

PM WORLD TODAY - VIEWPOINT – FEBRUARY 2008 Innovation and the Curse of Knowledge

By R. Max Wideman

In an article in *The New York Times*, December 30, 2007, titled: *Bright Ideas - Innovative Minds Don't Think Alike*, Janet Rae-Dupree observes:

"It's a pickle of a paradox: As our knowledge and expertise increase, our creativity and ability to innovate tend to taper off. Why? Because the walls of the proverbial box in which we think are thickening along with our experience.

The so-called curse of knowledge, a phrase used in a 1989 paper in *The Journal of Political Economy*, means that once you've become an expert in a particular subject, it's hard to imagine not knowing what you do. Your conversations with others in the field are peppered with catch phrases and jargon that are foreign to the uninitiated. When it's time to accomplish a task — open a store, build a house, buy new cash registers, sell insurance — those in the know get it done the way it has always been done, stifling innovation as they barrel along the well-worn path.

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Chip Heath, who with his brother, Dan, was a co-author of the 2007 book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, says "It's why engineers design products ultimately useful only to other engineers. It's why managers have trouble convincing the rank and file to adopt new processes. And it's why the advertising world struggles to convey commercial messages to consumers.

I have a DVD remote control with 52 buttons on it, and every one of them is there because some engineer along the line knew how to use that button and believed I would want to use it, too," Mr. Heath says. "People who design products are experts cursed by their knowledge, and they can't imagine what it's like to be as ignorant as the rest of us. To innovate you have to bring together people with a variety of skills. If those people can't communicate clearly with one another, innovation gets bogged down in the abstract language of specialization and expertise."

Amen to that. At the warm up to your next project team meeting, ask each of those present: "How many buttons do you have on your home video remote controls?" If some have more than one remote, tell them they are in luck, count all of them! Then ask: "How many of those buttons do you know what they actually do? Wouldn't life be less stressful if it was simpler?!"

Now consider how that idea might be applied to your current project, or even just to how you communicate about the project. Who knows, you might even come up with better solutions to the problem.



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Max Wideman, FCSCE, FEIC, FICE, Fellow PMI, is widely recognized as one of the world's leading authorities on modern project and program management (PM). The Wideman PM Glossary is one of the most widely-referenced lexicons of PM terms and terminology in the world today. Max Wideman has 40+ years of PM-related experience in a wide range of projects and industries. He is a registered professional engineer specializing in project management consulting. Max is a Fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineers (UK), a Fellow of the Engineering Institute of Canada, a Fellow of the Canadian Society of Civil Engineers, a Fellow of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) and a long-time member of the Institute of Management (UK). Max served on the PMI Board of Directors as VP Member Services (1984), President (1987) and Chairman of the Board (1988). In the mid-1980's, he led a team of PMI volunteers to document the PM Body of Knowledge for the Institute, published by PMI in 1987. Max won PMI's Distinguished Contribution Award in 1985 and Person of the Year Award in 1986. Max Wideman is the author of [A Framework for Project and Program Integration](#) (PMI, 1991) and [Project and Program Risk Management: A guide to Managing Project Risk and Opportunities](#) (PMI, 1992). He contributed chapters to [Project Management Handbook](#) (PMI/Jossey-Bass, 1998); [Field Guide to Project Management](#) (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1998, 2004) and [Project Management for the Business Professional - A Comprehensive Guide](#) (Wiley, 2001). His latest book is [A Management Framework for Project, Program and Portfolio Integration](#). (Trafford Publishing, Victoria, BC, Canada, 2004). A resident of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, Max Wideman's personal website can be found at www.wideman.com. Max can be contacted at max@wideman.com.