

THE POTENTIAL DOWNSIDE OF EXPERTISE

By Rick Boxx

English-born, Canadian author Malcolm Gladwell has written a number of books offering unique perspectives on the social sciences. In his book, *Outliers*, he made popular the concept that 10,000 hours of work in any certain field is necessary to become an elite performer in that industry. For example, airline pilots with 10,000 hours of time flying aircraft, or pianists who have devoted more than 10,000 hours to practice on the keyboards. It makes sense – if you had to undergo major surgery, would you prefer a surgeon who has performed the procedure thousands of times, or a novice with very limited experience?

Gladwell makes a good point – having expertise in any field can be extremely valuable. However, an abundance of practice and experience can also have a downside. You can become so accustomed to how your particular industry conducts business, you may find yourself unwilling to consider new and fresh approaches. Even ones that could work better than “we have always done it this way” methods.

Taking the attitude, “I am the expert, and this is the way things must be done,” can present obstacles to finding and implementing new, innovative approaches to problems both old and new. Putting it simply, pride in your industry knowledge can limit your future success.

The Bible has much to say about the value of humility, and we can easily apply its principles to the business and professional world. For instance, Proverbs 18:12 teaches, “Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, but humility goes before honor.” It may seem hard to understand how trust in one’s expertise can lead to “destruction,” but we have seen countless examples of businesses that have failed or stagnated because their leaders’ prideful refusal to step outside their areas of expertise to make necessary changes.

Overreliance on expertise can cause us to conclude, “I know everything there is to know about this.” But in an ever-changing world – particular in areas affected by technology – this attitude can be devastating. Whether it be transportation, medicine, bookkeeping, graphic design, food production or space exploration, each of these fields of endeavor has advanced dramatically as the “experts” willingly set aside their expertise to explore new ways for getting things done.

Proverbs 11:2 tells us, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.” Can you imagine the people who laughed when the Wright brothers were making their first crude attempts at flying? “Man will never be able to fly,” the “experts” declared, based on their expertise at the time. Yet those flight pioneers, and the many who followed them, proved human flight would even take people to outer space.

In his classic business book, *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins cites common characteristics held by leaders of high-performing companies. He describes “Level 5” leaders, individuals driven to do what is best for the company. One of their shared traits was great humility, deferring their expertise to encourage the contributions of others.

Whether they realized it or not, they were living out the admonition of Proverbs 19:20, “Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.” As Collins shows, humility is an important quality for all experts. Presuming we know all the answers because of past expertise can lead to disastrous outcomes, especially in our age of rapid, unprecedented change.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever heard of Gladwell’s “10,000-hour rule”? Can you think of anything you have done, investing that amount of time – or close to it – to achieve some level of expertise?
2. How would you define “expertise”? Why is it important?
3. Do you agree with the idea that overreliance on expertise can actually prove to be a liability? Can you think of an example – either from your own professional experience or from history – that shows that to be true?
4. What does it take, in your opinion, to achieve a balance between expertise and humility? Why do you think humility is often lacking in people that have established expertise in their respective areas of endeavor?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages:
Proverbs 11:14, 12:15, 15:22, 16:18, 21:4; Colossians 3:12; 1 Peter 5:5