

Building Our Capacity for Curiosity, Compassion and Courage

by Jamie Bonczyk and Hannah Riddle de Rojas



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her way to leadership, she completed a Head Start management fellowship at UCLA and became master trainer in the Minnesota Early Childhood Professional Development system. For self care, Bonczyk is a student and performer of improvised theater and storytelling. She primarily uses these skills to parent her 5 1/2-year-old daughter, Sylvie.



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The late, great senator from Minnesota Paul Wellstone said, "We all do better when we all do better." At times, it feels like we are competing against each other, despite having a shared goal of building a movement that is supportive of the children, families and the staff that comprise the early childhood education and care system.

The current societal context, coupled with the fundamental changes and conversations that accompany the professionalizing of our field, create an environment conducive to feelings of isolation and opposition. In this moment, we are increasingly required to engage in hard conversations: Who is in our field? Who is not? What are appropriate pathways for early educators? What does the professionalizing of our field mean for my program? What do these changes mean? How can we improve our systems to better serve children and families? What does it mean to create more equitable systems?

In these conversations, we are sharing ideas and feelings, which are frequently near and dear to our hearts. By sharing these ideas, we are leaving ourselves open to criticism. This is a vulnerable position, and the cost of not participating

and sharing our ideas is too high to ignore. How do we foster personal and organizational connections that draw us together while unifying our voices into one that speaks for many?

In many ways during our collective journey, as a field and a society, we have wandered away from the practice of

Want to dig deeper? Check out these TED Talks:

Daniel Goleman: *Why Aren't We More Compassionate More of the Time?* www.ted.com/talks/daniel_goleman_on_compassion?language=en

Robert Thurman: *Expanding the Circle of Compassion* www.ted.com/talks/robert_thurman_on_compassion

Krista Tippett: *Resurrecting the Word Compassion* www.ted.com/talks/krista_tippett_reconnecting_with_compassion?language=en

Brené Brown: *The Power of Vulnerability* www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability

HABITS OF CURIOUS PEOPLE	IDEAS ON HOW TO FORM THESE HABITS
They listen without judgment.	• Monitor your thoughts. • Look for the positive. • Avoid stereotyping. • Stop judging yourself. • Focus on your own life. • Remember how it feels to be judged.
They ask a lot of questions.	• Ask open-ended questions—try to avoid yes or no questions. • Always consider using follow-up questions. • Start getting comfortable with silence. Ask the question, wait for response, listen to the response and then wait some more. • Allow people to express themselves without interrupting them.
They seek surprise.	• Create pattern interruptions. • Seek awe. • Seek novelty. • Take positive risks. • Surprise others.
They are fully present.	• Recap or summarize what the person is sharing. • Stop yourself from prematurely forming opinions and responses. • Be aware of when you are multi-tasking—that means you are not fully present. • Spend a few seconds on your breathing to center yourself in order to be present.
They are willing to be wrong and aren't afraid to say, "I do not know."	• When you focus only on "being right" you focus on just one thing: your opinion. • Be open to receiving other people's solutions and answers. • Let go of control and be open to what is possible. • Let go of perfectionism.
They do not let past hurt affect their future.	• Anchor yourself in the present moment. • Discard memorabilia of what no longer serves you. • Make amends. • Transform your narrative. • Forgive.

three powerful character traits: curiosity, compassion, and courage. Rediscovering the power and impact of these traits, and how to use them in our lives, serves as an essential tool for strengthening and unifying our voice.

Curiosity: What do we Genuinely Want to Know About Each Other?

Merriam-Webster definition of curiosity: Desire to know: an inquisitive interest in others' concerns.

The challenge with being curious is that it requires us to silence our ego. Often, we do not ask questions due to worry of how others perceive our questions, or because we do not want to put anyone in an uncomfortable position. Our initial human instinct is to judge, while simultaneously taking the comments and opinions of others personally. Overcoming this hardwiring is crucial to being curious as an adult. Despite the high value that society places on curiosity and innovation, the dominant culture frequently quiets those who question the status quo. Consider this: when humans are born we are curious creatures, we constantly explore our environments. In many ways we are socialized into how to be curious in "appropriate ways," according to our cultural context, and unfortunately, many of the behaviors we learn through this process rarely cultivate true curiosity.

In her article, *Eight Habits of Curious People*, author Stephanie Vozza writes, "We are born curious, but when answers are valued more than questions, we forget how to ask." In order to know ourselves, it is important that we constantly ask ourselves questions. The following is a list of habits of curious people. Are you curious?

Cultivating Compassion

Merriam-Webster definition of compassion: Sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.

Life Is Good definition of compassion: Compassion is an act of connecting and sharing in the hard stuff, helping ease the pain, heal the hurt and right the wrongs.

When it comes to compassion, Brené Brown describes the mindset employed by the dominant culture in the United States in her book, *Braving the Wilderness*. It is the mindset of "Victim or Viking," a common lens through which we view the world. In this all-or-nothing mindset, we find ourselves trapped in a false dichotomy. We do not have to live in a world where our concern for other makes us weak, nor do we have to perceive the world as a constant threat to our existence.

Too frequently in our field, this mentality tricks us into considering only the short-term benefit of our actions. In turn, this quick-fix perpetuates many of the challenges we see in our field. Long, challenging work schedules leave educators and administrators exhausted. Low pay and lack of benefits leave educators and administrators in a constant hustle and ill-prepared for retirement. Many work environments in early education have plenty of room for improvement, as few have been designed with adult and child comfort combined.

What does it mean to implement compassion in our leadership? Where is the line between being too empathetic and just empathetic enough? How do we maintain appropriate boundaries and not become doormats?

Compassion does not have to mean we let our bleeding hearts be a reason for changing expectations for those with whom we work. Quite the contrary;

Listen to these Compassion and Courage songs curated by Life is Good

1. You Are Not Alone – Mavis Staples
2. The Weight – The Band
3. A Little Bit Of Everything – Dawes
4. High Tide Or Low Tide – Bob Marley & The Wailers
5. If There Was No You – Brandi Carlile
6. Join Together – The Who
7. Us – Brother Ali
8. Let It Go – Michael Franti & Spearhead, Ethan Tucker
9. Shelter from the Storm – Bob Dylan
10. Lean on Me – Bill Withers

<https://content.lifeisgood.com/ten-songs-of-compassion/>

1. Hey World – Michael Franti & Spearhead
2. Darlin' Do Not Fear – Brett Dennen
3. Hero – Family of the Year
4. Brave – Sara Bareilles
5. Moving Forward – Colony House
6. Failure – Martin Sexton
7. Carry On – fun.
8. (You Gotta Walk) Don't Look Back – Peter Tosh
9. Bottom Of the Barrel – Amos Lee
10. Head Full of Doubt/Road Full of Promise – The Avett Brothers

<https://content.lifeisgood.com/ten-strong-songs-of-courage/>

COMPASSION

Compassionate Leaders

- Actively listen.
- Understand why someone may interpret the world the way they do (but not having to agree with them).
- Work to an appropriate solution.
- Carefully select the language they use to describe others and ourselves.

Benefits of a Compassionate Work Environment

- Employee retention.
- Decreased stress.
- Improved employee health.

How to Cultivate a Culture of Compassion in the Workplace

- Set the tone for a compassionate environment.
- Pay attention to your colleagues.
- Take action and show people you care.
- Creating policies that foster compassion.

TRAIT	QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION
Courage	• Are you able to identify your values? Can you list behaviors that are consistent with your values? • Can you tell when you are acting against something you believe in? What does that feel like for you? • Do you have the tools to bring yourself back to your values? • Are there opportunities that you have not taken because of fear of a previous failure? What is your inner dialogue when you make mistakes? Do you focus on changing the behavior or do you consider it a character flaw?
Curiosity	• Consider your inner thoughts and evaluate their tone. Are your thoughts negative, positive, neutral? What assumptions are you making? • Do your questions come from a place of curiosity? Using phrases like "I noticed that," "Could you share more?," "Can you help me understand?" • Consider your inner thoughts; what do you think about? Are you able to quiet your thoughts? • How do you handle your mistakes? • What propels us to speak on topics that we do not actually know anything about?
Compassion	• What keeps you from being compassionate? • What are ways that you show compassion? • How are compassion and sympathy different?

compassion means that we are brave enough to acknowledge our colleagues' hardships and figure out solutions without watering down expectations.

Courage: Do We Have It?

Merriam-Webster definition of courage:

Mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.

Life is Good definition of courage:

Courage is our inner resolve to try new things.

Maurice Sykes opens the ninth chapter of his book, *Doing the Right Thing for Children*, with a Winston Churchill quote: "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." This quote lays the foundation for him to ask a series of questions of the reader, including: Do

you have the courage to stand up for children and do the right thing?

After years of advocating, awareness and hard work our field is establishing itself, and in perhaps one of the most volatile societal contexts our country has experienced. One of the ways that we will navigate our way through these complex changes is through conversations with our neighbors, friends, colleagues, and decision makers. We frequently experience moments to share ideas that challenge the status quo. Now is the time to unite, learn from each other and grow. In order to do this, we have to have the courage to listen, understand and question. We need the courage to solve conflict by focusing on the problem and not the person.

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