



Career Path: Try Not Telling People You're an Expert

Skills and Professional Development



Have you ever noticed how often we answer the question "What do *you do*?" with a statement of *what we are*? As in, "I'm a teacher," "I'm a nurse," or "I'm a lawyer." This no doubt conveys important information, which is why we do it. But there are at least three reasons why you might not want to identify yourself by your profession: unreasonable expectations, clouded self-image, and unwarranted assumptions.

Ironically, these are among the same reasons why people are usually proud to tout their professional credentials. Let's explore the dichotomy, after which you can decide how you'll refer to yourself (and think of others) from now on.

Unreasonable expectations

Here's something that happens to many recent law school graduates. Upon hearing that you've passed your qualification exams, a friend or relative asks you a ridiculously specific question about a narrow area of tax or inheritance law. When you say you don't know the answer and they are better off talking to a specialist, they say with some puzzlement and possibly suspicion, "But you're a lawyer, aren't you?"

Have you experienced something similar?

I suppose, compared to the layperson, the chances are much higher that you, the lawyer, would know the answer to a specific legal question. But, because of the breadth of the legal field, it's unlikely the average lawyer will retain detailed knowledge about many areas beyond those they regularly use.

Or consider the poor soul who rashly identifies as a doctor in a social gathering. All too often they must field similar questions about a strange itch or recurrent dizziness because, after all, they're a doctor aren't they?

This is more than irritating to both parties in the conversation. Over time I think such exchanges can be corrosive to clear thinking. If the people you interact with routinely come to you expecting that you know the answers to a lot of hard questions, you may be tempted not to disappoint them.

Indeed, most lawyers and doctors profess a self-confidence that is out of proportion to their actual track record. This is because compared to the layperson, the professional knows a lot. They certainly know enough to spout BS alongside good advice without anyone knowing the difference.

Others' high expectations are valuable if we force ourselves to live up to them. But beware of giving in to the temptation to believe others' expectations without doing the hard work necessary to be a real expert.

Clouded self-image

A related risk to identifying ourselves by what we say we are, rather than what we know or do, is that we get a false sense of what we are. This is because others' expectations of us shape how we see ourselves.

Take surgeons, whose self-image sometimes becomes greatly distorted over time. Not all surgeons are brain surgeons. Much of surgery is (reassuringly) repetitive and routine, making its practitioners more akin to experienced mechanics.

True, much of surgery beyond brain surgery is also difficult. But do we value the difficulty of the task itself or that human lives hang in the balance? And does the fact that lives hang in the balance reflect solely on the difficulty of the task or also the fact that hospitals make mistakes at distressingly high rates?

I am not picking on doctors. We could talk about mistakes made by any professional group and find that they are not at all rare (even if they are less likely to be fatal). My point with this discussion is to suggest that *professionals are people too and people are fallible*. It is therefore risky for us to put too much stock in our own favorable press when it comes to assessing our actual performance.

Unwarranted assumptions

Professionals are presumed to be experts in their field and, as laypeople, we give them great deference. Professionals know this and come to rely upon it, even when demonstrating humility would be welcome. The history of many professions is filled with cautionary tales of well-meaning but misguided individuals who were utterly wrong about vital topics. Medicine, psychology, economics, and even the annals of physics, are littered with the errors of our forebears.

Again, this is not to criticize any particular profession. It is to keep in mind that *professionals are just people*. Everyone is a fallible, biased, opinionated, and emotional creature .

I am reminded of the meditation practice called, "Just like me." As a way of developing compassion, the practitioner calls to mind the fact that everyone has fears, dreams, and desires and is, in many ways, "just like me."

There is another benefit to remembering that even professional experts are "just like us" in being fallible humans. We are less likely to be duped by credible-sounding experts trying to trick us. We are more likely to apply our own critical thinking to a situation and seek out additional information.

I described a while back how helpful it is to remind ourselves that [we are fallible](#) by adding, "But I could be wrong" to the end of our statements of belief. My suggestion today is that when listening to the advice of an expert, any expert, add "... but *they* could be wrong" to the end of their statement.

If you want adulation, for your assumptions to go unchallenged, and to enjoy the deference reflexively awarded to experts, by all means, continue to introduce yourself as a lawyer, a doctor, or similar expert.

But if you truly want to get better and to be recognized for your actual contributions, when asked what you do, try saying something like the following:

"Hi! My business card says I'm a ----- . But I do many things in life, some better than others. And just like everyone, I'm not always an expert at everything I do."

I wonder which version of you people will come to respect and appreciate more over time.

Be well.

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