

## 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 particular functional area, the initials and terms seem like a foreign language, yet everyone seems to know what everyone else is saying.

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

Here, test yourself on this alphabet soup of computer terms. What is each of these? ActiveX, bandwidth, cache, defragment, encryption, flat file, GIGO, HTML, IM...VoIP, WYSIWYG, XML, yobibyte, and zip. Are you familiar with these? Most are brand new terms to me. I found these at [www.techterms.com](http://www.techterms.com). (I realize some of you 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 as I read *Made to Stick*, a book by brothers Chip and Dan Heath. I could immediately see how this concept applies to leaders.

The more experience you have, the more difficult it is to remember what your listeners experience as they attempt to comprehend your comments.

Let me provide a “leadership” example. Let's say you are talking with folks 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, fiduciary responsibility, gross earnings, human capital, intellectual property...value proposition, weak dollar, ex-dividend, year-to-date, and zero based budgeting.

My guess is that most of those terms have a very explicit meaning to you. Do you think those terms mean something to the folks under your authority? I don't! If you doubt me, clip this article and spend some time in the break area. Gather a few folks around you and ask them to indicate if they think they could explain each word. Go slowly through the list, and I bet that fewer than half will raise their hands.

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. It's difficult within your organization for one department to communicate with another.

The “Curse of Knowledge” makes it difficult for parents to communicate 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 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 tell everything you know in great detail. It is better, however, to share just enough to be useful. Then, when the listener indicates some comprehension, share a little more (if it is requested).

Because of your role in your organization, you are cursed with knowledge. What do you do? Be sensitive, making special effort to be patient and understanding. As you share information, make your descriptions simple, concrete, and practical. Invite and welcome questions at all times!

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