



## The problems with knowledge and skills

No one is suggesting that having lots of knowledge and skills is a bad thing – on the contrary. The problems are more about what we mean by the words themselves; how those problems translate into confusion; and how the confusion translates into difficulties with determining if we have the right knowledge and skills to do the job – whatever the job may be.

Arguing about the definitions the two terms may seem more academic than real, but failure to clarify the difference and convert that understanding into practical, working models and processes can produce serious effects. First, a couple of swipes at what we mean by the words, and the importance of the concept that emerges.

### Levels of learning

Knowledge is about information, and can be acquired from many sources, for example, books and other publications; videos; academic papers; lectures; and simple conversation. Until knowledge is translated into information that resides between the ears of an individual, and can be accessed by that individual for application as behaviour, it has little value. Skill is about the translation of knowledge into effective behaviour.

The table below illustrates the point:

<b>Recognition</b>	Can the learner separate the concept from other concepts?
<b>Recall</b>	Can the learner label the concept's components?
<b>Description</b>	Can the learner explain the concept's components?
<b>Application</b>	Can the learner explain how to use the concept?
<b>Demonstration</b>	Can the learner use the concept?

A moment's reflection will lead to the conclusion that only at the demonstration level has (behavioural) skill been acquired. Moreover, the methods appropriate to learning for the first four (knowledge based) levels are different in kind from that required for the demonstration level. Knowledge can be acquired by any of the sources noted above, but skill requires practice and feedback.

In case anyone wishes to challenge that observation, reflect for a moment on the thought of trying to learn to ride a bicycle by only reading about how to do it. We suspect that grazed elbows and knees might be a normal consequence. Worse, ponder the thought of going up in an aeroplane with a new pilot at the controls, who has only, thus far, attended lectures on how to fly the thing! Or turning up for an surgical operation where the surgeon is fresh out of class, having watched any number of videos on how to perform the said operation! Enough said?

## **Motor skills and managing skills**

So far we have only discussed 'motor' skills – the skills we use that involve some sort of physical activity. Knowledge is a critical enabler of effective behaviour – witness the pilot or surgeon – but mostly the skilled practitioner is interacting with a physical 'thing', with apologies to the unconscious patient's body. When we move on to managing skills, the problems are compounded.

The problems relate both to definition and assessment. To illustrate: a common motor skill is needed to ride a bicycle, to get from A to B, without falling off. (For the purposes of these notes, the 'managing skill' of being able to ride safely, from A to B, over busy public roads, largely populated by demonic drivers late for work, is ignored).

It is easy to define what success looks like; it is easy to define a learning experience, with feedback loops, possibly from the contact between knees and elbows and the road surface. It is easy to assess when a learner has achieved a defined level of success. By definition, it is also easy to design an assessment process for a 'candidate cyclist for our firm' if we ever need such.

Now ask the same questions in relation to a managing skill and the difficulties become evident. Suddenly there are interactions between the manager and other people; there are issues of unpredictability about the future; there are uncertainties and ambiguities in the information available for processing; there are political dimensions to the decisions that have to be made – and translated into behaviour. To cap it all, most of the information processing goes on inside the head of the manager / candidate and, as such, is totally invisible to the observer.

The problems of (objective) definition and assessment are formidable. Moreover, it is also difficult to define valid opportunities for managers to demonstrate that they have the requisite skills. It is also difficult objectively to observe the behaviour patterns of the manager, and decide that the required skills are present in that individual - or not, as the case may be. (Those who lack the skills themselves may find that something of a challenge).

## **Conscious behavioural skills (CBS)**

We sneaked in that term 'behavioural' skills earlier without explanation, and we have now compounded that sin by adding another new word – 'conscious'. The use of the word 'behavioural' simply denotes the difference between what happens when we DO something that is visible to the outside world; and cognitive skills – the way we process information within our brains. 'Conscious' means that, in any given circumstance, we have a choice of available behaviours, and make a conscious decision about which to deploy – instinctive reactions are excluded.

Because of the issues specific to managing skills noted above, there are always many available options for behaviour, in different circumstances, and so the need for good, conscious behavioural skills increases. 'Behavioural skills', because it is not what we know, think or feel that produces good results – it is what we DO. Making good choices about managing behaviour is crucial to delivering excellent results.

## **Managing projects**

Now, all of the issues summarised above apply to managing projects, plus a few special additions thrown in to that particular witch's brew. First, all projects are, in one way or another, a leap into the unknown. If this is not true, why do we need a project at all? All we have to do is repeat whatever it is that we have done in the past and, hey presto, problem solved! Maybe not.

Projects, in one way or another are about introducing change – new products; new processes; new structures – whatever. That means that the risk of failure will always be higher than when repeating what is already known-to-succeed. Creating experiential learning has to be built in to project design and management, while handling the political and emotional dimensions of the associated risks. Moreover, the time frames with milestones, within which projects have to be delivered, create their own, special pressures and demands.

Then there is the question of changes that cross organisational boundaries – and most projects have that characteristic attached to them. This raises issues about negotiating resources and activities across those boundaries – yet another demand for conscious behavioural skills.

Maybe one more issue will serve to illustrate the point sufficiently. Generally, there is competition for scarce resources – zero sum decisions are commonplace. Acquiring the resources to ensure project success, not just in its management, but in the implementation of the product as well, adds another twist to the demand for conscious behavioural skills.

### **Blind alleys and escape routes**

First the old and then the new – well, newer. The 'qualities approach to leadership' emerged in the run up to the second World War. By the 1960s it had been thoroughly disproved as a viable method for even talking about managers and what they need to be successful. Producing long lists of qualities such as integrity, initiative, fairness, dedication, foresight and decisiveness – all taken from the original War Office list for potential leaders – add little value to our understanding of what it is that will make a good (project) manager. None is behavioural; none is objective; none is measurable; none is demonstrable; none is capable of being acquired through learning. Add to those minor irritants, the fact that we don't even know what the words mean. Try it sometime with colleagues. Ask people to write down what the 'qualities' words mean to them and then compare the answers! When we consider the number of abstractions involved in the 'qualities' words, the result is hardly surprising.

Latter day advances in psychology have dealt with some of the difficulties about qualities, but most issues remain. There are still disagreements about what the words mean. Critically, there is no clear evidence about the relationship between qualities / personalities / attitudes on the one hand, and behaviour on the other. Hence there is no clear evidence of a relationship with performance. And even if there was, the very concept of conscious behavioural skills implies that the application of knowledge as effective behaviour would over-ride other drivers of behaviour anyway.

In passing, none of the reputable providers of psychometrics make any claim about personality profiles being useful as predictors of performance. And just how many would miss that opportunity, if the claim were sustainable?

So how to move forward? The first step would be to profile the typical job of a project manager using the conscious behavioural skills model. The model, by the way, has been around since the 1960s, and was developed as an antidote to all the failing selection methods of the day. They included the famous qualities approach to leadership, along with a variety of attitude and aptitude tests, which also turned out to be useless as predictors of performance.

The model already has a very complete set of behavioural skills for interactions, including influencing, negotiating and managing relationships across organisational boundaries. It also contains behavioural skill sets for managing information, teams, achieving in difficult

circumstances, plus behavioural skills to support strategic thinking.

The second step would be to use the 'theoretical profile' for successful project managers as the framework to assess what is needed in particular organisational environments. The key tricks here are to focus on what it is that sets the 'starring performers' apart from the merely good people, and to ensure that the assessment process is both objective AND incorporates the relationship influencing dimension. When that is done, two developments follow naturally.

The first would be to use the new profile to assess the existing skill sets of people currently in the project management role. Gaps identified can then be addressed with targeted development programmes, which are made relatively easy by the conscious behavioural skills model. It means we can concentrate on what successful project managers actually DO – no brain transplants needed here!

The second would be to build the required skills profile into the recruiting process. The conscious behavioural skill model has the solution there as well. In the 1960s, the situational interview was established as the ONLY selection interviewing method that was a good predictor of performance. (The standard selection interview has a researched 100% track record – of failure, in that respect). The situational interview method still works extremely well, but beware. No interviewing method, however good, can be better than a negative evaluation. In other words, it can help screen out those who lack conscious behavioural skills, and screen in those with potentially good conscious behavioural skills. The key word is, however, 'potentially'. Check the levels of learning concept above and you will see that interviewing cannot get beyond the application level. A final assessment is still needed, targeting skills critical for the specific job – the 'go on, now demonstrate' stage in the selection process.

Which leaves one question on the table. If all this is so well known, and has been around for so long, why do more people not use the CBS model? The answer is that it is difficult. But those of us brought up in the 'just because something is difficult, is not sufficient reason, in itself, for taking no action' school of management, will not let the difficulty deter them. We are, after all, talking about the most precious asset any business has – its people. Getting the selection decisions wrong, by taking the easy route, may be equivalent to betting the company.

We can, of course, take another easy option. That is to go the competency framework route, with its endless descriptors, full of more abstract nouns, just like the qualities approach. Fashionable? Yes, but the research of Pascale et al suggests that, like all those other fashions in management, competency frameworks have probably passed their sell-by date, and that means that they will soon end up in the trash can of management fashions, with all their not-very-helpful forbears. Maybe we should concentrate on getting the basics right, so that our business does not end up with them!

### **And finally ...**

As a footnote to this little wander through the issues of project management skills, it may be noted that the concept of 'project management', as applied to organisational change programmes, has an appalling track record of failure. Odd? Not really. The issue is about the misunderstandings that arise about the nature of organisational change. It is organisational change programmes that fail. Organisational change only works really well when it is a way of life. In other words, there is no life cycle of a project to manage and, hence, it is the application of project management skills, however excellent, that is inappropriate. But maybe that is a subject for another day ...