



On the Road to Wisdom

By Dr. Jim Beaubien

The popular press tells us we are living in the information age, an age of learning organizations and knowledge workers. Although there's a lot of hype out there, much of it is contradictory and confusion. I've developed the following learning continuum to help me better put the concepts in context. The continuum starts with data and ends with wisdom.

Data are raw samples that reflect what is happening in a selected environment at the time the data is gathered. Data has no meaning in and of itself independent of the representational system used to gather it. The act of gathering data creates it. It doesn't exist until it's gathered.

Sensing and measuring devices are used to gather data. The data gathering process can be continuous or episodic. A thermostat is continuously gathering data about the temperature in a room. A series of security cameras may randomly gather data about what is going on in various parts of a shopping mall. Once systems are established, data can be gathered, accessed, processed, transmitted and stored without human involvement.

Information is the next point on the continuum. Data is not information and information is not data. Data is the raw material used to create information. Drucker defines information as data endowed with relevance and purpose. Data is meaningless until it is filtered, structured and organized to make it relevant for a particular task.

Think of information as a substance. It can be processed, utilized, stored and retrieved. It can be bought, sold, stolen or given away. It can overwhelm people if they get too much of it or impoverish them if they don't get enough. Knowledge comes next. Knowledge is qualitatively different than either information or data. While data and information are 'out there' and can exist independently of people, knowledge is 'in us' and requires a knower. Knowledge resides in people's minds. Information becomes knowledge when a person internalizes it.

Understanding is the next point on the continuum. Like knowledge, understanding is in us, not out there. Understanding occurs when we can use knowledge in a meaningful and relevant way in e.g. problem solving, decision making, communicating, persuading and so on. Understanding allows knowledge to be applied. The dictionary defines understanding this way: to grasp the meaning of something, to be totally familiar with the character and propensities of something or to achieve a grasp of the nature, significance of explanation of something. Understanding is the basis for action.

Judgment is the next point on the continuum. Like knowledge and understanding, it only exists in the human mind. The dictionary defines judgment as the process of forming an opinion or evaluation by discerning and comparing or the process of forming an opinion through careful weighing of evidence and testing of premises. Judgment builds on understanding in that it involves the weighing of alternative understandings and selection of the most appropriate in a given circumstance. Judgment is the basis for choice. It allows you to weigh alternatives and select best courses of action in a given set of circumstances.

Wisdom is the final point on the continuum. As with knowledge, understanding and judgment, it is an artifact of the human mind. It is marked by deep understanding, keen discernment and a capacity for sound judgment. This is often based on their ability to recognize patterns and draw on experience from different contexts. Wise people tend to draw on all of their experience when making judgments, not just experience related to the judgment in question. This ability to apply all they know to the problem at hand makes them very proficient. Wisdom is the basis for very smart choices.

I hope this continuum helps you make sense of this complex and often inaccessible set of concepts.