

From [Education Follies: four decades of tilting at windmills for no apparent reason](#) by Jeff Lee Byrem, (c) 2016



The Knowing-Doing Gap and the Nonscientific Sample of One

In the 1990's, the Delaware Department of Education assigned an inexperienced educator the daunting task of leading a task force to determine what should be done in order to improve failing high schools. I was a representative of the district in which I worked and sat quietly as suggestion after suggestion was made. After an hour of a futile pursuit of consensus, I suggested the issue was not what it was that *should* be done; rather, I suggested it would be more productive if we figured out why educators were not implementing what leaders in schools and districts *had already decided should* be done.

My suggestion generated some discussion, but before we pursued the matter too far, the facilitator turned the group back toward the task with which she had been

charged. Ultimately, nothing came of the inexperienced educator's attempts, through no fault of her own, nor was there a groundswell of interest in my suggestion!

Fortunately, and unbeknownst to me at the time, Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton studied this phenomenon and wrote a book called "The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action."

Sidebar: Note the reference in the title to "Companies." Also note that for some reason—even though schools are complex systems with many of the same sub-systems and systemic interactions found in business entities—educators, according to my nonscientific sample of one, are loathe to look toward the century of research generated in the fields of management and industrial psychology, much of which—including the title referenced above—has direct relevance to some of the most significant challenges educational leaders are expected to face.

Looking back over four decades in Education, my nonscientific sample of one leads me to hypothesize that **the Knowing-Doing Gap is an underlying foundation of failure in challenged schools.**

Sidebar: I did not use "root cause" because "underlying foundation," to me, suggests an observation/opinion and not a specific determination arrived at by a structured, root cause analysis.

The emotional impediments and social machinations that are the foundation of the Knowing-Doing Gap are complex, which means the approaches management must use to overcome the gap must be equally complex, but there is one simple axiom that every educator must accept and address unless s/he has a profound need to fail:

We must view with profound respect the infinite capacity of the human mind to resist the introduction of useful knowledge.

Francis Cummins Lockwood
Quoted in *The Freshman and His College* (1913)
by Thomas Raynesford Lounsbury

If you are an educator, you can imagine the number of times I have been a participant in professional development over the decades, including the numerous events I have facilitated for other educators, especially in the final years of my career. It is astonishing to me how often my colleagues participated in those sessions but never implemented what they learned. And if you are an educator, I am certain you are either an example of, or know colleagues who, exemplify the Knowing-Doing Gap, i.e. there is a gap between what such persons know they should be doing, and what it is they are actually doing in their classrooms.

What this means is, the decisions made by Knowing-Doing Gappers indicate the Gappers value their individual nonscientific samples of one over, say, Robert Marzano's nine *High-Yield Instructional Strategies*,¹ which were derived from a meta-analysis of a *very large* number of studies.² In my experience (*my* nonscientific sample of one), the Knowing-Doing Gap is a huge problem in education, especially in schools populated by the most disadvantaged and challenged students.

If you are an educational leader, I believe wholeheartedly that you should challenge yourself to learn all you can about the specific origins of, and specific approaches to overcome, the Knowing-Doing Gap.

You can buy, study, and reflect upon Pfeffer's and Sutton's book, but if you're as busy as I was when I was a principal, and you're reading this chapter at eleven-thirty p.m. because it's the first free minutes you've had all day, you might want to check out the [eight-page summary](#) the authors put together³.

¹ [Link to good summary of "Marzano's Nine" put together by Palm Beach Schools:](#)

<<http://www.palmbeachschools.org/qa/documents/Handout5-MarzanoHighYieldStrategies.pdf>>

² [Link to wonderful paper by Marzano re: the "Nine."](#) <

http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/curriculum/cali/setting_the_record_straight_on_high_yield_strategies.pdf >

³ <http://www.wenell.se/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/thinking_knowing.pdf>

If I've just piqued your curiosity, and you're not motivated enough to tackle the eight-pager, you can skim the following [summary of Pfeffer's and Sutton's work](#) that a blogger named Jason Yip put together in 2012⁴; *HOWEVER*, just reading Yip's summary below will not do the trick. I only offer it with the hope that reading it might motivate you to learn more about the Knowing-Doing Gap:

- **Why before How:** philosophy is important. Focus on Why (philosophy, general guidance) before How (detailed practices, behaviors, techniques).
- **Knowing comes from doing and teaching others how.** "Knowing by doing develops a deeper and more profound level of knowledge and virtually by definition eliminates the knowing-doing gap."
- **Action counts more than elegant plans and concepts.** Ready, fire, aim. Act even if you haven't had the time to fully plan the action.
- **There is no doing without mistakes.** What is the (top leadership's) response? Forgive failure. "Reasonable failure should never be received with anger."
- **Fear fosters knowing-doing gaps, so drive out fear.** "Organizations that are successful in turning knowledge into action are frequently characterized by leaders who inspire respect, affection, or admiration, but not fear."
- **Beware of false analogies:** fight the competition, not each other. Collaboration and cooperation over competition. "The idea that the stress of internal competition is necessary for high levels of performance confuses motivation with competition."

⁴ <<http://jchyip.blogspot.com/2012/01/eight-guidelines-for-closing-knowing.html>>

- **Measure what matters and what can help turn knowledge into action.** "The foundation of any successfully run (school) is a strategy everyone understands coupled with a few key measures that are routinely tracked." Focus on measuring the business model/process (aka why outcomes are achieved) over the outcomes.
- **What leaders do, how they spend their time and how they allocate resources matters.** "Leaders create environments, reinforce norms, and help set expectations through what they do, through their actions and not just their words.

If you are an educational leader who is placed into the role of change agent, and you ignore the Knowing-Doing Gap, I worry that you will be spending hours on planning for change that is likely to be doomed from the start.

If you are a teacher, and you are allowing your nonscientific sample of one to drive your practice, and not what *you know* is known about what works best with your specific kids, then *get over yourself!* You and I can “view with profound respect the infinite capacity of the human mind to resist the introduction of useful knowledge,” but *if you are a teacher charged with the moral imperative to educate our children and do NOT use what research indicates works in classrooms like yours, are you truly fulfilling that moral imperative?*

How would you feel about having an oncologist treat your child’s leukemia if that doctor had not incorporated into her practice what had been learned about the treatment of leukemia over the previous thirty years? If such a doctor somehow managed to establish a practice, it is highly likely that she would be sued for malpractice and ultimately drummed out of the profession.

How many teachers continue to practice on our kids, despite exhibiting the exact lack of professionalism shown by the oncologist described above, and why, as a culture, do

we continue to tolerate this travesty? Why are these teachers not drummed out of the profession?