Overcoming the "Curse of Knowledge"

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Do you find yourself sometimes trying to understand acronyms, jargon, and slang associated with a technical specialty? If you're new to that functional area, the initials and terms seem like a foreign language, yet everyone seems to know what everyone else is saying--except for you!

I deal with a variety of different businesses, so I'm having to cope with unique terminology all the time. One field I'll never master, however, is computer technology. Not only am I not skilled--or particularly interested--the terms are changing all the time!

If you deal with informational technology, the following alphabet soup of computer terms will likely be familiar to you: algorithm, bandwidth, cache, defragment, encryption, firewall, GIGO, HTML, import, java, kbps, linux, megahertz, nanometer, OASIS, POP3, QR code, RISC, SEO, terabyte, VoIP, WYSIWYG, XML, yobibyte, and zip. Most are terms I don't know. I found these on the internet at www.techterms.com. (I apologize to some of you who may not know what that means!)

Once you have knowledge, experience, and awareness in virtually any topic, it's hard to remember or even imagine lacking that knowledge. I learned of this term, the "curse of knowledge," as I read *Made to Stick*, a book by brothers Chip and Dan Heath. I could immediately see how this concept applies to leaders as they engage with new team members, direct reports, and other colleagues.

The more experience you have, the more difficult it is to realize what your listeners may experience as they attempt to comprehend your comments. They often won't stop you and ask, "Hey, I'm sorry, but I did not understand what you just said. Would you say it again, slower, and explain the terms?"

Let me provide an example many leaders will likely understand. Let's say you are talking with some workers in your organization, and you genuinely want to communicate with them about your business. You share information about assessed valuation, bottom line, capital budgeting, depreciation, EBITDA,… the weak dollar, ex-dividend, yield, or zero-based budgeting.

My guess is that most of those terms have at least a semblance of meaning to you. Do you think those terms mean something to the folks under your authority? Spend some time in your break area and find out. Gather a few folks around you and ask them to indicate which words they understand. Go slowly through the list, and make sure they understand you are testing this article, not them!

The "curse of knowledge" makes it difficult for you to communicate with your people. It's sometimes difficult to communicate with your suppliers and even to your community about the problems you experience in your work. Within your organization, it may be difficult for one department to problem-solve with another, or for a team member to understand another who is an internal supplier.

The "curse of knowledge" keeps parents from communicating with their teenagers, no matter how genuine their desire. It's difficult for American tourists to communicate with local nationals when they travel, even by speaking more slowly and loudly. It's difficult for technical specialists to communicate with anyone--just try calling a "help desk" for a computer software problem!

The more expert we become in any topic, the more intrigued we become by nuance and complexity. We forget what it's like to not know. A symptom of the "curse of knowledge" is a desire for accuracy to excess. Having the desire to serve, you tend to share everything you know in detail. It is better, however, to share just enough to be useful to the other person. Then, when the listener indicates some initial comprehension, share a little more (if it is requested).

Because of your role in your organization, you are unavoidably cursed with knowledge. What do you do? Listen! The tendency is to explain more. Instead, listen and be sensitive, making special effort to be patient and understanding. Invite questions. Encourage individuals to express their ambiguity. When you share information, make your description simple, concrete, and practical.

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