



There's No Shame In Saying, 'I Don't Know!'

A few months ago, I was asked to write this month's BackTalk. I readily agreed. (I LOVE to see my name in print – and the only way I've found to see it often is to write an article myself.) However, I had no real clue what to write about. Luckily, as the deadline for the article approached, Associate Publisher Elizabeth Starrett sent me an advance copy of the articles in this month's CROSSTALK.

After reading the great line up of articles she had assembled for the month, (hey – she brings chocolate to our reviewers' meetings, so I am always nice to her), this BackTalk practically wrote itself.

First, go back and read the publishers' note. Go ahead. Next, understand that Beth referred to the fact that she would have been greatly helped in a previous job if she had had the knowledge contained in this issue of CROSSTALK back then. What she was saying is that she didn't know that there was additional knowledge out there that she could use. In other words, she didn't know that she didn't know enough. The way I used to envision it, you either know something, or you don't know something. However, I now see that you can either know or not know something, and you can also know or not know whether you know or not. (Read the sentence again – it will eventually make sense.)

So, there are two dimensions of knowledge: The first dimension is what I know; the second dimension is my awareness of my knowledge. Figure 1 shows the four possible combinations of knowledge and self-awareness. Given a specific topic, your knowledge fits into one of the quadrants above.

Now the problems in communications become clear. I (of course) am in the "I know that I know" group. I am reasonably well educated. (Have I ever mentioned that I went to Texas A&M?) This is the best quadrant in which to belong – awareness that you are knowledgeable about a subject.

If you are not lucky enough to be among the "I know that I know," group, then I suppose the next best option is to be in the "I know that I don't know" quadrant. You lack knowledge – but are aware of your ignorance. You are teachable. You can admit to yourself and others that you don't know everything, and you are willing to learn.

Unfortunately, not all of us are so self-aware. Some of us belong to the "I don't know that I know" quadrant. You have knowledge, but are unable to either apply or use the knowledge you have. You've wasted your education.

And, coming in last and least, is the "I don't know that I don't know" quadrant. Here is where communication becomes a problem. A person who fits into this group is ignorant about a topic, but isn't even aware that they are ignorant. Of course, being unaware that they are clueless, they wander around in blissful ignorance. Unfortunately, they seldom wander around in blissful ignorance in silence. They become self-proclaimed experts, ready to share their opinions to anybody ready to listen,

thus making life miserable for those around them. Because they are totally unaware they are clueless about a topic, they are sure that they are experts, and frequently refuse to listen or learn from others.

Now, here's the scary part. If I think that I am an "I know that I know" person, and I'm wrong, well, that makes me a "I don't know that I don't know."

What's the cure for being an "I don't know that I don't know?" Unfortunately, often there isn't one. Self-proclaimed experts are hard to cure. Sometimes, they are even hard to recognize. I have listened to people who have never written a line of code lecture me about which programming language to use. I have listened to people that never managed a project explain how to create a schedule and how to gather requirements. Academic theory is one thing, but until you've managed a project, designed a large system, or written a real-time program, you just "don't know!"

Just having a college degree does not make you an expert in software development. You have to do it to truly understand it. Doctors, after graduating from medical school, cannot practice medicine. They have to complete a residency to show that they have practical knowledge along with theoretical knowledge. Why do we think we are different? Doctors who are

true experts are still said to practice medicine. They continue to learn as they perform their craft. Again, why should we be any different?

To become real practitioners, we have to practice for a while to become qualified. The first step on the road to becoming an expert is saying, "I know that I don't know" about some topic. There is no shame in saying, "I know that I don't know." We all have gaps in our knowledge. We cannot be experts in everything. We need to recognize the gaps in our knowledge, and learn from those who "know that they know." Find the real experts, and learn from them. And if you think you are one, maybe it's time to look one more time.

I never thought I would be quoting poetry in a BackTalk, but the following verse definitely applies:

O wad some power the giftie gie us –
To see oursels as ithers see us!"
("O would some power the gift to give us –
To see ourselves as others see us!")
– From Ode to a Louse
Robbie Burns

I am not sure why Robbie Burns wrote an ode dedicated to a louse – but I am sure you can come up with louses on your own that this ode applies to.

– David A. Cook
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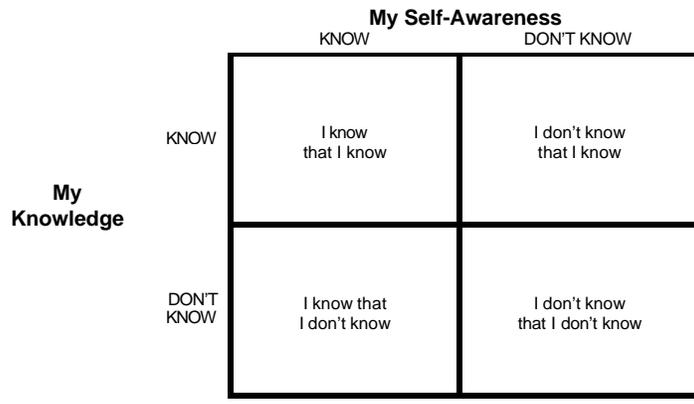


Figure 1: Knowledge Dimensions