

## CHAPTER 11



# Role Modeling Continuous Learning



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**Unlocking**  
*the*  
**MAGIC**  
*of*  
**Facilitation**



Unlocking the Magic of Facilitation:  
11 Key Concepts You Didn't Know You Didn't Know  
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# Role Modeling Continuous Learning (or the Myth of the Expert)

*"Technology's moving so fast, man. It's to the point where you can make stuff up, and people will believe you. You can be like, 'You seen the new Sony Teleporter?' People will be like, 'No, but I heard about it.' I end up saying that all the time—'No, but I heard about it.' It means I haven't heard about it, but I like you."*

*- Mike Birbiglia*

**T**he great (and seemingly paradoxical) thing about facilitation is that you often become more credible as a facilitator by owning what you don't know. This isn't always the case. Some people will respect you less, or find you less credible for saying you don't know something, because there is an irrational expectation of "experts" to know everything about a particular topic.

But for many, the mark of a credible trainer is one who is willing to admit when they don't know something. And



admitting that to the group, while scary, is role modeling what you're expecting of them: being a person who is willing to learn. Before we get into why it's so great to say "I don't know," let's talk about why some folks would prefer that you don't.

## THE MYTH OF THE EXPERT

In most learning contexts, there's an assumed power relationship of teacher (person with power, in the form of knowledge) and student (person who receives knowledge from teacher). We discussed this earlier, and came to the conclusion in the Facilitating vs. Teaching vs. Lecturing chapter that one thing that makes facilitation so great is the redistribution of power.

In training contexts where the teacher and the students are often all professionals of some capacity, this power relationship escalates the teacher role to that of expert (a person who knows everything, and is granted authority, about a particular subject).

There are a few problems with the term "expert," defined as a person who knows everything (or close to everything) about a subject: It separates people from their journey, and imagines them only at a particular point in time; it's easy to mischaracterize someone else by describing them as an expert; and people who use the title for themselves are in danger of misleading others. Let's dig into these three issues.

**Experts were all non-experts first.** Folks who know a lot about something used to know as little as anyone else; this is something we are forced to forget when we think of someone as an authority. Really, an expert is someone who is devoting time to learning something and constantly practicing engag-

ing with that topic. So maybe instead, we should think of it as “experting.” And experting is a constant process; there’s no standard sufficient period of time one must devote before we call them an expert, and there’s no amount of time at which one stops experting, because...

**Experts don’t know everything.** Not just everything about everything, but even within a particular functional area, nobody knows *everything*. Or, at least, it’s safer to assume someone doesn’t know everything than it is to assume someone does, but the term expert encourages the opposite. It encourages us to assume that a person knows it all, not to question any information they provide us, and to shame them when they don’t have information to provide.

**And wearing the “expert” title is generally misleading, at best.** Based on the research by Kruger and Dunning (1999), the more likely someone is to say they’re an expert, the less likely they are to actually be one. Termed the Dunning-Kruger effect, what they found is that as one learns more about a concept, it becomes more clear it becomes how little they actually know. While novices will rate themselves as highly competent, highly competent folks will recognize how much more they could learn. So really, the one constant thing we can count on an expert knowing, that a non-expert won’t know, is how much more there is for them to learn about a particular subject.

## ROLE MODELING CONTINUOUS LEARNING

As we become more comfortable with the process of *experting*, and less comfortable with the static identity of expert (and all the baggage that comes with it), there are doors

that open to us that weren't present before. By walking through these doors as facilitators, we can role model to our participants something we ask of them in every discussion, activity, or engagement: to acknowledge they have room to grow, and to allow others to support that growth, while holding them accountable to it.

**First, we must stop vilifying ignorance**, and instead, see it as the ideal place from which to learn. Most of us are ignorant about most things in the world. We haven't had the opportunity to learn, or we were too busy, exhausted, or distracted to learn. Either way, it's okay that we don't know something, and the last thing we should be doing is making others feel ashamed for not knowing something<sup>1</sup>.

It takes a lot of vulnerability to acknowledge our own ignorance, and often it takes a level of courageous compassion to affirm someone else's. These are things that often prevent us from being willing to celebrate ignorance as a starting place for learning.

**Embrace "I don't know."** If you want your participants to feel comfortable admitting ignorance, you need to be comfortable doing so yourself. And it's not just this phrase, but many other similar ones that can create a space where folks are willing to admit to something they might see as a deficiency. "I'm not sure," is another good one to start sentences with, if you're willing to give it an educated guess. And so is "It took me awhile to figure this out, but..." and other similar phrases that help highlight your own journey in experting.

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1 Willful ignorance, which we'd describe as an intentional, obstinate, and sometimes malicious refusal to be informed, is a whole different beast. We would not recommend celebrating this type of ignorance, and we also don't see it as a healthy place from which to learn, or to engage in a conversation.



The fear response to not knowing the answer to a question is often to make something up. We do this because we don't want to lose prestige, or fall from the "expert" status we were granted or felt we had to occupy by being a trainer. Holding onto this title, especially when we feel like we're deceiving others, can be exhausting and stressful, even though sometimes we feel like it's necessary. But tricking others into thinking you're an expert by not saying "I don't know" when you don't know is not helping anything. (And neither is the fear that's forcing you to keep up the charade<sup>2</sup>.)

**Get excited about opportunities to learn.** When we say "I don't know," there are a bunch of different reactions we often go through. Sometimes we feel guilty or apologetic (because we thought we should know), or even ashamed (because we're a bad person for not knowing). Once you've stopped vilifying ignorance (internally and externally), and begun embracing everything "I don't know," we hope you'll move toward a more positive reaction.

We see "I don't know" as a launching off point for genuine excitement to learn something. As facilitators who often facilitate similar types of conversations, not knowing something is wonderful: it allows you to be entirely selfish, ask questions for the sole purpose of satisfying your own curiosity, and all the while the rest of the group is also learning. Actually, they're learning two things: whatever it is you're learning, and also that it's okay to be that excited to learn.

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2 You're only a few bad 80s songs and one dead boss away from being a real-life *Weekend at Bernie's*. Don't be a real-life *Weekend at Bernie's*. And if you haven't seen *Weekend at Bernie's*, you can watch it for an example of how exhausting and ludicrous (and comical) it is to publicly maintain a lie.

## WORK IN PROGRESS

As you've read this book, regardless of your knowledge, experience, or previous interest in facilitation, we hope you've been introduced to at least one idea that was entirely new. In writing this book, we've learned dozens of things. As the book comes to a conclusion, we hope to leave you with more excitement than comfort, more questions than answers, and with more uncertainty than certainty. Our goal with a lot of this book has been just that: presenting things you thought were clear, muddying them up, then giving you a path toward re-clarifying them in a more holistic way. If we can get you to say "I'm not certain I'm ever certain," then we consider that to be a win, but there is one thing we want you to be certain of:

**You can be a wonderful, powerful, inspirational person and have room to grow.**

We are all works in progress. Sharing the products of our growth, knowledge, and learning is wonderful. Hopefully, the concepts in this book will help you do just that. And being open about where we still have room to grow, what we don't know, and what we haven't yet learned is also wonderful.

Allow yourself to connect with the humanity of being imperfect. It will brighten your spirits, open your eyes to the path ahead, and release you of unhelpful burdens. It will also allow you to connect with your participants with more authenticity, empathy, and sincerity. And it will always keep you in touch with your "beginner's mind," something that will keep you in the moment more than anything else discussed in this book—and can always be counted on to pull a rabbit out of a hat.



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