

Why You Need Deeper Knowledge – & How to Get It

Understanding the limits of your own knowledge can reap tremendous benefits – for yourself and your organization.

By Melanie Lockwood Herman

I've been coming to grips with the fact that I don't know very much about very much. I didn't figure this out on my own; I've been reading *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone* by Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach.

Three of my personal "ah-ha" lessons from the book include:

Familiarity and recognition are too often confused with actual understanding. The more common something is, the less we're likely to consider it deeply and probe for its true meaning. Sometimes the newcomer can see the illogic in something we accept without thought just because we're used to it.

The authors use the Pledge of Allegiance as an example. Many people know the text by heart yet clearly have never thought about its meaning. Thus, you'll hear people chant nonsensical phrases, from "One nation, under God, invisible" to "And to the republic, for witches stand."

These errors of familiarity remind us that true comprehension requires processing information with care and reflecting on the intention behind the words. Rote

memorization is an example of how our learning is too often superficial.

True intelligence resides in the collective – not individual – brain. What a relief! Sloman and Fernbach explain that humans actually store "very little detailed information about the world in their heads." They explain that true knowledge resides in our communities.

The key to applying knowledge to whatever you're striving to accomplish is to rely on information stored outside yourself – in the environment and "especially in other people." The authors explain that the highest, most meaningful forms of learning occur in a community. They also describe something you've probably witnessed countless times during staff meetings: "We learn best when we're thinking with others."

A team's success is mostly determined by how well its members work together, not the intelligence of the individuals. We must also remember that intelligence is present in every corner of our community or social network – not just with the apparent subject-matter experts.



“A good story tells us about how the world works.”

On the subject of shared knowledge, I was reminded of Leonard Mlodinow’s book *Subliminal: How Your Subconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior*. Mlodinow tells us that each person’s individual brain, although it’s “active, purposeful, and independent,” frequently gets things terribly wrong. Examples include inaccurate “first-hand” witness accounts that, far too often, send innocent people to prison. Mlodinow notes that our social networks provide us with knowledge bases we couldn’t build on our own, adding that “many of our activities in everyday life are possible only as a result of group efforts, of human cooperation on a large scale.” Our vehicles, high-rise buildings, and social communication technologies would all be impossible without our ability to pool knowledge.

The human brain, he says, “deserves a gold medallion for its extraordinary ability to create and maintain social networks,” such as organizations, governments, and basketball teams, “in which people work smoothly together to accomplish a common goal with a minimum of miscommunication and conflict.”

Storytelling inspires action because it helps make causal sense of the world. Sloman and Fernbach have helped me connect the dots between nonprofit leadership and storytelling: “A good story goes beyond just describing what actually happened. It tells us about how the world works more broadly, in ways that pertain to things that didn’t actually happen or at least haven’t happened yet.”

Storytelling inspires reflection of alternative courses of action. This type of thinking enables nonprofit teams to develop contingency plans and an adaptive capacity. And, because well-crafted stories are memorable and meaningful, storytelling in the workplace might also improve a team’s institutional memory.

According to journalist Walter Lippmann, “The real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance.” With the barrage of data and stressors that make noise around us and stimulate our minds each day, it’s no wonder that an individual has such limited capacity to recall and comprehend information.

Recognizing our own limitations, relying on the talents of our team members, and using proven techniques like storytelling can help us learn and make decisions effectively. Perhaps the first step to deconstructing the knowledge illusion is to unlearn what we think we know.

We’ve all heard the Socratic Paradox: “I know that I know nothing.” Having just read the Wikipedia page devoted to “I

know that I know nothing,” I now doubt my original belief that Socrates actually said those words. Wikipedia – a collective knowledge source – represents one of Sloman and Fernbach’s golden nuggets of advice.

One thing I’ve learned is that I don’t know much of anything for certain. In fact, none of us do. But I’ve also learned this: We know a great deal more together. **S**

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