

Bright Ideas



Supporting Organizational
Excellence & Innovation

From newbie to pro *Building worker expertise*

It would be nice to bring on workers who were already peak performers. Unfortunately, even experienced professionals will need to learn how things are done at your organization before they can get fully up to speed. For younger workers and those changing careers, the learning curve is steeper. Previously, we looked at how to determine where workers are. Now we will look at what you can do to move them along toward expert status.

Moving up the expertise ladder

Although the quantity and diversity of experience is an obvious contributor to expertise, mentoring and continuing education also play important roles. A supervisor's actions and organizational culture can support or inhibit the development of expertise. The mentorship role of a supervisor is to guide individuals to think about and gain insight into their experience, actions and learning, and figure out how they can use that in the future. This process is called *reflective practice*. Gary Rolfe has captured the essence of the reflection process as

asking and answering three questions about our work experiences:

- What? (i.e., What happened? What went right? What went wrong?)
- So what? (i.e., Why is it important? What difference does it make?)
- Now what? (i.e., What will I do differently (or the same) next time?)

The essence of reflective practice is in three questions:

*What?
So what?
Now what?*

Where an individual is on the expertise continuum determines the level of answer to these questions and the mentor actions that are most helpful in moving the individual forward.

Reflective practice for a novice is more likely to be focused on perfecting the practice of simple routines and recognizing

errors from their outcomes. The mentor may focus on using reflection to motivate adherence to proper procedure and prevent bad habits from developing. This process can also help novices articulate rules or identify relevant situational characteristics and guidelines for what to do based on whether the characteristics are present or absent.

At a later stage, a mentor may offer to expand individuals' knowledge of how their work fits into, and contributes to, the big picture. For instance, I once overheard a more experienced colleague offer to walk the advanced beginner who collected data through the analysis process so she could see what happened to the data once it left her hands. What struck me was how he contextualized the offer as a means for her to develop insights into her own work and what procedural variation was acceptable and what would invalidate the results.

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Novices vs. experts

Internal vs. external direction.

Most studies of expertise have compared novices and experts, without considering those at stages in between. In general, novices require direction by others as to what is most important to learn. Otherwise, they may be overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of what they don't know. They do not have the experience to differentiate between need-to-know-and-use-every-day from useful-to-know-where-to-find-it-when-you-need-it. (This is another reason why I've come to re-think the value of starting a job by reading the policy manual.)

Experts, on the other hand, are self-directed in their learning. They identify holes in their knowledge that they feel affect their ability to be effective or efficient at what they do. Then they seek ways to fill those gaps.

While novices seek definitive answers, experts seek ideas they may adopt or adapt.

Formal vs informal learning.

Novices tend to rely on more formal methods of learning, such as taking courses or professional development seminars and reading, because they are building their knowledge base from scratch. Experts are more likely to read or talk informally with knowledgeable resources among their peers because they are updating or filling holes in their knowledge base. An example of this difference can be seen at professional conferences, where novices spend their time attending sessions and collecting papers, while the old pros seek out specific attendees (often, but not always, other old pros) for conversations. The novices want to learn everything on offer, while the experts have specific needs they want to address. Experts still attend sessions of interest; they just recognize that there are sometimes better ways to find out what they need to know.

While novices note that factors limiting access to formal learning opportunities (e.g., lack of

time, coverage, money and training options) limit their growth, experts identify systemic issues as hindrances. For instance, organizational structures with distinct silos of practice create a narrow focus and limit cross-over of knowledge and innovation.

In between the extremes of novice and expert, one can use directedness and preferred learning methods to help identify movement through the continuum. As the characteristics of a particular stage of expertise become more pronounced, the supervisor or mentor's role shifts to the tasks of the next stage, whether it is the development of rules, recognition of relevant similarities and differences among situations that affect decisions and actions, understanding of the "big picture" and one's role in it, or interpretive skill.

Check This Out

B. J. Daley (1999) [Novice to expert: How do professionals learn?](#)

S. Lester (2005) [Novice to expert: The Dreyfus model of skill acquisition.](#)

From Where I Sit



Celebrate your growing wisdom

As we enter a new year (and look forward to Spring growth despite the snow), it is always a good idea to take stock and plan how we want to improve ourselves in the coming year. That includes determining where our professional development should take us.

The Japanese have a ceremony for the start of the new year, called *kagami biraki*. It translates roughly to "opening the mirror," although at my husband's judo club they usually translate it as "polishing the

mirror." They celebrate this ceremony by demonstrating the judo techniques they have learned, and reflecting on where they stand and what they want to improve. A pot luck feast is also involved.

We often fail to celebrate how far we have come and what we have achieved. Instead, we focus on how much more there is to do.

Let's pause in the new year, as daylight hours and warmth increase, to reflect on the expertise and wisdom we have developed so far and look forward to the growth to come.



K. K. Biersdorff Consulting supports organizational excellence and innovation through an array of planning, research, communication and training services that take projects seamlessly from start to finish.