

Sometimes, what you don't know is a lot...



Kathy Simons (WTS-LA President), Photo © John Livzey, 2018

In 2012 then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said this at a briefing, “As we know, there are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.” Wow. Hang on a sec. Let me read that again. Despite sounding a bit like word soup, that's actually beautifully poetic—and I think it offers some pretty deep meaning, too.

At work, how many times have you been faced with the challenge of developing a solution or coming up with an innovative idea without being given all of the information you need or the full context of the circumstances? Sound familiar? I have no doubt that some of you just muttered, “Every day...” So let's talk about that. Let's talk about acting on what we don't know.

On many occasions I am faced with a new problem or something that needs my urgent attention, without being given all of the necessary facts or context. As a business owner, this is practically a daily occurrence. And often, it is not something I am either familiar with or work with on a regular basis. What is an enterprising woman to do? Of course, your first instinct is to ask and then search for the knowledge or context you're missing. And sometimes you can. But that takes time. And time is usually a commodity in short supply. It's a luxury. So, many times you don't have the luxury of time to investigate further. And that's when you throw caution to the wind and dive in.

Goethe said, “Be bold and mighty forces will come to your aid.” Clearly, Goethe never worked in an office in the transportation industry. But he's got a point. When you don't have enough information and the time to get it, you've got to prepare yourself as best as you can and jump right in and seek enough information to make the best choice or develop the best solution you can. You don't have to know; you just have to know you don't know and not accept no as an answer. You must press on and use all of your skills and experience to make the best decision possible with the information you do have. Take responsibility for that decision or solution and own it. And once more information becomes available, be flexible and adapt to the new information. Change what you need to and don't be afraid to say that you got it wrong. What is true for individuals is equally true for organizations.

In any organization, there are standards, procedures, and ways of doing things. There are policies and rules and bylaws that govern the daily administration of the organization. They are extremely important and cover virtually every circumstance that can arise. But I promise you this: there will always be a moment in every organization where something new and unfamiliar arises. It happens. It's unavoidable. And WTS-LA is no different. Though we've been an extremely successful organization for more than 30 years, our bylaws and procedures do not cover every possible circumstance that can arise. So, what do we do when faced with an unknown unknown? How do we just jump in and solve the problem in an organization?

In short, you just do. Again, you make your best educated guess and own it. In truth, sometimes the best ideas come from exactly these circumstances. When you're up against it, those circumstances require you to explore, to push your boundaries and think out of the box. It might be unorthodox. It might be uncomfortable. It might make you some enemies. But if you act honorably and in good faith, you'll find that not only will you develop workable solutions, but you'll do so with the support of those around you, at least most of them anyway. There's another name for this process. It's called leadership. It's not always fun. It's not always popular. But it's always in demand. So, whether you're in charge of copy machine, a parking lot, a several-hundred person organization, or a multi-billion-dollar project, remember Donald Rumsfeld the poet, accept that there will be unknown unknowns, and do your best.