

FRICTION

INTERPERSONAL

Rush to Curiosity, Not Advice

The Experiment 1: The 48-Hour Curiosity Tally

Duration: 48 hours

Time required: 10 seconds after each conversation

Materials: A tally counter app, or a piece of paper divided into two columns: Yes and No

Goal: Find out how often curiosity operates in your conversations.

This experiment asks you to measure one thing across every conversation you have for two days.

Step One: The Only Question

At the end of every conversation, every single one, including the brief ones—ask yourself:

Did I learn something about this person that I did not know before?

Not about the project or situation but the person. What they are carrying, what they care about, what they are worried about, what they are hoping for. Something that would not have been in whatever story you were running about them before the conversation started.

Answer yes or no for each conversation. Mark your tally.

	YES	NO
Conversation 1		
Conversation 2		
Conversation 3		
Conversation 4		
Conversation 5		

Step Two: What You Are Measuring

You are not measuring whether you asked good questions or whether the conversation went well or whether you were kind or effective or present. You are measuring one thing: whether curiosity was operating or whether it was just something you intended to practice without quite getting around to it.

The yes/no binary is deliberate. It resists the temptation to grade yourself on effort or intention. Either you learned something new about the person or you did not. Either the conversation moved your understanding of them or it confirmed what you already thought. The tally does not care how busy you were or how short the conversation was.

Step Three: At the End of 48 Hours

Look at your ratio. Do not judge it, just look at it.

Our guess is that most people who run this experiment will be surprised by how low the yes count is, particularly in the conversations that felt most productive: the meetings where a lot got decided, the check-ins that moved quickly, the conversations with people you know well and think you understand.

Those are often the lowest-scoring conversations, because familiarity and efficiency are the enemies of curiosity. When we think we know someone, we stop asking. When a conversation has a clear purpose, we optimize for the purpose and skip the person.

Then look at the conversations that scored yes. What was different about them? What question got asked or what silence got held, that opened something up?

The Experiment 2: Pause the Story Before One Conversation

Duration: One week

Time required: 5 minutes of preparation, one real conversation

Goal: Catch the story you're running about someone before it runs the conversation for you.

Step One: Name the Story You Are Running

Choose one person you are currently frustrated with, concerned about, or approaching with a fixed interpretation of their behavior. It might be a direct report who seems disengaged, a peer who has been difficult in meetings, or a manager whose decisions you cannot understand.

Before any conversation with this person this week, write down in two or three sentences the story you are currently running about them:

What do I believe is true about why they are doing what they are doing?

Write it plainly, without softening it; this is not a document you are sharing. The story is the thing you need to see before you can set it down.

Step Two: Ask the Three Stake Questions

With the story written, turn to the three questions and answer each one as honestly as you can from the information you have:

- What is this person protecting?

- What is this person fearing?

- What is this person trying to achieve?

You may not know the answers. If you cannot answer these questions with confidence, you are running a story based on incomplete data. The gap between what you wrote in Step One and what you can answer in Step Two is where you get to work.

Step Three: Enter the Conversation Differently

Go into the conversation with one goal that is different from your default: not to explain, not to persuade, not to correct, but to find out something you do not currently know about what is at stake for this person.

Prepare one question in advance. It should be specific enough to require a real answer and open enough that you cannot predict what the answer will be. Some examples:

- What's been the hardest part of this for you?
- What would need to be true for this to feel workable to you?
- What's the piece of this I might be missing?
- What are you most concerned about?

Ask the question and then stop talking.

Step Four: Debrief

After the conversation, return to what you wrote in Step One and ask:

- Was the story I was running accurate?
- What did I learn that I did not know before?
- What would I have done differently if I had led with this question from the start?

What we tend to find in using this is not that the story was entirely wrong; it is that it was incomplete. People are rarely doing what they appear to be doing for the reasons we assume. The colleague who pushes back on every initiative is usually protecting something. The direct report who seems checked out is usually carrying something. The question does not fix the situation, but it puts you in a fundamentally different relationship to it, one where you are working on the real problem rather than the one you projected.