easily as for loving. A leader with intelligence is aware of his or her intentions behind the questions, because no matter how much you try to disguise them, they will have an effect.

In addition to *how* we ask questions we need to cultivate our skill in knowing *what* questions to ask. Einstein’s ratio of dedicating 55 minutes to figuring out the right question and just 5 minutes to the solution gives us a hint of importance of this. He said: *“If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question; I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.”*

This is a rich area calling for more study. In any case, I have added an appendix of powerful questions that you can take a look at if you are interested in finding more alternative powerful questions for your toolkit.

## Summary

In this article I have covered what I mean by intelligence and leadership, I then joined them together in the concept of Leadership Intelligence and presented 14 core competencies that define Leadership Intelligence. I concluded that the most important competency in developing Leadership Intelligence is to be curious and ask questions. My hope is that with a little more of Leadership Intelligence we will increase the productivity and decrease the detrimental effects of stress in organizations around the world.

*What will you be fascinated about today?*

*Big Agenda Coaching specializes in removing critical blind spots that prevent leaders from operating with their Leadership Intelligence and delivering results.*

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### Questions for focusing collective attention

What is the right question?

What problem are we trying to solve?

What solutions are offered now?

What are the results that are required?

What do we want?

What question, if answered, could make the most difference?

What opportunities can we see in the situation?

What assumptions do we need to test?

What do we know so far?

What do we want more of?

Who needs to be involved?

Who knows?

Who cares?

Who can?

### Questions for connecting ideas and deeper insight

What if .....?

What if we had more/less of .....?

What's emerging?

What's taking shape?

What's missing?

What are we learning?

What do we need more clarity about?

What perspective - outside of our discipline/situation – could give us more insights?

Who would argue against us?

What would be the opposite of this situation?

What holds us back?

What would happen if we did nothing?

What resources we need?

What are the potential consequences?

What are the alternatives?

### **Questions to create forward movement**

What is now possible?

What would it take to change this situation?

What can be done now?

What are we committed to?

How committed are we?

What needs immediate action?

What's the next step?

What is the goal?

How?

How soon? How often? For how long? Since when?

With whom? With what?

If our success was guaranteed, what bold steps might we take?

What are we choosing?

How will we know something has changed/we've reached our goal?

How do we want to celebrate our achievement?