Knowing &
unknowing;
TRUTH AND LIES

JOHN POWELL WRITES

I'm sitting at my desk right now after the USB Knowledge Conference where Thabo Mbeki started us thinking about truth and knowledge. They seem the same, but they're not. Or maybe they are. And it makes a difference. I mean out there … in the real world. Mbeki was talking about the wider world, but the difference is relevant to managers and managing.

The difference between truth and knowledge is a philosophical question. Socrates' great teacher, Plato, offered the tripartite theory of knowledge. He said that to claim knowledge of something it must be **true**, you have to **believe** it, and there must be **evidence** for it. Sounds great, doesn't it? Just three simple rules to check: I know my car is in the car park because it really is there; I believe it is my car and I can see that car through the window.

But it isn't so simple in today's world. Take the case of Colonel Gadaffi. The late leader of Libya was surrounded by a cocoon of self-initiated propaganda which convinced him that the Libyan people supported, accepted, even adored him. He would have claimed to know that he was a revered leader. But what was the truth? It's no good arguing that 'in reality' the people didn't adore him, because the reality was that their overt actions (or inactions) belied their inner feelings.

Then along came the Twitter storm in which (according to the victors, who always write the history) knowledge of the truth of the Libyan people's feelings for Gadaffi cohered in a populist communicative act. Suddenly everyone agreed. Gadaffi, rather than being the Beloved Leader, was a Bad

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Thing. The result we know. Gadaffi was killed on 21 October 2011.

The Libyan experience gives us some pointers to our approach to these two ideas of truth and knowledge in the managerial domain.

First, they are different. Something can be true but you don't know it. For example, your staff may think you are the personification of Ricky Gervais, but you think they all worship the carpet you float over. Challenge your assumptions about what you know.

Second, what you know may not, in fact, be true. You see Plato was wrong about the **belief, evidence, truth** stuff. It took 2 000 years to realise it, but the Belgian philosopher François Gettier noticed, in the 1960s, that there are certain evidential errors which lead to something not being known while Plato's rules are kept. For example, the car in the parking lot you're looking at may be an identical vehicle to yours, but not actually yours. Yours *is* there, but it's not the one from which you are drawing evidence. Challenge the evidence before you.

Fortunately, these paradoxes are rare when we have an appeal to reality, but (and this is my point three) most of the situations which we deal with in managerial life do not have an appeal to reality. Like Gadaffi's fickle followers, reality is constructed by a social process. It simply does no good to ask what is true and hence what is known, since what is true is often arbitrarily constructed by a group of communicating persons. It would be unthinkable that your personal or corporate reputation could be created by a group of people whom you do not know, all passing silly messages over Twitter. Well … get over it. It's already happening. And there is little you can do to counter the madness or wisdom of crowds. Challenge your own assumptions about what constitutes knowledge, especially when you are dealing with a social context.

Oh, and by the way … just to give you some practice, there are three errors of 'fact' in the piece above. See if you can find them. (*The answers are on page 27.*) a

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