

In my last post I identified deep expertise as the single most important driver of innovation and explored some of the characteristics that distinguish experts from others. To really drive innovation, we need to dig deeper into the nature of expertise so we can nurture it in our organizations. Our knowledge of expertise will help us to better develop and engage deep experts.

- **Deep expertise is rare.** Most everyone has some level of expertise in one thing or another. There are a lot of expert wannabees. But the truth is, there are very, very few true experts. Deep experts stand head and shoulders above others in their command of their discipline. They have the passion, experience, and motivation we discussed previously, and that combination has created something truly special.

Never underestimate what it takes to develop authentic deep expertise or the value it provides. The contribution of a true expert may be worth the combined contribution of 20 others who are merely competent.

- **Expertise changes the way problems are solved.** Many are prone to think that experts find the best solutions because they're analytical and use a disciplined approach to problem solving. No. At the risk of spouting what should be self-evident, the best problem solvers are simply those who know the most about the subject. Pure and simple. Experts know the most. Their experience has provided them with many stored patterns that are the source of their intuition. It's non-experts who typically resort to analysis and structured problem solving. Intelligence can be thought of as the ability to recognize patterns and to draw inferences and make predictions based on those patterns. That's what brains are built to do, and that's what experts do better than others.
- **Expertise is transparent to the expert.** Experts typically have a high degree of unconscious competence. They don't know everything they know. They just know. They often can't explain how they see solutions that others miss. The answers just appear, almost magically. Their stored mental models and patterns are incredibly rich, and focused practice has carved deep neural networks that enable solutions to spring forth clearly and unobstructed.
- **For the most part, deep expertise is tacit.** Because it's transparent to the expert, it's virtually impossible for the expert to articulate. Imagine you pose a problem to an expert and ask them to speak aloud as they solve the problem so you can understand how they reach a solution. Forget it. As quickly as you can describe the problem, the expert's brain is scanning (probably subconsciously) patterns stored from experience and identifying a preferred solution. But since the request was to articulate the thought process, the expert will attempt to explain the intuited solution by implying some analysis or decision-making process that might sound good but that totally fails to capture what's really happened in the brain.

This phenomenon presents a real dilemma to those of us who would like to capture and document and disseminate expertise. If your organization develops the capability to transform the tacit to the explicit, you're on your way to building a capacity for innovation.

- **Multiplying expertise is difficult.** Because expertise is rare and largely defines one's value to an organization, asking an expert to share expertise represents a threat of sorts. If I share my

expertise, won't it reduce my value? Now, many experts do rise above this and may even fail to recognize it, but the threat is there nonetheless and may complicate the transfer of expertise.

Remember that experts are motivated by being an expert. Recognition for expertise is fertilizer for the ego, and many experts have outsized egos. Those egos can be a huge problem. Egos confound teamwork, listening, teaching, cooperation, fairness, understanding, sharing, negotiation, humor, and relationships in general. When you try to multiply expertise in your organization, you'll face all these obstacles and more.

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