

A LINE ON LIFE

9/23/87

Experts Are Human Too *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

To get information or answers to problems we cannot solve, we often consult experts. Most of the time, we completely accept what they tell us. Sometimes their answers seem unacceptable, but we follow their advice anyway. Unfortunately, even experts are human – and therefore subject to error.

In their entertaining and informative book, *The Experts Speak* (1984), Christopher Cerf and Victor Navasky provide the many experts' judgments, which were demonstrated to be *wrong*. Here are some examples:

1864 – "*The boy will come to nothing.*" This is a quote from Jacob Freud predicting the future of his son, Sigmund.

1876 – "*Hurray, boys, we've got them! We'll finish them up and then go home to our station.*" This is what General George Custer said when he first saw the Indian encampment at the Little Big Horn.

1879 – "*How can he call it a wonderful success when everyone acquainted with the subject will recognize it as a conspicuous failure?*" This was a physics professor's evaluation of Thomas Edison's invention, the electric light bulb.

1889 – "*I'm sorry Mr. Kipling, but you just don't know how to use the English language.*" These words were used by a newspaper editor informing Rudyard Kipling that an article submitted by Kipling would not be published.

1921 – "*(He) made a great mistake when he gave up pitching. Working once a week, he might have lasted a long time and become a great star.*" This was a baseball manager's comment on Babe Ruth's decision to change from a pitcher to an outfielder.

1936 – "*Forget it, Louis. No Civil War picture ever made a nickel.*" A production executive at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer movie studio was advising the president of the studio not to buy the film rights to the novel, *Gone with the Wind*.

1943 – "*I think there is a world market for about five computers.*" This was the response of the chairman of the board of International Business

Machines – better known as IBM – as he commented on the future of computers.

1954 – "*You ain't goin' nowhere...son. You ought to go back to driving a truck.*" Those were the words of the manager of the Grand Ole Opry, explaining to Elvis Presley why he (Presley) was being fired after one performance.

1963 – "*That singer will have to go.*" These were the inspired words of an early manager of the Rolling Stones evaluating Mick Jagger's value to the group.

1964 – "*(He) doesn't have the presidential look.*" This was said by an executive at a United Artists movie studio, explaining why he did not select Ronald Reagan for a role in a movie.

There are many more examples in Cerf and Navasky's *The Experts Speak*. As amusing and entertaining as it may be to review the mistakes of the "*high and mighty*," how does this help us "*everyday*" people to make our lives better?

Usually we trust the experts and their decisions, and this is the way it should be. However, every once in a while, we go along with expert advice even though we have serious doubts about it. Usually this is because we assume that the expert is **infallible** – completely free from making errors. As you can clearly see from the examples above, this assumption is not always true. What can you do if you have serious doubts?

Suppose you are having problems with your car, and the mechanic recommends a complete and rather expensive overhaul. If you have any serious doubts, ask him to explain – in terms you can understand – why he thinks this is necessary, especially in contrast to other less expensive repairs. Then – if you still have any doubts – explain the reasons for your doubts to the mechanic as specifically as possible. This can give the mechanic new information, which can lead him to revise the estimated need for repairs. However, if you both still disagree strongly, consult another mechanic. (In deciding to consult another mechanic, you need to weigh the cost of the repair against the cost of the extra consultation.)

The same situation can exist, when you go to a physician for a health problem. After examining you, she may recommend surgery. In this situation, not only do you have the financial costs involved, but you also have worries about your own physical wellbeing. Any surgery involves some personal risk. As with the mechanic, if you have any serious doubts, ask her to explain why the surgery is necessary in contrast to other treatments. It is even more important here to state your reasons for disagreeing with the physician in detail. As with any expert, if she has more information, she can make a better decision. Especially when thinking about having an operation, if you still have any doubts, consult another physician. (In fact, most insurance companies now *require* a second opinion.)

Essentially it is easier and more helpful to trust experts, whether they are parents, engineers, physicians or psychologists. However – realizing that experts are human too – trust can include questioning them or seeking other opinions. If you don't believe me, why not ask another expert?

* Adapted from Louis Penner's *Social Psychology: Concepts and Applications*, West Publishing, 1986, page 467.