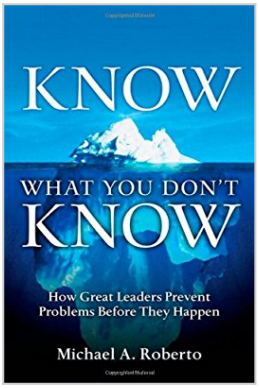

Know What You Don't Know: How Great Leaders Prevent Problems Before They Happen

By Michael A. Roberto

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Problems remain hidden in organizations for a number of reasons, including fear, organizational complexity, gatekeepers who insulate leaders from problems that are coming up, and finally, an overemphasis on formal analysis in place of intuition and observation. This book lays out the key skills and capabilities required to ensure that problems do not remain hidden in your organization. It explains how leaders can become effective problem finders, unearthing problems before they destroy an organization. The book explains how leaders can become an anthropologist, going out and observe how employees, customers, and suppliers actually behave. It then goes on to present how they can circumvent the gatekeepers, so they can go directly to the source to see and hear the raw data; hunt for patterns, including refining your individual and collective pattern recognition capability; "connect the dots" among issues that may initially seem unrelated, but in fact, have a great deal in common; give front-line employees training in a communication technique; encourage useful mistakes, including create a "Red Pencil Award"; and watch the game film, where leaders reflect systematically on their own organization's conduct and performance, as well as on the behavior and performance of competitors.

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Know What You Don't Know: How Great Leaders Prevent Problems Before They Happen By Michael A. Roberto Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #980702 in Books
- Published on: 2009-02-08
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.28" h x .79" w x 6.14" l, .97 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 224 pages

Preface

In the spring of 2005, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara came to speak to my students. At the time, I served on the faculty at Harvard Business School. My colleague Jan Rivkin and I invited McNamara to answer our MBA students' questions about his years in the Defense Department as well as his time at Ford Motor Company and the World Bank. My students had studied the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War. We examined those case studies as part of a course focused on how to improve managerial decision-making. Most class sessions focused on typical business case studies, but students found these examples from the American presidency to be particularly fascinating. We had analyzed the decision-making processes employed by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and their senior advisers. Now, we had an opportunity to hear directly from one of the key players during these momentous events of the 1960s. McNamara came and answered the students' questions, which included some tough queries regarding the mistakes that were made during the Vietnam War as well as the Bay of Pigs debacle.

McNamara had not visited the Harvard Business School in many years. However, he recalled his days at the school quite fondly. McNamara graduated from the MBA program in 1939 and returned a year later to join the faculty at just twenty-four years of age. The students expressed amazement that he had been on the faculty sixty-five years prior to his visit that day in the spring of 2005.

Before the class session began, McNamara asked me about my research. I told him about a new book I had written, set to come out two months later, regarding the way leaders make decisions. Then McNamara asked about teaching at the school, inquiring as to whether we still employed the case method of instruction. When I indicated that the case method still reigned supreme in our classrooms, he expressed his approval. He recalled how much he enjoyed learning and teaching by the case method. McNamara then affirmed a long-standing belief about this experiential learning technique. He explained that the case method provided students good training in the subject matter I researched and taught—namely, problem-solving and decision-making. After all, most cases put students in the shoes of a business executive and make them grapple with a difficult decision facing the firm.

McNamara then surprised me when he mentioned that this approach to teaching and learning did have a major deficiency. He argued that the case method typically presents the problem to the student. It describes the situation facing a firm and then frames the decision that must be made. In real life, according to McNamara, the leader first must discover the problem. He or she must figure out what problem needs to be solved before beginning to make decisions. McNamara explained that identifying the true problem facing an organization often proved to be the most difficult challenge that leaders face. In many instances leaders do not spot a threat until far too late. At times, leaders set out to solve the wrong problem.

Now here I stood, quite pleased that I had just completed my first book on the subject of decision-making. I anticipated its release in just a matter of weeks. I had built a solid course on the subject as well. McNamara seemed to be telling me that I had missed the boat! I needed to be helping managers and students learn how to find problems, rather than focusing so much attention on problem-solving. I wrestled with this thought over the next six months, and then in the winter of 2006, I set out to write a new book. This time, I would write about the process of problem-finding, rather than problem-solving and decision-making. Two and a half years later, I have completed that book.

The Central Message

In this book, I argue that leaders at all levels must hone their skills as problem-finders. In so doing, they can preempt the threats that could lead to disaster for their organizations. Keep in mind that organizational

breakdowns and collapses do not occur in a flash; they evolve over time. They begin with a series of small problems, a chain of errors that often stretches back many months or even years. As time passes, the small problems balloon into larger ones. Mistakes tend to compound over time; one small error triggers another. Once set in motion, the chain of events can be stopped. However, the more time that passes, and the more momentum that builds, once-seemingly minor issues can spiral out of control.

Many leaders at all levels tell their people that they hate surprises. They encourage their people to tell them the bad news, rather than providing only a rosy picture of the business. They hold town-hall meetings with their employees, tour various company locations, and remind everyone that their door is always open. Still, problems often remain concealed in organizations for many reasons. Unlike cream, bad news does not tend to rise to the top.

In this book, I argue that leaders need to become hunters who venture out in search of the problems that might lead to disaster for their firms. They cannot wait for the problems to come to them. Time becomes the critical factor. The sooner leaders can identify and surface problems, the more likely they can prevent a major catastrophe. If leaders spot the threats early, they have more time to take corrective action. They can interrupt a chain of events before it spirals out of control.

Through my research, I have identified seven sets of skills and capabilities that leaders must master if they want to become effective problem-finders. First, you must recognize that people around you filter information, often with good intentions. They hope to conserve your precious time. Sometimes, though, they filter out the bad news. Problem-finders learn how to circumvent these filters. Second, you must learn to behave like an anthropologist who observes groups of people in natural settings. You cannot simply ask people questions; you must watch how they behave. After all, people often say one thing and do another. Third, the most effective problem-finders become adept at searching for and identifying patterns. They learn how to mine past experience, both personal and organizational, so that they can recognize problems more quickly. Fourth, you must refine your ability to “connect the dots” among seemingly disparate pieces of information. Threats do not come to us in neat little packages. They often remain maddeningly diffuse. Only by putting together many small bits of information can we spot the problem facing the organization. Fifth, effective problem-finders learn how to encourage people to take risks and learn from their mistakes. They recognize that some failures can be quite useful, because they provide opportunities for learning and improvement. You must distinguish between excusable and inexcusable mistakes, though, lest you erode accountability in the organization. Sixth, you must refine your own and your organization’s communication skills. You have to train people how to speak up more effectively and teach leaders at all levels how to respond appropriately to someone who surfaces a concern, points out a problem, or challenges the conventional wisdom. Finally, the best problem-finders become like great coaches who watch film of past performances and glean important lessons about their team’s problems as well as those of their principal rivals. You must become adept at review and reflection, as well as how to practice new behaviors effectively.

The outline of this book is straightforward. The book begins with a chapter describing the overall concept of problem-finding. Why is it important, and what does it mean? Then, each of the following seven chapters describes one of the critical problem-finding skills and capabilities I have identified in my research. Throughout the text, I refer to the endnotes, which provide information if you’re interested in learning more about the academic research upon which I have drawn. Finally, the book closes with a chapter that examines the mindset of the problem-finder. I argue that becoming an effective problem-finder requires more than mastering a set of skills. You have to embrace a different attitude and mindset about work and the world around you. The best problem-finders demonstrate intellectual curiosity, embrace systemic thinking, and exhibit a healthy dose of paranoia.

The Research

The research for this book consisted of nearly one hundred fifty interviews with managers of enterprises large and small. I asked them to speak with me about their successes and failures and to describe how they tried to prevent failures from taking place. The interviews took place in a wide range of industries. I spoke with many CEOs as well as business unit leaders and staff executives. The field notes from these interviews, as well as other artifacts collected during my visits to these firms, filled several large drawers of the file cabinet in my university office.

Throughout the research, I sought breadth as well as depth. I conducted single interviews at a wide range of firms in many industries. I have not limited my research to private-sector enterprises; I have drawn upon many nonbusiness case studies in my work. In a few instances, I examined a particular organization in great detail. For instance, at the FBI, Jan Rivkin and I conducted many interviews with people at all levels of the bureau. For the rapid-response team study, Jason Park and I interviewed roughly twelve people at each hospital. We also observed many weekly meetings at one of those organizations. At Children's Hospital in Minneapolis, Amy Edmondson, Anita Tucker, and I interviewed a number of physicians, nurses, and administrators. At GameWright, a children's game company in Massachusetts, Taryn Beaudoin and I spent a great deal of time learning about the organization and interviewing managers.

I have sought to conduct research that is fundamentally interdisciplinary in nature. Throughout my field studies, as well as my review of others' work, I have drawn upon the literature in domains as diverse as psychology, political science, marketing, sociology, economics, neuroscience, and medicine. No one field has a monopoly on issues pertaining to leadership. I have conducted research, and drawn upon others' work, that I believe is highly relevant to the practice of management. Far too much research conducted at business schools today has little or no value to business leaders. While I cite a number of important experimental studies throughout the book, I have tended to emphasize the findings from intensive field research where other scholars and I have spoken with and observed real managers in action.

How to Read This Book

You probably have significant demands on your time. For this book to have value, you must be able to apply the ideas to your work. You must come away with tangible changes in how you go about leading your teams and organizations. Therefore, I encourage you to adopt an active learning approach as you read this book. Do not simply turn the pages and try to digest the ideas. Simply reading the text represents passive learning, which typically has less impact than a more engaged approach. As you examine the manuscript, begin to think about how to put the ideas into practice. Try implementing some of the concepts in your organization. Bounce your ideas off valued colleagues. Do not wait until you finish the manuscript. Experiment with the ideas presented here, reflect on your experiences, and refine your approach. Try to make the ideas come alive for you. Find the techniques that best fit your style of leadership and the demands of your organization.

Finally, keep in mind that becoming a better leader is a never-ending journey. No book can provide a recipe for transforming you into a successful leader. It will not happen overnight. Even the best leaders have opportunities to improve. I can only hope that this manuscript stimulates you to think differently about your roles and responsibilities as a leader. Perhaps you will take a fresh look at how you and your colleagues approach problems and mistakes. If you avoid a major failure in part because of what you have learned here, this book will have served a very useful purpose.

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July 23, 2008

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