

Knowledge Plus Skill Does Not Equal Will

By Gerry Riskin

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One of the great joys I have experienced in practicing law and consulting to professional service firms is the opportunity to work with people who are extremely bright and capable. Studies have been conducted by those outside of the professions that have concluded that professionals grasp concepts faster than any other identifiable group in society.

Believe it or not, this ironically can give rise to a handicap. Professionals who are used to assimilating huge amounts of information very rapidly sometimes do not distinguish between acquiring knowledge and acquiring a skill. In preparing to become professionals, and in practicing their professions, professionals assimilate huge amounts of information. It is not uncommon for a professional to say, If there is something you think I should know about this, please hurry up and tell me; if you want me to read, I read quickly; if you want to show me anything else I'll be happy to look. But let's get this done so I can return to my practice.

I have had the pleasure of dealing with many good firms whose leaders have said, If the programs you propose do nothing more than raise awareness, then they will have been worthwhile. I politely argue with that position indicating that there is nothing easier in the world than raising the awareness of professionals, but that indeed more is required if there is to be any accomplishment at all.

Specifically, the raising of awareness on its own — or, put another way, acquiring knowledge by itself — will not change performance or lead to achievement. The second component to achievement is the acquisition of skill.

Skill is always learned in a four-step process as follows:

- 1) Show me. Show me involves describing for the individual learning the skill exactly what the skill is to be acquired whether it is learning to tie shoelaces for an infant or learning to drive a car for a young adult or learning a sophisticated client relations skill, like courting or cross-selling. The individual must first have a very clear vision of what it is that he or she is expected to learn how to do.
- 2) Steps. Steps require that the skill be broken down into a sequence of logical and proven steps that those who are successful in executing the skill seem to consistently follow.
- 3) Practice. No skill is learned without practice. Therefore, after understanding what the skill is and being shown what the logical steps that might be incorporated are, the individual learning the skill must actually try it. Ironically, this is an area where many professionals have difficulty. They don't seem to understand the distinction between discussing or conceptualizing something and actually doing it. For example, a group of professionals who might be making a presentation in the hope of being retained to do certain work will agree without hesitation to the value of strategizing and discussing how they might behave in the presentation, but are often reluctant to engage in a rehearsal. Without doubt, the rehearsal yields benefits to the group that dramatically outweigh conceptualizing alone.
- 4) Feedback. Feedback is most valuable when it is from peers and clients. When someone learning a skill actually tries it, feedback is essential in order to help the individual acquiring the skill determine how he or she is doing.

I favour two very specific questions in the feedback process which are as follows:

First, ask *What did you like about how X did that?* This question invites positive reinforcement and, more importantly, communicates to the individual executing the skill what he or she might be doing that is effective that they may not even realize because so often feedback is not available. Additionally, this question protects the self-esteem of those who are receiving feedback.

The second question is: *Is there anything you might have done differently?* You'll note that this question does not ask whether

the individual himself or herself should have done anything differently, but rather, asks the observer, had he or she been in the shoes in the individual acquiring the skill, would they have done anything differently? This allows the person acquiring the skill to observe alternate approaches.

Over the years professional firms have gained considerable sophistication in fostering the acquisition of both knowledge and skill within their firms.

The final and most important ingredient is, however, missing in most firms today, including brand-name firms. The missing ingredient is the will to employ the knowledge and skill. Most good firms are so focused on production that they do not allocate sufficient management time to assist individuals in accomplishing objectives that are made possible by virtue of the knowledge and skill such individuals have acquired. For example, it is surprising to me the number of sessions I have conducted with senior management teams within professional firms where the most senior leader — senior partner or managing partner or both — will be absent because, notwithstanding their intention to attend and their knowledge that they could influence the thinking of their management team, a client crisis will keep them away from the meeting. I have watched groups of very capable leaders argue and debate fundamental practice issues without the presence of leadership to guide or gently encourage or gently discourage. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not uncommon. Worse, this abdication of leadership tends to influence the leadership style of the next level of management in turn. Practice group leaders typically do not spend time getting to know the individuals in the group and influence the choices of members in terms of action plans and follow up to ensure that such plans are achieved.

The will to manage means simply the decision to invest time in the leadership role — appointing figure heads who devote the majority of time to their own practices is not management. It's even worse than no management, because it gives the illusion that there is some kind of management. Only the results bear witness to the fact that such a configuration is not management at all.

The will to manage must include the following:

a) A willingness of a leader to get to know the individuals within the group. (If the group is too large, then the group must be broken into smaller component pieces. I have served firms that have even subdivided groups arbitrarily into subcomponents and in order not to give them a name which would connote qualitative differentiation have called one group orange, another blue, another red, etc.)

b) To allow the group to determine what it can accomplish as a group that cannot be accomplished by the individual members alone:

- Allow the group to formulate basic rules of conduct like showing up on time or agreeing to do what they promised each other that they would do.
- Formulate plans as individuals that are in harmony with the aspirations of the group.
- Insure that over time that the nature of the work that the group accepts or seeks will ensure a prosperous future for the group.
- To Help the group understand the drivers of profitability and how delegation, supervision and scheduling of work impact profitability and quality.
- Assist the group in obtaining the knowledge and skill and making the time to develop a better practice over time.
- To foster innovation.
- To ensure that achievements of a billable and non-billable nature are recognized and appreciated.
- To ensure that achievement becomes a habit rather than a rare exception.

Even without perfect knowledge and skill, the will to proceed can be a huge competitive advantage.