

A stage with spotlights and an audience. The background is dark with several rows of bright spotlights. In the foreground, a row of people is visible, looking towards the stage. The text is overlaid on the image.

Keep Me Honest

How to call bullshit on a guru.



The longer I'm in the profession of lecturing and writing, the more I worry about becoming one of those annoying gurus you see in infomercials. You know who I'm talking about. They're people who talk as if they're always right, preaching to the world as if everyone is too stupid to do in a year what they could do in a day. I hate these people; I always have.

But the irony of my life is that I'm slowly becoming one of them. It's against my will, but lecturing and giving advice is what I do, and every day, with every job, the slow cloud of guru-itis spreads across my soul. I live with the fear that when I'm not careful, a little part of me—a part too small to notice—mutates into the form of the people I despise. I'm terrified of this, and I could use your help.

The problem is that despite a core of humility and deep joy in the comedies of my many errors, I'm hired to lecture to people who want to hear from a know-it-all expert. They want me to be as amazing and gifted and perfect as possible, and will bill me as such to their audiences. Wouldn't you rather listen to a best-in-his-field rock-star genius than to Mr. Mediocre Normal Guy? Certainly. It makes my hosts look better and the crowds larger. But with each wave of promotion comes an increase in the odds that I'll start believing my own PR.

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Here's a list of ways you can help me—and my fellow know-it-all experts—see our bullshit. You can help me recognize when I've gone too far and have drunk my own Kool-Aid. Having good people ask tough questions and call me on it when I'm out of line helps me to become truly wise—the reason I do this in the first place. I promise I'll never get mad if you do, and I'm open to suggestions for other tricks to keep my ego in line.

Ask, "Have you done this yourself?" Most gurus haven't been practitioners in a long time. It's easy to forget the differ-

ence between giving advice about how to do something and actually doing it. And the longer it has been since they've done something, the easier that thing will seem to be. Of course, just because a guru hasn't done it doesn't mean he's wrong—it just means that he might need to ease up on the arrogance, or to seek out more examples.

is wrong is dangerous. If she's so smart, and she's never failed, it just means she's a coward: She's never been ambitious enough to fail. But if she's failed and never talks about it, she projects an unreal image of what it is to be a human being. It's harder to learn from aliens than humans, I think. Ask for stories of mistakes and failures, whether the expert's own or others. This will force any true guru into open and honest territory where she can be of greater use.

Ask, "Why do so many people fail at this?" A wise person will answer this with some acknowledgment of how hard the

and jumps to assume that all of my dates and quotes are wrong. You can criticize someone's research but still buy the theory and premise, as some facts are less important than others. More important, look for gurus who make changes to their work when they learn of mistakes.

Use an expert as your negative stepping-stone. This is the definition of a heckler. They want to steal thunder and use someone else's platform as a launching pad for their own. This rarely works, as it doesn't earn real fans. Critiquing—especially harsh, venomous criticisms—is always easier than creating. Never say

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Ask, "How do you know what you know?" Phrases such as "studies show," "I have seen," and "the leading theory is" are all suspect. What study? Where did you see this? Who says it's the leading theory? Don't let an expert's assumptions stand unchallenged. Gurus should support their claims just like everyone else does.

Ask, "When is the theory you are advocating wrong?" Nothing works all the time. A smart person is aware of the limitations of any idea or practice. Ask them to explain the alternative of their position, and when they might take it.

Look for admissions of mistakes and failures. Someone who never admits she

thing is to do. But this question contains an ego trap: I once heard a famous consultant say, in response, "Because not enough people follow my advice."

Sometimes people make mountains out of typos. Mistakes come in all shapes and sizes, and in the pursuit of detecting bullshit, it's possible to build your own sizable ego around minor flaws you find. In keeping experts and gurus honest, a couple of things *not* to do:

Find a factual error, and act as though you've discovered gold. Factual errors are everywhere. Many good books contain them, and it's hard as a writer to sort through the origin of every statement or date. The existence of a mistake does not mean that the theory or premise of the author, or lecturer, is wrong. It indicates a mistake in research, something common to just about all popular research. It drives me nuts when someone finds I misquoted someone, or got a fact wrong,

something is not worth the paper it's printed on unless you can name a book on the subject that is.

In short, be constructive with your criticisms. I'm happy to see what I write torn to shreds if the shredder helps make something helpful from the remains. But if he leaves them on the floor or sets fire to them right before walking away, the world has not been made a better place. You score points in life for being insightful and building on what people say, not for tearing it down. If tearing something down is necessary to build your theory, that's fine, but people passionate about tearing down often forget that second part.

The danger, too, with criticism that can be easily brushed off is that it can serve to reinforce the guru's own belief that he is in fact a best-in-his-field rock-star genius, impervious to serious challenge. And that's a belief that I, for one, would be better off not having—regardless of what my event host says in his introduction. ■