

The Risks of Ignorance

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I have seen a frightening erosion of the value of information and truth. It is frightening because of how commonplace it has become to choose your own facts and your own truth when reality becomes inconvenient. When that becomes commonplace-when truth doesn't prevail-it becomes a far more dangerous world than we realize. We don't become victims of a disaster, we create the disaster.

We always explain to our clients, primarily communities and organizations looking to find success, that accurate information is critical to good decision making, and a lack of information is what is truly dangerous. My explanation has always been: "You know what you know, and you know what you don't know. Those things don't usually hurt you. It's what you don't know you don't know that hides the danger that ruins you." In other words, when you don't know something, you can find the information out. Once you know the information, you can plan and act in a way that addresses it. However, when you aren't even aware that you are missing important information, the risks are potentially grave.

I have been wrong about that being the worst situation, however. When you are completely oblivious to the existence of certain information, it can be harmful. Becoming aware of information, but denying it is true because you don't like what it says, is like driving full speed head-first into a wall you know, but deny, is there. It's quite stupid, but this is at risk of becoming not only socially acceptable, but exponentially more commonplace. It's the worst situation because it isn't accidental destruction. It's entirely deliberate. It's sad to watch when it happens.

For our municipal clients, the information they are missing is especially important for sound management of their infrastructure and their viability as a community. Most communities have a good sense of the state of their infrastructure above ground because it is easy to see and assess. For many, the condition of the infrastructure below ground is far less certain, because it was often put in without accurate records of dates, locations and materials. As well, trying to assess its current state is often a rather costly process that proves prohibitive for many communities. However, information can be gathered.

Most municipalities rely on an accounting exercise that depreciates their purchase value of their assets over several years. It's an important accounting process, but it's not valuable for asset management. Depreciating a \$100 fire hydrant over 20 years for accounting purposes doesn't help you prepare for the \$180 it's likely to cost you at today's prices. Many municipalities-particularly smaller rural municipalities-don't have adequate knowledge of what re-investment is required to repair and replace aging infrastructure, and have limited or even no reserve funds set aside to do this work. So, many municipalities utilize their capital depreciation numbers for planning, but they are often not aware it doesn't prepare them for a real-world replacement of their assets. In effect, they don't know what they don't know and that can ruin them.

Yet when the real picture of a municipality's ability to replace its infrastructure is seen, many go into shock and denial, because it calls into question their viability as a community. They become afraid, and that is understandable; it's a common reaction to a new challenge. The real danger occurs when it becomes permanent denial. There is great risk when you don't know what you don't know. However, once you know, continuing to deny it is a horrible situation that makes bad matters even worse.

It has become fashionable to call anything you disagree with "fake news", or to provide your own "alternative facts." We seem to have been given permission by the Twitter (Leader) of the Free World to deny any information that doesn't agree with how we want the world to look. We can't allow that to go unchallenged, or we become silent passengers in that car racing toward the wall. Our communities need to find the facts, face reality, and plan for long-term viability. Ignoring the facts and ignoring reality may mean we are still viable for as long as it may matter to us, but we owe it to the next generation who want to live in our communities to ensure we plan in a way that makes our communities viable for them as well.

It's hard to find the facts, and sometimes even harder to admit them, but our future depends on both.

This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.