

The Curse of Knowledge

— Brief Overview —

Are You Tackling the Right Project?

Early in 2011, while New England was still buried under a mountain of snow, Jeff Reeves went on the hunt for a consultant. Jeff, the vice president of sales and marketing for ERQuip, a manufacturer of products used in hospital emergency rooms, is unassuming and soft-spoken—not a stereotypical, hard-charging head of sales. He had moved to ERQuip to join the senior team at a mid-size company while cutting his commute to ten minutes.

Alas, within days of jumping into his new role, Jeff realized most of his new sales team had languished in their roles for more than two decades. They relied on old-school selling methods that just weren't cutting it anymore. He quickly set out to find an expert who could train his salespeople in strategic selling. A perfectly reasonable and logical next step.

However, Jeff was hunting for the wrong expert. Strategic selling skills were not the best solution for ERQuip's woes, and hiring a training company, no matter how talented, would have turned out to be a colossal waste. The game-changing, high-ROI solution in this case was a wholesale shift in communication between headquarters and the old-school sales folks combined with new sales processes.

Jeff had initially not chosen the right project or the right type of expert. Unfortunately, based on the requests I receive from executives to help nail down a great project and consultant, this mistake happens about half the time. The problem is most consultants will reassure you, "Yes, we do that, and here's how..." Only a few will honestly admit, "No, I don't do that, exactly, but I can help you when you get to the next stage." Neither of those answers will put you on the path to outstanding results.

To hire the best outside expert, you have to have the right project in mind, and as I just pointed out, executives get that wrong surprisingly often. Why? Because you, like me and everyone else, suffer from the "curse of knowledge."

The Curse of Knowledge

When I'm speaking at a conference or corporate event, I often illustrate the curse of knowledge with a short exercise. Well, an exercise and some guile. Here's the guile: early on in the speech, I ask if it is anyone's birthday. If the audience is large, there is a good chance that at least one person is celebrating their birthday, and I honor them with a small gift. Whether or not it was someone's birthday is actually irrelevant. I've planted the idea of birthdays in everyone's mind, and that's what counts.

Later in the presentation, I invite the audience to participate in a simple exercise: "I am going to tap out the rhythm to a song, and I want you to guess what song it is. It's a very familiar song that everyone in the audience will know. In fact, some of you may feel like you've heard it a couple of times too many!"

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See whether you can guess the song.” Then I tap out the first couple of measures. TAP TA-TAP TAP TAP TAP. Pause. TAP TA-TAP TAP TAP TAP. “That’s enough,” I announce. “How many of you have figured out the song?” The majority of audience members wave their hands. You are mentally raising your hand because you, too, know what song I tapped out, don’t you?

From the stage, I continue. “I guess it was pretty easy. Are you sure you’ve got it? We’re all going to sing it together.” Most hands stay up. I start conducting them, and as a group, they invariably launch into a rousing rendition of “Happy Birthday.”

“Wait a minute!” I exclaim. “What are you singing? Couldn’t you hear what I was tapping?” Then I belt out the first two bars of “The Star Spangled Banner” —which, of course, has the same rhythm as “Happy Birthday.” Try it now: “O-oh say can you see, by the dawn’s early light.” Same rhythm.

After the laughter has died down, I’ll explain what happened in this replication of a fabulous study designed years ago by Elizabeth Newton at Stanford. The audience suffered from the curse of knowledge. People caught up by my presentation already knew the rhythm for “Happy Birthday,” and many had rehearsed it mentally when I brought up birthdays earlier in the presentation. They were absolutely sure that “Happy Birthday” fit the rhythm I was tapping out. As a result, they confidently assumed they had the answer when I asked them to sing along.

The same phenomenon occurs every day in business. While you may have chimed in on “Happy Birthday” five hundred times in your whole life, you’ve lived the rhythm and tune of a company five hundred times after working there only two years. If you have been in an industry for just ten years, you have learned, heard, and sung the conventions and logic of business at least 2,500 times!

Is it any wonder that when you face the rhythm of a certain situation, you think you know the right answer? You can’t unlearn that knowledge any more than you can unlearn “Happy Birthday.”

Beating the Curse

The curse of knowledge hits you when you are formulating a project—before you make your first call to an outside expert. The closer you are to the strategic end of your mission, the higher the likelihood you’ve faced the same situation numerous times and are confident in your answer. In fact, you are more likely to be right in situations you have faced many times. Alas, the curse of knowledge makes it far less likely that you will recognize when you’re wrong.

Now that you know about the curse of knowledge, it’s easier to understand why you should welcome outside input on whether you do, in fact, recognize the song. When you think your best bet is to contract talented implementation experts to bring your plan to fruition, accept input on whether your approach is really the best option. If you have decided to hire an expert to help build the plan, solicit advice on whether you are focused in the right area. In other words, track down the appropriate expert to help answer the follow-up question, “*Is that the best way?*” A top-notch expert will tell you quickly and free of charge whether you were already on the right track or will present you with compelling evidence that you should re-examine your alternatives

In addition, the following series of questions will help you past the curse of knowledge:

- **Why are we undertaking this project?** Asking a series of “why” questions forces you to think at least one level higher in the chain of decisions that led you to this project. You are not asking why you need a consultant, which is a separate question, nor are you asking whether it’s a project worth doing; rather, you are asking why you are doing the project at all. What is the higher-level goal this project serves? In ERQuip’s case, the answers to why it was conducting sales training were that their salespeople’s skills were no longer effective and that sales were flagging.
- **What is required to achieve our higher-level goal?** As discussed in *The Executive’s Guide to Consultants*, your project is usually one of a number of pieces that must be in place for the overall goal to be met. What else is required? Keep to elements that *must* be in place, not those that are helpful or enablers. For the ERQuip salespeople’s skills to be effective, the following had to be in place: they had to have the right skills, and they had to be motivated to use them.
- **What is our evidence that this is the best area of focus, or is it a strategic decision?** Assumptions are not the best basis for marshaling your resources to attack a problem. What observable evidence do you have that, of all the pieces that must be in place for you to achieve your goal, the focus of this project is the best one? In ERQuip’s case, the need for improved negotiation skills was based on the vice president’s sense that the marketplace was changing and his salespeople were too reliant on relationships. That’s not evidence; it’s assertions. Upon further inspection, it turned out that motivation was also a problem and that it hinged on poor collaboration between marketing and sales. There are times when strategic choices rather than evidence will dictate the focus of your project.
- **Is this the best way to proceed?** Even if you have solid evidence supporting the focus of your project, you should still question your approach. For instance, ERQuip called some outside experts, explained the situation, and posed the question “Is this *the* best way to move forward?”

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