

Data dilution

Why you benefit from paring information down to the critical few **Interviewed by Paul R. Harvey**

John F. Kennedy once remarked, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.” And people have taken this philosophy to heart.

They attend lectures, seminars and night classes on a host of topics. They subscribe to cable television services that provide a nearly limitless smorgasbord of choices. They proudly report to their friends that they’re “on their third book this month.” And they surf the Web. But how much of this information really sticks? How much of it has an impact on people’s lives, either professional or personal?

“Very little,” says Dr. Dick Ruhe, a senior consulting partner with The Ken Blanchard Companies®. “And if there is a trend right now, it’s in the wrong direction. Now, we can get our hands almost immediately on anything that’s out there. The problem is there’s too much of it.”

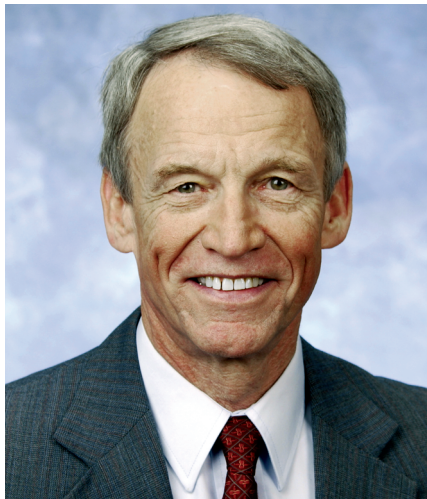
Smart Business spoke with Ruhe about this tidal wave of information and what to do about it. He recently coauthored “Know Can Do!” with Ken Blanchard and Paul J. Meyer. The book deals head-on with the challenge of getting things to stick.

What are the three reasons people don’t learn?

The first is ‘information overload.’ There is simply too much coming in. People either don’t focus, or can’t. The mass of data dilutes any one piece of it. We don’t need more breadth, we need more depth. The second is ‘negative filtering.’ People close their own minds through negative thinking. They critically question all new ideas. Such evaluation is helpful, but too much of it is crippling. The third is ‘lack of follow-up.’ The research is clear that even when people successfully incorporate fresh information into their thinking, it rapidly goes away unless used very soon.

Can less actually be more when it comes to reading and learning?

One of the problems that people have with knowledge is they keep wanting to know new things. Who wouldn’t want to be in the group that wants to know new things? Besides, they actually don’t have a



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choice. We already know that most people spend the majority of their communications time reading and listening, rather than writing and speaking. So there is a nonstop flood of information coming in. People complain about being buried in it.

The problem is that people can only emphasize a few things. Those who try to emphasize everything emphasize nothing. In order to take advantage of new information, we have to reduce this flood down to the ‘critical few.’

The book mentions Green Light Thinking. What is that?

Not only are people themselves hypercritical, but they are surrounded by wet blankets. When approached by others with ideas, there is a natural human tendency to look for what is wrong or at least the major obstacles to adopting a new order of things. A limited amount of this is OK, but too much reduces any chance of running with a new approach or solution.

We suggest holding people accountable for Green Light Thinking. Before they can say anything negative about something, they must identify reasons and solutions

that support it. There will be plenty of time later to coarse- or fine-tune the recommendation. During meetings it can make sense to literally assign someone to be the Green Light Thinker. The person becomes the advocate and contributes the optimism and positive mindset that often are missing.

How can you change the energy level people have to do things differently?

An essential ingredient in making change happen, any kind of change, is ensuring that there are positive consequences in place. Whether it’s for others or for ourselves, there must be a conscious or subconscious association of good things with the initiative. Energy includes drive, motivation, attitude, inspiration, enthusiasm, etc. All of these have a strong positive correlation with positive consequences. If you go on a diet, recognize progress — any progress. If you are trying to adopt a new problem-solving system, celebrate success in moving forward.

How does the concept of unconditional love come into play?

This is quite related to positive consequences. People get so accustomed to trying to do better, they actually don’t even see the improvement; they only see where they could have done better. So they predispose themselves to a critical, negativistic attitude. In ‘Know Can Do!’ we suggest ‘catching people doing something right.’ Many people go through their whole lives trying to finally get approval from important others who may not even be with them any longer — parents, teachers, coaches and so on. There isn’t enough unconditional love. If there were, there would be less dissatisfaction and depression and more good in the world. <<

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