MASTER EXPERT

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

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The Master Expert develops increased expertise in others so they can apply specialist knowledge, which increases overall organizational capability.

Knowledge Transfer

What are the benefits and barriers to experts passing on their expert knowledge?

IN THIS CHAPTER, WE WILL EXPLORE:

- The benefits for all experts, stakeholders and organizations, of being effective at knowledge transfer.
- The common barriers experts typically face in achieving effective knowledge transfer.

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER DEALS WITH increasing the ability of others to apply specialist knowledge, which facilitates overall increased organizational capability.

In the previous four chapters covering Expert Knowledge, we introduced the concept of an expert knowledge strategy (see Figure 46.1). The fourth and final stage of this strategy is the *knowledge sharing* component, which we cover in this capability of Knowledge Transfer. It's a critical capability to get right if an expert aspires to operate at the Master Expert level.

Many experts we meet are hugely frustrated with having to do the same work year after year, dealing with low-level requests that interrupt higher order work, and being constantly under pressure as the single go-to person for particular tasks or work. There are also significant advantages, for both stakeholders and the organization, to equipping others to be more capable and responsible so they can avoid delays and be more autonomous.

When done effectively, sharing knowledge with others is the solution to all of these problems. It allows us to transfer or delegate work to other colleagues and make them more self-reliant. Some of this work may be the less taxing problem-solving and administrative tasks.

Of course, knowledge transfer is not simple or easy. In our experience, many senior technical experts aren't very good at it, either due to neglect, stubborn refusal, or an inability to master the relevant techniques. We're often concerned that sharing our expertise in some way could jeopardize our job security or career opportunities. Lack of technique comes into play if experts aren't familiar with how people learn, or the available options and methods to build capability. Experts sometimes believe they have no colleagues to delegate activities to (none that are obvious to them, anyway).

But the benefits of successfully sharing knowledge are twofold. It either allows others to solve their own problems rather than being dependent on us, or we build our colleagues' ability to solve problems for others instead of relying on us to do so. Many knowledge transfer initiatives achieve both of these benefits. These are game-changing achievements.

Why? What's in it for us?

Firstly, building others' abilities and responsibilities allows us to shift our focus to higher impact areas. Very often, the fact that we're the only person who can do a particular thing, or are the only one with a particular knowledge set, ensures that we get tied up with all the associated requests, which may not always be the best use of our skills, experience, time and efforts. If know-how and responsibility are distributed, then we can focus our attention on higher order priorities. We get to do the fun stuff and the high-value stuff.

> *"If we are the only person who can do something, we don't get offered more interesting opportunities."*

Secondly, helping our colleagues and team members become more expert fosters higher morale, autonomy, commitment and confidence. Though we might justify holding on to certain activities so as to "not bother people," developing our colleagues' capabilities often triggers higher levels of engagement because they feel they're growing and progressing. It also demonstrates our leadership and commitment to being a team player. In short, knowledge sharing is extremely good for our personal brand. Also, building redundancy into what we do—that is, others can do the work if we're not available—allows us to be available for other things. This can include high-value projects, broader roles within our area of expertise, working on cross-domain teams, secondments to other parts of the organization or other parts of the world, and promotion opportunities. If we're the only person

who can do certain things, most organizations will choose not to offer us these opportunities because we're seen as irreplaceable.

Thirdly, in committing to effective knowledge transfer, we're fostering others' increased self-reliance. By building our colleagues' capability, we're contributing to their personal and professional growth and to the overall capability of the organization. We're playing a role in talent development, something we discuss in detail in Chapter 49.

Fourthly, enabling others reduces single-point sensitivity. There can be a significant risk that the organization is exposed if we're the only person who has a particular expertise and we become indisposed for any reason.

Finally, by enabling others, we're able to work on higher level tasks and projects and add more value to the organization.

> *"There may be a tendency among experts to hoard their knowledge."*

Making Excuses—Real or Imagined?

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT knowledge transfer, many experts offer excuses for why they don't help with the training and development of their colleagues.

The sorts of things we hear experts say are:
- No one else can do it as well as me. (There's a tendency among experts to hoard their knowledge.)
- It won't get done properly unless I do it.
- None of my colleagues are interested or have the time to help me with my workload.
- It'll be much quicker if I do it myself.
- I've tried to train people before to do some of my more complex work, but they just can't do it.
- I don't have time to train someone.
- It would take too long to train someone. It's not worth the effort.
- There is no one here to train. I don't have anyone to delegate to.
- It's not my job to train people.
- This is my favorite part of my work. I don't want to give it to someone else.

Do any of these reasons resonate with you? Have you heard yourself say them? Or think them? Deep down, subconsciously, might there be some inner voice telling you that some of these are valid in your situation? At some stage or another, most of us justify not delegating or sharing knowledge based on some of the reasons described above.

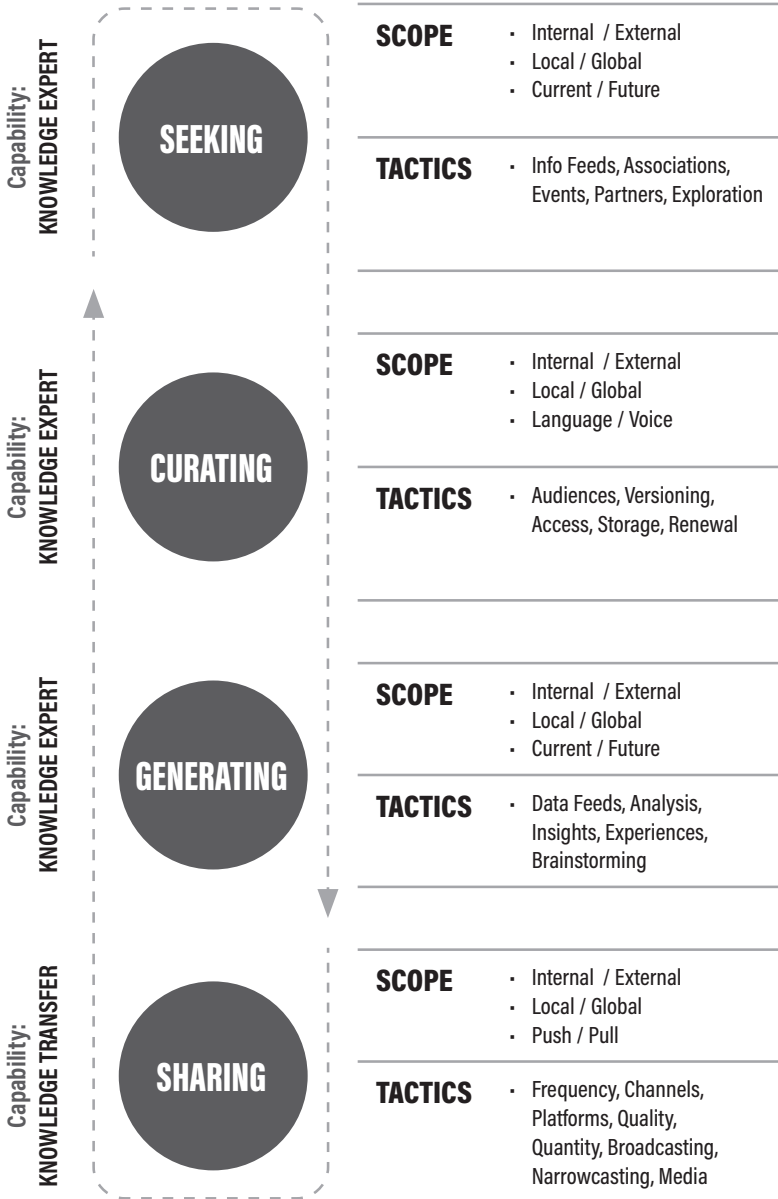**Capability:** EXPERT KNOWLEDGE
An Expert Knowledge Strategy

FIGURE 46.1: An Expert Knowledge Strategy

Of course, if you're the only person who knows how to do something, this may appear to be to your advantage. Experts have recounted stories to us of colleagues who shared their expertise with more junior colleagues and were then shown the exit. The more junior (and cheaper) expert was deemed a better option. As a consequence, there may be a tendency among experts to hoard their knowledge.

Working as we do with many organizations, we hear this often, but we find evidence it happens to be scarce. In our experience, most experts who demonstrate the ability to develop others, educate colleagues to solve simple problems themselves, and motivate technical colleagues to rapidly advance their expertise are typically either promoted or quickly asked to do higher order activities. Because they have delegated to others, they're free and available for more interesting work and projects. Transferring knowledge also tends to demonstrate their mastery of critical enterprise skills, as well as technical skills.

To master the knowledge transfer skills and techniques we'll describe in the following three chapters, we have to first overcome a few natural barriers (see Figure 46.2).

> *"Knowledge transfer requires us to take time to save time."*

The first barrier is that our tendency as experts to want to solve things is ingrained. We're here to help, and we want to be seen to be doing so. Though seemingly efficient and service-oriented, this desire to help ultimately inhibits growth, both our own and that of the colleagues we can empower with improved skills and knowledge.

The second barrier to effective knowledge transfer is that we tend to underestimate our less experienced colleagues' learning agility. Colleagues (even junior ones!) are often far more capable of thinking things through, solving problems, and taking effective action than we give them credit for. Rapid development is typical, even with quite limited coaching. Part of this is psychological: our self-worth dictates that we perceive the work we do as complex and taking years to master. This may be true for *everything* we know and have experienced, but *selected* knowledge and experience may be easier to pass on. We transfer knowledge one task or challenge at a time.

The third barrier is a further misconception: we believe knowledge transfer typically takes far longer than doing it ourselves. As busy experts, as much as we mean to get around to building capability in our colleagues, this week is just never the right week to take the time to devote to it. We have too much on. It's quicker in the short term for us to fix it ourselves. But this is a

false economy. Put it off, and we'll always be stuck in the responsive fixer role. Knowledge transfer requires us to *take time to save time*, and for many experts in highly responsive roles (with lots of regular unplanned troubleshooting), that's not easy. But it's possible. And there is a large payoff once successfully completed.

The fourth barrier is more difficult for us accept: we might not be as good at knowledge transfer as we think we are. Knowledge transfer is a skill in its own right. It's difficult to deploy the right processes and planning, particularly if our colleagues have a very low base of knowledge. This requires us to go back to basics and not over-complicate things too quickly. For an expert who can see twenty different possible answers to a simple question, this can be challenging, so it requires discipline. Part of this dynamic is an underlying and often unconscious wish to show how much we know, to demonstrate how expert we are to those we're training.

This instinct gets in the way of effective transfer. We make the expertise sound too complicated, and this undermines the student's confidence. They begin to doubt that they'll ever master the work and the knowledge. They then tell us it's too hard, which confirms our bias that only we can do it. Unfortunately, this is a common story.

A fifth barrier is worrying about our personal brand. If we're asked to fix something for a colleague and instead of doing so, we start asking them whether they read the documentation or followed the troubleshooting process, we can be perceived as avoiding our responsibility to help or being obstructive.

Our colleagues sometimes can't see the long game, which is that our objective is to help them save time and build their capability (fixing things themselves without having to wait for us to arrive). We have to manage expectations carefully and be clear about our intent. Why we're taking extra time to try and upskill them has to be understood.

In some circumstances, we want to hold on to work that we really enjoy doing, or work that we feel defines our value to the organization. We're concerned about lessening our status and perceived value by delegating tasks that others could do but that we get kudos for when we do them. It can be flattering to seem indispensable. And who doesn't get a kick out of demonstrating a high level of mastery?

Finally, there's an underlying worry among some experts that what they do is so dry and mundane that no one will be interested in learning it.

Capability: KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

6 Barriers to Expert Knowledge Transfer

1	**INGRAINED WISH TO HELP**
2	**UNDERESTIMATING COLLEAGUES**
3	**OVERESTIMATING TIME INVESTMENT**
4	**POOR TRANSFER SKILLS**
5	**PERCEIVED NEGATIVE BRAND IMPACT**
6	**LACK OF INTERESTED COLLEAGUES**

FIGURE 46.2: Six Barriers to Knowledge Transfer

Mastering Knowledge Transfer

IN THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS, we'll suggest new ways of thinking about knowledge sharing and delegation and their role in our journey to becoming a Master Expert.

The capability of Knowledge Transfer deals with developing others' ability to apply specialist knowledge, facilitating an overall increased organizational capability. Knowledge Transfer describes three roles an expert must play:

- **Knowledge Sharer**: ensuring knowledge is disseminated effectively across the organization to relevant parties.
- **Knowledge Coach**: helping colleagues understand and make the best use of our specialist knowledge.
- **Talent Developer**: ensuring that we and colleagues are involved in continuous learning, and actively identifying and developing future talent.

TAKING ACTION

Growing Our Knowledge Transfer Skills

IF THIS IS A capability in which you believe you could add greater value, here is a high-level suggestion for action to take:

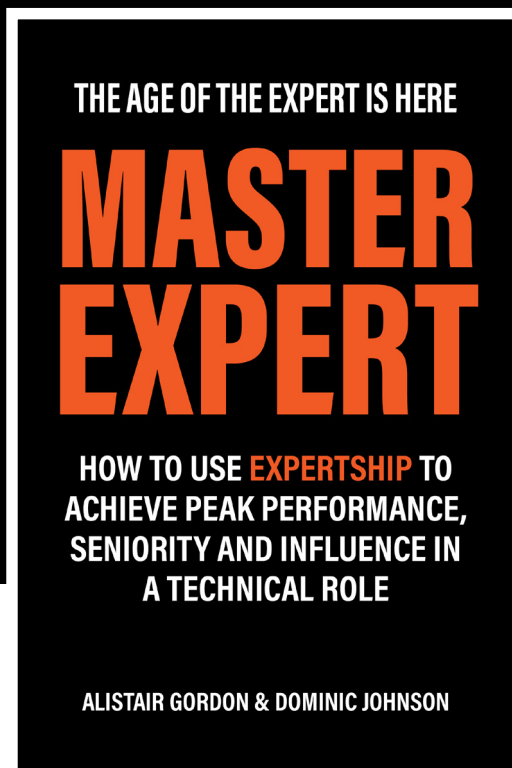## ▶ PLAN TO OVERCOME KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER BARRIERS

As discussed in this chapter, we all experience multiple barriers to the effective sharing of expert knowledge. Master Experts focus on initiatives that overcome these barriers.

Questions we might want to ask ourselves:

- To what extent are there opportunities for people to self-solve rather than me explaining or doing everything for my colleagues? How might I position these in a positive way with colleagues?
- To what extent do I underestimate the capability of my colleagues? Which tasks or projects give me the best opportunity to test their capability without major risk? How will I convince myself that taking a small risk for a big gain is worth it?
- How do I provision slightly more time to get the training message across to colleagues? Rather than me just doing it myself, should I be planning and scheduling specific times to do this?
- What is my current approach to transferring knowledge? Am I as effective as I could be? Do I rush things or assume knowledge that colleagues don't have? Am I patient with people as they learn? What needs to change in the way I approach knowledge transfer to make it a positive experience for my colleagues and myself?
- What is my "what's in it for you" pitch to colleagues who aren't stepping forward to learn things but who I know are capable? Who else could help me persuade willing helpers to step forward?

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