

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

By Bob Osborne, EFCA West  
Director of Church Health  
([bob.osborne@efca.org](mailto:bob.osborne@efca.org))

June 1, 2020

### Blind Spots

*“Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.”<sup>1</sup>*

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld got a lot of flack when he uttered those words at a press briefing on February 12, 2002, five months after 9/11. That seems to be the nature of things said by high-level government officials – whether your utterances are considered sage or gaffes oftentimes depends upon whether you are or are not part of my team. Donald Rumsfeld was not the first to talk about “unknown unknowns” – he was just the one that made it, at least for a time, famous.

Unknown unknowns are blind spots, and blind spots can get us. Leaders cannot address issues they cannot or do not see and, if we are not careful, we can hurt those who are following us as well as the mission we are pursuing when we don't account for our blind spots. For church leaders, minimizing our blind spots, looking for and uncovering our unknown unknowns, is something to talk about.

I have found it helpful to divide what we think we know about the future into four categories:

- **Known knowns**: These are the things that we know we know. They are almost always accurate because, well, we know them. We know our current cash flow. We know the status of our facilities. We know the commission that Jesus gave those who follow Him. We know his commands and promises. Because we know that we know these things, we can act on them with a high level of confidence.
- **Known unknowns**: These are the things that we know we do not know. We know we do not know what tomorrow will bring. We know we do not know how or when the economy will recover. We know that we don't know how soon congregants will be

---

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, *There are known knowns*, accessed May 4, 2020

comfortable meeting in larger-group worship and programs at our churches. We know we don't know when Jesus is coming again. Because we know that we do not know such things, we can make contingency plans and strategies and step out with appropriate caution and alertness so that we can adjust to whatever circumstances we face.

- Unknown knowns: These are the things that we know but we were not aware that we knew them, usually because we didn't have to act upon that knowledge before. Leaders likely encounter unknown knowns less frequently than the others and, when we do encounter them, it is often a blessing. An example of an unknown known would be to have a person on your team that, unbeknownst to others, happens to have expertise in the issue before the team. Perhaps a person having the spiritual gift of discernment or wisdom may "see" something related to an issue that he or she didn't know they had before it popped into their brain and out of their lips.
- Unknown unknowns: This is the danger zone for leaders. These are things that we don't know that we don't know. Not only do we not know them, but we don't even know that we might need to know about them. We fly blind and without instruments, oftentimes blissful in our ignorance until we encounter what we were not expecting and never imagined. An example that happened to me was during a board meeting in which we discovered that our church suddenly owned payment of hundreds of thousands of dollars for an adjustable rate mortgage. We thought we had a fixed-rate mortgage. The massive balloon payment due immediately was an unknown unknown. By God's grace, we were able to refinance. The whole COVID 19 situation which we are all navigating was, just a few weeks ago, and unknown unknown. We didn't know that we needed a plan to be the church without meeting together as a church.

You can see why it is so important to narrow the field of potential unknown unknowns that we face – our blind spots. How to do this? Let me offer some timely suggestions for your conversation.

- When considering possible actions, engage in conversations that explore areas where we may not already be thinking. A good example of this is known as "red teaming." It's where someone has the responsibility to enthusiastically advocate against your plan to expose its weaknesses. This forces us to consider things that we had not thought of before – exposing blind spots. Let's consider a contemporary decision churches across the country are facing – how soon can we "reopen" church services?
  - First of all, the way the question is phrased conveys a built-in bias and a blind spot. It presupposes that the goal is to gather the church together as soon as possible. It asks when can we do so rather than when should we do so. The factors and values that drive a "can we?" decision can be vastly different than the factors and values that drive a "should we?" decision.
  - Most of us church leaders and most in our congregation are highly desirous of gathering together in larger groups again and as soon as possible. We long for the face-to-face fellowship and camaraderie we used to enjoy and even took for

granted just a few weeks ago. Church leaders are frequently pressed to identify a date when we will gather again in larger group worship. Leaders want to gather – congregants want to gather – and we pursue doing so as soon as possible.

- A “red team” exercise will also actively consider other issues that could militate against the decision we are about to make – it illuminates potential blind spots. Red team inputs into our decision-making could include the following issues that we might otherwise blow right past.
  - Though church members and staff may feel great about gathering for “normal” church services again, what will the people in our community that we are trying to bring to Christ think about us and the Savior we purport to serve? Will they view our actions as prudent, wise, something to celebrate and as a demonstration of our love for our neighbors, or will they view us as selfish, uncaring religious wackos (yes – red-team conversations include words like “wacko”)?
  - If another COVID19 outbreak occurs and is traced to our church which was among the first to gather in large groups again, what will that say to our congregants about our leadership and our care for them, and what will it say to our neighbors who need Jesus?
- In many of our church boards the majority (if not all) of the board members are older men. The majority are often empty-nesters or parents of older children. How quickly we forget what it was like to have small children in the home, and I suspect that many of us have no idea what it’s like to have small children at home in today’s culture and circumstances. In our desire to minister to people in our churches, do we understand what it is really like to be at home all day with small children in different school grades, teaching them, with both parents trying to work at home? Do we know what it is like to be a senior citizen with limited technical experience trying to navigate our on-line presence? Do we know what it’s like to be a first-generation immigrant from a country whose banks cannot be trusted and how that impacts on-line giving? The best way to deal with these unknown unknowns – these blind spot – is to ask them what it is like and to ask them what help they might want or need. The resulting information will illuminate some of our blind spots.
- One of the best ways I know to illuminate blind spots and to shed light on unknown unknowns is to talk about them and ask about them. When considering a decision, do we consistently pause (the pause is important) and ask ourselves these two questions:
  - What do I not know about this decision that I may need to know?
  - Who will this decision impact and do I understand the potential perspectives of those people, especially how their experience differs from mine? How can we gain the added perspective that I need to make a wise decision?

We church leaders need to think broadly as we seek to bring glory to God through our service of leadership in His church. Turbulent times require greater wisdom and quicker thinking by

Something to Talk About  
June 1, 2020

church leaders – but, we cannot sacrifice the “wisdom” in our pursuit of the “quicker.” We need both.

Investigating the unknown unknowns of church leadership is something to talk about.

The EFCA West team is ready to assist you as you navigate the seasons of ministry. Let us know if we can serve you in any way. We have several helpful resources posted on our Website (go to [efcawest.org](http://efcawest.org)), our Facebook pages and our YouTube channel. Please check them out. Let’s keep the conversation going.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.  
Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at [bob.osborne@efca.org](mailto:bob.osborne@efca.org).*

*This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders’ conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.*

*Prior articles can be found at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.*