Curse of Expertise

Idea In Short

Senior leaders assume that deep knowledge automatically improves their ability to teach, sell, design and lead. It often does the opposite. The curse of expertise sets in when experts unconsciously project their own fluency onto people who have never encountered the material before, producing instructions no one can follow, products no one can use and pitches no one understands. The fix is not less expertise; it is a structural habit of testing ideas against fresh eyes before they reach the market or the team. Pair every expert with a genuine novice reviewer, measure comprehension rather than approval and reward simplicity as a deliverable in its own right. Executives who treat this bias as a process problem, not a personality flaw, protect the return on every dollar spent building expertise in the first place.

A senior partner spends twenty minutes describing a market entry strategy to a client's board, using terms like "TAM-SAM-SOM", "beachhead segment" and "unit economics" as though they were common vocabulary. The board members nod, ask no questions and later admit privately that they understood roughly half of what was said. The partner is not being deliberately obscure. Years of practice have made this vocabulary so automatic that using simpler words would feel unnatural, almost like explaining arithmetic with an abacus. This is the curse of expertise at work:

> the more fluent someone becomes in a domain, the harder it becomes to remember, or even imagine, what it is like not to know it

The Mechanics of Losing a Beginner's Mind

Cognitive scientists describe this bias as a specific case of a wider phenomenon called the curse of knowledge, in which a person's own knowledge state contaminates their model of

what other people know.1 The original demonstration came from a 1990 Stanford study in which participants tapped out the rhythm of familiar songs, such as "Happy Birthday", on a tabletop while a listener tried to guess the tune. Tappers predicted listeners would succeed about half the time. Listeners actually identified the song only 2.5 percent of the time. The tappers could hear the melody complete in their own heads and could not conceive of the silence the listener actually experienced.

Expertise magnifies this effect because skill acquisition physically restructures how information is stored and retrieved. Novices process a task as a sequence of discrete, effortful steps. As practice accumulates, those steps chunk into single automatic units, freeing working memory but also erasing the expert's conscious access to the sequence that once required attention. A surgeon no longer thinks through each incision; a tax attorney no longer parses each clause; a data scientist no longer questions why a regression needs a control variable. The compression that makes experts fast also makes them poor narrators of their own process, because the steps they skip are the steps a beginner most needs explained. Psychology Today's coverage of the bias notes that this gap grows wider precisely as competence grows, which is why the most capable people in a room are often the worst equipped to explain themselves to the people who need it most.2

Author Steven Pinker put the mechanism plainly.

> The better you know something, the less you remember about how hard it was to learn

Pinker's observation, made in the context of academic and technical writing, applies with equal force to strategy decks, onboarding manuals and product interfaces built by people who long ago forgot what it felt like to encounter the material cold.

Where the Bias Costs Money

The curse of expertise is rarely visible as a single dramatic failure. It shows up as chronic friction: proposals that require three follow-up calls to clarify, software that support teams spend half their time explaining and training programs that new hires rate as confusing

despite being written by the company's most senior practitioners. Each instance looks like a minor communication issue. Collectively, they represent a recurring tax on every transaction where an expert has to transfer understanding to someone who has not walked the same path.

Product organizations feel this acutely. Engineers and designers who use their own software daily internalize its logic so completely that navigation feels self-evident to them and baffling to a first-time user. Usability research consistently finds that the people closest to a product are the worst judges of how intuitive it actually is, which is why testing with real, unbriefed users catches problems that internal review, staffed entirely by experts, reliably misses. The Decision Lab's summary of the bias points out that this dynamic extends well beyond software into any situation where a creator must anticipate an audience's starting point, including textbooks, policy documents and financial disclosures.3

Sales and consulting carry a parallel version of the problem. A pitch built by people who have spent months immersed in a client's data set will naturally answer questions the client has not yet formed, while skipping the basic framing the client actually needs to follow the logic. Buyers rarely say "I did not understand that." They say "let us think about it", walk away and the deal quietly dies. Forbes contributor Bryce Hoffman has documented how this bias erodes trust specifically in high-stakes negotiations and sales conversations, where a listener who feels lost tends to disengage rather than admit confusion.4

Why Seniority Makes It Worse, Not Better

A common assumption inside organizations is that experience solves communication problems over time, since senior people have presumably explained their work to junior colleagues many times before. The opposite pattern tends to hold. The longer someone works surrounded by equally expert peers, the more their internal calibration of "basic knowledge" drifts upward, because everyone around them already knows the shorthand too. A partner who has spent fifteen years around other partners loses the calibration point that a client, a new analyst, or a first-time buyer represents. Seniority does not correct the bias; it removes the feedback loop that would normally reveal it.

This is compounded by status dynamics. Junior team members are often reluctant to tell a senior expert that a slide, an instruction, or a pitch made no sense, out of concern that the question will read as a lack of preparation on their part rather than a lack of clarity on the

expert's part. The result is silence that experts misread as comprehension. The original academic paper on the curse of expertise, from researchers at Carnegie Mellon, found that experts making predictions about novice performance were consistently overconfident, underestimating how many errors and how much time novices would actually need, even when explicitly incentivized to be accurate.5

Correcting for the Bias Without Diluting Expertise

The instinct to solve this problem by simplifying everything for everyone is a mistake; expert audiences need precision, not condescension. The more durable fix is procedural: build a mandatory checkpoint where content, whether a client deliverable, a product feature, or a training module, passes through someone who genuinely lacks the background knowledge before it ships. That reviewer's job is not to approve the material but to attempt to use it, restate it, or act on it and to report where they got stuck.

Several practices make this checkpoint effective rather than symbolic.

- Recruit reviewers who are true outsiders to the specific workstream, not simply junior members of the same team who have absorbed the same jargon
- Measure comprehension directly, by asking the reviewer to explain the idea back or complete the task unaided, rather than asking whether the material seems clear
- Treat every point of confusion the reviewer reports as a defect in the material, not a deficiency in the reviewer
- Build the checkpoint into the workflow with a deadline and an owner, since voluntary review gets skipped under deadline pressure

Wikipedia's summary of the bias notes that professional writers, technical communicators and instructional designers have long relied on exactly this kind of naive-reader review as a countermeasure, precisely because self-editing by the original expert cannot reliably catch what the expert cannot see.6

Rebuilding the Beginner's View Deliberately

The organizations that manage this bias best treat clarity as a measurable output, not a personality trait some communicators happen to have and others lack. They track how long it takes a new client to restate a recommendation correctly, how many support tickets a

feature generates in its first month and how many follow-up questions a pitch draws before a prospect commits. Each of those metrics is a proxy for whether expertise successfully transferred and each can be improved through process rather than through hoping that experts will spontaneously remember what it was like to be new.

Some firms formalize the discipline further by rotating experienced staff through onboarding duty, on the logic that teaching a genuine beginner is one of the few activities that reliably forces an expert to reconstruct the steps they have long since automated. Others build "explain it to a smart outsider" as an explicit deliverable requirement, distinct from the technical deliverable itself, so that translation work is planned and staffed rather than squeezed in at the end. Neither approach eliminates the bias, because the bias is a structural feature of how expertise forms in the brain, not a habit that can be broken once and forgotten. What both approaches do is install a recurring check that catches the gap before a client, a customer, or a new hire pays the cost of it.

- 1The Curse Of Knowledge
- 2What's The Curse Of Knowledge And How Can You Break It
- 3Curse Of Knowledge
- 4The Curse Of Knowledge: What It Is And How To Overcome It
- 5The Curse Of Knowledge
- 6Curse Of Knowledge

Summary

The curse of expertise is not a character defect; it is a predictable byproduct of how memory and skill consolidate over years of practice. Once a task becomes automatic, the brain compresses the steps that used to take conscious effort and the expert loses reliable access to what it once felt like to be a beginner. That loss shows up in confusing training manuals, overbuilt products and pitches that lose a room in the first ninety seconds. Organizations that name the bias, build in novice review and reward clarity as a skill in itself avoid the tax that expertise otherwise imposes on communication, hiring and client relationships. The advantage of deep knowledge is real. Realizing it requires deliberately reintroducing the perspective that expertise quietly erases.