

The Curse of Knowing, or, Why We Are All Such Lousy Communicators

Too Much Knowing

When you know something, particularly if you know it very well, then your mind says to you, “That’s just common knowledge. Everyone knows that.” When you have to explain that thing to someone else, therefore, you tend to start your explanation at what feels to you like the beginning point (“Everyone knows the basics already”), but what feels to the other person like the 1,000 foot level. What is common knowledge to you – the “basics” – may not be common knowledge to your audience.

A Good Example

One of the best examples of this phenomenon is driving a car. Most adults know how to drive a car, but for several years of our lives we didn’t, even after we’d grown big enough to reach the pedals. After we learned how to drive, and especially with several years of driving experience behind us, we’ve learned so well that driving is, for the most part, automatic.

Until, that is, you have to teach a non-driver how to drive. At that point, the “Curse of Knowing” rears its ugly head, especially if the non-driver is your teen-aged son or daughter. All that knowledge and experience that you have had for so long is completely new to the non-driver. The most obvious thing, such as looking both ways before pulling into traffic, is something a new driver must learn. It’s not intuitive; it’s new. It’s not simple; it’s complicated. “Common knowledge” is not everyone’s common experience.

Knowing the Problem Is Not the Solution

The problem of assuming that what you know is shared common knowledge with another person is the bread-and-butter issue that marriage counselors face every day. They have a name for it: mind reading. This is where one person thinks that he or she “knows” what the other person is thinking or, in this case, what the other person “knows.” Even when you try to be clear in what you say, you are sometimes still misunderstood because you don’t share a common set of “things you know” with the other person.

Clearly, just knowing the problem is not the solution to it. It's hard to remember that everything you now know you once had to learn, whether from life or from vicarious experience such as movies, TV, or books. Even tougher to remember is that not everyone you know has learned all the same things you know!

An Explanation for the Curse of Knowing

I found an explanation for why the Curse of Knowing keeps zapping us from Alan Alda's new book, If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face? In it, Mr. Alda describes an experiment that illustrates the problem. Divide a group of people into two groups, the *tappers* and the *listeners*.

The *tappers* listen to a well-known song (such as "Happy Birthday") and then try to communicate the identity of the song to the *listeners* (who haven't listened to the song.) The *tappers* can only communicate with the *listeners* by tapping the rhythm of the song with a finger on the tabletop. (Try this yourself! It's more difficult than it seems.)

People who measured the results of this experiment found that the *tappers* were able to successfully get the *listeners* to identify the song only about 2-3% of the time. The most interesting result, though, is that the *tappers* estimated that they had successfully communicated the name of the song between 50% and 80% of the time!

Your Brain Is Not Always On Your Side

Once a person has tapped a song, the rhythm in his head is so clear and strong that he can't believe that others can't hear it too. This is one of the reasons that playing Charades or Pictionary is so frustrating and entertaining all at the same time. Watching another person's physical gyrations as they try to "act out" a title or phrase is the entertaining part, whereas the person trying to act it out gets frustrated that others can't seem to understand what seems so clear in his or her mind.

How to Handle the Curse of What You Know: 3 Suggestions

There are things you can do to make sure your efforts to communicate are more understandable. Here are three suggestions:

1. *Ask the person what he or she just heard*

Say something like, "I may not have been very clear, but I want to be sure you got the gist of it. Help me out, please, and tell me what you thought I was trying to say." This is

particularly effective if you are giving someone instructions or explaining a position, and it works better one-on-one than in a group.

2. *Goal-Strategy-Role*

Before you start talking, be clear in your mind about your overall **goal** for what you are about to say. Is it to inform, to inquire, to direct, or something else?

Being clear in your mind about what you want the outcome of your communication to be will help you develop a **strategy** for how to say it in a way that will point your audience toward your goal.

Clearly describe what **role** you want your audience to play, being as specific as possible about the steps involved, the obstacles to be overcome or avoided, what the end-point will look like, and the timeline involved.

Goal-Strategy-Role

3. *A picture is worth a thousand words*

Provide some kind of visual representation of what you want to communicate – a picture, a flowchart, a timeline, a graph – something to help your audience see what you are talking about. Don't worry if it looks like a doodle; the only thing that matters is whether it helps illustrate what you are trying to say.

I once had a boss who always kept paper and marker close at hand, on which he would draw something to aid in what he was saying. It might be as simple as making a bullet-point list of his main points. While many of his efforts at illustration weren't museum quality, they were almost always helpful in getting his points across.

Better Today than Yesterday

Perhaps if we remind ourselves that our first attempt at getting a point across or asking or responding to a question might not be as clearly expressed as it seems in our mind, we will give ourselves the opportunity to come up with a better way to say what we mean. Remember, if you want to be understood, it's your responsibility to make the effort, rather than your audience's responsibility to try to figure it out. Effective communication is often an elusive goal that is brushed aside by time pressure. But if you can be better at it today than yesterday, that's progress!