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LOL: The “Know-Do” Gap

“Say-Do” gap is a common phrase. It means, do your words and actions line up? As a leader, they better. If not, credibility drops like a rock. In FCG’s culture work, the “Say-Do” gap is often the biggest predictor of success. Leaders who talk about the importance of culture, then violate it with their actions, create cynicism. Staff members wonder, “Why should I take our culture norms seriously when the leaders don’t?”

Wise leaders measure this gap. An organization we worked with recently had the “Say-Do” gap as a specific question on their employee engagement survey:

“Do the leaders of this organization align around and behave in accordance with our cultural values?”

The leaders were surprised to learn that only about half of the employees said, “yes.” The obvious follow up activity from this result is to explore with staff members how the leaders are failing. Leaders should proactively solicit feedback from staff members. Ask, “What is the gap? How do we fix it?” (Don’t ask, “Is there a gap?” That leaves a clear out for staff members, “No, everything is cool.” Then they exit quickly.)

So what is the “Know-Do gap?” Simply put: What we **know** and what we **do** (practice) are different. It arises frequently in our team trainings. Many readers know that FCG wrote a popular book (over 50 copies sold to non-family members...) called, ***High Performing Investment Teams*** (Wiley, 2006). The book describes seven behaviors that high performing teams practice. The “core four” as we call them are:

1. Curiosity
2. Candor
3. Accountability
4. Appreciation

One client wrote to us:

I am a big fan of your work on teams and culture. When the book was first recommended to me, I read it straight through in one night. Thereafter, I asked my team and new hires to read, discuss, and apply. Unfortunately, I don’t see the principles applied very often.

(Note: the author of the email was NOT a family member...)

Typically, teams are quite receptive to these concepts and the associated behaviors when we introduce them. For example, curiosity is about openness to feedback, excitement about learning, willingness to ask questions, and the courage to try new approaches. The opposite of curiosity is defensiveness, which is characterized by being closed and righteous (“I’m right; you’re wrong.”)

Curiosity is an incredibly powerful tool for success. We have countless examples of curiosity leading to better solutions, stronger relationships, and improved learning. A common benefit is repairing trust. When a colleague does something that seems untrustworthy, you can react in one of several ways.

1. Silently judge the person as untrustworthy and become suspicious of them.
2. Overtly call them out on it, which—as you can imagine—usually ends up badly.
3. Get curious and ask them, “Help me understand what just happened?”

When the curious approach (#3) is used, we frequently see that there is a reasonable explanation for the behavior in question. Rarely is it the case that Machiavelli is roaming the halls of your firm, intentionally scheming and spreading seeds of discontent. Instead, we see that there has been a misunderstanding which can be cleared up if each party assumes “good intent” and discusses the event curiously and respectfully.

The Know-Do gap emerges on the **second** go around with teams. They enthusiastically ask for another session. When we show them the agenda for round two, they are disappointed: “But this is the material we’ve already covered. We know this already.” Hence, the Know-Do gap: I understand the concept intellectually, so I’m ready for a new one. Wrong.

Imagine someone saying, “I took a golf lesson, so now I’m ready to play. Why do I need another lesson? I understood what the pro was telling me.”

I suspect the reason that the Know-Do gap exists in our industry is because the people are so smart. They hear us talk about the concepts, they take good notes, they ask intelligent questions and—presto—they know what to do. In the case of curiosity, BE curious! Simple.

But as the golf analogy above suggests, knowing and doing are quite different things altogether. The FCG team has been teaching and practicing these core four behaviors for years, and we don’t come close to doing them perfectly. Why would a novice expect to be any different?

Research indicates that rookies at a new activity are wildly naïve and overconfident. Again, take golf. Prior to playing a round of golf, many newbies express confidence that they will play well after only a brief introduction to the game. They reason: it’s simple. All you must do is hit the ball straight down the fairway. And the ball isn’t even moving! How hard can **that** be?

Well, for those of us who have played golf, the answer is equally simple: ridiculously hard!

The same principle is true for FCG’s key behaviors. They sound simple enough, but they are a lifetime journey, which we never complete. Some exceptions exist, like the Buddha or Jesus, but not so for the average person. A practical example from my domestic life is when my wife and I have a tiff, I often ignore curiosity and go right to defensiveness. (To confirm, just ask her.) I’m sure you can relate.

However, I have made progress over the years. (At FCG, we say, “progress over perfection.”) Years ago, I would **stay** defensive for hours or even days. My progress is measured by the amount of time I remain defensive. I’m happy to say that now the time interval between getting defensive and shifting back to curiosity is far less. In fact, sometimes I don’t even get defensive, which is big progress.

You see the point I am making: these behaviors are not ONE and DONE. They are not intellectual concepts, like math theorems. They require understanding AND ongoing practice.

So, please, the next time we suggest a deeper dive into one of the key behaviors, consider your response. Have you and your team really mastered it? Are you really ready to move on to new material? Or are you the person who says, “I read a book on golf and took a lesson, so let’s move on to tennis.”

Close the Know-Do gap first. These behaviors are only powerful if you practice and master them. How do you know if you’re progressing? Ask your colleagues. And again, not by asking: Have I got that curiosity thing down? Standard response: Oh yes. Rather, ask: how can I improve on curiosity? I really want to get good at it. Encourage candor.

A second way to measure progress is what I described above. Notice when you get defensive. Then see how long it takes you to recover and move back to a curious mindset. When you start to close that gap, down to a few minutes or even a few seconds, then you are becoming a master. The benefits are huge. (Ask my wife ...)

Have some fun with this. The next time you interact with FCG, give us some tough feedback. See if we get defensive. Then see how long it takes for us to recover. 😊

Curiously yours,

Jim