

Beyond Competence: Communicating Expertise Under Uncertainty

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Abstract

This essay explores the ethical challenges of communicating expertise under uncertainty in consulting. Based on a semi-structured interview about a \$1.2 million NASA project, it examines a decision in which internal uncertainty was presented with amplified confidence. Drawing on literature on the rhetorical construction of expertise, structural pressures in consulting, and moral disengagement theory, the case shows how certainty becomes strategically constructed in high-stakes contexts. The findings highlight a structural grey zone where professional codes provide limited guidance for communicating uncertainty.

Introduction

When organizations invest millions in strategic decisions, they often do so based on predictions about a future that does not yet exist. In these moments of uncertainty, consultants are brought in as experts. Yet uncertainty does not disappear simply because an expert is present. In many consulting projects, especially those involving innovation or long-term outcomes, decisions must be made before reliable data exist, making consulting not merely a technical activity but inherently an ethical one (Krehmeyer & Freeman, 2012). Ethical tensions surrounding consultancy have been widely discussed in the literature.

Sturdy (2009) highlights that consultants operate within ambiguous zones of responsibility and accountability, where influence over major decisions is significant, yet ownership of outcomes remains minimal (p.5). This structural ambiguity contributes to what Bouwmeester and Stiekema (2015) describe as the paradoxical image of consultants as “experts without expertise” (p. 2433). They argue that authority is exercised through persuasive framing rather than demonstrable certainty, making expertise a socially constructed image shaped by rhetoric and stakeholder perceptions (Bouwmeester & Stiekema, 2015, pp. 2433–2435).

However, unethical behavior in consulting is not typically portrayed as the result of deliberate misconduct, but rather as stemming from contextual pressures such as client expectations, competitive market dynamics, and role ambiguity (Redekop and Heath, 2007, pp. 47-48). Professional frameworks such as the Dutch OOA Code (2022) emphasize expertise as one of the core principles, intended to protect clients from incompetence and misrepresentation. However, academic research complicates this seemingly straightforward notion of expertise. Expertise, therefore, becomes not merely a matter of possessing knowledge, but of how it is constructed and conveyed under uncertainty.

This tension becomes particularly visible in projects where results cannot be verified immediately and data remain incomplete. The case examined here concerns an independent consultant advising a firm managing a \$1.2 million NASA contract. The consultant was asked to recommend whether a larger-than-expected portion of the budget should be allocated to marketing a national innovation competition. The client lacked reliable performance metrics, and the outcomes of the decision would only become measurable after nine months.

This situation raises a central ethical question: when certainty is unattainable, what constitutes responsible expertise, and are professional codes sufficient to regulate it? Drawing on a jokes-based interview method designed to reduce social desirability bias (Bouwmeester, 2023, p.80), this essay analyzes the case through literature on the rhetorical construction of expertise (Bouwmeester & Stiekema, 2015), structural pressures in consulting (Redekop & Heath, 2007), and moral disengagement theory (White et al., 2009). This essay argues that professional codes are insufficient to regulate the communicative performance of expertise under uncertainty, because confidence itself becomes strategically constructed under structural pressure.

Case Narrative

To explore how consultants navigate uncertainty and expertise, a 30-minute semi-structured interview was conducted with Daniel Meyer (pseudonym), an independent consultant. The interview was conducted via Zoom and began with consulting-related cartoons to encourage open reflection (Bouwmeester, 2023). With consent, the conversation was recorded and transcribed. Meyer discussed a past project advising a firm responsible for a \$1.2 million NASA contract to run a nine-month national competition focused on developing solutions to measure PFAS contamination in U.S. federal waterways under new regulations. At the launch of the project, a key strategic decision needed to be made.

The central decision revolved around allocating a significantly higher-than-planned share of the budget to a nationwide marketing effort. The CEO was confident that the firm's established technical network would generate enough submissions. Meyer was not convinced. Drawing on his previous experience managing twelve NASA competitions totaling approximately \$12 million, he believed that broader national visibility was essential to attract submissions from universities, research institutions, and private companies.

The difficulty was that no reliable data were available to guide the decision. Although the firm had previously invested in marketing campaigns, it had not tracked whether online engagement translated into actual competition submissions. As Meyer explained, "there's just no way to know if their past spend had any impact" (Meyer, p.c.). Ultimately, his recommendation relied on experience and professional judgment rather than empirical evidence. Time pressure intensified the dilemma. The marketing push had to occur immediately to ensure visibility at launch, as insufficient visibility could irreversibly undermine both the quantity and quality of submissions. Yet, as he noted, "You won't know the results until the end of the competition" (Meyer, p.c.). The implications went beyond a single project: a weak outcome could damage the relationship with NASA and affect future contracts, "if we didn't do this, the result could have been catastrophic for this contract" (Meyer, p.c.).

Internally, Meyer estimated his confidence in recommending increased marketing investment at approximately 50 percent. Externally, however, he communicated the recommendation with roughly "80 percent confidence" (Meyer, p.c.). While preparing his presentation, he reviewed his slides and concluded, "this language isn't strong enough." He consciously sharpened the framing to ensure it came across as decisive, stating that the strategy was "the only path forward" (Meyer, p.c.). He deliberately framed the alternative as potentially "catastrophic", rationalizing his recommendation as responsible risk mitigation.

Meyer acknowledged that client expectations influenced this communication style. In his experience, consultants are expected to provide clarity rather than visible hesitation. Although he briefly questioned whether he might be overstating his certainty, he ultimately concluded that strong framing was necessary. The client ultimately followed his advice and expanded the marketing investment. At the time of the interview, eight months into the competition, submission levels appeared promising. Yet for the majority of the competition, Meyer operated in a prolonged period of uncertainty.

Interpretation

The OOA Code of Conduct (2022) identifies expertise as a core professional principle. Consultants are expected to operate within the limits of their competence and avoid creating unrealistic expectations. At first glance, Meyer appears to comply with this principle: he possessed relevant experience managing comparable NASA competitions, he did not fabricate data, nor did he claim knowledge he did not possess. The ethical tension therefore does not arise from incompetence, but from how uncertainty was communicated.

The central dilemma concerns the confidence gap between Meyer's internal assessment (approximately 50 percent certainty) and his external presentation (approximately 80 percent confidence). By amplifying certainty beyond his internal assessment, he shaped the client's perception of risk and probability. The code assumes that expertise is about competence and honesty, yet it provides little guidance on how to communicate probabilistic uncertainty in high-stakes contexts. This exposes a grey area between persuasion and ethically problematic overstatement.

Bouwmeester and Stiekema (2015) argue that consultant expertise is not merely technical but part of a "socially constructed" professional image embedded in a "rhetorical situation" (pp. 2433–2435). Authority depends on how convincingly expertise is performed and recognized. Meyer's reflection that "this language isn't strong enough" illustrates precisely this performative dimension. His presentation transformed a judgment into what appeared to be a strategic necessity. However, this rhetorical performance does not occur in a vacuum. Redekop and Heath (2007) suggest that unethical consulting practices often result from contextual pressures rather than intentional wrongdoing (pp. 40–41).

Meyer explicitly acknowledged that visible hesitation could undermine credibility and that certainty was "a very high part of their expectation" (Meyer, p.c.). The large financial stake and potential future contracts further intensified pressure. The amplification of confidence can therefore be understood as a structurally embedded, rather than purely overstated confidence. Additionally, moral disengagement theory provides insight and highlights a subtle ethical tension. White, Bandura, and Bero (2009) explain how individuals justify ethically questionable actions through mechanisms such as moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and advantageous comparison (pp. 45–48). Meyer framed the amplification of certainty as "risk mitigation," a form of moral justification that presented the decision as protective leadership. At the same time, the term "risk mitigation" functions as a form of euphemistic labeling, masking the discrepancy between internal and external certainty.

Moreover, characterizing the alternative as "catastrophic" constitutes advantageous comparison, heightening perceived danger to make his recommendation appear not only reasonable but necessary. The limitations of professional codes become evident here. According to Poulfelt (1997), consulting ethics requires interpretation in ambiguous contexts (p. 65) and resembles "walking the tightrope" (p. 66). The OOA sets competence boundaries but offers little direction on communicating uncertainty. As Meyer noted, codes are "a nice to have... but [they] wouldn't stop someone" (Meyer, p.c.). The case therefore exposes the limits of formal rules in regulating expertise under uncertainty.

Conclusion

This case demonstrates that responsible expertise under uncertainty is not simply about competence, but about how certainty is constructed and communicated. Meyer acted within his expertise, yet deliberately presented stronger certainty in a high-stakes situation. Such amplification is embedded in the rhetorical construction of expertise and reinforced by pressures. Moral disengagement mechanisms further explain how this escalation can be framed as responsible risk management. While professional codes such as the OOA establish important ethical boundaries, they offer limited guidance for navigating uncertainty in practice. Responsible consulting therefore requires careful judgment about how certainty is expressed, so that persuasive framing does not turn into overconfidence.

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