



Explain by Example

Van Hoerlande Patrick

As far as I'm aware, and I must admit to not reading all the articles on CONNECT, there is only one article that is directly a result of the first speech of SACT ([SACT's All Hands Call](#)). That article under the title '[Distinctive abilities not "capacity"](#)' goes deeper into the proposal to change the word 'Capacity'. If you did not read it, do so.

Another topic touched during his speech sounded strange to me when I heard it. Mentally noted, I laid it aside for later consideration. That later was much sooner than I anticipated and came in the form of a book with the title *Made to Stick*.¹ In that book the authors describe how you can communicate an idea that sticks like Velcro in the memory of your audience. This is a topic that goes beyond the intent of this article but it is nevertheless very interesting for us. The book (which should be on the HQ SACT reading list) also explains the value of examples. Let's explore that topic by conducting an experiment.

Question: How many songs will your neighbour guess when you tap the rhythm of 5 songs?

Answer: 1, maybe 2, certainly less than your total number of songs.

Not convinced? Grab your colleague and do the experiment. It only takes 5 minutes and it is lots of fun!

Why is that? Well as the 'tapper' you tap the rhythm while you play the songs in your head. It all makes perfect sense; your tapping really is in synch with the melody of the songs. Unfortunately, your neighbour, the 'listener', only hears the tapping, not the melody in your head. Missing that piece of information, your neighbour tries to match a melody. Suddenly, your flawless effort to tap 'Happy Birthday' becomes 'Jingles Bells'. This phenomenon is called the 'Curse of Knowledge'.

An example: during your first weeks in the HQ, your branch head drops by your cubicle and advises you to not limit the transformation of a concept to one line of development of DOTMLPFI. Clear? He leaves you clueless as to what that meant. But for him, after 2 years at HQ this makes perfect sense.

Your colleague, reading the question marks in your eyes, turns towards you and explains that for your study to minimize the effects of mines, you should not limit yourself to defining a better mine disposal system (material), but also think of another way to do it (doctrine) or to train soldiers to be aware of the dangers of mines (training). Isn't that clearer?

Like the branch head, we are all under the spell of the curse. After months of studying an issue, we become an expert on the topic. We understand every little detail, its relationships and importance to the whole issue. Concept development, global programming, and transformation all make complete sense after a while. When explaining those abstract concepts to others, we provide them with a definition loaded with more abstractness and every nuance important to catch it all. Sometimes we

¹ Chip Heath & Dan Heath, *Made to Stick. Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. Random House Inc, New York, USA, 2008.

even add a touch of fluffiness to enhance consensus building further up the chain. The result is a complete and near perfect explanation of what we mean. Right?

No. The listener in our experiment, our audience does not hear the music in our head. We explain concepts as if the audience is us: the tappers. Why do they think we are tapping 'Jingles Bells'?

How to prevent the effect of the curse? Well, by singing while tapping. By being concrete in explaining abstract concepts. And examples are a good and natural way to do just that (We can do even better by telling stories, but that's a different story). Don't be afraid, you can never be too concrete. Not even for a general. Talking abstract may grant you the status of an expert, but painting with examples will elevate you to the level of genius.

I could have started this article with the definition of the 'Curse of Knowledge', but I bet that after the experiment (even if you did not do it) the idea stuck better. The use of the example made it more concrete and that is what our Supreme Commander expects us to do. We should refrain from stupefying our counterparts and aim for concreteness. Explain by example.