

BRIDGING THE “KNOWING VS. DOING” GAP

My wife and I have two children. Although they are ten years apart, they seem to have the same issues around making the leap from knowing to doing. For instance, my daughter has taken a high school class entitled “Life Skills.” It was supposed to teach these kids how to do things like cook, clean, do laundry, sew etc.

I’m not sure why this takes a full semester since most parents could provide this “life skills” training in a day or less. Also, topics missing from the class include basic concepts of money management and how to develop strong relationships but I digress.

She would come home from class and tell us all the things she now knew how to do like cooking, cleaning and laundry. After a while, my wife and I would comment on how it was nice that you know how to do things but it would be great if you actually did them! This comment ended the discussion.

Similarly, our son says when told he needs to pick up his clothes and put them in the dirty laundry basket, “I know” which I follow with, “I know you KNOW, I want you to DO!”

If you are a parent, you definitely know what I’m talking about!

This lack of connection between “knowing” and “doing” is not just a childhood phenomenon. As adults, there are lots of things we know that we don’t do:

We know we should:

- eat better
- spend more time with family
- exercise more
- read more
- watch less television

We know this but the majority of us just don’t do it. The most glaring example of this to me occurred recently when I drove by a cancer center and saw employees outside smoking. You can guess what they see every day yet they still smoke. It’s hard for me to understand this lack of connection.

Now, on to the organizations you work in. Does this inability to translate “knowing” into “doing” (let’s call it the KD Gap) that we see in children and adults also apply to organizations?? You bet it does!!

Most organizations have a lot of bright and talented people. Many with advanced degrees and some with PhD’s. Others have gained significant knowledge through experience and through continuing education. So let’s assume for this discussion that most organizations have a significant collective knowledge base which could be used to great benefit. The question then becomes, “Is it used to take action?”

People and its organizational knowledge remind me of software applications, such as Microsoft Word or Excel. The functionality of these products far exceeds our typical use. In fact, I would guess that we maybe use 10% of the functionality of these products.

I would argue that maybe 10% of the organization’s knowledge is actually used effectively and that less than 10% is translated into action (i.e. doing). If we look at it using this lens, it’s easy to see that most organizations are grossly underutilizing the knowledge and capabilities of their people and are not consistently putting it into action.

So as a manager and leader, what do you do about the KD gap? Here are some thoughts:

Take Inventory – What happens so often in organizations is that skills and talents are evaluated during recruiting and then once someone is placed in a position, managers and leaders forget these skill sets and only view someone based on the title of their current position. Capabilities are not used and people become frustrated because they aren’t able to contribute as much as they could.

Unfortunately, many high-quality people leave for other organizations where their skills and talents can be better put to use. What a waste! Make sure you keep an inventory of skill sets of all your employees in some sort of database so that you always know what your people are capable of. This should be reviewed in detail when positions open up or you are creating new ones.

A big morale killer is hiring outside your existing talent base if the skills are already within the company. Also make sure you have a process for keeping this database up to date so the information is relevant and timely.

Match Roles with Talents/Passions – Now that you have a complete inventory of your people, you can evaluate whether they are in the right role or not. If not, you figure out how to get people in a more appropriate role or create a path to it.

This skill inventory is especially helpful when creating project teams. You not only want cross functional people on teams but you also want a variety of different skill sets. Many leaders assemble teams with more of the “fill in the box” approach of finding available people and slapping together a team. A team that is haphazardly put together rarely generates good let alone exceptional results.

Create an Action Based Environment – Leaders need to spend a significant amount of time creating a work environment that generates results. Most environments generate a lot of activity but not necessarily results (e.g. how much time to you spend in unnecessary meetings or answering unnecessary emails?)

Leaders need to lead by example in this space. They need to create action based themes in all of their communications, require agendas and action plans for every management meeting, eliminate activities (meetings, emails) that create no value, ask pointed questions of teams and projects to ensure results are being generated.

Depending on how engrained “non -action” is in the culture will dictate how long you will have to continue the intense repetition of the message. Remember, culture wasn’t created overnight and it certainly won’t change overnight. Be patient as culture change is a long process!

Encourage Risk Taking – This starts with communications by leadership as to the importance of risk taking. Speeches, newsletters, management meetings must all have the consistent messaging that risk taking is not only encouraged, it’s expected. The process, however, does not end here.

This message must then be followed by action. Leadership must challenge people in day to day operations to take risks. I’ve seen too many leaders say they encourage risks and then their actions are to the contrary. Your people will believe actions over words every time! This leads us to our next thought.

Celebrate Failures – Thomas Edison said, “I know 10,000 ways to make a light bulb that doesn’t work.” The creative process and improvement

initiatives will involve failure. As a leader, you need to be treat failures as learning processes that move us closer to our objectives and communicate this to your people.

Let me be clear, this does NOT include failures that were due to poor planning or execution. There needs to be accountability for these failures. I'm talking about good faith efforts to "move the needle" that for some reason or another, just didn't work out. This is where you need leadership to encourage people to get up, dust themselves off, learn the lessons from failure and then get after it again.

Act and Adjust - There certainly are times when the best action is to do nothing but the vast majority of the time, the inability to take action can cripple an organizations ability to compete and succeed. I know most of you have been involved in situations where potential actions are reviewed, revised, revisited over weeks, months and sometimes years.

This "treading water" effect consumes a lot of time and energy and delivers no results. While your competition is moving forward, you are doing nothing. For the most part I've found that 80% of an analysis can be done relatively quick. It's the last 20% that seems to take forever. If after you do the 80% and direction seems pretty obvious, stop analyzing and start doing. How much information is enough? Get it in motion and adjust/change during the process as needed. Speed in execution is a huge competitive advantage.

Celebrate Successes - Any sort of success based on decisive action and risk taking needs to be communicated throughout the organization This should include recognizing the people involved and outlining the risks and actions they took. By consistently highlighting these successes, you can create momentum that helps to get others to think differently about taking risks and taking action.

The **KD Gap** can be narrowed and eliminated over time with hard work, patience and by applying some or all (depending on your organization) of the concepts outlined above. The question now is will this additional "knowing" translate into much more "doing?"

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