

Stay Curious
Ida Abbott

Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day.

– ALBERT EINSTEIN

Being a lawyer is tough. Working with lawyers is also tough, even when you're trying to help them. Yet after more than four decades as a lawyer and consultant in the legal profession, I still love what I do. One of the reasons for this long-term satisfaction is my abiding curiosity. There is so much I don't know, and every situation and person I encounter presents a chance to learn something new. Even if what I learn is of no particular significance, the experience is usually fun, useful or even inspiring.

As children, we all start out curious. Every day is magical as we explore, inquire and learn about everyone and everything that surrounds us. Many people, especially those who later become lawyers, continue that quest as we grow up. We love to learn, and we develop and pursue many interests. Then, as our careers take hold, much of that curiosity dims. We stop being inquisitive except as to work matters, especially when work pressures consume the time we'd like for other things. We become concerned about being seen as expert and professional, so we focus on answering, not asking questions. And because we worry about being perceived as anything less than an authority, we don't ask about things that might make us seem naive or uninformed. In the process, we lose the magic of exploration, inquiry and letting our minds run free. We also lose the sense of wonder that brings us joy.

Curiosity is marked by wanting to know more. It is motivated by a desire for new and challenging ideas and experiences. And its benefits are numerous.

- **Curiosity makes you a lifelong learner.** It allows you to indulge your love of learning in countless directions. It can propel you to dig deeper into a subject that fascinates you, to learn a little about a lot of different things, and to explore far beyond your boundaries. It makes you a keen observer who finds new meaning in a familiar experience or is drawn to unusual subjects that pique your interest.
- **Curiosity is the driver of creativity.** It moves you to search for fresh approaches and different ways of thinking and doing. When you ask "why" or "what if" instead of accepting things as they are, you are led toward new ideas, new solutions and new possibilities in your work, career and life.
- **Curiosity builds your resilience.** It energizes you and keeps you from growing complacent or stale. Instead of succumbing to routine, your mind stays more active and engaged both at work and with the world. When things go badly or you're feeling down, you can recover more readily when you have other interests that divert you and give you pleasure.
- **Curiosity transforms ignorance or fear into an asset.** We often feel afraid when we are in an unfamiliar situation, among strangers or people more expert than we are, or when we don't know what to say or expect from others. Not long ago, I helped develop a mentoring program for lawyers in a Middle Eastern country. I was confident in my knowledge of the subject matter, but everything else about the project was foreign to me, including the language, culture and legal system. Rather than fret about my ignorance and "otherness," I used my curiosity to build rapport and trust. From our first meeting, I told the participants about myself, what I knew and

what I didn't know, and I asked them to educate me while I helped them. As our work proceeded, we all learned a great deal from each other, and not just about mentoring.

- **Being curious makes you a better networker.** Many (maybe most) lawyers resist networking. But having a strong network of personal and business relationships makes your life and career much easier. When you need to find an expert, a new job or a babysitter, a strong network means you have people to call on for help. And curiosity can make networking painless, interesting and even enjoyable. Almost everyone has something intriguing in their life, their work or their past. When I meet someone new, I try to discover what it is. Personal stories often lead to enthralling conversations; business stories can produce reasons for meeting again. Both can lead to a deeper personal or business relationship. The key, though, is to be curious about what you can learn from or about the other person.
- **Curiosity makes you interesting to others.** When you ask people about themselves and show a genuine interest, most people are pleased; many are flattered. Rather than think less of you or consider you uninformed, people appreciate that you're interested in what they do or know about.
- **Being curious makes you a better rainmaker.** Connecting with people is essential to rainmaking. Building strong relationships – developing your social capital – increases the possibilities that business will come your way. Asking potential clients about their business and legal needs shows them you want to understand them and how you can best help them. Early in my consulting practice, I wrote columns on best practices in professional development for a new legal journal. Each column highlighted two or three firms engaged in that practice. As I interviewed those firms in depth, I learned not just their effective practices but also what their needs were. Researching those columns helped me build my expertise and reputation, and many of the firms I featured became clients.
- **Curiosity makes you a better lawyer.** When you are curious about and interested in what you are doing, you tend to put in extra effort and do a better job. Intellectual curiosity enhances your knowledge of the law. Learning more about your clients, their motivations and their predicaments expands your empathy and improves your ability to advise and represent them. Learning about the opposing parties and counsel improves your ability to create better strategies and achieve better solutions.

Perhaps most importantly, curiosity makes you a happier person. It opens windows to the unexpected and the wondrous. Your life is enriched when you pursue interests in the world around you, not just within the sphere of your job or the law. A narrow focus on tasks and routine closes you off to diversions and adventures that could bring you pleasure or excitement. When you are receptive to the unfamiliar, you are more likely to come upon opportunities to experience discovery, joy and delight. A mindset and attitude that embrace novelty, even if just occasionally, can give rise to moments of insight, meaning and happiness.

Ida Abbott is the President of Ida Abbott Consulting. Ida promotes and supports career development and advancement from the beginning of a lawyer's career through retirement. Ida has long been a leader in the field of talent management, particularly mentoring, leadership and sponsorship, and she is co-founder of the Hastings Leadership Academy for Women and the Professional Development Consortium. She is a popular speaker and prolific author. She is also an elected Fellow of both the American Bar Foundation and the College of Law Practice Management. Learn more about Ida at www.IdaAbbott.com.