

# Questions for a Curious Leader

An Interview with HopeLab's Pat Christen  
and Richard Tate

HopeLab makes innovative products that improve health and well-being, like games that help young cancer patients fight their disease. They also run office meetings so fun, yet productive, that the meeting style is becoming a product in itself.

Bridgespan Partner Katie Smith Milway spoke with leaders Pat Christen (president and CEO) and Richard Tate (vice president, Communications and Marketing) at HopeLab on how they foster a culture of curiosity, and how it impacts their work researching and developing products that improve psychological and physical health. HopeLab began with a game for young cancer patients called Re-Mission that let players zap cancer cells. Playing the game was correlated with statistically improved health behavior, like better adherence to prescribed treatment regimes. HopeLab's second product, Zamzee, combines an activity meter and motivational website to get kids to move around more and fight the trend toward sedentary behavior and obesity. HopeLab is now turning its attention to the concept of resilience, creating products that cultivate a sense of purpose, connection, and control for people to help them respond to adversity and, ultimately, improve their health.

**Katie Smith Milway: Pat, I've heard about the way you start meetings with question cards that ask things like "Am I staying curious, even if I am certain I am right?" What's this about?**

**Pat Christen:** We look at our culture as a product, just like Re-Mission and Zamzee are products. The content and the quality of the experiences others have when interacting with us is part of how we have impact in the world. And we believe a culture of curiosity is key to innovation. We have an abiding belief in the powerful combination of curiosity, candor, and 100 percent responsibility. These are all different tools that amplify curiosity and learning. In our experience, curiosity unlocks new opportunity.

**Katie: What are the most visible benefits of your culture?**

**Pat:** On a practical level, we see the number of people who attend meetings at HopeLab and say, "I can't believe how much we got done *and* we had fun. How do you do this? We hate meetings at our company." In meetings, we

“Am I staying *curious* even if I'm certain I'm right?”

FROM HOPELAB'S "QUESTIONS FOR A CURIOUS LEADER"

productivity because employees are highly engaged in their work. Our culture even shows up in the way we write our contracts. We achieve more mutual value with our vendors and create enduring allies and ambassadors.

expect people to speak up—to ask questions, share ideas, and contribute. We have a high commitment to accountability that creates a sense of ease around

**Katie: How does this translate into the way people at HopeLab go about their days?**

**Pat:** It can be hard to remain curious, but cultivating a culture of curiosity shows up in lots of ways in our work. For example, agendas are always in the form of questions. It's a sign of respect for people's time and attention. By building agendas around questions, everyone at the meeting is invited into the conversation to help us make sense of an issue, solve a problem, or imagine a new area of opportunity. Try creating a meeting agenda, put each agenda topic in the form of a question, and see how much more focused and productive your deliberations become.

*“Am I creating experiences of ease, joy and laughter for others and myself?”*

FROM HOPELAB'S "QUESTIONS FOR A CURIOUS LEADER"

We also use our "Questions for a Curious Leader" cards in the office. In a meeting or conversation, you might choose one that speaks to you, and share it. The curiosity categories we developed are: 100% Responsibility, Opposite Stories, Allies, Emotions, Gossip, Win-Win, Sufficiency, Noticing, Beauty, Genius, Ease, Integrity, Candor. For example, one of the cards prompts colleagues to stop and ask themselves, "In this moment—am I creating a win-win situation? Or do I feel the world is a zero-sum game?"

**Katie: So what has changed in your culture since you began using these cards?**

**Pat:** Candor. It's critically important for our people to learn from failure, to be resilient, to innovate and excel at innovation. But it's hard to get people to embrace failure. Often times, we want to cover it up or put a good face on it. The ability to create community where failure is surfaced as quickly as possible is powerful.

**Katie: Can you give us an example?**

**Pat:** When we were developing the game Re-Mission 2 to motivate kids with cancer to stick with their treatment regimes, we were knee-deep in the game design. I became concerned that we were losing the engagement of the kids.

**In This Moment: Am I Taking Responsibility or Blaming Others?**

*In this excerpt from "Questions for a Curious Leader," HopeLab describes what it means to take 100 percent responsibility for one's choices as a leader.*

What does it mean to take 100% responsibility in our lives? More often than not, we take more than or less than our share. We often play the villain, the victim or the hero.

As victims we feel powerless, at the effect of the world around us. We take less than 100% responsibility for our lives as we look for heroes to save us or villains to blame.

As villains we are masters of the blame game. We take less than 100% responsibility so that, when things go wrong, we can blame others. Or we take more than 100% responsibility so we can blame ourselves. It doesn't matter, as long as we get to place blame.

As heroes we come to the rescue. We take more than 100% responsibility to relieve pain or discomfort. Often we are appreciated, even celebrated, as part of the bargain. But the relief is only temporary. To maintain our hero status, we seek out victims to save and villains to vanquish. It's exhausting.

Any of these roles sound familiar? What to do? Step out of the drama and step into presence. Assume 100% responsibility — no more, no less.

And we had some information that indicated this. So I brought the team together and said I think we have gone astray.

Initially, it felt embarrassing and scary to discuss this openly.

We had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars that were sunk costs. The team immediately involved with the vendor felt like they had failed. So we acknowledged it, took full responsibility, and we changed course. We shifted from a complex game design to a simpler, mobile-friendly design approach more in line with the way kids play games today. We moved from producing one [big] game to

**“Am I taking full *responsibility* for my physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being and renewal? Am I supporting others in taking full responsibility for theirs?”**

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creating multiple mini games. I think people were anxious but relieved. The course correction happened very quickly. When we came to a full stop and got curious, we saw where we had veered off course, and a new way of doing things emerged.

#### **Katie: How do you embark on a conversation like that?**

**Pat:** I say [to my team], 'I have this story in my head, I could be wrong, but if I'm right, it is completely my responsibility. I have no interest in blame, but deep interest in what your insights and intuitions are telling you. What's your story about where we are with this product right now?' Paying attention to being completely responsible for your emotions and behavior and completely disinterested in blame is the key.

We call the dynamic in blame games "the villain, victim, hero triangle." When you recognize you are in that game, playing one of those roles, you have the choice to step off the triangle and take 100 percent responsibility for yourself. (Read the sidebar "[In this Moment: Am I Taking Responsibility or Am I Blaming Others?](#)," excerpted from "Questions for a Curious Leader," to learn more about the triangle.)

#### **Katie: Richard, you have been on this journey with Pat in fostering curiosity in the workplace. How did you land on a deck of question cards?**

**Richard Tate:** We started thinking about curiosity questions four years ago, reflecting on our own practices and exploring a number of tools used by others to support high-quality leadership. One reason we did this was that we were getting inquiries from other organizations about how we cultivated our culture. We thought maybe we should write a book describing the questions we use, but a book didn't feel practical for workplace use. So two colleagues and I adapted some work we found particularly powerful from the Conscious Leadership Forum and created these "Questions for a Curious Leader" cards. Now we're exploring how we might create a workbook based on the cards. (Read all 28 questions from the cards in the sidebar "[Sparking Curiosity](#).")

If you are practicing curiosity, no matter what you are learning, I believe it will benefit the organization. I had a woman who was working with me, a member

of my communications team. She said, “I want to go on a photography cruise.” We helped subsidize it. She discovered a passion for photography, and for the next four years became our in-house photographer. She discovered a new interest and talent and, as a result, we have saved tens of thousands of dollars on outside photographers by supporting that learning opportunity.

## Sparking Curiosity

The following questions, excerpted from HopeLab’s “Questions for a Curious Leader” tool, prompt curiosity about your choices as a leader. There is no right or wrong choice: “The point is to be honest with yourself about how you’re behaving in the moment.”

### In this moment...

CURIOSITY	
Am I staying <b>curious</b> even if I’m certain I’m right?	Am I attached to being right and getting <b>defensive</b> ?
CANDOR	
Am I saying what is true for me? Am I demonstrating that I am a person to whom others can express themselves with <b>candor</b> ?	Am I <b>withholding</b> facts, feelings, or beliefs to manipulate an outcome?
100% RESPONSIBILITY	
Am I taking full <b>responsibility</b> for my physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being and renewal? Am I supporting others in taking full responsibility for theirs?	Am I <b>blaming</b> others or myself for what is wrong in the world? Am I choosing to play the villain, the victim, or hero, taking more or less than 100% responsibility for my life?
OPPOSITE STORIES	
Am I seeing that the <b>opposite</b> of my story is as true as my original story? Am I recognizing that the meaning I draw from my story is my chosen interpretation, not “The Truth”?	Am I seeing my stories and the meaning I give them as “ <b>The Truth</b> ”?
ALLIES	
Am I experiencing others as equals and <b>allies</b> , perfectly suited to help me grow?	Am I experiencing others as greater than me, less than me, or <b>obstacles</b> in my way?
EMOTIONS	
Am I fully experiencing and acknowledging my <b>emotions</b> and then letting them go?	Am I <b>resisting</b> or holding on to my emotions, becoming rigid, numb or withdrawn as a result?

GOSSIP	
Am I speaking <b>directly</b> with the person with whom I have a concern? Am I encouraging others to speak directly with those with whom they have a concern?	Am I talking about others in ways that I would not if they were present? Am I listening to others <b>gossip</b> ?
WIN-WIN	
Am I creating <b>win-win</b> solutions for any concerns or opportunities that arise?	Am I experiencing life as a zero-sum game, creating <b>win-lose</b> solutions for any concerns or opportunities that arise?
EASE	
Am I creating experiences of <b>ease</b> , joy and laughter for others and myself?	Am I experiencing life as a burdensome <b>struggle</b> ? Am I judging play and laughter as frivolous?
SUFFICIENCY	
Am I feeling that who I am and what I have is <b>sufficient</b> , that there is enough time, money, love, energy and any other resource I need?	Am I experiencing a <b>scarcity</b> mindset, believing I must grasp, protect or hoard “what is mine” so I can get enough of what I need?
NOTICING	
Am I <b>noticing</b> and appreciating the gifts in my life, in whatever form they appear?	Am I living carelessly, <b>unaware</b> and unappreciative of the world around me?
BEAUTY	
Am I noticing, attending to or creating <b>beauty</b> ?	Am I enduring, allowing or perpetuating <b>mediocrity</b> , inelegance or ugliness?
GENIUS	
Am I fully expressing my human potential—my unique <b>genius</b> —and supporting others to fully express theirs?	Am I <b>holding myself back</b> , choosing to live in areas of incompetence, competence or even excellence, but not in my unique genius?
INTEGRITY	
Am I in <b>integrity</b> —keeping the commitments I make with intention?	Am I out of integrity, <b>mindlessly</b> breaking commitments to myself or others?

To download a PDF of HopeLab’s “Questions for a Curious Leader” go to [HopeLab.org/culture](http://HopeLab.org/culture).

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