

STORYTELLING THAT EXPANDS YOUR INFLUENCE

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REVIEW

LET YOUR CUSTOMERS SHAPE WHAT'S NEXT

TURNING OBSTACLES INTO STEPPING STONES

BUILD AN EXIT WORTH CELEBRATING

Forbes | Books

A portrait of Rod Adkins, a Black man with short hair and glasses, wearing a blue checkered blazer over a light blue button-down shirt. He is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. The background is dark and out of focus.

Nothing Is Ever Finished

TURNING A LIFETIME OF
CURIOSITY INTO A PHILOSOPHY
OF LEADERSHIP, INNOVATION,
AND LASTING IMPACT.

ROD ADKINS

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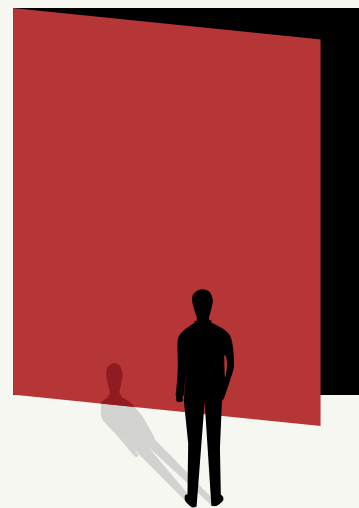
How Rodney C. Adkins turned a lifetime of curiosity into a philosophy of leadership, innovation, and lasting impact.

Before Rodney C. Adkins learned to lead one of the world's most influential technology companies, or provide oversight to corporations from the boardroom, he developed an inconvenient habit around the house.

If something had gears, wires, springs, or screws, he wanted to know what lived beneath the casing.

Clocks became puzzles. Radios became mysteries. Vacuum cleaners surrendered their secrets one carefully removed screw at a time. Often, everything returned to working order. The family eventually recognized his curiosity was special enough for him to become an engineer.

Years later, Rod would realize he had never really stopped taking things apart. The objects simply became larger. Machines became organizations. Circuits became businesses. Individual components became technologies, markets, teams, and leadership challenges whose hidden connections mattered every bit as much as the parts visible on the surface.



Refusing the obvious explanation and looking underneath may be the defining characteristic of a storied career. It followed him into corporate boardrooms, philanthropic organizations, and classrooms. Today, it forms the foundation of his new book, *Curiosity Redefines the Limits: Advantages Gained from Life, the Workplace, and the Boardroom*, a reflection on the lessons that transformed an inquisitive child into one of corporate America's most respected technology leaders.

The Kid Who Wanted to Know Why

Rod likes to describe himself as “imperfection at its best.” The phrase reflects a perspective earned at birth. Born 12 weeks premature in Augusta, Georgia, he weighed just under three pounds.

“Maybe my curiosity drove me to see the world sooner,” Rod joked.

The Adkins household lionized education. Homework came before recreation. Dinner conversations grew into lively debates. When there were no homework assignments to complete, Rod and his siblings were expected to spend study time reading the family's *World Book* or *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Learning was simply what the family did.

Rod embraced it, thriving academically as a result. Outside the classroom, curiosity never rested. Success in his tinkering with appliances had never been measured solely by the outcome. Understanding the process was equally rewarding.

That perspective would become crucial to his success.

Long before he managed billion-dollar businesses, Rod had already learned that failure can teach just as much, if not more, than immediate success.

At Miami Jackson Senior High School, he was voted student council president, graduated as valedictorian, earned recognition as “Most Intellectual,” excelled in track and field, and earned a black belt in karate before most teenagers were deciding what they wanted to study in college.

There came a moment in those years that quietly redirected his future. One day while sitting inside the school's administrative office, Rod became captivated by an IBM tabulating machine.

He wanted to understand how punched cards stored information, how data moved through the machine, and why the process seemed almost magical. The first time he created his own punched card, something clicked. His childhood fascination with taking apart machines suddenly met a technology capable of changing the world.

Building Bigger Machines

Rod arrived at IBM in September 1981. It was the fulfillment of a dream, but not the end of it. If anything, Rod believed he had only reached the starting line.

His first assignment focused on printer assurance, testing products before they reached customers. It wasn't the glamorous engineering role he had imagined while studying at Georgia Tech, and he quickly realized his managers had not yet figured out who exactly they had hired. Some assignments felt trivial, even meaningless.

“This turned out to be another defining moment for me,” Rod said. “I decided to apply my operating principles: speed, style and grace, and listening. I would complete every task quickly and ask for even more assignments from my leader. I kept a positive external attitude and approached my job with a fierce commitment, which started to define my reputation.”

Managers noticed the young engineer who volunteered for difficult assignments instead of avoiding them. They noticed someone who asked thoughtful questions instead of merely completing tasks. More importantly, they noticed someone who seemed genuinely interested in understanding the business, instead of simply his own corner of it.

That distinction would change everything.

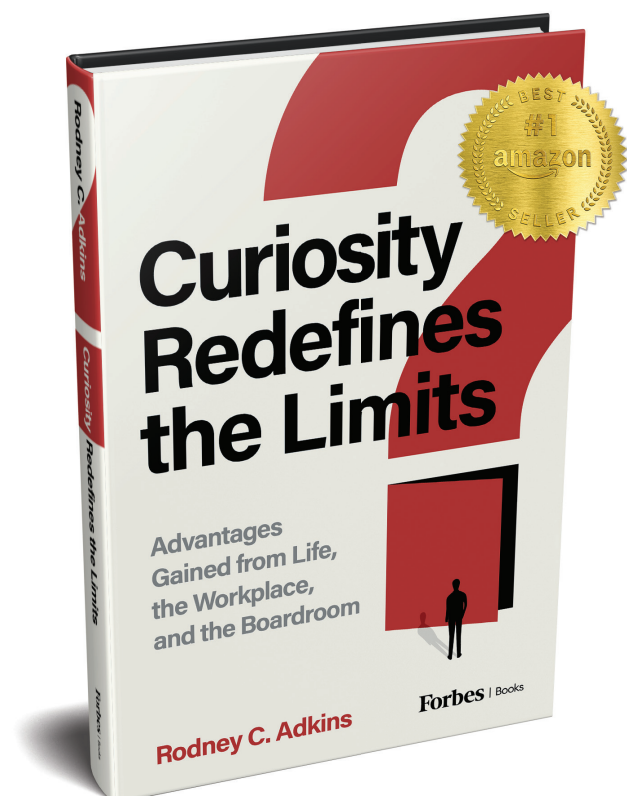
Within a few years, Rod moved from engineering into product development, then into leadership assignments that exposed him to senior executives, customers, strategy,

manufacturing, and product planning. Temporary assignments as technical assistant and executive assistant evolved into a graduate-level education in leadership. Instead of seeing products in isolation, he began seeing entire systems in the interaction between technology, people, operations, finance, marketing, and culture. The machines had become much larger, but his instinct remained exactly the same: understand how all the pieces fit together before deciding how to improve them.

In *Curiosity Redefines the Limits*, Rod repeatedly emphasizes that success stories aren't built through isolated moments of brilliance. They are built through accumulated opportunities, careful preparation, and leaders willing to invest in emerging talent.

His career embodies that principle.

During his 33 years at IBM, Rod helped lead businesses spanning personal computing, servers, semiconductor technology, storage systems, and enterprise computing.



Eventually, he was promoted to Senior Vice President of IBM's Systems and Technology Group and a corporate officer, assuming responsibility for technologies that powered businesses around the world. On the way, he worked alongside some of the industry's most influential innovators while helping guide IBM through periods of significant technological transformation.

When Rod reflects on those years, he spends surprisingly little time celebrating titles. He talks instead about people.

Again and again, the book returns to mentors who opened doors, managers who challenged him, colleagues who sharpened his thinking, and teams whose collective achievements exceeded anything one individual could accomplish. His leadership philosophy is refreshingly uncomplicated: great leaders develop other leaders.

"My primary focus has been to help others become more competitive and improve their quality of life," Rod said. "I would always take on the extras as a mentor, talent development leader, or community supporter."

That idea echoes throughout the endorsements that introduce *Curiosity Redefines the Limits*. Former IBM Chairman and CEO Samuel Palmisano praises Rod's ability to innovate while developing others. Ken Chenault highlights his intellectual curiosity and leadership. Arvind Krishna, Lisa Su, Jeff Benck, Mark Dean, Kathryn Guarini, Colin Parris, and numerous others describe someone whose greatest influence occurred through mentorship, encouragement, and example. They speak less about organizational charts than about personal impact.

That may be Rod Adkins's most enduring accomplishment. Technology changes. Products become obsolete. People, however, continue building long after their mentors have moved on.

The Next Chapter

Rod's retirement from IBM was not the end of his working life. He simply found another set of complex problems to solve.

Corporate board service offered a new opportunity to exercise the same curiosity that had shaped his engineering career. Serving on the boards of UPS, W.W. Grainger, Avnet, PayPal, and other organizations required a different perspective than managing technology businesses, yet the underlying discipline, unsurprisingly, remained familiar. Success depended on asking thoughtful questions, understanding interconnected systems, challenging assumptions, and helping organizations prepare for the future.

Education remained a vital part of his life's work.

Whether serving Georgia Tech, Rollins College, the Smithsonian, STEM initiatives, or Kappa Alpha Psi's youth development programs, Adkins consistently returned to one belief: Success creates an obligation to expand opportunity for someone else. His book acknowledges teachers, coaches, professors, managers, fraternity brothers, and family members who invested in him long before his accomplishments justified their confidence. Their generosity shaped his understanding of leadership.

Someone believed in him. Now it was his turn to believe in others. Today, he and his wife, Michelle, are trying to create a world that affords opportunities for those who need it most.

"For Michelle and me, philanthropy has been an effective way to capture the positivity of material impact on people's lives," Rod explained. "Our focus makes a difference for people and programs needing help with resources to give them a better chance at competing. This will allow them to have what any human being aspires to have, independent of our differences, which is a better quality of life."

The couple are deeply involved in scholarships, philanthropic leadership, board service, community organizations, and countless conversations with young professionals searching for direction. *Curiosity Redefines the Limits* reminds readers that careers are not built in isolation. Every pivotal moment includes someone willing to offer guidance, encouragement, or simply the confidence to imagine a larger future.

The book highlights a lesson we often overlook: Curiosity may open the first door, but we rely on people to help guide us through it.

Nothing Is Ever Finished

Looking back, it is tempting to measure Rod Adkins's life through milestones like engineer, executive, SVP, director, philanthropist, or author. Each title reflects achievement. However, none fully explains the man behind them.

The better answer can still be found in that curious young boy sitting on the floor of his family's home with another household appliance spread into carefully organized pieces around him. Most children would eventually outgrow that habit.

Rod Adkins simply found larger things to take apart, whether they were multinational organizations or even his own assumptions.

His journey demonstrates that curiosity is about more than acquiring information. It is about refusing to accept that today's understanding is complete. Every accomplishment becomes another beginning. Every solution reveals another question. Every success creates another responsibility.

That is why *Curiosity Redefines the Limits* feels less like the conclusion of a distinguished career than the continuation of a lifelong conversation.

The child who wondered how a radio worked eventually helped shape technologies used around the world. The student who imagined walking into the executive suite eventually did exactly that. The leader who benefited from extraordinary mentors has spent his life becoming one himself.

His story reminds us that successful people never believe they have finished learning. Rod Adkins certainly doesn't, and his legacy continues to be written. Join the ongoing conversation at RodneyAdkins.com. 