

The Errors of Experts:

When Expertise Hinders Effective Provision and Seeking of Advice and Feedback

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Abstract

To be effective, experts need to simultaneously develop others (i.e., provide advice and feedback to novices) and advance their own learning (i.e., seek and incorporate advice and feedback from others). However, expertise, and the state of efficacy associated with it, can inhibit experts from engaging in these activities or doing so effectively. We discuss when and why cognitive entrenchment and reduced perspective taking lead experts to hold misperceptions about others. We then explain how these misperceptions lead experts to provide less helpful advice and feedback to novices and to be less likely to seek and take input from others. We offer insights to overcome these barriers, enhancing experts' ability to provide and propensity to seek advice and feedback.

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1 Introduction

Experts—those with a high level of knowledge or skill in a particular domain, acquired through experience over time [1-3]—often occupy dual roles as teachers and learners. As teachers, experts are often responsible for the development of novices’ knowledge and skills, particularly through the provision of advice and feedback [4**-7*]. As learners, experts often engage in continual self-improvement and broadening of their knowledge base in order to maintain and grow their expertise to remain relevant, knowledgeable, and adaptable in constantly changing fields. Thus, experts serve not only as “providers” of advice and feedback for novices, but also as “seekers” of advice and feedback to maintain and build on their expertise.

Although experts can be a valuable source of advice and feedback, expertise—and the self-efficacy associated with proficient knowledge and skills¹—can also serve as a barrier to the effective provision and seeking of further information. In particular, greater expertise, and the self-efficacy associated with it, result in two types of miscalculated inferences: (1) incorrect inferences about novices’ level of performance as well as the type of advice and feedback novices are seeking, and (2) incorrect inferences about the utility of others’ advice and feedback. Whereas the first miscalculation results in experts delivering content that is not as helpful as it could be, the second results in experts failing to seek input from others or ignoring such input when provided.

¹ We make this distinction as one can be considered an expert and yet not feel the psychological effects of expertise or vice versa. These can therefore occur independently of each other and have disparate effects on provision and seeking of advice and feedback which we address in this review.

Experts miscalculated inferences in providing and seeking input from others arise from cognitive entrenchment [1, 8, 9] and a lack of perspective taking [10, 11**]. Cognitive entrenchment, or cognitive inflexibility with respect to one's domains of knowledge [1], prevents experts from incorporating new ideas [1, 8, 9] and engaging in perspective taking, or the cognitive process of imagining the world from another's point of view [12]. Experts, particularly those who have successfully overcome a difficult challenge, are less likely to adopt the perspective of those struggling through the same challenges they endured [13]. Because expertise increases cognitive entrenchment and reduces the willingness and ability to take others' perspectives, experts may not recognize what input will be most useful to others [14**], which contributes to a failed "shared reality" and therefore less effective advice and feedback exchanges [4**]). Furthermore, cognitive entrenchment and lack of perspective taking leads experts to overlook the possible value in seeking others' perspectives and input. As a result, expertise, and the self-efficacy associated with it, can inhibit individuals from providing useful advice and feedback to novices and from seeking and taking advice and feedback from others.

We explore how misperceptions resulting from cognitive entrenchment and a lack of perspective taking underlie (1) errors in experts' evaluation of and communication with novices when providing advice and feedback and (2) experts' lower likelihood of seeking and integrating advice and feedback from others. We then offer possible approaches to overcome these barriers.

2.1 Expertise as a Barrier to Effective Advice and Feedback Provision

People often seek out experts for advice and feedback, yet the cognitive entrenchment and lack of perspective taking associated with expertise is often a "curse" [15, 16] that prevents experts from providing advice and feedback effectively. The process of providing input

reinforces these challenges, as it elicits a sense of power and confidence [17*] that further inhibits experts' motivation to adopt others' perspectives [18].

More specifically, experts make incorrect inferences about novices because cognitive entrenchment in their own knowledge and skill base inhibits their ability to adopt novices' perspective [10]. For example, established experts (relative to emerging experts) underestimate how long novices take to learn a particular skill [16]. Because people use their own skills and abilities as a benchmark to evaluate others, established experts (relative to emerging experts) make the wrong inferences about novices' abilities: they tend to rate novice performances poorly, are less able to discern among novices' performances, and are less effective at identifying potential among novices [19]. Because experts are also more confident than non-experts, they are also more likely to negatively judge and penalize advice seekers who decide not to take their advice [4**]. These tendencies can lead novices to shy away from experts in favor of advice from those who offer more positive input [*20].

Second, when experts try to communicate advice or feedback, they struggle to take the perspective of novices and thus mispredict what content and style would be most useful to novices. In terms of content, experts suffer from the illusion of transparency: They assume others can intuit their evaluations, which leads them to provide feedback that novices perceive as more positive than experts intended [11**]. Additionally, when providing advice on how to improve, experts often try to help receivers narrow down a set of options, whereas receivers are more interested in gathering more information and widening their options [4**]. In terms of style, experts' advice is often too abstract and difficult for novices to immediately absorb [10]. The tendency for experts to be abstract is reinforced by the tendency of novices to infer expertise and judge advice based on the level of abstraction signaled in others' language [21]. As a result,

experts provide feedback and advice that is not as well-received as it could be, given their level of knowledge and skill [10, 22].

2.2 Expertise as a Barrier to Effective Advice and Feedback Seeking

Although experts can be effective at developing their expertise by seeking and taking in information [23], the sense of efficacy associated with proficient knowledge and skills can result in an inference that others' input may not be valuable, creating a barrier to the effective quest for input. In particular, the overconfidence and heightened self-efficacy associated with expertise increases cognitive entrenchment, preventing experts from 1) seeing the benefits of others' input, 2) incorporating useful advice yielding novel information or ideas, and 3) accepting negative feedback or disconfirming information.

First, because of their overconfidence in their skills and abilities within their given domain [15], experts are less likely than non-experts to seek advice and feedback about their performance or decisions [14**]. Heightened self-efficacy serves as an internal signal that one is performing well, such that those who are efficacious may see little value in feedback from others, relative to those who are less efficacious [14**]. Notably, this link holds for self-efficacy tied to one's area of skills of expertise rather than general confidence in one's abilities. A meta-analysis revealed that trait self-efficacy (representing general confidence in one's abilities) is uniformly positively related to seeking behaviors (e.g., feedback and advice seeking), whereas state or job-specific self-efficacy (representing confidence within a specific domain or task, akin to expertise) is less positively, and even negatively, associated with the same behaviors [24]. Moreover, experts may avoid asking questions because they believe that seeking input from others will diminish their image as experts [25*].

Second, increased self-efficacy, confidence, and superiority resulting from expertise can exacerbate people's natural tendencies to discount others' advice in favor of their own views [8, 5, 18, 26]. Discounting the input of others prevents experts from considering valuable advice, even if it contains novel ideas or information [27-29], and compromises accuracy in expert judgment [30]. As a result, experts lose out on opportunities to enhance their creativity and broaden their knowledge and skillsets [1, 8, 9].

Third, although high trait self-efficacy allows one to better handle negative feedback [31], high self-efficacy in a specific domain may lead experts to discount negative or disconfirming feedback [32]). Given the subjectivity and nuance of many performance domains [33], experts may misperceive their own performance [34], prompting them to question the accuracy of others' evaluations and ignore disconfirming but relevant feedback [8, 35]. For example, managers ignore employees' opinions [36], especially from employees who are outside their circle of confidants [37]. Such adverse reactions to negative feedback hinder experts' performance. For example, after receiving disconfirming feedback, experts double down with overly precise predictions and assessments, at the expense of accuracy, to reaffirm their identity as experts [38**].

3 Overcoming Barriers

Recent and ongoing research provides insights to help experts overcome cognitive entrenchment and lack of perspective taking during advice and feedback exchanges.

A possible antidote to cognitive entrenchment is to encourage experts to adopt a continual learning mindset. When experts adopt a growth mindset, they are more invested in facilitating the development of others through advice and feedback [39, 40]. One way to foster a continual learning mindset is to equip experts with the knowledge that asking others for input

can increase, rather than decrease, perceptions of competence [41], humility [25*], and liking [42].

Similarly, experts might be encouraged to see what they could learn from others, particularly those who are often overlooked as sources of knowledge (e.g., those lower in their organizational hierarchy and presumed novices who actually have expertise in other domains). For example, although employees naturally seek out people lower in the organizational hierarchy for advice on social norms [43*], they do not naturally consult them when seeking to develop knowledge and skills, despite the proven benefits of doing so [44*]. Experts could deliberately seek input from overlooked members of their network (e.g., weak ties with novices) who might share helpful input in the development of creative ideas [45*]. Learning “downward” from those lower in the organizational hierarchy not only enhances experts’ own performance [44*], but also makes experts more engaged and effective when providing advice to novices [46].

When it comes to lack of perspective taking, one solution is to reorient experts to focus more on others. For example, Sherf and Morrison [14**] provided evidence that taking the perspective of others mitigates the negative association between self-efficacy and feedback seeking. Crucially, this evidence emerged both for individual differences in proclivity toward perspective taking and through a simple manipulation that asked people to imagine what others are thinking or feeling. Relatedly, novices can ask questions that encourage experts to see their perspectives [47]. For instance, encouraging novices to ask for advice rather than feedback prompts experts to provide future-oriented suggestions that novices find more constructive and actionable [48].

Another method to foster better perspective taking is to help experts re-engage with their past struggles as novices. For example, when experts rediscover their past challenges as novices

(e.g., reading old dissertation drafts [49]) prior to delivering input to others (e.g., giving feedback on others' dissertations), they re-learn the overlooked challenges their past selves experienced as novices, which enables them to provide input that novices find both more encouraging and useful [22].

4 Future Directions and Conclusion

Although we have focused on how having greater expertise—and the efficacy associated with it—creates barriers for advice provision and seeking, additional research is needed to understand how lacking expertise (being a novice)—and the lack of efficacy associated with it—impacts the provision and seeking of input. On the provision side, the feeling of being “too young” leads novices to underestimate the value of their advice, inhibiting the sharing of information that others actually perceive as helpful [50*]. On the seeking side, novices likely make the incorrect inference regarding the best source of advice or feedback, overvaluing the advice from top-performing experts when input from emerging experts or others may be just as valuable [51]. Future research is also needed to identify strategies to enable those who feel like novices to share helpful information, and to equip novices to seek individuals who will provide the most helpful input.

In summary, experts play an important dual role: They develop others by providing advice and feedback, and further their own learning by seeking out and taking in information from others. We suggest that although experts are often proficient in these roles, there are times when barriers hold them back. Namely, misperceptions, resulting from cognitive entrenchment and a lack of perspective taking, contribute to ineffective advice and feedback exchange. By engaging in continual learning and focusing more on others, experts can overcome these barriers and become more effective in their roles.

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