

Collaborative Adventures



Volume 7, Issue 4
September 2009

True Knowledge Exists in Knowing that You Know Nothing

By: Adam Lowe

Let's jump right into an experiment, shall we? Recruit a friend, any friend will do. Now, think of a song. Got it? With a pen, pencil, your hand or anything else you can use, tap out the song (extra credit if you own tap shoes and can tap out the song with those). In your head, the song probably sounds spot on perfect doesn't it? But the test is this – Can your friend guess what song it is? Unless you're one of the rare extremely talented tappers out there, or your friend is musically gifted, chances are he or she only heard a series of random taps.

I can name that tune in five notes, Mr. DeWitt.

It's referred to as "the curse of knowledge", credited to Chip Heath and Dan Heath, authors of *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, and it's a simple, yet often overlooked concept in communications: An idea, concept, phrase or word makes perfect sense when you think about it, but when you externalize it, you get a series of blank stares and dumbfounded expressions. Take solace – you're not surrounded by idiots. *But if they're not idiots, why don't they understand what I'm talking about?* In simple terms – you know too much.

...and knowing is half the battle.

And the other half? Trying to overcome that knowledge! Yes, **sometimes** knowledge isn't necessarily a good thing. Ever find yourself thinking "*I don't understand why they can't get this?*" Well, the diagnosis is simple: You're cursed with knowledge. How long have you been working in your system of care? One year? Two, five, maybe even ten years? You probably know all the gritty details about everything that goes on in your SOC; you know all the trade secrets behind your practice and all of the methodology behind defining successes and positive outcomes. Unfortunately, it's also likely that many individuals outside of your system of care **don't** share in that knowledge.

As you communicate with families, community partners, funders and other agencies, consider for a moment: "Is this our view, or their view?" Don't know how to answer that question? Just listen. Simply spending time with your various audiences is a great way to get into their shoes and learn more about what they know. Consider one of the Phrases that Pay: "*Listen, Listen and then Listen!*" As a professional, it is important to devote your time and talents to the art of listening. By turning off the self talk inside of your head (where the curse of knowledge happily lives) and consciously paying attention, you will hear everything you need to better understand what your audience knows.

Important advice: Did you know a solution of dihydrogen monoxide and sodium chloride, when consumed in excess, can be fatal? However, when laved against areas affected by streptococcal pharyngitis, it is considered an appropriate course of treatment. Confused? As you consider what this means, read on.

How do you overcome the curse of knowledge? Simply being aware of it is a great start. Here are some other ways to beat the curse:

Make it Concrete – Use Data

"Seeing is believing", "The proof is in the pudding" – There are dozens of sayings (if not more) that allude to the idea that individuals need proof of something before they will buy into it. Nine times out of ten, that means using data to tell (or support) your story. But it's not quite that easy: Data can suffer from the curse of knowledge as well, so it is important to know how to translate data into language that appeals to the intended audience.

Be Creative – Make it Visual

Some individuals learn by listening, some learn by interacting, and still others learn visually. Using visual aids such as photos, diagrams and video can pique your audiences' curiosity and keep them engaged. Instead of standing in front of a group and reading a client success story, display pictures of that client while you tell the story. Instead of a spreadsheet filled with data, use diagrams and pictures to visualize your information.

Keep it Simple

Have you figured out our important note of advice? Let's look at it again: *Did you know a solution of dihydrogren monoxide and sodium chloride, when consumed in excess, can be fatal? However, when laved against areas affected by streptococcal pharyngitis, it is considered an appropriate course of treatment.*

In other words: Drinking saltwater can kill you, but gargling it can help sooth a sore throat.

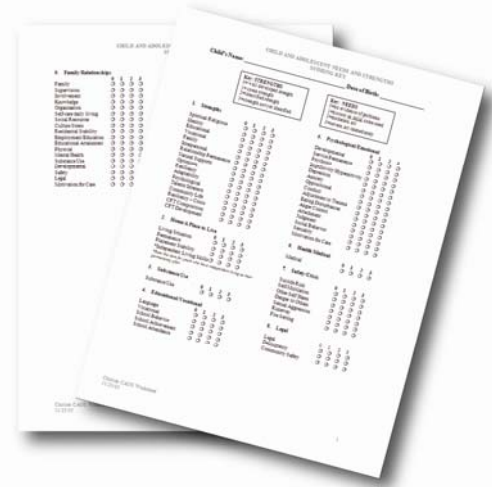
Using language that isn't appropriate for the audience is a core element in the curse of knowledge. Sure, you may sound like an expert, and people may say "Wow, they really know what they're talking about", but in the end, if you're speaking a different language, people simply won't understand (or care about) your message.

Examples of jargon that you may not realize are jargon for some people:

- Strengths based services
- Least restrictive
- Community based
- Natural supports
- Blended (or braided) funding

Depending on your audience, words and phrases like these may not be common knowledge. After considering our tips on listening, think about how you might explain these words and phrases to audiences that don't fully grasp the concepts.

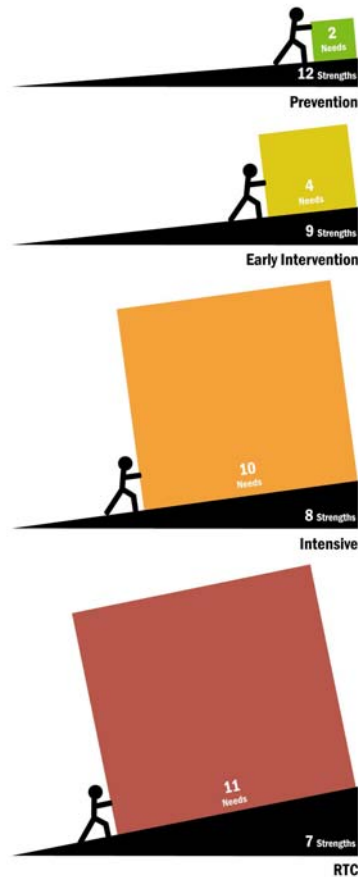
Now that you know more about the curse of knowledge, are you going to let this knowledge curse you, or will you let this knowledge lead you towards breaking down communications barriers?



Data is a strong backbone for any message but depending on the audience, mounds of forms and spreadsheets may not be an appropriate way to present it.

Visualizing the Dawn Project

Mean Strengths and Needs of Youth in Tiers



Sometimes a simple visualization can be dramatic and tell a complex story.