Trust the Experts

Owen Bennett is a senior design engineer with 15 years of industry experience. His work has earned multiple accolades, and he is widely credited with elevating his firm to its current position of prominence. Within the company, Owen is well regarded—most of his colleagues find him personable, though some also note that he can be intimidating to work alongside. Part of this perception stems from his reputation for being less receptive to feedback or alternative approaches. Yet, given his track record and widely admired technical expertise, this trait is often regarded as a quirk rather than a flaw.

For the past several months, Owen and his team have been developing a new advanced material with potential breakthrough applications in the aerospace sector. Steve Wilson, a recently hired junior engineer, was tasked with reviewing the team's technical data and helping to finalize the client presentation. During his review, he noticed a subtle anomaly in the results—something that did not align with his expectations. After running through the calculations again, he believed he had identified a critical error in one of the design assumptions.

Although Steve felt confident in his analysis, he was mindful of his limited experience and new status on the team. Unsure how to proceed, he first brought his concerns to Amelia Grant , a colleague who had joined the firm only a few months earlier and who had gone out of her way to make him feel welcome and comfortable. After examining the data herself, Amelia admitted she could not be certain whether there was a mistake, but she encouraged Steve to raise the issue with Owen before the client presentation, stressing the importance of validation in engineering work.

That evening, Steve spent yet more time with the calculations, and still he felt that an error had been made. The next day, he worked up the courage to meet with Owen directly. At first, Owen was welcoming and asked how he was adjusting to the team. But when Steve raised the potential error, his tone shifted. Though not openly defensive, he assured Steve that he and the team had already double-checked the work multiple times, emphasizing their collective experience. He thanked him for his diligence, but closed the conversation by saying he looked forward to the finalized presentation.

Steve left the meeting unsure whether Owen would revisit the calculations, and questioning whether he had made the right choice in speaking up.

Discussion Questions

1. What would it mean for Owen to demonstrate humility in this situation?
2. How do power dynamics in engineering teams foster—or hinder—an environment of professional humility?
3. Why is it important in technical fields to acknowledge one's own limitations or the possibility of error?

4. What is the difference between humility and skepticism? Is there an inherent tension between expertise and humility?
5. Imagine the following scenario: *A few weeks after the client presentation, the team learns that the advanced material has failed during preliminary field testing—fortunately without causing injury or major loss, but enough to delay the project and damage the firm's reputation. When the data are reexamined, it turns out that the issue Steve identified was indeed a contributing factor. In the aftermath, Owen expresses deep regret, admitting that he had dismissed Steve's concerns too quickly because he felt confident in his team's past successes.*

    How, if at all, would this outcome change your thinking about Owen's earlier response to Steve, or about the broader importance of humility and openness in professional collaboration?