BRIDGEPOINT COACHING & STRATEGY GROUP

Information Is Not Knowledge

Why Teams That Hear Everything Keep So Little, and How Leaders Make Learning Stay

Dean Miles · Founder and President, Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group · November 2026

Executive Summary

Think back to the 1970s and 1980s. You probably had dozens of phone numbers memorized. Home, the office, your best friend, your grandmother. Today most of us could not recite five. The numbers did not get harder. They moved. They used to be knowledge. Now they are information, stored somewhere else, there when we look them up and gone from us the moment we hang up.

This paper is about that shift, and it is not really about phones. Most organizations run on information: decks, dashboards, pre-reads, recaps, all-hands, and now a summary of anything, on demand, in seconds. Leaders have more access to information than any generation before them. They also forget it just as fast.

> **"The speed at which we have access to information today is only matched by the speed at which we forget it."**
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> DEAN MILES

The distinction is not mine. Charlotte Mason, an English educator who worked on it from the 1880s into the 1920s, called it "fundamental." I first read her about fifteen years ago, and it has shaped how I coach ever since. My working version is simple. Information is short-term. Knowledge is long-term. Information belongs to whoever wrote the deck. Knowledge belongs to you, because you did something with it.

The pages ahead cover what Mason meant, a test for which one you have, why most organizations are built to move information and call it learning, and one tool, Say It, Write It, Draw It, that takes minutes and turns what people heard into what they know.

The Phone Numbers You Used to Know

Why did those numbers stay? Because you used them. Every call was a small act: pull the number up from memory, dial it, get a digit wrong, fix it. Nobody handed you the number at the moment you needed it. You carried it, for years.

Now the phone carries it. That is a good trade for phone numbers. It is a bad trade for the things a leader actually needs to know: the strategy, the customer, the risk nobody wants to name, the decision the team made last Tuesday. Those get handled the same way the phone numbers do now. Stored somewhere. Looked up when needed. Never really ours.

Mason saw the same pattern a century ago in schoolchildren cramming for exams. They could memorize a string of facts, she wrote, and "the new possession serves its purpose for a time, but it is not assimilated; its purpose being served, we know it no more" (Mason, 1925, p. 16).

Swap the exam for the quarterly business review and you have most of corporate life. A leader studies the deck the night before, presents it well, and a month later could not tell you the third point on slide four. The deck served its purpose. Nobody knows it anymore.

Try it on your own team. Ask them to tell you, in their own words and without the slides, the three priorities from your last offsite. If you get three different lists, or the slide titles read back to you, the offsite produced information.

What Mason Meant

In 1903, J. H. Badley, headmaster of Bedales School, answered one of Mason's pamphlets with a request: define knowledge, because most readers would take it to mean information. Her answer is the clearest statement of the idea I know:

> **"The distinction between knowledge and information is, I think, fundamental. Information is the record of facts, experiences, appearances, etc., whether in books or in the verbal memory of the individual; knowledge, it seems to me, implies the result of the voluntary and delightful action of the mind upon the material presented to it."**
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> CHARLOTTE MASON, SCHOOL EDUCATION, P. 224

Three parts of that sentence do the work.

- **Voluntary.** The mind has to act. Nobody can know something for you, and no amount of sending it to you will do it. Mason later put it bluntly: "Knowledge is not instruction, information, scholarship, a well-stored memory" (Mason, 1925, p. 303).

- **Delightful.** Interest is not optional. Mason did not mean entertainment. She meant the mind actually engaging with the material instead of holding it at arm's length until the meeting ends. In my own workshops I have used a shorthand for this: knowledge is information touched with emotion. That is my working definition, not a line from Mason.
- **Action upon the material.** Knowledge is a product, not a deposit. Something has to happen to the information before it becomes yours. Mason compared it to digestion: the mind works on knowledge "that it may be incorporated, which is not the same thing as 'remembered'" (Mason, 1904, p. 225).

She also said why it matters. Information picked up along the way is "only by chance, and here and there, of practical value." Knowledge "is power; as it implies an increase of intellectual aptitude in new directions, and an always new point of departure" (Mason, 1904, p. 224). Information answers the question you already had. Knowledge lets you handle the one you did not see coming.

None of this is an argument against information. Mason was clear that a person "cannot think without an abundant, varied, and regular supply of the material of knowledge" (Mason, 1903). You need plenty of information. It is the raw material. The mistake is treating the delivery of the raw material as if it were the finished product.

	INFORMATION	KNOWLEDGE
Where it lives	In the deck, the file, the feed, the phone.	In you.
How long it lasts	Until its purpose is served.	Years. It stacks on what you already know.
Whose words	The author's.	Yours.
What it takes	Exposure.	An act: say it, write it, or draw it.
What it lets you do	Repeat it.	Recast it for a new audience and use it in a new situation.
How you check it	"Any questions?"	"Walk me through it."

The Test: Can You Tell It Back?

Mason gave teachers a test, and it works just as well in a boardroom. "Perhaps the chief function of a teacher is to distinguish information from knowledge in the acquisitions of his pupils." The child with knowledge, she wrote, "will recast, condense, illustrate, or narrate with vividness." The child with only information "will write and speak in the stereotyped phrases of his text-book, or will mangle in his notes the words of his teacher" (Mason, 1904, p. 225).

> **Knowledge sounds like you. Information sounds like the deck.**

You have heard both in the same meeting. A leader with knowledge of the strategy can explain it to a new hire, the board, and a frontline crew, in different words each time, and simpler each time without losing what matters. A leader with information reads the slide title aloud, repeats the consultant's framework in the consultant's words, and gets lost the moment someone asks a question in a different order.

Listen for the stereotyped phrases. They are the tell. Borrowed acronyms, recited slogans, a strategy that can only be explained with the slide on the screen. None of that means the person is not smart. It means the material has not been worked on yet.

Mason's method follows from the test: "As knowledge is not assimilated until it is reproduced, children should 'tell back' after a single reading or hearing: or should write on some part of what they have read" (Mason, 1925, p. 155). Elsewhere she put the reason simply: "we are so made that only those ideas and arguments which we go over are we able to retain" (Mason, 1925, p. 292).

So when I ask a leader to walk me through something, I am not testing their memory. I tell them so. I am not asking you to recite it. I am asking you to tell it back in your own words, because that is the moment it moves from information to knowledge.

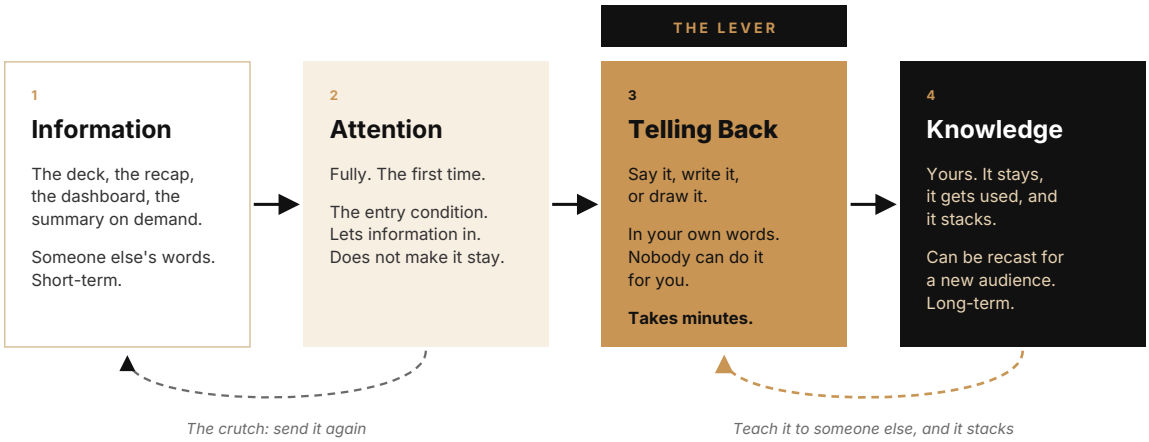


Figure 1. From Information to Knowledge. Attention lets information in. Telling it back, by saying, writing, or drawing it, is what makes it stay. The grey loop is what most organizations do instead: send the information again. The amber loop is what happens when people teach what they know to someone else.

Organizations Built to Move Information

Look at how a typical organization tries to make something stick. Send a pre-read. Present it. Recap it at the end. Circulate the slides. Send a follow-up email. Re-present it at the next meeting for the people who missed it.

Every one of those steps moves information. Not one of them asks anyone to do anything with it. In my July article, *Twenty Minutes Beats a Wandering Hour*, I called this the crutch. We have built organizations on it, and in doing so we train inattention at industrial scale. If people know the material will be sent again, they have no reason to take it in the first time.

That article was about attention. After 13,000 hours of coaching conversations with 245 leaders, it is the trait I see most reliably separating exceptional leaders from merely capable ones, and it is the entry condition. This paper is the second half of the same argument. Attention lets information in. Telling it back turns it into knowledge. One without the other does not hold.

Meetings

Meetings are where the confusion costs the most. I tell leaders this plainly:

> **"If we're just sharing information in meetings, we might as well not have the meeting. The goal needs to be transferring knowledge."**
>
> DEAN MILES

If the purpose is to move data, send an email. It is faster, and people can read it when they can give it attention. Bring people into a room when the purpose is for them to leave knowing something they did not know before, in a form they could explain to someone else. That changes what happens in the room. Less presenting. More telling back.

A fair objection

Repetition has a place. Pilots read back clearances. Surgical teams run checklists. But look at what a readback is: the listener produces the information, in their own voice, and someone checks it. That is narration, not a second exposure. The line I drew in July still holds. Repetition that demands output trains attention. Repetition that merely re-supplies input destroys it.

Summaries on demand

AI and search have made information cheaper and faster than it has ever been. I use both, and I am not arguing against them. But when anyone in the room can summon a summary in seconds, having the information is no longer an advantage. Knowing it is. The phone numbers are the warning: whatever we stop carrying, we stop knowing.

The question I put to senior teams is the one I ask myself: what is the reinforcement rhythm within this organization that takes information and data and turns them into knowledge? Most teams have a distribution rhythm. Very few have that one.

The Tool: Say It, Write It, Draw It

The goal is to move what people heard from short-term memory to long-term memory. There are three ways to do it: an oral narrative, a written narrative, or a pictorial narrative. Say it, write it, or draw it. Any one of the three works. What does not work is hearing it again.

Four steps

1. **One exposure, full attention.** Present the material once, well. Tell people at the start that they will be asked to tell it back. That single sentence changes how a room listens.
2. **Choose a narrative.**
   - **Say it.** Two minutes, out loud, no slides: "Walk me through how you are going to approach this."
   - **Write it.** One paragraph in your own words. No copying from the screen.
   - **Draw it.** One page. A map, a flow, a sketch of who does what. If you cannot draw it, you do not have it yet.
3. **Debrief with three questions.** What has become more clear? What have you been reminded of? What will you do?
4. **Teach it within a week.** Explain it to someone who was not in the room. Teaching is where knowledge starts to stack. Once it is all in your head, the next idea has something to attach to.

Two rules make it work. First, no recital. If what comes back is the slide, ask again, in plain words. Second, the leader goes first sometimes. A team that hears its leader tell something back imperfectly, and fix it out loud, learns that telling back is how serious people work, not a test for juniors.

Five swaps for your next meeting

INFORMATION MOVE	KNOWLEDGE MOVE
"Any questions?"	"Walk me through how you are going to approach it."
A recap email after the meeting	Before anyone leaves, each person writes the decisions in their own words. Read them aloud. The differences are the work.
Re-presenting the deck next month	Ask one team member to explain it to someone new, while the rest listen.
Reading the pre-read aloud in the meeting	One reading beforehand, then narration in the room.
The workshop binder	One drawing on one page, made by the person who has to use it.

Five questions before you call a meeting

1. Is the goal to move information or to build knowledge? If it is information, send it.
2. What should people be able to explain or do afterward that they cannot do now?
3. Who will tell it back, and how: say it, write it, or draw it?
4. Am I asking for confirmation or for narration?
5. When will we go over it again, and will that time ask for output or just re-send the input?

In Practice: Two Patterns I See Often

These are composite patterns drawn from many engagements, not accounts of any one company or person.

Pattern A: The new executive and the firehose

In the first months of a new role, a senior leader is handed more information than anyone can hold: strategy decks, budgets, org charts, and a long line of introductions. The instinct is to read more and take more notes. What tends to help is the opposite. After each important conversation, write one paragraph in your own words about what you learned. Once a week, explain the business to someone outside it. The gaps in what you know show up fast, while there is still time to ask.

Pattern B: The offsite that faded

A leadership team spends two days aligning and leaves with photos of the whiteboards. Six weeks later each person describes the priorities differently, and each is sure the others drifted. Nobody drifted. They left with information. The fix costs about twenty minutes. Before the team leaves the room, each person writes the priorities from memory and reads them aloud. At thirty days, they do it again, from memory first and the photos second.

How Coaching Helps: Discovery, Design, Development

Most leaders cannot tell from the inside what they know and what they merely have. Information feels like knowledge until someone asks you to explain it.

- **Discovery: find out what is actually known.** I ask the leader to walk me through the strategy, the team, and the hardest decision in front of them, without slides. I talk in confidence with the people around them and ask what they could tell back about the leader's priorities. The distance between those two accounts is usually the first piece of work.
- **Design: decide what must become knowledge.** Not everything needs to. Phone numbers can live in the phone. We pick the few things the leader and the team must truly know, and build telling back into the meetings where those things are handled.
- **Development: make it stay.** Each session ends with the leader telling back what they are taking from it, in their own words. Doing that oral narrative back to me is the point, not a formality. We recheck with the same stakeholders later. If they can tell back what the leader is working on, it has become knowledge for them too.

Reflection Questions

Answer alone, without notes, then compare with your team.

1. What are the three priorities from our last offsite? Could each person on my team tell them back the same way?
2. What do I explain at work only with a slide on the screen?
3. When I check whether my team understood, do I ask for confirmation or for narration?
4. Which of my standing meetings mostly move information that an email could carry?
5. What did I learn this year that I have taught to someone else?
6. Where in my organization does information get re-sent instead of told back?
7. What do I need to truly know in my role, and what can live in the phone?
8. When did I last say, write, or draw something to make sure I understood it?
9. What is our reinforcement rhythm for turning information into knowledge, and who owns it?
10. If a new hire listened to my team for a week, would they hear our own words or the deck's?

If you reached for your notes on the first question, begin with it. That is information you have been treating as knowledge.

About Dean Miles and Bridgepoint

Dean Miles is the Founder and President of Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group, the executive coaching, training, and leadership development firm he founded in 2007. He began coaching and facilitating at Pfizer in 1996, thirty years ago this year, and spent 13 years in sales and training leadership at Pfizer and Merck. In his twenties he ran an undercover narcotics office. His executive coaching practice began in 2008 on drilling rigs, coaching rig supervisors, work during which the recordable incident rate was cut by a third. He has spent 13,000 hours in coaching conversations with 245 leaders. The organizations of the leaders he has advised represent $300B+ in combined revenue and assets under management.

He is a Certified Professional Co-Active Coach (CPCC). He holds an M.A. in Executive Leadership, completed with high distinction, and is a PhD candidate in Organization and Management, with a dissertation on self-regulation and premature scaling in startup failure. He is featured in the Wall Street Journal bestseller *Becoming Coachable*.

Let's Talk

If your team hears everything and keeps very little, let's talk. A first conversation is confidential and carries no obligation. Bring one thing your team was told this quarter that should have stuck. We will find out together whether it became knowledge, and you can decide from there.

WEBSITE: deanmiles.com **EMAIL:** dean@bridgepointcsg.com

Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group. Direction. Not just motion.

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