

Know & Do is publishing a series of monthly “Think Papers” for its subscribers and clients, highlighting different issues that promote the philosophy of ‘**knowing + doing = being**’. Our approach is: if you cannot define where you want to **BE**, how can you **KNOW** what you are **DOING** will help you reach your goal?

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The Knowing – Doing Gap

Think Paper No. 1; Series 1

Introduction

The purpose of these papers is simple; they get you the reader to *think* about a subject area. Henry Ford once stated that:

“Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is probably the reason why so few engage in it”

We live in a world of instant access, instant demand and have seemingly lost the opportunity to stop and think too long about things. The Miriam Webster dictionary provides the following definitions of the verb ‘think’:

“Have a particular opinion, belief, or idea about someone or something; Direct one’s mind toward someone or something; use one’s mind actively to form connected ideas; Take into account or consideration when deciding on a possible action”

In many of the training programmes that we run, feedback tells us that a large percentage of participants really value the time and space to *think* about a subject and what it means or how it relates to them. They relish the chance to explore the subject, play with it and view it from different perspectives.

Therefore, our think papers are designed to expose readers to ideas, to encourage thought and offer comment on them. We want to promote a thinking culture and get people engaged in knowledge creation and more importantly, its ultimate application.

We deliberately chose the name of our company to reflect a philosophy that we try to live; “**Know and Do**”. It is a simple mantra yet one which is profound when applied. All too often though, we have first-hand experience of where we have been brought in to work with clients (individuals or organisations) where one or both elements have been missing. More often than not it has been the application of the knowledge that has been lacking and not the knowledge itself.

Acting on Knowledge

“A little knowledge that acts is worth infinitely more than much knowledge that is idle.” -Kahlil Gibran

Knowledge has no power until it is applied. A fire cannot be lit by knowledge alone; a spark must be applied to light the fire from within. We find ourselves in a global knowledge economy with many companies, teams and individuals stagnating as they fail to systematically apply what they already know. In a rapidly changing market place, many companies are discovering that what they KNOW *and* DO is not keeping pace with what they want or need to BE.

Why do so much education and training, management consulting, and business research and so many books and articles produce so little change in what managers and organisations actually do? This was the central premise of a book by two Harvard Business School Professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton: *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How smart companies turn knowledge into action*¹. The book provides **an insight into why so few companies apply enough of what they know.**

They came across instance after instance of where companies collectively spent thousands, if not millions, on hiring in expertise from management consultants only to fail to implement the advice produced. The book was a four year search about what causes the knowing-doing gap. A gap incidentally the authors found reported across all industries. They found no simple answers to the knowing-doing dilemma. They did report however, that:

“One of the most important insights from our research is that knowledge that is actually implemented is much more likely to be acquired from learning by doing than from learning by reading, listening, or even thinking.”

One of their main recommendations was *“to engage more frequently in thoughtful action. To spend less time just contemplating and talking about organisational problems.”* Taking action they state *“will generate experience from which you can learn.”*

The **knowing-doing gap** arises due to several factors. According to the authors, this gap can be minimized if organisations understand and carefully deal with the following eight factors:

**...thoughtful
action**

1. Why before how

Too many managers want to learn “how” in terms of detailed practices and behaviours and techniques, rather than “why” in terms of philosophy and general guidance for action.

¹ Pfeffer, Jeffrey; Sutton, Robert. (2000). *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publications.

2. *Knowing comes from doing and teaching others how*

Learning is best done by trying a lot of things, learning from what works and what does not, thinking about what was learned, and trying again.

3. *Action counts more than elegant plans and concepts*

Without taking some action, learning is more difficult and less efficient because it is not grounded in real experience. The idea of “firing” and then “aiming” helps to establish a cultural tone that talk and analysis without action are unacceptable.

4. *There is no doing without mistakes*

In building a culture of action, one of the most critical elements is what happens when things go wrong. Even well planned actions can go wrong. All learning involves some ‘failure,’ something from which one can continue to learn. Reasonable failure should never be received with anger.

5. *Fear fosters knowing-doing gaps, so drive out fear*

Fear in organisations causes all kinds of problems; it starts, or stops, at the top. People will not try something new if the reward is likely to be a career disaster. Putting people first and driving out fear are not just ideas to be implemented when times are good. Companies can downsize, can even close a facility, but do it in a way that maintains employee dignity and well-being and, as a consequence, productivity and performance. In organisations that are successful in turning knowledge into action, leaders inspire respect, affection, or admiration, but not fear.

6. *Fight the competition, not each other*

It is a mistaken idea that because competition has apparently triumphed as an economic system, competition within organisations is a superior way of managing. Firms establish various practices that intensify internal rivalry. Cooperation has somehow developed a bad reputation in many organisations but the phrase actually means that the result is the product of common effort, the goal is shared, and each member’s success is linked with very other’s.

7. *Measure what matters and what can help turn knowledge into action*

The dictum that ‘what is measured, is what gets done’ has led to the apparent belief that if a company measures more things, more will get done. But that is not at all the case. Organisations must also measure processes, not just outcomes. A few measures that are directly related to the basic business model are better than a plethora of measures that produce a lack of focus and confusion about what is important and what is not.

8. *What leaders do, how they spend their time and how they allocate resources, matters*

Leaders of companies which have been successful in minimizing the knowing-doing gap understand that their most important task is not necessarily to make strategic decisions, or, for that matter, many decisions at all. Their task is to help build systems that facilitate transformation of knowledge into action in a smooth, reliable way.

The future then does not lie in the hands of those who think, plan, imagine, dream, and hope *but* don't do. It lies in the hands of those who ***Know and Do***.

Your Thoughtful Action

Complete the following short exercise to help you see how easy it is to apply this in everyday situations.

This exercise will allow you to embed the concept of knowing and doing something about a particular issue you want to take action on.

Knowing	Doing
Step 1. <i>Take a current issue you have and one that you want to do something about</i>	On a clean sheet of paper write it down in simple clear steps
Step 2. <i>Think about 3 clear actions that you could take now today to let you know that you were on the way to doing something about it</i>	Write them down in positive and present tense terms Sign and date it
Step 3. <i>Visualize yourself doing these and sense the positive reward you get from the</i>	Find a quiet space and 'observe' yourself performing these action Imagine you're watching yourself on film Make the image clear, bright and colourful Sense the sights, sounds and feelings <i>...Now go ahead and do it!</i>

Your life is the sum of your choices; make today count and act on what you know to do. If you don't like where or who you are right now, take habitual action to change it.

Please share your experience with us. If the exercise has helped you, let us know and share it with other readers to encourage them to make a positive change.

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