

# BEING SELF-AWARE AND ADAPTIVE

EXTRACT: CHAPTER 7

# MASTER EXPERT

HOW TO USE **EXPERTSHIP** TO  
ACHIEVE PEAK PERFORMANCE,  
SENIORITY AND INFLUENCE IN  
A TECHNICAL ROLE

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## CHAPTER | 07 |

# Being Self-Aware and Adaptive

**How does heightened self-awareness of our impact on others lead to better outcomes?**

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### IN THIS CHAPTER, WE WILL EXPLORE:

- What are the key attributes of someone who is self-aware about how they're being experienced by others?
- What techniques can we deploy to become naturally much more self-aware?
- How do we build the capability to put ourselves in others' shoes and understand their emotional state? How does this help us add real value to our teams and organization?

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**THE SECOND EXPERT ROLE** in the Personal Impact capability is that of Self-Aware Adapter. This expert role deals with the extent to which experts are highly aware of their own impacts on others, to be humble, and to be capable of adapting to others and new situations.

The behaviors at each level of Expertship for this expert role are described in Figure 7.1.

At immature levels, experts tend to be focused on developing their ability to manage their own emotions. They'll be learning to be aware of their personal impact on others, hopefully looking for and positively responding to feedback from colleagues. They'll be focused on how they communicate rather than adapting to the way others communicate or make sense of incoming communication. Early stage experts may come across as self-important while they're trying to establish their expert credentials.

Experts who are derailing are typically very poor at managing their own emotions. They're known for being combustible and moody. Focused on their own situation, they'll not care about or even be unaware of the personal impact they're having on others. They often quickly shoot down ideas that they don't agree with in a negative, combative manner. Typically, they'll have little notion of how they're being negatively experienced by others.

The Master Expert, on the other hand, demonstrates superior ability when it comes to managing their own emotions and helping others manage theirs. They're very aware of and constantly monitoring the impact they have on others, and they care about making a positive impact on their colleagues and stakeholders. They demonstrate a willingness and superior ability to adapt their communication style to engage effectively with others. And as expert as they are, they're known widely as humble.

## Mastering Self-Awareness

**MASTERING SELF-AWARENESS IS A** critical milestone on the way to expert mastery. The ability to stand back and observe the impact our beliefs and actions are having on ourselves and those around us enables us to adapt our actions to have a greater positive impact. Without awareness, we can't find our way to a place where we're adding more value.

*“If we lack of self-awareness, it means that we just haven't noticed how we come across to others.”*

One practice that may help is regular reflection. Ask yourself these questions: How am I feeling right now? How was my mood during the day? How did those moods influence my behavior? Were there any problematic exchanges with other people? Can I identify what triggered those exchanges? What is it about those triggers that provokes such reactions? What was I feeling when I said or did that?

**Capability: PERSONAL IMPACT****Expert Role: SELF-AWARE ADAPTER****MASTER  
EXPERT**

- Excellent at managing own and others' emotions.
- Aware of their personal impact on others.
- Willing and able to adapt communication style to engage effectively with others.
- Shows humility.

**EXPERT**

- Manages own emotions effectively.
- Aware of their personal impact on others.
- Some ability to adapt communication style to others.
- Shows humility.

**SPECIALIST**

- Developing ability to manage own emotions.
- Learning to be aware of personal impact on others.
- Focused on their own communication style.
- May present as self-important while establishing expert credentials.

- Poor at managing own emotions.
- Does not care about, or is unaware of, personal impact on others.
- Quickly shoots down ideas they don't agree with in a negative manner.

**DERAILING****FIGURE 7.1: Self-aware Adapter Behaviors**

Over time, you will probably observe patterns that repeat. Experts who lack self-awareness commonly show up in the following ways:

- Negative/cynical, focusing on why things will be difficult to implement.
- Impersonal/aloof, in their own world, preoccupied with their own considerations.
- Arrogant/judgmental, they think that they're smarter than everybody else.
- Prickly/temperamental and easily triggered.
- Unhelpful/non-responsive, absorbed in their own agenda.
- Becoming a pleaser, avoiding all risk of conflict, saying yes to every request, and depending on others' approval.

It's rare that these behaviors are intentional. If we lack self-awareness, it means that we just haven't noticed how we come across to others or how we're showing up. And when we finally do become aware, possibly by taking notice of the eighteenth piece of feedback, we may have little insight into why we present like this and therefore also lack insight as to how we might change.

An inability to recognize our own feelings will hamper our capacity to recognize feelings in others. Experts can often struggle to legitimize other people's feelings because they may see them as somehow contrary to reason and therefore potentially problematic, containing biases, and so on.

Experts who score highly in self-awareness:

- Are measured, composed and balanced.
- Are considered in their viewpoints and aware of/on top of their own biases.
- Can adapt their style (of decision-making, communicating, and so on) in line with the situation.
- Are fully present.
- Handle change more adaptively.

There are a number of different ways we can develop our self-awareness. We can:

- Start paying more attention to the feedback we receive. This might be direct (e.g., someone telling us that they think we're rude) or indirect (e.g., someone grimacing when we criticize their ideas for the third time in a meeting).
- Pay more attention to our own behaviors, moods or even bodily sensations. For example, you might observe that you're a bit snappy with a colleague. Or, if you think that you're overloaded with work, you might push back on requests more aggressively. This might be seen as developing an awareness of your triggers and habitual responses.

- Do an audit. There are many self-assessment tools and personality tests that we can take (such as DISC, 15FQ+, Myers Briggs, Genos EQ, StrengthsFinder, and many more) that all provide perspectives on understanding our innate tendencies.
- Solicit formal feedback, either in writing, verbally or via a 360-degree tool, which can be very enlightening. As a technical expert, you may find Expertship360 to be the most relevant tool because it measures the behaviors of experts rather than people leaders. These tools make it easier for people who have a perspective of our conduct to identify what they do and don't appreciate about working with us. Warning: don't do this unless you're committed to taking action accordingly. Asking people for their feedback creates an expectation that you're prepared to act on that feedback (assuming it's consistent from many parties). If you don't take the corresponding actions, you will likely do further damage to your personal brand.
- Keep a diary. This entails spending a few minutes each day on evaluating key events and interactions and how they have affected us. Evaluating how we responded can be a very powerful way of paying closer attention to what's going on emotionally. According to C.S. Lewis, "The more you listen to your conscience, the more it demands of you."
- Reflect on and develop a statement of personal mission and values.
- "It's surprising how effectively we can read others if we simply *pay attention*."

*"It's surprising how effectively we can read others if we simply pay attention."*

## Emotional Awareness of Others

**MASTERING EMOTIONAL AWARENESS OF** others comprises the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes and develop a sense of what they're feeling, their priorities and their needs. For experts who want to be more influential, getting really good at understanding how others are feeling is a breakthrough capability.

Contrary to popular belief, we're all inherently capable of empathy, at least in principle. It's surprising how effectively we can read others if we simply *pay attention* to what people say, their tone of voice, and their body language.

Other practices, such as paraphrasing what others have said or reflecting back their feelings, can prompt the development of an empathic frame of mind. We need to listen for the essential meaning and associated feelings rather than merely filtering for facts. Of course, we can also engage in a more structured understanding of others' needs and feelings through exercises such as eliciting feedback or conducting surveys.

There are a number of ways that a lack of awareness of others can play out with experts. These include being viewed as:

- Opinionated or a poor listener and not appreciative of others' needs to feel heard or to be able to express their opinions and needs.
- Running our own agendas and not being committed to mutual or collective outcomes.
- Task-focused and committed to some output or standard of performance, regardless of whether others can relate to it.
- Lacking people skills, prone to being blunt, lacking tact and consideration.
- Insular, withdrawn or excessively shy.

*“Are we worrying about things we can't possibly hope to influence? Is this increasing our frustration?”*

These traits could also represent deficits in self-awareness and self-management, as well as awareness of others. The development of empathy (the ability to put oneself in others' shoes) is a very strong theme in this book. Empathy lies at the heart of all relationship building. Without it, we won't be able to ask the right questions or elicit full and honest answers due to a lack of psychological safety.

Experts who rate highly in the emotional awareness of others:

- Build more trusting relationships that are grounded in mutual understanding (reciprocal partnerships).
- Have a better read on the social and political climate.
- Have greater insight into stakeholders' felt needs, concerns, perspectives and expectations.

There are a number of ways in which we can develop our awareness of others:

- The chapters in this book on Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement contain numerous tools and tactics to increase mastery in this area.



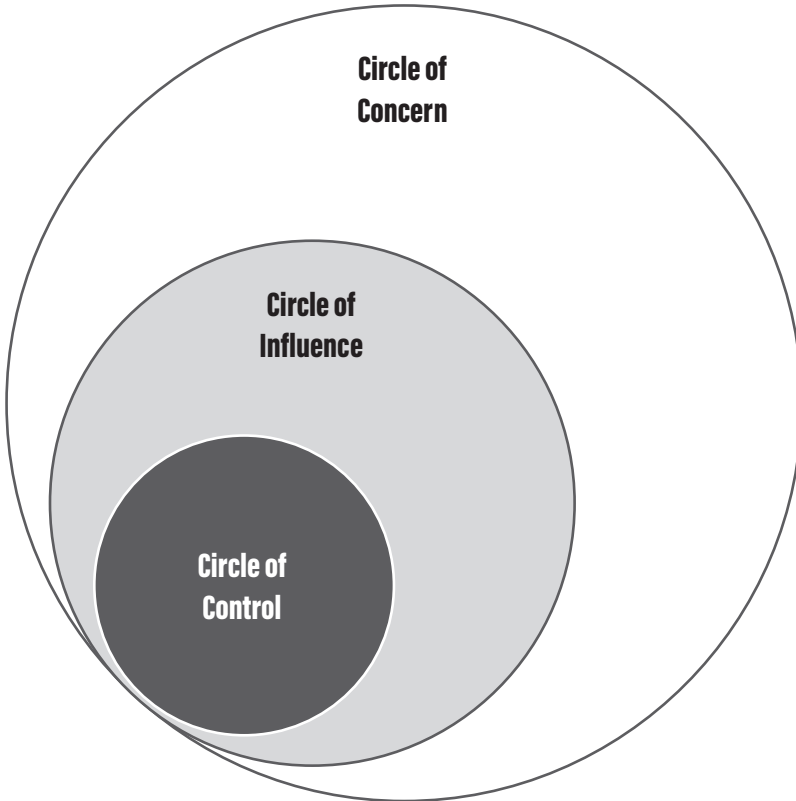
- Make a deliberate point of building and paying attention to rapport when meeting with others. Pay attention to body language and other non-verbal cues.
- Practice reflecting back, paraphrasing and summarizing what others have said to their satisfaction.
- Utilize various personality style frameworks (e.g., DISC, Myers Briggs, Team Roles) to get a better sense of where others are coming from.
- Look for cues as to others' motivations.

## **Worrying About Things We Can't Influence**

**ARE WE WORRYING ABOUT** things we can't possibly hope to influence? Is this increasing our sense of frustration and making us come across as unduly negative?

A useful framework is the circle of influence framework introduced in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey (see Figure 7.2).

## Personal Impact THE CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE



Adapted from Stephen Covey, *7 Habits of Effective People*

FIGURE 7.2: The Circle Of Influence

Covey argued that you can direct your attention either to the things that you're concerned about but have no control over (the Circle of Concern) or to the things over which you have a high degree of control and influence (the Circle of Influence).

You will get a very different result for each circle. If you direct your attention to things beyond your control or influence, you're likely to feel frustrated and disempowered. You may feel overwhelmed and despair that the situation is beyond your remedial powers. On the other hand, if you focus on matters you can do something about, you will feel more hopeful and develop a sense of ownership.

For example, Ed has just learned that his recommendation that the business invests in a particular software package was refused at the finance meeting.

Many people, when faced with a disappointment like this, might be tempted to express their frustrations publicly by criticizing the decision-makers or those who failed to adequately sell the merits of the proposal, and could just become discouraged.

Discouragement, the sapping of our courage, is the natural consequence of focusing on matters beyond our control or influence. It just reinforces a sense of being powerless against larger realities.

Some people have developed the habit of focusing on their Circle of Concern (things that bother them but which they can do little about) to the point that they have convinced themselves that they have no control over anything. Everything seems like a lost cause. It's almost like they find any expressions of hope to be intolerable and feel compelled to extinguish the perceived false hopes of anyone who might voice them. Many experts who people believe to be skeptics or cynics exhibit these tendencies.

On the other hand, Ed could choose to focus on his Circle of Influence.

- “Okay, that’s disappointing. Let me find out what criteria was applied and see if I can sharpen it up next time.”
- “Let me find out which decision-makers I need to get closer to next time.”
- “Let me work on my proposal writing skills.”

At the very least, Ed will feel less like a discouraged victim. And there's a good chance that by pursuing well-chosen positive strategies, he will also increase the likelihood of getting a superior outcome next time. Certainly, he won't repel people from wanting to have a conversation with him, as is the case with the person wallowing in a cynical Circle of Concern.

## Growing Our Ability to Adapt

**THE FINAL FIRST VERSIONS** of this book were written in 2020 in the middle of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Surely, if any single event provided an example of how important it is to be able to quickly adapt to new circumstances, this was it. And interestingly, it has quickly become a fine example of how quickly individuals, teams, and whole populations can adapt quickly if there is a clear need. Many ways of living and working changed overnight.

This chapter has focused on our ability as an expert to adapt our communication and interpersonal style to our stakeholders and colleagues, the better to build win-win relationships with them.

More generally, the ability to adapt to new circumstances is a broader skill that requires mastery. We discuss these themes in the chapters dealing with change and market context.

It's perhaps worth noting that when organizations are looking to hire very senior executives these days, the ability to quickly adapt and pivot is a key attribute most head-hunters are looking for. This applies to experts as much as general leadership positions.

## TAKING ACTION

# Growing Our Self-Aware Adapter Skills

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IF THIS IS AN expert role in which you believe you could add greater value, here are some high-level suggestions for actions to take:

### ▶ FOCUS ON YOUR CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE

- Stressing about matters we have very limited or no ability to control is a waste of valuable energy. We can easily fall into the trap of feeling disempowered because we lack formal authority. Getting past this and focusing on what we can influence is both positive and fulfilling. Questions we might like to ask ourselves:
- Have I distinguished between the things that concern me but which I can't do much about (things in my Circle of Concern) and the things I can do something about (things in my Circle of Influence)?
- Regardless of feeling overwhelmed and paralyzed by how complex and challenging the circumstances are, do I focus positively by considering all the moves I could make?
- Have I identified stakeholders and colleagues I could partner with to extend my circle of influence?

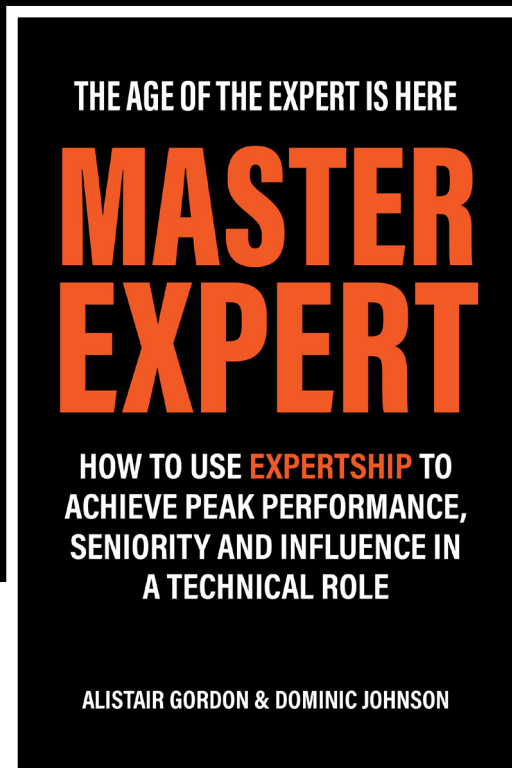
### ▶ PRACTICE APPLYING EMPATHY

Experts who don't listen effectively are likely to be seen as arrogant, not understanding, and uncaring or indifferent. Not listening properly can often lead to experts jumping to solutions before getting the whole story, or at least having stakeholders feeling heard. Questions we might like to ask ourselves:

- How good am I really at listening? Do I truly seek to understand? Or am I overly keen to get to solutions via making assumptions about what I have heard?
- Whenever stakeholders express heightened emotions (e.g., frustration), do I listen and respond empathetically?
- Am I constantly using paraphrasing to make sure I have understood?
- Do I regularly get buy-in from stakeholders or is trust an issue? Will practicing empathy help me understand both facts and feelings better so I can produce elevated results?

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