

How do you balance your experience and professional judgement with openness to new ideas?



I'm running various leadership workshops for executive teams and one of the areas we're covering is how far our professional experience takes us as leaders, where it holds us back and what else we need. Various teams I work with often experience a clash between their experienced leaders who say "I've tried this before and it didn't work" and those new to their roles and hungry to pursue new ways of doing things.

So if you want to get into this with me, start by thinking about the opportunities and challenges you face in your present role and what helps you succeed. Think about

the following statement and give yourself a score between 0-10 – 0 being not at all and 10 being very much:

“I use my knowledge and experience every day. They help me navigate the challenges, take new opportunities, collaborate effectively and make sound judgements”

Now think back to when you were starting your career. Could be in this role, or another. You were excited, ambitious and...inexperienced! You came up with lots of exciting ideas for change and innovation at team meetings. You were full-on excited. Your superiors may have taken a while to catch on. They seemed hard to get through to, slow, wary, concerned, unable to see beyond “that’s not how we do things round here”.

Try and recollect those kinds of experience you may have had in the past and how they affected your motivation.

How did it feel, that sense of not getting through, as if trying to push a rock up a hill? If you work in a membership organisation like a global accounting firm network, you may have encountered resistance among your member firms when seeking their support for a new idea or initiative.

How often did you hear things like:

“Well it’s a great point but we’ve tried that before and found it was too difficult to implement.”

Or

“We need to focus on our core strategy right now.”

Or

“It’s definitely worth thinking about. Let’s come back to that.” And they never did.

What did you decide back then in your career when those things happened?

Maybe you came to conclusions like it’s not possible to change anything around here, even though everyone knows it’s not working as it is!

Now fast forward to today and remember what you scored yourself on the importance of experience in navigating challenges and taking new opportunities.

Imagine you’re in a brainstorming meeting:

You’re hearing all sorts of new proposals from emerging leaders in the team about ways to improve existing things, eg change how you run events, manage registrations, focus of the business programme, build engagement with your audience, evaluate their feedback and deliver change.

How do you respond to change and new proposals that run counter to your familiar and proven ways of doing things?

Do you embrace what you're hearing, or is that voice in your head saying "I've heard this before" or "This will never work"?! Judgement and scepticism is born and quickly takes over!

It really is a challenge isn't it, when a new idea comes in that you've tried and have first-hand experience of. How can you accept that for someone else in the team, with no prior experience of this idea working well or badly, it really makes sense to them and it's important for them to pitch this idea and try to gain support for it, when your instinct tells you it's not the way to go?

This is where the limits of our world as leaders start to manifest! When our experience tells us something new is impossible!

And here's the paradox: you've been on both sides of the table here – as a newbie years ago you were a revolutionary ideas person pushing the boundaries. Now you're a seasoned leader with experience of what works and what doesn't. While you have an appetite for innovation, you also need to exercise judgement.

Have you unwittingly become like those senior managers you encountered early in your career, erring on the side of caution rather than adventure?! Ohh nooo!

Right...! Feels painful doesn't it!?

But there's still hope, so let's try another perspective:

So how do we harvest the benefit of our experience **and also manage its constraints?**

An authentic answer in such a meeting might be eg
"Everything I know tells me this makes no sense, yet I like the bold ambitious vision. I'll park my knowledge and better judgement and stop worrying about "how to do it" while we explore what this could mean for the network."

This is a way to respect your guardrails and judgement as having value – because they are valuable reference points that only experience gives us - while at the same time not letting them stop you considering important new ideas and other ways of thinking.

Hint: Make a point to notice how you typically respond when someone's new idea comes out of the blue - if you always respond with a warning of what could go wrong, what signal does that send others about your openness and capacity to think outside the box?

Timing: What if you noted your instinctive concerns and guardrail ideas, while keeping them in the background for a little longer? You don't have to make them your first contribution to the discussion. Suspending your scepticism a little longer,

so you can stay open to see if the idea gains some ground, provides you with some space to think before cautioning against a,b,c.

Remember: having newbie ideas people and experienced ones working together on the same team is a proven recipe for success, as long as both are given the respect they need. They're motivated by different needs:

Ideas person: has a need for recognition, wants to make a mark, wants to be trusted with a project, wants to show they are ambitious and keen to make a difference

Experienced person: has a proven track record of success, wants to ensure and protect the stability of the business, including managing risks, while being hungry for innovation too.

As a bridge between both worlds – validate and examine what is important for each person.

E.g. “What could be important for you to help us balance innovation and mitigating risk?”

“How can I show you I'm ready for a bigger challenge?”

No longer is it about position A vs position B. We're discovering why their positions are important to them. What is the real interest of each person.

What's decisive in this: emotional intelligence is present – engaging hearts as well as minds is what motivates bigger action and helps dissolve obstacles.

This approach enables something new to occur, building the trust for everyone to explore something challenging for them personally in a safe environment, rather than staying comfortable sticking to existing patterns.

So be thankful for your experience and what it has taught you, continue to extract what's valuable from it, while realising that experience isn't the whole blueprint for future challenges. If you over-rely on experience to meet future challenges, you'll soon hit a wall and realise that it only takes you so far.

As Abraham Maslow, American psychologist 1908-1970, famously said: “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail”. All about cognitive bias where we rely on familiar tools or methods to solve all problems, whether appropriate or not. Too much comfort leads to lack of adaptability.

And fast forward to a more recent perspective:

“We don't hire smart people and tell them what to do. We hire smart people to tell us what to do!” Steve Jobs, former CEO, Apple Inc.

Want to know more?

If your team could do with some external input to get a new perspective by having a facilitated workshop on a theme like this one, reach out and let's explore what could be a good fit. Connect with me [here](#) via Calendly.

For more examples of our coaching on leadership topics, go [here](#) to read our helpsheets and case studies.