

This is a blue book. Or is it?

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Depending on the information available to them, people may have very different perceptions of one and the same reality. To people reading the article, the book in our illustration clearly is blue. Before deciding whether the book in the picture is in fact blue, readers may want to gather as many pieces of information as possible. A task that is usually much easier for teams.

Blown away

The first day of the 2014 European Athletics Championships in Zurich was quite extraordinary weather-wise. Competitions had to be postponed by an hour as a thunderstorm hit Zurich. There was heavy rain in the stadium, but when looking down from the main stands, things did not look all that bad. Representatives of TV stations working from there were annoyed by the delay and demanded to know what was going on. As I was standing in front of the camera of a German TV channel, Swiss TV showed live images from the warm-up track two kilometres away. The facility was literally blown away by the storm at that very moment. So, instead of having to defend a delay, I was given the opportunity to explain how we had prepared for scenarios like that. The journalists asking the questions were suddenly more appreciative than annoyed.

News information

The situation made me realise how strongly differing information levels influence perception. The person in our illustration is looking at the front of the book – which is red. All things considered, the book is both blue and red, evidently. I call this type of facts news information. You receive them, process them, and adjust your position.

Knowledge-based information

Knowledge-based information, to me, is based on expertise rather than superficial knowledge. There is a difference, as the following famous story shows: After Max Planck had received a Nobel Prize in Physics in 1919, he held numerous speeches about quantum mechanics. His chauffeur, who was always there with him, soon knew the script by heart. One day, they decided to have a bit of fun. The chauffeur would hold the speech in Munich. He did an

impeccable job, his “chauffeur” Planck sat in the audience. One of the questions after the speech was complex. Keeping his cool, the speaker of the day replied that he found it hard to believe that someone in an advanced city like Munich would ask such a basic question, and that he would let his chauffeur answer it. Learning a script by heart can never replace the broad knowledge of a true expert.

Experience-based information

When I started to serve as a General Manager for the America’s Cup-winning Alinghi team in 2004, I worked hard to familiarise myself with all the knowledge I would need. However, I am not a sailor. I had no experience whatsoever of what it would be like to risk my life on a sailing boat. And that is what people do in the America’s Cup. Intelligence and diligence cannot help you get experience-based information. As far as safety issues were concerned, I was out of my depth. So, despite being responsible for handling the team’s budget, experienced sailors made the decisions when it came to safety measures and materials.

Collective information

There is a flood of information available every day. Individuals can no longer gather and classify all facts and aspects there are or they need. Teams have become ever more important in our increasingly digital and interconnected world. Using all kinds of information and sources systematically and open-mindedly is the only way to make “informed decisions”. In a team, every member can contribute and help secure a group’s success.