

The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action.

Pfeffer, J. & Sutton, R. (2000). Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Why this book?

Pfeffer and Sutton outline five elements in our organizations that widen the gap between knowing and doing (talking about and taking action). As the founder of Stakeholder Centered Coaching Marshall Goldsmith is fond of saying: "There is no evidence that the world is a better place because of what we know; the world is a better place because of what we do." This book outlines some of the barriers that prevent individuals from getting things done. The five limiting processes can be used in coaching individual leaders and more structurally at a higher organizational level.

The term GAP is used to indicate many differences between what we say or believe and what actually happens. Pfeffer and Sutton provide a very helpful template to more fully understand what gets in the way of behaving in alignment with your espoused goals and values. How would learning and schools be different if we closed this GAP?

Knowing different theories is important AND, as well all should know, insufficient. The importance to transfer knowledge into action, apply useful ideas, and focus on how to adopt new learning, is summed up by Lew Platt, former the CEO of HP when he said: "I wish we knew how to execute what we know at HP." If we can't apply knowledge into a useful application to the organization, the work gets stymied or at least delayed. If we learn by doing, the gap between knowledge and action shrinks. People learn to swim by getting into the water, not by reading books on swimming.

A point made early in the book offers a reason so many efforts to get results do not produce in a timely manner. So many systems built by consulting firms, information technologists, and knowledge gurus are separated from those who are closest to the work. This also leads to ineffective use of budgets, the intellectual capital of the people working, and sometimes an arrogance of knowing what's best from the office. Pfeffer and Sutton say: "Social interaction is often crucial." Watch a couple of episodes of Undercover Boss on CNBC network. You will be amazed at what you learn when you walk in the shoes of the frontline colleagues.

Another idea presented in this book suggests that "knowledge" is viewed as a noun. This finite description can, or will, limit the possibility of gaining future knowledge. What if we focused on "learning" as an alternative? This active verb signals an ongoing process. Herb Kelleher, SW Airlines said, "We hire for attitude." He said he can teach ticketing processes but he can't teach attitude. Sounds like he is on to something.

Here are the five elements that play out in real time:

1. When Talk Substitutes for Action
2. When Memory Is a Substitute for Thinking
3. When Fear Prevents Acting on Knowledge
4. When Measurement Obstructs Good Judgment
5. When Internal Competition Turns Friends into Enemies

Anyone who has sat through endless meetings, long planning sessions, or been involved with the reverse “butterfly effect” (a great deal of energy with little result) will see one or more of the five elements playing out in real time.

1. **When Talk Substitutes for Action.** There are distinct advantages from constructively talking about problems, processes, and purpose; but without taking action we cannot see whether or not the proposed plans work or waste time and energy. Unfortunately, some people are content going to meeting and talking. How many of you have been in meetings that are reminiscent of the movie Groundhog Day where the same meeting happens over and over again? We have talked about the same issue month after month with no action that would move us forward.

Some people think talking about an issue is taking action. Valuable resources in time, money, and ideation suffer. Even when a decision is reached about a problem; that does not ensure action will be taken on that problem. “A decision, by itself, changes nothing.” Preparing written reports without follow up actions do not produce feedback that is needed and useful to the organization.

Pfeffer and Sutton warn us, “Mission statements are among the most blatant and common means that organizations use to substitute talk for action.” They go on to say: “There seems to be little connection between how much effort an organization devotes to planning or even how well it does planning and how well it performs.” Planning without actions is an academic exercise. When hiring, do we talk to the person and see if we like them? Do we actually have them do something so we can see what they do with an issue or learning?

2. **When Memory Is a Substitute for Thinking.** “People in organizations that use memory as a substitute for thinking often do what has always been done without any reflecting.” You hear: “We tried that before and it didn’t work.” Well, what did we learn from that initiative? What has changed in the context that it may be worth trying again? Do we have different staff with different skills?

A quote in the book by Stephen Quesnelle stated: “Sacred cows are the barriers that everybody *knows* about but that nobody *talks* about...They’re the policies and procedures that have outlived their usefulness – but that no one dares touch.”

Premature closure is a way to get out of facing problems. It also sucks the positive energy out of the room. It also can become a barrier to any alternative, more positive approach. People don't like uncertainty so they run to a conclusion as fast as they can. The authors quote David Kelley: "This is the best we can think of right now. But the only thing I am sure of is that it is temporary and it is wrong. We just have to keep experimenting so it keeps getting better all the time." This quote signals to learn continually because the landscape keeps changing. And, will continue to change. Get Over It.

And there is another danger that comes from a history of success. "As their successes accumulate, organizations grow complacent and learn too little," as stated by the authors. Richard Pascale (1990), *Managing on the Edge*, said in his opening line: "Nothing fails like success." We get lulled into believing we have arrived at the right answer and we resist ongoing reflection and thinking.

3. **When Fear Prevents Acting on Knowledge.** Remembering one of W. Edwards Deming's principles was *Drive Out Fear*, the authors remind us that without a safe place ideas will stay hidden. In *The New IQ* by Chris Coffey (2015) he explains the need for having 'safe space' to create opportunities for deeper conversations. Taking risks must be honored and sometimes rewarded.

When fear exists, people don't talk as much and they certainly will not take a risk on an innovating idea. Here is a quote which can have a dampening effect: Samuel Goldwyn: "I don't want yes-men around me. I want everyone to tell me the truth – even though it costs him his job." This quote from the book is an example of why people will not give honest feedback. The alternative is what David Russo said in this book: "We punish nothing. We reward creativity. Very much like Maria Montessori, we believe creativity should be followed, not led."

The following suggestions are quoted in the Knowledge Doing Gap for driving fear out of the organization during Hard Times:

- ***Prediction:*** Give people as much information as possible about what will happen to them and when it will happen.
- ***Understanding:*** Give people detailed information about why actions, especially actions that upset and harm them, were taken.
- ***Control:*** Give people as much influence as possible over what happens, when things happen, and the way things happen to them; let them make as many decisions about their own fate as possible.
- ***Compassion:*** Convey sympathy and concern for the disruption, emotional distress, and financial burdens that people face.

4. **When Measurement Obstructs Good Judgment.**

A perfect example of when measurement obstructs good judgment is – a former superintendent of a large urban school said, “raise test scores or find a new job.” What is interesting is that most of the good principals found another job, out of the district leaving a leadership drain. Good Job Mr. Supt. How did that work for you? How did that work for the staff? How did it work for the kids? You might get the numbers and lose the relationships with customers and colleagues. Whatever the metrics, they should be used as guides for actions since we can never have absolute control of all variables. The metrics should also be aligned with the behavior we want to see. Measuring test scores can be an important part of assessment. If it is at the expense of relationships, it may not be a long-term success indicator.

Another example is why GE, Microsoft, Google, and others abandoned the ‘rank and yank’ measurement system for employees. Ranking everyone and eliminating the bottom 10 percent, in theory, would increase productivity. The result was eliminating some of the most creative team members and fear was created among those who still had a job. The cost of human resource replacement is high in money, time, and organizational knowledge.

When measurement obstructs good judgment there are many short-term consequences for the people and the organization. “Morale governs motivation which is key to timely product development; strong culture fosters a healthy work environment” and that “employees need rewards for key contributions and successes.”

The authors make the point: “Real control does not come simply from having a plethora of outcome measures. Control and improvement come from measures that provide information about processes, measures that give people immediate and understandable information about how they need to act.”

“Too many leaders confuse feedback with paperwork.” “Filling out a form is *inspection*, not feedback,” says Kelly Allan. “History has taught us that relying on inspections is costly, improves nothing for very long, and makes the organization less competitive.”

Metrics should be relevant to organizational values, long-term success, and be as controllable as possible by the person who is being held to the standards. “You might think that organizations would recognize the commonsense wisdom expressed in a line from Otis Redding’s song:” “Sitting by the Dock of the Bay” on the need for fewer, focused measurements: “Can’t do what ten people tell me to do, so I guess I’ll remain the same.” as quoted by the authors.

5. **When Internal Competition Turns Friends into Enemies.** “The beliefs about competition are so ingrained that they serve as mindless, automatic, but powerful principles for organizing and managing individual behavior.” We have to be careful that

the metrics don't spur on internal competition where to win, your colleague has to lose. That shortsighted process will ultimately defeat the system. "Internal competition makes it even more difficult for people to put knowledge into action and to learn from each other.

SUMMARY

Firms That Surmount the Knowing-Doing Gap. Those companies that have been successful have created the space for conversations that lead to action. And, after action is taken, feedback is collected and used for reflection for continuous improvement. It takes leadership, and honest conversations about important issues, to create a culture where the gap is closed between knowing and doing.

Turning Knowledge into Action. The following quotes from the Knowing-Doing Gap seem to capture why action is so important.

"CEO David Kelley likes to say that: "Enlightened trial and error outperforms the planning of flawless intellects."

"There is no doing without mistakes. What is the company's response?"

"Reasonable failure should never be received with anger."

Clayton Christensen, the author of The Innovator's Dilemma and other valuable books wrote: "What companies need is a forgiveness framework, and not a failure framework, to encourage risk-taking and empower employees to be thinking leaders rather than passive executives."

Close the GAP – Release new energy for yourself and others to put great ideas into action.

Here is the link to order your copy

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