

# The Advantage of Not Knowing Everything

By Joe Whitefield

A local newspaper was doing a story on education that featured a first-grade teacher. When asked by the reporter to describe the teacher, one of her current students replied, “She teaches us things we never knew.” That truly says a lot about the teacher’s ability to teach and the great relationship she developed with her students. It also says something important about the mindset of the student who seems to enjoy learning new things.

Do you remember the feelings associat-

ed with learning new things? The process of gaining knowledge brings a sense of accomplishment for the effort required to learn, as well as empowerment from the knowledge itself. When we learn new information about a subject, more options are available and the potential for success is greater. Hopefully, your desire to learn “things you never knew” is still strong today. There certainly is a lot to know to be a successful facilities manager. If you are anything like me, continuous learning is not only a desire, it is a must.

In their new book, *Think Like a Freak*, authors Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner speak to the many facets of thinking (and learning) in order to encourage the readers to tackle the diverse, challenging questions they face. In addition to the global economic and environmental questions that affect us all at some level, there are several personal questions for consideration including:

- Should I quit my job?
- Should I go back to school?
- Should I go on a diet?
- Should I sell my motorcycle?
- Should I grow a beard or mustache?
- Should I splurge on something fun?

## GET EDUCATED

The answers to these and all questions have some cost and consequences for those asking. They definitely require some thought and consideration of relevant trade-offs. Of course, knowledge of the subjects and understanding of the issues would go a long way in answering these types of questions effectively. Suppose a person does not possess enough knowledge or information to make an informed decision. Clearly, it is time to get educated. With a superabundance of resources today, that should be easy, right? Turns out, it may not be as easy as you might think.

Levitt and Dubner highlight a particular barrier to learning things that we do not know—namely, *failing to acknowledge what we do not know*. They go so far as to say the three hardest words in the English language are “I don’t know.” There are many reasons for people



wanting to appear more knowledgeable than they truly are. Regardless of the reasons, the real problem, as the authors put it, is, "Until you admit what you don't yet know, it's virtually impossible to learn what you need to."

For me, the learning process typically takes one of three forms: explanation, example, or personal experience. Whether hearing from others, observing the experiences of others, or experiencing something firsthand, each form of learning has a set of accompanying benefits while also imposing certain costs or risks. These costs, perceived or real, can serve as the reason for people bluffing their way through situations and not pursuing the appropriate information they need to make better decisions.

No one wants to display a lack of knowledge on any subject to their peers. I suspect the greatest fear of acknowledging you don't know something is that others will possibly develop a diminished view of you or your abilities. Taken too far, this fear could have detrimental effects because we cut ourselves off from the usefulness of knowledge obtained by others' communications or experiences. Ironically, the knowledge-bluffing process could produce the same results when poor outcomes reveal the lack of knowledge all along.

#### RESOLVE AND DESIRE

How prevalent is this barrier for you or others in your organization? Let me suggest that the first step in confronting this fear-based barrier is to rephrase the problem to an issue of timing rather than intellectual capacity. Consider the difference between the statements "I don't know" and "I don't yet know." The former suggests defeat, while the latter suggests resolve and the desire to know.

Learning is best achieved when resolve and the desire to know are the drivers. So, strive to foster an organizational culture of learning and innovation. When learning and discovery are the goals, knowledge is the byproduct. Then, knowledge in the form of directly

applicable information and feedback that proves/disproves can be used for the good of the individual, organization, and institution.

Knowledge gained through any process can be applied to improve our decisions today, providing better outcomes and additional benefits to our institutions both today and tomorrow. Admit-

ting that you do not know something (or everything) may be the breakthrough first step that leads to learning something you never knew. ☺

Joe Whitefield is executive director of facilities services at Middle Tennessee University, Murfreesboro, TN. He can be reached at [joe.whitefield@mtsu.edu](mailto:joe.whitefield@mtsu.edu).

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