THE CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE

By Timothy King

I live under a curse, a despicable, damaging curse that affects most professionals at one time or another: the curse of knowledge. You see, the curse of knowledge attacks those who have “done that, been there and know that,” those who think their common knowledge is common to all, yet others have still to learn.

To acquire specialized knowledge is a blessing, but to forget that others do not share in this knowledge is a curse; for when we forget, we assume, and when we assume, problems can and will occur.

I’ll share a couple of examples:

• Example 1: One day while performing a safety inspection at a sister facility, I was teamed with a senior supervisor with whom I had never worked before. While inspecting, I found an air hose that did not have a valve attached to the end. I immediately took a picture, then unhooked the air line while shaking my head in amazement.

As I began making notes, I realized that the supervisor was staring at me with a befuddled look on his face. When I asked what was the matter, he simply inquired, “What was wrong with the air hose?”

Shocked, I explained to him that all air hoses must have a valve on the end in case the line is pressurized; if the line is pressurized without a valve on the end, the end of the line becomes a whipping snake of a weapon.

As he slowly nodded his head in agreement, he said, “In my 30 years, I have never heard that, but I see why that could be a problem.” Here was a dangerous situation that I thought was common knowledge, but this highly intelligent gentleman, who had participated in numerous government inspections and countless industry training classes over the years, never knew. My knowledge was not his knowledge.

• Example 2: When my wife and I first started dating, she asked me why I kept shifting gears while driving, even though the vehicle we were in had an automatic transmission. For a moment, I forgot that she did not have my knowledge about the shady old vehicles I grew up with, those where functioning brakes were a borderline luxury.

The arrogance we have in our precious knowledge feeds the curse, and it is this overconfidence that ushers in our downfall as a true professional.

You see, those old trucks had questionable brakes, to say the least, and it became second nature for me to downshift when going down hills or coming up to a stop, because this was the only surefire way to know that I would actually stop. Thank goodness I grew up in a sleepy town with no stoplights and a few strategic snowbanks.

But then, it dawned on me that my bride-to-be did not know my history or have my knowledge, and so I explained my reasons for driving an automatic transmission like a manual. Needless to say, she was shocked and expressed disbelief, but she understood. She was shocked at my actions, and I was shocked that she did not know what I considered obvious. My knowledge was not her knowledge until I shared it.

Until I realized that I had this curse, I believed I was a well-versed safety professional who was going to use his knowledge superpower to save the world; however, once I grasped the concept of my affliction, I came to realize I was the exact opposite of what a safety professional is supposed to be: a resource who uses his/her knowledge to educate others so they can improve themselves and grow. I was an expert in my knowledge base, but not a professional in my field.

The curse of knowledge befalls us all at one time or another. Think about a situation when an expert spoke to you on a subject you did not know, and the individual spoke to you as if you knew exactly what s/he was talking about. Think of how lost you felt. Now, think about a time when a professional explained what s/he was talking about in a way that a layperson could understand. Not so lost, were you?

We must remember that everyone does not share in the same knowledge base; if they did, experts and professionals would not be needed. On some days we are the professionals, on others, the layperson. If you call yourself an expert in a field, there is a good chance that those around you are not. So be the professional, be the teacher: step up and share your knowledge so that others can grow.

The curse of knowledge must be battled daily. To do so, we must first acknowledge its existence; the first step of any battle is to know your foe. Once you know your foe, then you must learn what its main weapon is. In this case, the weapon is arrogance: the “done that, been there and know that” attitude. The arrogance we have in our precious knowledge feeds the curse, and it is this overconfidence that ushers in our downfall as a true professional. Arrogance is a bitterness that drives others away. Sure, people will seek your knowledge, but that is all; they will see you as nothing more than a talking book, not the trusted resource you have been called to be.

I pray that I am not the arrogant buffoon of years past. I constantly remind myself that my profession calls me to be a teacher who gladly shares his knowledge with others. One day, the knowledge I share may save a life.

Timothy King, CMSP, is the safety and health manager for the Buzzi Unicem USA cement plant and quarry in Chattanooga, TN. King started in safety while working in the lumber industry in the late 1980s then transitioned to the mining industry 11 years ago. King guides and cultivates an operation’s safety culture by bringing safety from just a priority to a value. King is a member of ASSP’s Chattanooga Chapter.

assp.org MARCH 2019 PROFESSIONAL SAFETY PSJ 61