Sometimes curiosity prompts me to pick up a book even when it seems to have little to offer for the retiree lifestyle: if well-written, why not peruse it? Such was the case with Michael Roberto's *Know What You Don't Know*. The title proved thought-provoking. Of course we understand there are gaps in our knowledge; none of us knows everything. But do we identify the gaps that are detrimental if left unfilled? How do we know where to fill them and with what information?

Roberto addresses managers, CEOs, and leaders of all stripes. Inasmuch as most of us are leaders in some capacity or other—as siblings, parents, members of civic, political, or church organizations—if only we knew how, we could take on much more active and productive roles. Hence, Roberto is apropos even for those of us who don't manage large organizations in business or industry.

Leaders often miss problems until a crisis occurs, he writes. Every organization, no matter how successful, has plenty of problems, but these often lie beneath the surface, hidden from view. Seek out problems, he advises; embrace them. Successful leaders do not view problems as threats. They know that the earlier you discover a problem, the more likely you are to contain the damage. Such leaders also spend time deciding how to decide, by identifying and then filling the knowledge gap. This means extending our ability to suspend judgment, for decision-making needs a good deal of forethought. The sort of critical and divergent thinking that Roberto advocates can avoid tragic, even deadly, mistakes, as he shows in the following example.

In decades past, the aviation industry was structured around an ethos of alpha-male hierarchies. "The captain possessed tremendous authority and status. The crew learned not to question the pilot's judgment," he writes. A sign posted by an airline illustrates the point: "The two rules of commercial aviation—Rule 1: The captain is ALWAYS right. Rule 2: See Rule 1." Another airline stated in its guidelines that "The first officer should not correct errors made by the captain."

During the 1970s, safety experts worried over air-transport accidents. They found that the principal cause wasn't mechanical failure or a crew lacking appropriate technical skills; no, the causes of tragedies were "deficiencies related to interpersonal communication, teamwork, decision-making, and leadership." The worst occurred on March 27, 1977, when two Boeing 747s collided and 583 people lost their lives.

In response, NASA conducted a series of workshops on aviation safety. As a result, airlines began to implement Crew Resource Management (CRM) training. The innovation was to change the culture of flight crews. CRM training emphasizes teamwork over individualism and focuses on communication skills. So successful has been the CRM approach, many other industries have adopted it, including "the military, the merchant navy, the nuclear power industry, firefighters, health care organizations, and offshore oil and gas companies." Those who implement CRM techniques report substantial safety improvements in their organizations. Employee morale, I imagine, also changes for the better.

The military doing CRM? you ask. That fortress of fossilized rigidity that gave us forcible near-drowning (water-boarding) as "enhanced" interrogation technique, shamed us in the eyes of the world with Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, handed millions to contractors like Halliburton for shoddy or nonexistent work and equipment?

The same institution, yes indeed.

Martin E. P. Seligman in *Flourish* writes of being contacted by the Pentagon with a request to teach the skills of humanist leadership. "We can now teach the skill of well-being—of how to have more positive emotion, more meaning, better relationships, and more accomplishments," Seligman writes, adding that these skills should be taught at every level, even in schools. The military asked him to instruct drill sergeants—drill sergeants!—in his method. By all counts, the experiment has been highly successful and is set to continue on a broader level.

There is a flip side to this coin. For every manager with the resources, skill, and personal space to implement a Seligman or Roberto method—or collaborative approaches he or she has devised on his or her own—there are ten, hundreds, perhaps thousands forced to fall in line to a different drum roll. Generally speaking, managers have been trained, or in their careers have absorbed, appropriate human-management skills and sound business practices. The problem is, their higher-ups won't allow them to exercise these.

Imagine a small but successful business that has been absorbed into a larger entity and now is managed by people clueless as to its specific parameters. They'll treat the newcomers in the same big-management style that has worked overall, though often not well. Such CEOs fail to observe carefully, ask questions, and listen intently. The knowledge and past performances of the small group are disregarded; higher-ups impose practices that will not work and the small-group managers know it, but if anyone raises objections, he or she gets the boot. Much human suffering is caused by these tactics, which often operate on a mantra of cutting expenses at all cost.

This is the "Wal-Mart Effect," a phenomenon that has given rise, according to some analysts, to a "Wal-Mart Economy." More on that in my next column.