

The Danger of Learning Without Unlearning

By BH Tan

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The willingness and courage to let go of your knowledge is the beginning of practical wisdom.

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The difference between explicit and tacit learning

In early 2015, there was a talk in Singapore on humanitarian medicine attended by about 500 medical practitioners and volunteers from various parts of Asia. The speaker was the group CEO of one of Singapore's largest healthcare groups. He described a case involving an elderly dementia patient who had a foot amputated due to diabetes. Now the other was becoming gangrenous. This person did not have any family members. What should the doctors in the audience do?

A vast majority of them said that they would amputate the remaining leg because that was the most logical thing to do. And they knew how to do it. But when asked what they would prefer if they were the patient, only one or two wanted the operation.

In a broader context, when faced with a challenge, many people will reflexively do what they have been trained to do. However as the example on amputation has demonstrated, the practice of medicine is not just about treating an illness. Good doctors use both the head as well as the heart. It is first and foremost about taking care of the patient.

Decision-making based entirely on the expertise that one has acquired, i.e. explicit knowledge, may be woefully

inadequate, even irresponsible. Dependence on explicit knowledge assumes that the world is mechanistic and predictable. If the approach worked in the past, it should work now. In the 21st century, complexity is the defining feature of the business environment. We need professionals and leaders who can make judgments recognizing that everything is contextual and in a state of flux. Knowing the right way to do the right thing is of paramount importance. This calls for *tacit knowledge* or practical wisdom. If explicit knowledge is know-how, tacit knowledge is know-why or know-what-is-most-appropriate.

Tacit knowledge comes only with experience, hard-knocks and reflection. In the course of practising our craft, be it medicine, engineering, leadership, teaching, sales, marketing, or design, we will be faced with the contradictory needs of human nature- the tried-and-tested vs trial-and-error, exactness vs approximation, substance vs form, and so on. Many will remain stuck in the either-or dualism indefinitely. In the fullness of time, there may come a point when, unbeknownst to ourselves, we abandon the habit that has defined us. Perhaps, it is an offhand remark from a colleague or a friend. Or we might be in a rut and are finally ready to explore new ideas. Now looking in from outside, we suddenly see with new eyes what has eluded us for the longest time. Our

Our fresh insights propel us to a higher level of understanding. Unencumbered by dogmas, we proceed self-assuredly to improvise. We transcend the either-or dichotomy, reconciling it with the inclusive both-and mindset. This is tacit learning.

Learning from the Dao

Lao Zi (circa 500 BC) was a contemporary of Confucius. His name means the Old Master. The classic Chinese manual on the art of living *Dao Te Jing* or simply *The Dao* is widely attributed to him. This is likely to be the most widely translated book after the Bible. It reveals the wisdom of living systems, describing the patterns of energy within and around us. The Dao consists of 81 verses, written with grace and large-heartedness. They radiate a sense of humanity, humor, paradox and deep wisdom.

To be knowledgeable, acquire something every day;

To be wise, drop something every day.

You become light and still,

Doing nothing, yet nothing is left undone.

Verse 48, *The Dao*

Drop your tools or die

In a keynote address entitled *Drop Your Tools* to educators in Rochester, New York on June 15, 2006, Professor Karl E. Weick, University of Michigan, expounded on the pressing need to reconfigure management education. When the dynamics in the environment keep shifting, how can we prepare managers to become more adaptive?

Weick shared real-life cases of wildland firefighters who were trapped in an exploding fire. As the safety zone was within sight, the most sensible action would be to drop

their heavy equipment and run for their lives. Yet, many of the firefighters refused to do so, were engulfed by fire, and died with their tools beside them. One firefighter perished with his backpack on and a chain saw in his hand, a mere 250 feet from safety.

These aren't isolated incidents. There are many other examples such as air force fighter pilots who refused to eject from their distressed aircraft, and died as a result. In 2014, the South Korean ferry Sewol was on route from Incheon to Jeju with hundreds of children and teachers for a school excursion. The ferry was visibly overloaded and structurally unsound. Nobody, the captain and his crew no less, felt anything was amiss. Along the journey, it sailed into treacherous waters and started to list dangerously. Orders were passed down for all to remain in their cabins. Most people obeyed unquestioningly. More than 300 passengers, mostly children, were drowned. There were a few survivors though. These were the children who took matters into their own hand. They defied their elders, clambered onto the upper deck and jumped overboard.



South Korean ferry Sewol lying on its side

In organizations, it's not uncommon for managers to continue to cling to old style of working and relating though it's causing tension. They dive into operational minutiae when they should be thinking more strategically.

They micromanage when they should delegate and empower. They insist on using the same process and methodologies even though there is evidence that they are trapped in a downward spiral.

Letting go is hard to do

Why do people hang onto their tools even though they may no longer serve their purpose? There are likely to be two main reasons: we all prefer to remain in our comfort zone, and it's the power of habit. Having the right set of tools dramatically increases our chances of success. However, relying on these tools regardless of context can hinder our progress. As the saying goes, "If all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."

Remaining in our comfort zone is second nature to most people. The pilot who went down with his disabled plane preferred the cocoon of the cockpit rather than the unknown conditions upon ejection. Weick has an interesting explanation for firefighters' refusal to drop their tools: they didn't think of their tools as separate from themselves. A seasoned firefighter is one who makes skilful use of his tools. Tools become part of his identity. Which self-respecting firefighter would abandon his tools? And which engineering managers would dare to challenge time-tested processes on the production lines? At the start of our learning journey, the knowledge that we acquired presupposes a stable, knowable and predictable environment. We are taught traditional logic, reasoning and methodologies. The instructions we receive are characterized by clear cause-and-effect relationships. The teaching conducted in schools and colleges is done so in such a context.

Then we start to tackle more difficult problems. Though

there is still a clear relationship between cause and effect in difficult situations, it is not visible to everybody. There may be multiple correct answers. Zeroing in on the preferred one requires domain expertise. This is the context of our work environment. We are under pressure to perform. Hence we focus on acquiring more and more tools. If they work, let's just keep using them. Soon a deeply entrenched habit forms. It becomes our autopilot. We don't ask why. We just do.

As we progress further, we run smack into volatile and ambiguous situations. Now the right answers are far from obvious. Complex challenges defy existing approaches or solutions. Domain expertise may not help. Even the experts are at odds with each other. In truth we don't know how to proceed. This requires us to take pause and reflect. And lighten up, so to speak.

Lao Zi tells us that less is more. He has a profound expression for this – *wei wu wei*- which literally means *doing not doing*, The tempo slows. Now we can decide why. Then what, when and how to act. But first we need to be brave enough to let go of our knowledge. And do what our heart tells us. This is the hallmark of wisdom.

How changing one habit quintupled a company's financial performance

Back in October 1987 when Paul O'Neill gave his first speech as CEO of Alcoa, the aluminium manufacturing giant, investors were nervous. Alcoa's product lines were faltering, profit margins and revenue were in decline. But O'Neill didn't talk about reviving the business or anything else that would bring comfort to Wall Street's ears.

"I want to talk to you about worker safety," he began.

The room went silent.

“Every year, numerous Alcoa workers are injured so badly that they miss a day of work. Our safety record is better than the general American workforce, especially considering that our employees work with metals that are 1500 degree and machines that can rip a man’s arms off. But it’s not good enough. I intend to make Alcoa the safest company in America. I intend to go for zero injuries.”

The audience was stunned. This was incredible. For the new CEO, safety trumped profits. Where was the promise to raise profits and lower costs? Investors ran out of the room as soon as the presentation was finished. Many of them advised their clients to dump their stock immediately. As one analyst put it, “Alcoa’s board put a crazy hippie in charge, and he’s going to kill the company

O’Neill’s emphasis on safety made a profound impact. He later explained, “I knew I had to transform Alcoa. But you can’t order people to change. So I decided I was going to start by focusing on one thing. If I could start disrupting the habits around one thing, it would spread throughout the entire company.”

A year later, Alcoa’s profits hit a record high. Paul O’Neill was a former US Government Secretary of Treasury and a complete outsider to the business. He concentrated on changing one important, or keystone, habit throughout his organization-safe working practice. And this had a domino effect, causing many other habits or processes to change too. When he retired, 13 years later, Alcoa’s annual earnings was five times higher than when he started.

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