



Excellence to Expert

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Experts are individuals who consistently outperform their peers — no one does it better than an expert. A group of experts may have different experiences, embrace different knowledge, use different skills, but they all consistently produce superior results. To state the obvious, experts have more experience, knowledge, skills, and success in their field than almost anyone. They are the best at what they do, and their record of performance proves it. This does not mean that experts can necessarily outperform everyone every time in every circumstance; rather, on an overall, long-term basis, expert performers get more done in less time, in more places, and with superior results more often than less expert performers do.

Interestingly, few experts see themselves as expert. Most see themselves as works in progress, that is, as still needing greater knowledge and increased skills, and still able to learn a great deal more from their experiences.

Experts are all too aware that if they don't continue to make the effort to learn from experience, gain more knowledge, and develop new skills, they will be quickly surpassed by those who do. Therefore, experts are among the greatest learners in their respective fields.

First and foremost, they read. The written word remains the most prominent source of knowledge in advanced civilizations. A true expert does not overlook such important sources of information. Experts also have highly developed networks of relationships. But it was not who they know that got them to the top; it was listening to the people they know that got them there. Experts use networks as a source of new insights, information, and skills — not for self-promotion. Experts:

- Seek knowledge insatiably
- Have a superior memory
- Plan extensively and act intuitively
- Meet inadequacies and failures
- Are self-monitoring

Seeking Knowledge Insatiably

Business professionals who make the final step and become experts have made, and continue to make, significant investments in learning all they can about their industry, the requisite skills for good performance, and every factor that may influence the final outcome of their efforts. People seek more knowledge for a long list of reasons, but for experts that list inevitably includes passion for what they do. Meeting experts, you find people who enjoy talking endlessly about their business, seek others' views on pertinent topics, and have extensive libraries devoted to subjects that affect their enterprise.

Experts use extensive resources to build large stores of knowledge. Experience and colleagues represent essential sources of knowledge, but books, journals, and magazines, as well as conferences, education programs, and clients are also important sources for experts' knowledge.

As you move up executive levels, you move further away from where the action takes place. It is easy to lose touch with what is really going on in the organization. A study of more than two hundred thousand executives, managers, and business professionals found that the most successful executives use a leadership style that keeps the information pipeline open and the critical data flowing freely. The open pipeline, in turn, feeds the evolving thinking style of the analytic, information-hungry senior executive focused on finding the right answer. This skill manifests in public when senior executives encourage employees to offer information. In private, they use that information to narrow down options and identify the best one.

To stop learning is to never improve. Experts know that. Lower-level performers are generally satisfied with what they know and, surprisingly, believe they pretty much know all they need to know.

Expert performers' superior knowledge permits them to use the workplace environment to great effect. They demonstrate greater flexibility in using equipment or technology for greater efficiency of operation than lower-level performers. Make no mistake, however; experts do not use the latest and greatest technology only because it is available or because everyone else is using it. Only if a new piece of equipment will help them complete tasks with greater efficiency and produce greater quality will they consider using it.

Experts do not collect information simply as a matter of habit or interest. They can tap their extensive knowledge to envision many ways of using equipment, skills, strategies, facts, facilities, or objects for multiple purposes, whereas those with less expertise might perceive only a single purpose.

Interestingly, when experts are faced with relevant topics with which they have little or no familiarity, they take measures to gain understanding. They take pains to talk with people who are experts on the topic, read pertinent materials, and even work on developing their own mastery of required skills. When you recognize the importance of your personal understanding of a subject in bringing it to bear on your success, you are seeing the world of information like an expert.

Having a Superior Memory

It would be an exercise in futility if the knowledge you fought so hard to collect and construct filtered out of your memory like sand through a sieve. How are experts able to retain the knowledge they've been able to accumulate? It's not that they are any more intelligent than the average person, necessarily. Rather than large intellectual powers and capacities, they have skills that help them remember what they learn.

In a study of experts' recall memory, two things happened when they encountered new information. First, the experts evaluated the quality of the information. During this process they considered the reliability of the source, the contribution of the information to their current knowledge, and the significance of the information in terms of practical application. As they had since they were at the competent level, these experts sorted the important information from the unimportant in what they observed.

Second, the experts made predictions based on what they thought would happen next. From there they

speculated on how they could use this information and on what effect it would have in influencing the next series of events. In short, a key to the superior memory of an expert is found in two questions — the same two questions you can ask yourself the next time you encounter new information regarding your business:

- How good is this information?
- How can I use this information?

Planning Extensively and Acting Intuitively

At the competent step in developing expertise, preparation for action became more sophisticated as you planned contingently. As a proficient performer, you devoted more time to analyzing a problem and using pertinent information to think forward toward a workable solution. Experts build on these skills by improving planning and preparation and thereby set themselves up for taking effective, situational actions through intuitive responses.

Extensive Planning

Expert performers have a high regard for planning and being prepared. Despite years of experience, they still feel the need to devise detailed plans to ensure that they meet their desired objectives.

When you are an expert, your planning includes extensive evaluation of available information. You weigh action strategies to determine which external factors are most likely to influence outcomes and which action strategies may prove most effective in navigating the situation to meet the goal or achieve the desired result, given the resources available and the factors likely to be encountered. Experts mentally plan out consequences of sequences of actions so they know the cost and benefits of each potential action prior to engagement.

When you are an expert, your planning includes familiarizing yourself thoroughly with many of the factors you will likely face. You organize the knowledge and resources that are most useful in negotiating the events that are likely to occur and assemble a catalog of strategies you can bring to bear on the situation as events unfold. Experts are seldom, if ever, caught unprepared. Experts' planning does not, however, create scripts that they follow to the letter once the situation or event begins. Plans play an important preparatory role, particularly in dynamic and uncertain environments, but they do not inflexibly establish a sequence of actions.

Intuitive Action

A major divide between expert and less expert is the use of intuition in decision making. Experts use intuition — shaped by years of experience and sharpened by extensive knowledge — to make many of their most important decisions.

Experts get a gut feeling and have the confidence to go with those feelings — even if those feelings run counter to accepted logic or convention. They know they cannot know everything possible about the situation or the players involved, but they have planned and prepared extensively and are highly attuned to the important events as they unfold. Something has to be the trigger that signals the green or red light, and most often that trigger is the expert's intuitive feeling.

Intuitive decision making is a dangerous practice for beginners, and perhaps for even capable or competent performers, but it is the *modus operandi* for experts. Years of reflective practice, experimentation, trying, failing, and succeeding are required to gain an expert's intuitive ability. The criterion that separates the expert from the less expert is not the amount of intuition used but rather the superior performances and solutions the process yields.

How do experts develop intuition? The genesis of intuition resides in two factors:

- Extensive knowledge
- Extensive familiarity with the environment — that is, experience

The years of study, the assembly of knowledge, and the careful planning are all needed to incubate intuition. It also takes an intimate knowledge of your surroundings. You must know well the players and the activities that make up the social dance of your business. Who will do what, where, when, how, and why? Combined, there is no way to know precisely all of that information. But years of experience in similar business settings percolate with accumulated knowledge to enable you, the expert, to gain a sense of what is likely to happen, where and when it will happen, how, and why — and that sense, that deep feeling in your gut, is intuition. Often, that feeling can run counter to conventional wisdom.

To develop a deeper intuitive sense for business decisions, you must practice using your intuition when it comes to you —and with experience and knowledge it

will develop more. Learn to listen to it and trust it. For many who are schooled in logical analysis, trusting it is the hard part. In the initial phases of practicing intuition, look for a relative low-risk decision and go with the gut feeling when it comes. Soon you will come to trust that feeling like an old friend, and you will find yourself making superior decisions — but with no way to explain them other than “I just had this feeling.” Intuition, remember, is not a logical or analytic process; it is indispensable in the decision making process of experts. Extensive planning and intuitive action are a powerful combination in an expert's arsenal.

Meeting Inadequacies and Failures

Often the difference between proficient and expert performers is how they handle failure. Those who fear failure are seldom those who excel. Those who learn from their failures are the better for having failed. Experts view failure as an opportunity to learn. Success reveals what you do well. Failure shows you what you can do better. So how do experts make failure work for them? First, experts rigorously analyze the causes of failure. Second, they take corrective action.

Analyzing the Causes of Failure

Because experts see failure as both a natural by-product of attempting to extend current performance levels and an opportunity to learn, they thoroughly analyze the cause of their failures to learn all they can from these experiences. Experts recognize that, in analyzing failure, they can learn to identify and correct deficient practices, reset goals, understand their current limitations, overcome weaknesses, and see possibilities for future performance. The only way to gain advantage from a failure is through a careful, objective, and honest analysis of the causes.

Without understanding the cause of a failure, correcting the problem or ultimately finding a successful solution is impossible.

For the beginner, capable, or even competent performer, solving the problem meets the goal or expectation. To these professionals, if the problem is solved, it needs no further consideration or thought because it is time to move on to the next challenge or problem. The adequacy or permanency of the solution is not an issue because the problem is solved. Experts think differently. Although a solution may solve a problem, it may not satisfy the expert who is constantly asking the question “Could I have done that better?” When you ask yourself

that question, you are thinking like an expert. You may discover that there is nothing wrong with your solution, decision, or action, but you may also find there may have been a better way. In assessing the quality of their solutions, experts are not looking to judge whether they were right or wrong. Rather, they are looking for a better way. Experts are rigorous in analyzing the causes of failure or determining the adequacy of the solutions so they can figure out precisely how to achieve success.

Self-Monitoring

An interesting phenomenon occurs in almost every field or business. Beginners believe they know a great deal more about the business than do experts. If you ask beginners how much they know in relation to all there is to know about their business, they are likely to tell you about 70 to 80 percent. Experts are likely to tell you that they know only about 50 to 60 percent of all there is to know about their business.

Obviously it is the expert who knows more, so why the difference in perception?

In reality, when you reach the expert level, you are far better at understanding the limits of your knowledge and skills. You are also more self-critical of your work and love what you do to such a degree that you strive to be even better than you are now — regardless of any success or awards you may have enjoyed. Beginners, in contrast, don't know enough to know just how little they know.

Self-monitoring is the careful observation and tracking of your performance and outcomes. More than mere reflection on your experiences, self-monitoring pushes you to move beyond evaluating your business experiences and engage in critical self-analysis. That's not to say that to be expert you must turn negative and self-deprecating. Rather, you learn to identify elements of your professional practice that merit increased attention and scrutiny.

Goal setting and behavior modification become linked to your ongoing critique of your business performance, and you regularly monitor your progress toward reaching targeted objectives. Self-monitoring serves a wholly intra-personal and goal-directed process of behavior analysis, modification, and implementation. You become the steward of your professional growth and improvement.

Self-monitoring is not a practice confined to business professionals. It has been traced to superior performances in acting, academic achievement, and sport. Expert physicists, writers, athletes, teachers, and musicians have all used self-monitoring to continue to improve their performance.

As a result of this practice, experts are more aware of errors made and are better at accurately predicting which problems will be most difficult during problem solving.

Maintaining Expertise

The hallmark of expert business professionals is their consistent and superior performance. They do not necessarily reveal signs of being anymore intelligent than anyone else, nor do they necessarily appear to be devoting more effort than others during their performance. (At times they even seem surprisingly relaxed.) But appearances can be deceiving. The skills of experts are extensive, complex, earned over years of experience and deliberate practice, and dependent on extensive knowledge of all facets that affect the outcomes of their performance.

With clear goals, sustained practice, and a thirst for learning and experience, you can move into the elite ranks of your business, trade, or profession. The level of expertise you achieve is yours to determine.

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