

## **The power of not knowing by Louise Clifton**

**How confident are you to say that you don't have the answer?**

**Not knowing is powerful. It encourages us to question, rather than assume. It enables us to share expertise and promises collective enquiry. This is why it's important, and it's why we need to flip our mindset from seeing 'not knowing' as a deficit, to becoming intentionally more curious.**

*'We're at our best when we know the very least'*

**Liz Wiseman**

Author and CEO, The Wiseman Group

How many times in a typical week do you feel that you know, and are in control of, everything you should to do your job as well as you hope?

So many of us hold ourselves to account for things that we assume we should know, or that we suspect others expect of us, even if there's little logical or qualified reason for this being the case.

I'd be surprised if many of us could honestly answer that we felt we knew everything we thought we should, 100% of the time.

When thinking about this piece, I had to come head to head with my own anxiety about not knowing. For me, this feels like a gnawing feeling that I'm missing a trick when planning and doing both the tactical and strategic parts of my job, and funnily enough when I broached this with a friend, they too admitted that they feel nervous about not knowing the answers **either**. So, here was my first revelation: I'm not alone.

And if I'm not alone, I wondered how many other people in higher education might feel this way too?

This is when I was struck by a peculiar irony: that a core purpose of higher education is to interrogate what we think we know, and pursue what we don't. After all, when we research cures for cancer, we develop ideas, test them, and put them to peers for review; we don't assert that we know the answer and wait for it to be disproven.

Another purpose is to nurture skills in debating, and ways to examine evidence, weigh up arguments and ask questions that challenge the way we think.

All of this suggests that we should value curiosity; that this is an excellent place to start from. And yet, so many of us hold ourselves to account for things that we assume we should know, or that we suspect others expect of us, even if there's little logical or qualified reason for this being the case. This leads us to behave in ways which are inimical to the fundamental purpose of universities, and as a result, we miss huge opportunities.

## **Knowledge is power, isn't that the saying?**

Relying on past knowledge makes our professional curiosity lethargic.

Knowledge is part of our professional ensemble. You can wake up, put on your knowledge-power outfit, and use it to present informed, smart decisions. It gives you a tried and tested route map to follow with a repertoire of actions and experience to lean on, and that's a shrewd way to work, there's no denying it.

But I want to debunk this as the best way to work. I want to start with this question instead:

*'How does what I know get in the way of what I don't know, but maybe need to learn?'*

This was asked by Liz Wiseman, author and CEO of the Wiseman Group, in [a talk](#) she gave to Brigham Young University.

This question suggests that relying on past knowledge makes our professional curiosity lethargic. We assume we don't need to learn anything new, because we already have the answer. And if we extend this mindset to those we lead, we risk dampening curiosity and innovation in others, not to mention tripping over our own hubris on the way.

In the same talk, Liz also points to a startling figure drawn from her research which indicates that only 15% of what we know now will be relevant in 5 years' time. And here's the thing, we don't know which 15% this is. If Liz is right – that knowledge has a lifespan as short as five years – then it's even more imperative that we broaden the way we work to accept that we need to make decisions based on curiosity and a willingness to experiment.

Instead of holding ourselves hostage in a position that assumes we must know the answer, what if we were to flip the idea of not knowing and adopt the intention to become more curious instead?

By doing so, we allow ourselves to move more freely in a space that encourages us, and others around us, to learn, adapt and grow. And not only will this release us from the shackles of having to be faultless, we take these off for future generations of leaders too.

## **Curiosity, collaboration, and becoming a learning organisation**

We need to pursue being curious to help us shift our professional mindset from individual accountability for knowing towards collective enquiry

We need to switch our mentality. We need to pursue being curious to help us shift our professional mindset from individual accountability for knowing towards collective enquiry, and enable our organisations to become more sustainable in the process.

I want to put this case to you for why collective enquiry is better than individual accountability, and what this has to do with being a learning organisation.

A learning organisation values openness, trust and co-creation. It seeks out learning and answers not from one person, but from collective expertise and experience. It uses this knowledge to create solutions that are adaptable and agile, because they don't hinge on one person's perception, life-experience or skill set. There's evidence that this approach, where employees take part in the development of their organisation, increases people's engagement and satisfaction, and adds huge value to the organisation too.

Using this collaborative way of working is dependent on a culture which thrives on fearless questioning and feedback, building resilient trust. It's a culture which accepts the premise of not knowing and leverages this curiosity to see possibilities in the multiple, rather than the one-dimensional.

A recent example of this can be seen in the collective work that created the first images of a black hole at the centre of Messier 87. Produced by eight different telescopes and the work of a global band of scientists and technicians, these images wouldn't have been possible without a shared sense of purpose, and the collective knowledge and pooling of resources to see this purpose through. As Liz Wiseman puts it, working this way means "*we can mobilise the experience of others*" to help us achieve what's not been possible before.

## **How to be curious**

It begins with questions

Going back to where we started, what does being curious actually look like for ourselves?

It begins with questions; our springboard to changing perspective, and an astute way to leverage curiosity in others too.

But questions are only one part of the solution. They need to be used in an environment where we give permission both to ourselves and others to use them to unlock wider, more diverse thinking.

Within this, we also need to acknowledge that the ideas and answers that can flow may not always be what we're looking for, but that their purpose is to stretch our understanding, and help us feel our way to the answer that fits best.

We need to also learn to accept that we grow most at, or towards, the raw edge of our comfort zone too. Whilst our comfort zone is an easy, comfortable place to be, life rarely stays in one place (or a place like this) for long. Learning to adapt and flex by taking the reins of curiosity, and using this to empower you to be nimble, will help you find comfort in not knowing.

It's not easy, admitting that you don't know. But there is a quiet strength in it, and if you can pivot toward this, even by the smallest margin, you can set the tone and culture for those that follow you.

*Be and stay curious. Embrace the possibilities of not knowing.*

## Further resources

[The Power of Not Knowing](#) by Liz Wiseman, a talk given in January 2016 to Brigham Young University

[Changing education paradigms](#) by Sir Ken Robinson, TED talk video on curiosity and divergent thinking

[The genie in the learning organisation? The experience of using multi-level action learning at the Leadership Foundation](#) by Louise Clifton and Paul Gentle, an article on becoming a learning organisation

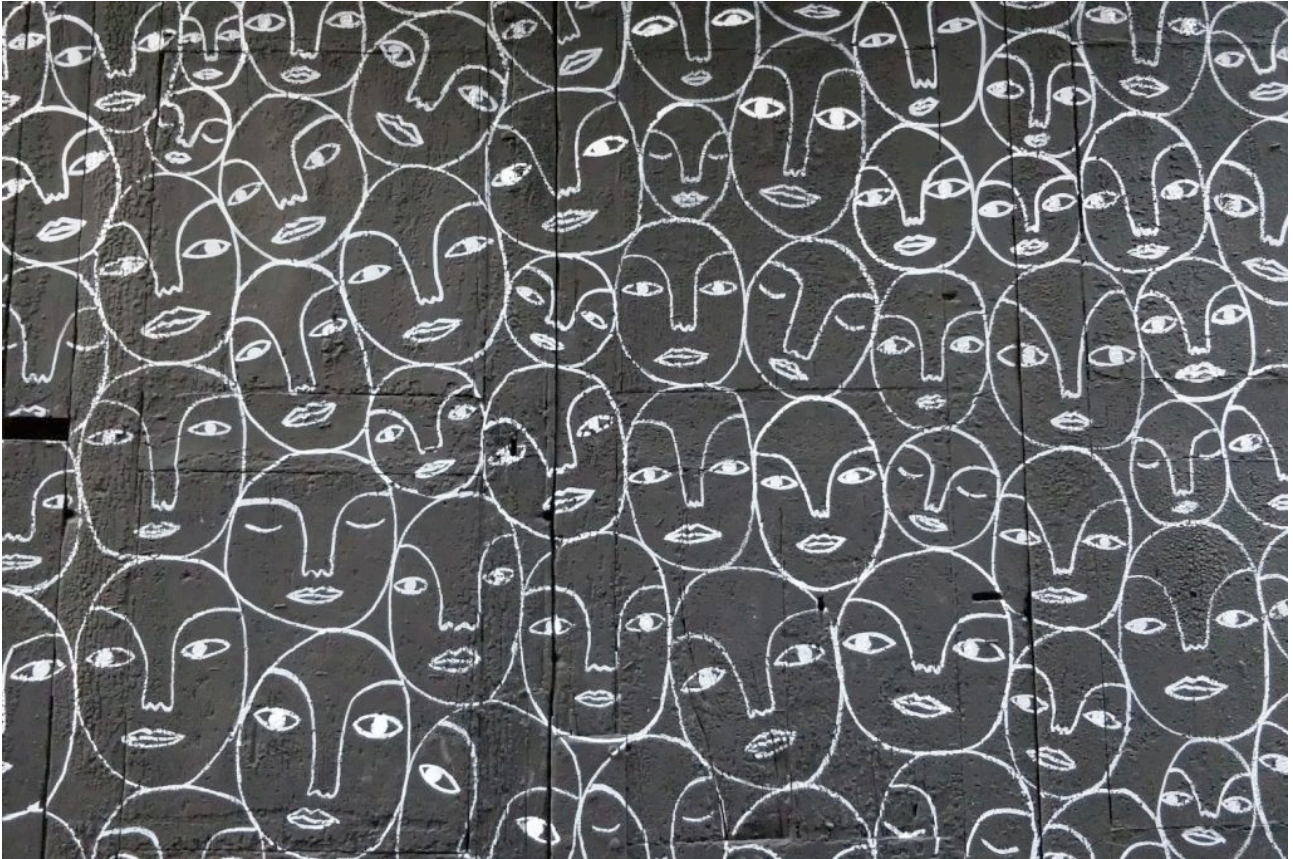


**By Louise Clifton**



Louise is the former Director of Marketing, Communications and Operations at Invisible Grail. Louise's passion is to help people bring alive the stories that show the wider world who they are and why what they do matters.

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