

# Career Compass No. 89: Overcoming the Arrogance of Expertise

Being an expert in the subject area is critical to addressing major issues, like a pandemic. But if people won't listen to you, all the expertise in the world won't help.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Mar 30, 2021 | ARTICLE

*I work in the public health department of a Midwestern suburban county. Recently I became the program manager of a newly established COVID-19 public education and enforcement unit. Our team is composed of experienced public health professionals, many of whom have master of public health degrees. Our goal is to promote the public health officer's protection and safety edicts related to the pandemic.*

*Our team has focused on a robust public education campaign but we have experienced a lot of pushback from many residents, small business people, and faith leaders. Therefore, we have been forced at times to resort to warnings, issue some citations, and as a last resort fine small retail businesses, restaurants, and even a few churches and synagogues.*

*We are very frustrated that residents and business people are resisting the safety measures. COVID cases are surging. Hospital beds are full. People are dying.*

*What don't people get? People are not listening to health experts who are relying on facts and science. Given this distrust of science and expertise, I'm also very concerned about everyone getting vaccinated.*

*How do we get people to listen and adhere to reason?*

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You raise a critical issue for local government. We in local government agencies are often subject matter experts who use our expertise to serve the public. Yet people may not always listen to our expert advice. Your experience as a public health expert can inform the efforts of other subject matter experts in the fields of policing, community development, environmental sustainability, emergency services, and family support.

I commend your efforts to protect all of us and save lives. I also support your fact-based decision-making and your attempts to achieve compliance without criminalizing behavior.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 emergency, public health officials had to act with urgency based on the best science available and you continue to do so. However, after a year of enacting various health measures, people are criticizing you and even abusing you. It is very frustrating.

Yes, it is disturbing that people are not adhering to safety restrictions and thus putting everyone at risk. The problem is that people are not listening to experts . . . and experts are not listening to people. (See Fared Zakaria's webinar, "[Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World](#)," Yale University Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, Dec 2, 2020.) The COVID-19 pandemic is not a technical challenge. Rather, the pandemic is a classic adaptive challenge that cannot be solved solely by science or data-based efforts. With adaptive challenges, every group argues for its own preferred solution and value conflicts abound. Adaptive challenges require incorporating many kinds of expertise, ideas, and perspectives. Ultimately, adaptive problems require the collaboration among experts and non-experts.

As a public health leader, you cannot force people to follow. People choose to follow or not. Many people are obviously not following the experts.

We experts are justifiably proud of our expertise. I am certainly proud of my knowledge and expertise. However, I believe that we experts need to acknowledge our blind spots, and in some cases even arrogance. Because we have the professional knowledge and training related to a local government challenge, we tend to dismiss the values, perspectives, and fears of non-experts and at times stereotype people who do not embrace our expertise. People perceive this as arrogance and resist and rebel.

Our world has become a lot more complicated. Change is accelerating and it is discontinuous and nonlinear. We cannot anticipate all the change or the consequences of change. So, we do need expertise in all spheres, not just in public health but in areas such as homelessness, climate change, police reform, and wildland fires. However, we experts cannot appear to be arrogant. Rather, we need to seek a sense of humble expertise.

## Learn-It-All

Instead of relying solely on your knowledge and expertise, experts must seek to learn from people as well as educate them. You must seek to understand people's values, concerns, and fears.

As Dan Rockwell has stated: "Arrogance needs to give answers. Humility stays curious." (*Leadership Freak* blog, "[How Curiosity Is the Answer for Arrogance](#)," Oct 31, 2016.) Others may experience our educational efforts as lecturing. People resist know-it-all experts.

## Seek Hard and Soft Data

Typically, we experts seek and use hard data. In your case, you use infection rates, hospitalization rates, number of deaths, and effectiveness rates for vaccines.

Experts also need to consider “soft” data. Again, people’s values, concerns, fears, and perspectives must be considered as part of your program design and implementation. Should we not consider as valued data people’s concerns about losing one’s livelihood, being evicted, leaving children at home to do school work with little guidance, or not being able to visit a dying loved one?

## Consider Impacts as Well as Results

Some people perceive experts as out-of-touch. While your mission is to achieve certain results (in your case, preventing infections and saving lives), you must consider the impacts of your decisions on the lives of others in order to gain credibility and ultimately trust. (See Dan Rockwell, *Leadership Freak* blog, “[How Curiosity Is the Answer to Arrogance](#),” Oct 31, 2016.)

For example, as part of decision-making about instituting public health measures, have you seriously considered the impacts on the daily lives of people, such as social isolation, depression, loss of livelihoods, evictions, addiction, domestic abuse, and children’s loss of learning opportunities? If people do not perceive that you have fully considered these challenges threatening their lives and care about these concerns, then they might not listen to you.

## Acknowledge the Inequities

The pandemic as well as other government decisions and policies (such as hiring and contracting practices, land use and housing development choices, educational policies, lending practices), can lead to growing inequities in our communities. While higher paid knowledge workers and professionals of all kinds (including many public sector employees) can work from home, COVID-19 has had a profound negative impact on lower-income service workers who cannot work remotely. These service workers are more likely to lose their jobs in the shutdown; cannot afford in-person private schools or tutoring or learning pods for their children; have less access to technology; live in small apartments with no backyards; and often lack decent health insurance. Many of these “essential” workers are people of color.

In our planning, have we responded to some of these inequities?

## Move from Empathy to Compassionate Action

To get people to listen to us, we need to demonstrate empathy. Empathy is not sympathy that leads you to feel sorry for the difficulties or misfortunes of others. Rather, empathy is the ability to see the world through the eyes of the other person and understand, acknowledge, and consider their unique hopes, fears, ideas, and perspectives. (See [Career Compass No. 86: Empathy Is a Superpower](#)).

Empathy is a necessary first step. However, we must then go beyond empathy and respond with compassionate action. Compassion requires that you respond through your action as a leader. Therefore, as an expert and leader, what are you going to do in order to respond to the concerns and fears of people?

## Strategies for Becoming Humble Experts

To effectively respond to any of our adaptive challenges (the pandemic, climate change, police reform, affordable housing), we need intellectual humility. Here are some strategies:

### 1. Ask yourself four questions

- Do I think more like a soldier (defending territory) or a scout (exploring new territory)?
- Would I rather be right or would I rather understand?
- Do I routinely solicit and seek out opposing views?
- Do I enjoy the pleasant surprise of discovering that I'm mistaken?

(See Warren Berger, [The Book of Beautiful Questions](#), 2018.)

### 2. Proceed with a “beginner’s mind”

Buddhists and Zen masters talk about the limitations of making decisions based on your “expert’s mind.” An expert’s mind is a full mind. It is full of data and technical knowledge and experience. There is very little room for additional ideas and perspectives.

To better perform in a complex, disruptive, and uncertain world, professionals need to begin their problem-solving by employing a “beginner’s mind.” A beginner’s mind is an empty mind. There is room for more and different kinds of data, other values, and new ideas on how to solve problems.

### 3. Engage in deep and authentic conversations

In government, we often see community engagement as a necessary and time-consuming evil. We organize meetings with stakeholders to achieve “buy-in” for our ideas. Seeking buy-in is highly manipulative. We are trying to “sell” our idea or solution. People can sense our efforts at buy-in a mile away and thus resist our decisions and solutions.

To get people to consider our expert advice, we need to first engage them in deep and authentic conversations. We must approach the conversation with curiosity and a desire to learn from the other person or group and thus be open to their experiences and “data.” This requires a big dose of respect for the other party, not prejudging or dismissing but fully considering their views and ideas.

Deep listening requires open-ended questions, such as:

- What do you need to protect yourself, your family, or your business during the pandemic?

- What is your greatest fear or concern?
- If you are concerned about \_\_\_\_\_ (for example, your child learning, earning a living, being isolated from love ones), how might we all protect ourselves and still minimize your concerns?
- How can we work together?

“Humans need to be heard before they listen,” Amanda Ripley writes (see David Brooks, “[Nine Nonobvious Ways to Have Deeper Conversations](#),” *New York Times*, Nov 19, 2020.)

While different views may be expressed in any conversation, we must keep the “gem statement” front and center. In your case the gem statement is “I care about your family and their safety and well-being” even though we may disagree about safety measures.

## 4. Collaborate with other experts

Our big adaptive challenges are too complex and require that we cross technical silos. In responding to COVID-19, public health professionals must engage other experts, such as behavioral scientists, communications and marketing specialists, child development and education experts, mental health professionals, and economists. (See Fareed Zakaria webinar, “[Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World](#),” Yale University Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, Dec 2, 2020.)

Does your public health team include other kinds of expertise?

## 5. Be transparent

Transparency helps create credibility and trust in decision-makers. In announcing decisions, we leaders must explain:

- The process we used.
- The key data.
- The rationale for the decision.
- The downsides or negative consequences of the decisions (for example, the side effects of vaccines, or the economic impacts of lockdowns).
- What we know to be scientifically true.
- What we do not know.

Explaining what we do not know is critical. For example, we may decide to close the playgrounds in the county (see case in point below) based on our professional judgment that closure is a wise public health move. Our professional judgment is a valid basis for closing facilities. However, we need to be transparent about the basis for closing playgrounds; we cannot imply that it is based on facts and science unless we have the hard evidence.

## 6. Admit when we have changed our minds

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s leading infectious disease expert, has developed a great deal of credibility and trust since he is obviously committed to public service, speaks plainly, and acknowledges when he makes a mistake and needs to change course.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Fauci advised us that wearing masks was not required. At that time, experts did not know the extent to which people with COVID-19 could easily spread the virus, and Fauci wanted to also reserve the limited supply of masks for frontline health care workers.

With more data, Fauci publicly acknowledged the change in direction and strongly advised everyone to wear masks as well as maintain social distance.

## 7. Use the best communicators

We experts need to identify the best communicators for our message given each audience. For instance, recognizing the history of institutional racism and the mistrust of the Black community, perhaps professionals need to engage local Black doctors, scientists, and faith leaders as key communicators in our efforts to vaccinate everyone.

## A Case in Point—Opening Up Playgrounds

Many parents, especially lower-income service workers, and those who live in urban apartment complexes, have been very concerned that their children have no place to play and run around. Child development and recreation experts have supported the need for playgrounds, advocating that playgrounds are essential spaces and not luxuries. These experts indicated that play spaces promote mental and physical health, enhance problem-solving and coping skills, and even lessen the effects of trauma. (See Joshua Sabatini, "[Playgrounds Reopen During COVID Shutdown](#)," *San Francisco Examiner*, Dec 10, 2020.)

If public health experts were to engage stakeholders (parents, recreation professionals, child development experts) in authentic conversations and collaborate across technical boundaries, perhaps playgrounds could be reopened with safety not compromised, under some of the following conditions:

- Only people in the same household can make the trip to the playground.
- No play dates are allowed with children from other households.
- Everyone over two years old must wear a mask at all times.
- The use of the playground is limited to 30 minutes.
- Visitors must remain six feet from all people not from their household.
- Eating and drinking are not allowed.
- Hands must be cleaned before and after playing.

This case for reopening playgrounds combines risk assessment with collaborative and creative problem-solving. As data from the experience is collected, we acknowledge what we learn, pivot, and make adjustments.

## Getting People to Listen to the Experts

We need you to apply your public health expertise if we are all to survive the pandemic. You must continue to act with urgency to serve all of us. However, to be as effective as possible, people must listen to you. I am not suggesting that you reverse

public health restrictions. I am encouraging you to be wary of the potential arrogance of expertise and to consider other possibilities and opportunities as time permits. To get others to listen, you must engage other experts and non-experts in conversation, consider all the hard and soft data, and be as transparent as possible in what you know and what you do not know.

Given the urgency to protect people, you will not be able to respond to all issues and concerns. But you do need to consider and incorporate some other ideas or perspectives in your decision-making in order to create credibility. Again, people need to listen to the experts...and the experts need to listen to the people. The hard things can only be done together.



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