

The Free Fall of Knowledge – *What if my 'not knowing the right answer' harbours an exciting opportunity where I am not limited by what I already know and how I habitually respond to things that life throws at me?*

What if? - *A serious scientific answer to an absurd hypothetical question?*

Hypothesis: Let's assume: The Unknown is a 'bitch'. So is Change.

Universal knowledge: Change happens. We deny, have fear ... become angry & disillusioned, ... then depressed.

Problem: *There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to recognize or at least classify it. Man always tends to avoid physical contact with anything strange.* – Author Ellias Canetti

*Change?
What change?*



*I won't
do this.*



*How will it
affect me?*



*I'm off.
This isn't for me.*



*Who
am I?*



Question: What if we started *exploring* it? How would acceptance and commitment to change help us *enhance our knowledge*? How would a paradigm shift create free capacities to manage change to our advantage?

Anecdotally:

The key insight throughout the trainings this year has been that it helps greatly when people understand that *'not having ready-made answers'* is nothing to do with ignorance or weakness and that by staying **curious** about the *'here and now'* they can source themselves to cope with anything strange effectively.

Or so the lore goes:

'Where should we begin?' I ask in a kick-off session. Four pairs of eyes stare back at me. The question is not rhetorical. It is meant to uncover the expectations that are placed on people in situations high in uncertainty and complexity. Expectations that are normal, but that often get in the way of learning and growth. Although deceptively simple, this question always takes groups right *to the edge*.

'You're asking US this question? Surely YOU know. You're running this programme.' I say nothing and look around the room.

'Start at the beginning', quips one participant. I keep silent, and sit down.

'With the agenda', says another. Suggestions are starting to come thick and fast now.

'I want a clear roadmap. How can we start without knowing what to work on?'

I can sense impatience. Some people are shifting in their chairs, others are looking at me dismayed, waiting to see what I do. I do nothing.

'What do you want from us?' shouts an exasperated voice.

'I'm more interested in what YOU want from me.' I answer.

I am not fulfilling the *traditional expected role* of the person at the front of the room. Without a task and clear direction, the disequilibrium in the group is quickly increasing.

'Why don't you just tell us what to do?'

After a while, silence descends on the group. All eyes are on me. The silence feels heavy and uncomfortable. I feel tempted to say something, but I hold steady. The void gets filled quickly.

'This won't work. We'll never agree to one answer. Let's break into smaller groups and brainstorm', suggests a participant. There is an almost audible sigh of relief. Finally, something to do. The more structure-oriented people are immediately attracted to this proposal. They are starting to move their chairs, but there are some who are holding back. As there is no consensus in the group, nothing happens.

'I feel like we're poking around in the dark.'

Someone cracks a joke about 'Black Friday'¹ and the whole group laughs uproariously. The tension dissipates for a few moments, but is short-lived.

"If we don't have a framework, we're lost.'

I sense that frustration is reaching a new level. One person is leaning back in his chair, looking absent. Two participants start talking amongst themselves, and I notice one person is checking his phone.

'There's nothing worse than this happening in a meeting ... take the lead!' says someone aggressively.

Time seems to slow down. In what is dubbed 'Tuende's Cave', I can hear the train pass by outside. I don't think I have much time now. I stand up, take a deep breath and start debriefing the session.

The unknown

When we are faced with an uncertain and complex task, we inevitably come to the edge of our competence. We are at the edge if there are changes in the energy of the situation – embarrassed laughter, fidgeting or boredom; if information is missing or keeps being repeated; or if there is nervousness, feelings of getting lost or not knowing what to do next.

When the disequilibrium increases, we naturally fall back on what we know. We resort to tried and tested ways of organizing a group, designing an agenda or creating some structure. We look to those in decision-making **roles** to restore the equilibrium and provide us with clarity and safety. Otherwise we blame them for not 'showing leadership', or we disengage altogether from the current situation, finding things to occupy us.

What is behind the avoidance of the unknown?

The dangers of appearing not to do a job well, not to have sufficient expertise, of not knowing enough are real. The consequence of not fulfilling our responsibilities, our objectives, are always in the background. There is a lot at stake.

When we are well within our comfort zone we feel full of mastery and agency. Feelings of mastery, agency, autonomy and control are important and are connected with our sense of well-being.

Roles are like a protective cloak that we can hide behind to avoid the vulnerability of not knowing. We can rely on the structures and processes around us, the lists and plans we create to give the impression of order, control and certainty. In time this becomes a habit. It becomes so second nature that we forget we are wearing a mantle of defence. We have become a straightjacket. Like the emperor with no clothes, everyone pretends not to notice. Nobody dares state the obvious: that the *emperor is naked*. We are vulnerable in our incompetence.

Psychologist Ellen Langer argues in her work *'Illusion of Control'* that when things are becoming more unpredictable or competitive, stress levels rise and we feel more at the mercy of our circumstances. It is

¹ Excursion in the dark titled 'Discover our Senses' in Vienna

then that we attempt to increase our sense of control and relieve our sense of powerlessness. Control appears as a *grasp of certainty*.

Typical reaction patterns

Analysis paralysis – *'We need to form a jour-fix to discuss this.'*

Scrambling for security – *'I get really impatient with my team.'*

Passivity & Self-defeat – *'I look to my manager to do something. After all, it is his responsibility.'*

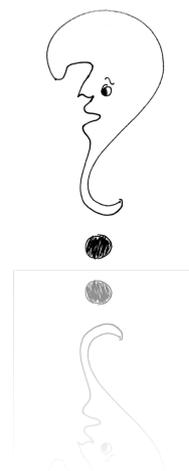
Catastrophic thinking – *'We will never get out of this situation.'*

Jumping into action – *'I don't have time to play with questions. We're here to get a job done, and quickly.'*

Resistance – *'This is crap. We don't need this.'*

For example, resistance is a pushing away of the present, usually as a reaction to change and the loss associated with change. It could be resistance to something that is unpleasant or negative, something that we fear or dislike or is too difficult to see.

Change always involves loss. We do everything we possibly can to avoid loss, even if it means achieving something we have always dreamed of. So we resist it.



We shall forever deal with unanticipated events

As Shakespeare coined it: *The fool doth think that he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.*

To make decisions when we don't have the answer is surely foolish, yet sometimes we have to act the fool. In Tarot cards, the Fool is an archetype that represents all possibility and therefore it is an image for fluidity and flexibility. He is restless but wise. He does not sit on his laurels. He knows when it is the right time to move on and when to camp out. His character is open, honest and unconscious; and we can think of him as a free spirit, following nature rather than a pre-planned path. He would be called *naive* in our modern-day world. The Fool asks us to take a leap of faith and to trust in the journey. As Steve Jobs encouraged the graduating class of 2005 at Stanford University: *'Stay hungry. Stay foolish.'*

How can 'Not Knowing' enable people?

Professor Carol Dweck, a world-leading researcher of motivation at Stanford University, was very interested in finding out whether there was a correlation between intelligence, talent and success. In her book *Mindset* Dweck published some startling findings from her research: that mindset makes more of a difference to success than ability does.

Dweck distinguishes between two basic mindsets. A **fixed mindset** is where we believe that our intelligence, talents and traits are fixed at birth. This is a fixed idea, that it is unlikely we will ever be able to change much.

In contrast, a **growth mindset** is one in which we believe that we can develop further, cultivate our traits and improve our talents through sheer practice, discipline and persistence.

For example, Dweck argues that those who have a fixed mindset need to constantly prove themselves and confirm to themselves and others their capability. They do everything to avoid the unknown, which they believe will result in failure. Every situation is evaluated for a binary outcome: *'Will I succeed or fail?'*, *'Will I be a winner or a loser?'* With this mindset we avoid tasks we are not sure we will be good at. If we have deficiencies, we will naturally want to hide them. They may also seek to surround themselves with people who can make them look good, rather than those against whom they may not measure up. A fixed mindset stops us from being open to trying new things and experimenting.

How does John know he is 'right' and Jack is 'wrong'?

He doesn't. It is the hardest question to hear and one of the most challenging to work with.

Entertaining doubt

To believe fully and at the same moment to have doubts is not at all a contradiction: it presupposes a greater respect for truth, an awareness that truth goes beyond anything that can be said or done at any given moment.

This is not about lack of belief in ourselves. Doubt is a doorway to possibility and admitting doubt shows flexibility and openness to learning and creativity: something we need in a world that is rocked by constant change. We assume that if people saw our doubt, they would lose faith in us and we don't like the way this thought makes us feel.

How to gain ground?

Social relations is not a thing you can learn from a book. It is what neuroscientists call implicit, procedural or *embodied* learning. The body is our unconscious and it reveals itself through habit and intuition. If we limit ourselves to what we know about, we limit access to what we really know. This might sound surprising to those accustomed to viewing the body simply as a cart that carries the brain around. So when I say 'body', I mean that how we move and how we stand is the way we are in the world.

What happens below the neck is crucial as a source of data for what is going on, as well as for giving us clues in navigating the unknown.

Practicing being embodied ...

When we went to Vienna to *Discover our Senses*, a journey of experience in complete darkness in November last year, we had several hours to work with each other with nothing to provide a sense of orientation. Participants felt scared and exhilarated at the same time.

Progress in the course of activities was slow and people took tentative steps to move forward carrying out the tasks assigned to them. As they became more comfortable with not seeing, their other senses kicked in. They relied more on what they could smell – welcome or not – and were asking themselves: *What is the shape of this room? Who is next to me? How can I move unhurt? ...*

They listened intently, and felt a heightened awareness of their movements. The direct experience came into play as people had to turn off some habitual sources of information to learn more from surprising sources. This experience will remain fresh and vivid in their minds for many years.

For example, one of the lessons that we could draw is: We might look at our new employee as a source of information, rather than go to the usual trusted sources.



Paradoxically, this shutting down creates new knowledge. That is one secret to not knowing: far from reducing knowledge, the process is generative, creating knowledge in new ways that unlocks tough challenges that the old knowledge couldn't address.

Possibility, opportunity and learning are just around the corner. I trust that this article will unnerve even the most productive & knowledgeable person and invite all who are playing at the edge and dipping their toes into the uncharted waters of the unknown to join me to venture even further than we have ever ventured before. Let's learn what is good about not knowing to master the challenges ahead of us.

Tuende has since 2006 undergoing comprehensive changes developing from a translator & interpreter to a language & communication trainer to a relational executive coach.

She is currently working on a book on change in collaboration with Karl Prammer, senior researcher in the field of Organisational Development at Klagenfurt University, creator and author of "TransformationManagement" and CEO of C/O/N/E/C/T/A Vienna School of Organisation Consultancy, and is deep diving towards her doctoral thesis at Ashridge University in Great Britain. She heavily sources her approach from Gestalt theories by Perls. Her work has been greatly inspired by the insights gained in projects completed at VHPO, for which she wishes to extend her deep gratitude to all who have believed in and supported her in her endeavours so far.