

What About Bob?

The Colorado river is narrow and deep. It carved the Grand Canyon out of stone. Knowledge can be narrow or broad, more like a lake with varying depths. A narrow focus can be powerful like a laser but its impact is confined and selective. Is your lighting depth deep and narrow or wide with varying depths?

Greg Ortt, my friend and co-worker, told me about his recent dinner experience with a lighting celebrity. Greg has been in our industry for decades and he has an uncommon ability to communicate what he has learned. When he talks about lighting he gets animated, his hands punch the air, his voice rises and his facial expressions complement his passion. Greg can also be like this when he talks about his family, his faith or the Buckeyes from his home state of Ohio.

Greg's knowledge is the lake and his dinner guest, the unnamed lighting celebrity, went narrow and deep when talking about lighting. He stared and went silent on anything else. Topics came and went but conversation only flowed if it was about our industry.

Buckminster Fuller was an architect, inventor and visionary. He feared that over specialization (narrow and deep) would ultimately destroy our civilization. On a somewhat lesser scale the lighting industry is threatened by this as well.

When groups come to the Lighting Solutions Center I encourage them to engage. My argument is that there are no experts in lighting. It is too broad for one person to grasp. We all have gaps and what may appear basic knowledge needed for your job could be a revelation to the person sitting next to your. We don't know what we don't know. This lack of knowledge can hold us back, it can hurt us.

An example of this is innovation. We can't create or destroy matter, all we can do is modify it. When we fuse together different ideas and materials in a new combination, that is innovation. It necessitates an awareness of the periphery. The farther out we see increases our potential for unique fusions. It is easier to build on a broad foundation.

David DiLaura told me that his students education was not completed until they were immersed in a "real world" work environment for a couple of years. David is revered in our industry partially because of the broader understanding that he brings us. He was immersed in the workplace then turned to teaching, minimizing the criticism levied on academics who possess only a narrow understanding of their subject.

Dr. Michael Siminovitch, Director of the California Lighting Technology Center exemplifies the importance of a general knowledge or broad understanding of our industry. He and his team are involved in many technologies and need to understand the interrelationships of not only the products but the skill sets engaged in the lighting industry. Michael understands what he needs to do to satisfy the requirements of the University connected to his facility. But developing products at the CLTC and meeting the academic aspects necessary would have a very limited impact if he did not

understand the relationship needed with manufacturers to evaluate and turn the CLTC ideas into reality to impact the market.

The pace of business narrows our focus, especially in this economy with a reduced work force. We have less time to research and less time to learn new skills. Certainly we need individuals with deep knowledge but even they can often benefit from a wider perspective.

Personal life choice toward narrow interests can be judged only by their overall effect on quality of life. In functional societies however the detrimental effect exceeds that of limited dinner conversation. The effect on our lighting industry of a limited vision is to restrict innovation and growth. Limiting our vision can be comfortable. For some this is yet another of life's elusive balances. We do not learn in our comfort zone. That is where we spend most of our time but that zone is comfortable because it is familiar. We learn outside of our comfort zone where we are stretched and exposed to new information and experiences.

Diversity of knowledge, like biodiversity, is life sustaining. We need specialists proportionately. While doing lighting design in a nuclear power facility in Michigan Bob introduced himself to me. He wore a leather toolbelt over his sweatshirt. I cannot remember his title but recall that he was a gifted facility manager. Initially my questions about regulations or task requirements would lead me to an engineer involved in that specific area. Invariably the engineers all led me to Bob, telling me that they weren't sure but he would know. Bob was the generalist who was able to shape their disparate contributions into useful knowledge.

In the movie *What About Bob*, Richard Dreyfus plays a narrowly skilled academic. The techniques he offers in his book, *Baby Steps*, fail to help when he is confronted by a real life basket case. Part of why the script is funny, aside from Bill Murray's shtick is that the humor we laugh the hardest at resonates with an element of truth. Seemingly wise people who misunderstand something basic can be funny unless the misunderstanding has negative consequences.

What can we do with this observation about the benefits of broadening our knowledge and experience? First we must push ourselves outside of our comfort zones. The next time you are at dinner and find that you are not able to engage in the topics being discussed, think about the breadth of your knowledge and what is being discussed that you could learn from. When scheduling classes at the IES Conference or Lightfair consider an unfamiliar topic. Publications new to us that are directed at Architects, electrical distributors, contractors and interior designers can offer fresh perspectives (in addition to LD&A of course). And remember that the best way to learn is to teach. Share what you learn with at least one person so that you both benefit. If you are too uncomfortable at first, may I suggest taking "Baby Steps"?

