

▲ Ask HN: How do you deal with overconfident and mediocre individuals?

45 points by kevinfb 4 hours ago | hide | past | web | 34 comments | favorite

I have a high bar for expressing absolute confidence for something (ie knowledge in a field or proficiency in a language) and am continuously surprised by people who claim mastery of something/that they are a natural at something, but in reality are quite mediocre, or above average at best. Furthermore, the same individuals tend to put down others who are more humble/less confident in their skills, directly or subtly.

It infuriates me when these individuals subtly bring down others, but I am unsure how to approach it - directly, indirectly, or just ignore it and focus on my own work and goals.

I also anticipate that I'll be told the only way is for me to be more vocally confident in myself, but that is not my natures and I have little appetite in continuing the status quo.



add comment

▲ peterh 1 hour ago [-]

There are two issues here. Firstly is your perception that they are 'quite mediocre, or above average at best' - this is your problem. Looking down on people for being less than yourself is not an admirable trait, something you seem to share with them.

The second issue is the other person 'tend to put down others who are more humble/less confident in their skills'. This is a what you would call a jerk (or arsehole in UK parlance). This is the issue that needs fixing. Are you in a position to call them out on this? Not necessarily official manager type position but pull them up each time they do it.

Someone like this could be seen as a bully and making the workplace unpleasant for the quieter / more humble members. Their skills are irrelevant, if they were the most brilliant programmer in the world this would not excuse such behaviour.

reply

▲ icebraining 47 minutes ago [-]

Firstly is your perception that they are 'quite mediocre, or above average at best' - this is your problem. Looking down on people for being less than yourself is not an admirable trait, something you seem to share with them.

Why are you assuming the comparison is with oneself?

reply

▲ havetocharge 39 minutes ago [-]

It may be a reasonable assumption, since the author lead with the "I".

reply

▲ willart4food 24 minutes ago [-]

Didn't you, yourself, just look down on OP?

reply

▲ jchw 20 minutes ago [-]

Well, would you consider constructive criticism to be looking down on someone?

reply

▲ mmjaa 1 hour ago [-]

>>How to deal with 'overconfident' and 'mediocre' individuals?

Realise that the source of your problem is your own hubris.

"Overconfident" just means "un-tested and un-proven".

"Mediocre" just means "un-developed".

No man is an island, if you feel that your social perspective is coming from a place of moral authority, it is incumbent on you to place that altitude in perspective - push these people forward. The "overconfident" need testing - real application. The "mediocre" need training - you have an opportunity to push these key members of your team forward.

And, you should. Anything less would be a manifestation of your own 'overconfidence' - and the fact you're asking, means you are, actually, also 'mediocre'.

Thus, hubris is your real bug. Fix it.

reply

▲ zdragnar 6 minutes ago [-]

Ignoring the semantics, it would be naive to believe they there are no people in tech who concretely claim more knowledge and skills than they possess, and attempt to exert undue influence. As such, there is still value in the question at hand.

Anecdotally, there is a common thread among people like this that I have met: their experience in the field is very narrow, in the sense that they believe in a "one true way". That might be the only way that they've ever worked, or they bought into some cargo-cult style culture.

I'm loath to prescribe means of "dealing" with such people, because with all things in life, it depends on the situation, though a good starting point is the same for all contention:

Find common ground, acknowledge common goals, identify ways to work together as a team. Don't settle for harassment, though be charitable in interpretation when possible.

reply

▲ muzani 1 hour ago [-]

It's natural. It's Dunning Kruger effect. People become very confident when they first learn a little and consider themselves experts.

It is rather hypocritical to put someone down for lacking knowledge; doing so implies that you are judging them as lacking knowledge. You end up doing the exact same thing. I have never seen this done in a way that doesn't backfire.

I just treat people like that as children or teenagers. You don't have to be mean. You just entertain and enjoy their illusion. They might grow out of it and realize what fools they were.

Be tolerant, similar to religious tolerance. They believe what they do. If you have enough evidence to convince them, you can do so.

You might end up in a closed circle of smarter people, but that's fine. The competent ones tend to float to the top.

reply

▲ rootlocus 4 minutes ago [-]

> It is rather hypocritical to put someone down for lacking knowledge; doing so implies that you are judging them as lacking knowledge. You end up doing the exact same thing. I have never seen this done in a way that doesn't backfire.

No, it's not. OP doesn't put anyone down because he doesn't communicate his attitude towards the other person. When someone tells you "Wow, you really don't know what AARB stands for? How did you pass the interview? It's like DUUH, basic knowledge." with a smug or contempt face, he's putting you down. I've met people like this and they were very hard to work with. Other remarks I've heard are "How the fk should I know, ask the idiot who implemented that piece of shit, I would've made it perfect", or "A bunch of losers who can't code without memory leaks decided smart pointers were a good idea, so now everything is slow".

When someone counters someone else's bold claims of confidence or idiotic remarks with a puzzled look like "I'm wondering if you really know what you're talking about", he's not putting the other person down.

reply

▲ mijoharas 9 minutes ago [-]

> It's natural. It's Dunning Kruger effect. People become very confident when they first learn a little and consider themselves experts.

The Dunning Kruger effect doesn't support what you claimed [0][1]. (Provided that I read your comment correctly).

[0] <https://danluu.com/dunning-kruger/>

[1] <http://www.talvarkoni.org/blog/2010/07/07/what-the-dunning-k-...>

reply

▲ maxxxxx 36 minutes ago [-]

There was an article posted here a while ago that described how people from elite schools always talk with confidence even if they have no clue and how this is a recipe for success.

If you are soft spoken I think the only way to get peace is to get in a position where you can control your part and can ignore louder people. I have done this at previous companies and in the long run you get noticed by your results. If you can't find that place it's probably better to look for another job.

reply

▲ internetman55 22 minutes ago [-]

The famous educator John Taylor Gatto thinks one of the keys of elite education is the ability to speak extemporaneously and intelligently for a few minutes on topics you know nothing about.

reply

▲ maxxxxx 12 minutes ago [-]

I see this a lot in a lot of middle management types. They can join any meeting and contribute with "insightful" comments and only after a while you realize that they just repeat platitudes or steal someone else's ideas.

The problem is it's really hard to deal with them without looking confrontational or defensive. That's why I said you have to find a place where you can control your work and get credit for what you did. There are plenty of places where results count and not smooth talk.

reply

▲ narutozumaki 24 minutes ago [-]

Do you have a link for the article? It sounds interesting.

reply

▲ saint_abroad 50 minutes ago [-]

> Talk is cheap. Show me the code. - <https://kml.org/kml/2000/8/25/132>

Insist on implementation to back theory.

reply

▲ brazzy 2 hours ago [-]

Well, you're not going to be able to change the status quo that confidence is largely admired and taken at face value. That's the world you live in and have to deal with. But if your specific goal is to prevent overconfident people from "bringing down" those who are less confident (presumably mainly you), your best bet is to move the discussion concrete, measurable past successes and failures, and resist attempts to change the topic away from those.

If the discussion is inherently about plans for the future and there is no past record of achievements (how do you know they're overconfident then?), insist on a process that produces concrete, meaningful process in reasonably short increments so that unrealistic promises will be exposed early on.

reply

▲ nnq 1 hour ago [-]

> insist on a process that produces concrete, meaningful process in reasonably short increments so that unrealistic promises will be exposed early on

This is gold. Might print it and frame it :)

reply

▲ teekert 1 hour ago [-]

You like it because it allows you to not change yourself, you are going to change the processes (or at least, people in general like this). It's a way, true, but will it work everywhere? What if you could change yourself to handle these situations better, regardless of the processes? That's the hard way.

reply

▲ nnq 1 hour ago [-]

I'm not a fan of working "in reasonably short increments". I actually find it painful since I tend to think/work in "leap. then sleep" cycles. But I prefer to weed-out "frauds" fast, even at the expense of inconveniencing people more like myself. Also, communication gets easier - much simpler to explain 1 day or one week of work than 1 month. Even if at times people like me must find creative ways to say "not much happened this week" when you know that the whole work allotted for the following three months will probably happen in one intense week, though you have no idea when the stars will align for that week to happen, and you have to keep pushing rocks with little outside visible progress until the magic happens :)

reply

▲ jokoon 52 minutes ago [-]

Maybe tell them that it can be hurtful, even when said with humor, or tell them it's not really funny.

If they are that much overconfident, just remind them of what they did wrong to make them realize they are not so perfect.

Also just try to tell them without being judgemental. Try to use the "maybe" word or "I might be wrong but", try to make the person doubt a little so that he/she can take a step back.

You can also try to joke about that person's overconfidence.

reply

▲ bitL 32 minutes ago [-]

If you are managing them, give them a solvable but challenging task. When they succeed, remove them from your mediocre individual pool. When they fail, repeat once. When they fail again, you have 2 examples in your favor when arguing with them. Use wisely.

reply

▲ rasengan 12 minutes ago [-]

The age-old adage:

1 delete Facebook 2 hit the gym 3 ????. 4 profit.

Who cares what others do. Focus on what you do.

People still think I don't know how to code for example lol.

I don't give a flying f. :)

reply

▲ Dowwie 1 hour ago [-]

When you work as a team, being right is important but so is getting along with others. Try to turn your fury and intolerance into a constructive experience by developing an important skill of diplomacy.

reply

▲ teekert 1 hour ago [-]

Imho the entire problem is -and should be- yours. If you feel that such people take jobs/fame/complements away from you, you should work on your expression of confidence. Because logically, these what you call "over confident" people get stuff done and get praise (or you wouldn't be jealous of them!) Yes, you are jealous of the success which you think is undeserved. But that is an opinion. Nobody needs a smart person that never opens their mouth at the right time or that doesn't offer their services or is unclear about what they can do.

You are obviously an introvert, so this will be hard for you, at first. But you are going to have to grow a pair and either offer your skills to people looking for them and prove you are better than the other person or learn to not feel annoyed by it. As you say, you ignore the situation and you focus on your work, ask yourself: Why? What will this behavior bring you? How could you alter that behavior to feel less frustration in such situations?

You want change. You are going to have to deeply realize that the only factor you can change in this world, is yourself. Change your behaviour and you change the status quo. Keep being frustrated and you end up with the status quo: frustration... until it breaks you.

Start by seeing (and naming, writing down even!) the merits of the behaviors that you seem to hate so much. It is also (mainly?) your metal connection between this behavior and the value you give it (you call it negative, it is not negative, it is nothing but a behaviour). You are going to have to unravel this connection before you can start to apply it yourself (and receive the merits that come with the behaviour). This takes time and requires energy and constant awareness and honest reflection.

What works for me is mantras. Short things I tell myself before entering a situation. For me it's things like: "Everybody here makes money, I'm not here for fun, be clear on the fact that you are going to want your hours paid if this negotiation turns into a set of tasks that you can pick up." Because I feel like the things I do are not worth a lot of money because I convince myself they are easy. But they usually are not, I'm just good at them (and I have to tell myself that as it doesn't come naturally to me.) And man, it took me 35 years to learn this ;). Don't underestimate these processes.

Yes you are going to have to realize the subtle art of not giving a F (which -if you read the book- translates to giving a F* about only the right/useful things). I think that book is very valuable to people like you and me.

reply

▲ dhoulb 1 hour ago [-]

There may be a place for those people — i.e. where a fast confident decision is actually better than a thoroughly discussed 'correct' decision.

Those people, in my experience, are usually pretty comfortable taking big risks (on their spoty information), which can be useful.

But if you're the second kind of person, working with the first kind would be infuriating. So for long term happiness was your goal you'd probably want to work for organisations that encourage careful collaborative decision making.

Basically, if you've recognised in yourself that you don't like these people, avoid them (and places they'd be drawn to).

I can't think of any way you could 'bring them down to size', etc, that wouldn't just bring more pain.

reply

▲ nnq 1 hour ago [-]

> I can't think of any way you could 'bring them down to size', etc, that wouldn't just bring more pain.

That's horrible advice. OP should be encouraged to be on the offensive regardless of position. Fighting for what you believe is true is the good fight, and it's ok to even fight it with more subversive/underground tactics if you're not the extroverted type. And 'more pain' can be a good thing regardless who experiences it. Just remember to fight back harder if things turn against you, and keep fighting until something/someone breaks (and if it's you that breaks, that's ok too, it means you needed the breaking and re-building). Pain helps people and organizations grow healthy.

It's the person who's leading the discussion and asking people about their skills who should adequately select for people either 'fast and confident' or 'deep and thorough' or 'collaborative and thorough'.

Also "careful collaborative decision making"... you can have "careful decision making" or "collaborative decision making" as very very separate kinds of doing things. One is the introvert loading up ideas and facts into his/her mind and letting them brew for a while until a solution is ready to be distilled and shared. The other is a group of amiable people thoroughly talking through the possibilities. If you prefer the former process, you might make better team with "fast and confident" people by completing their "lack of depth", than with the "never ending chatter" of a team of amiable group-thinkers.

reply

▲ EZ-E 2 hours ago [-]

In which context ? In personal life I would simply avoid them.

In any case trying to confront them and get them to "change" is bound to lead to disastrous results.

Just focus on yourself unless it personally affect you.

reply

▲ northey 24 minutes ago [-]

"Hell is other people"

reply

▲ throwaway32 2 hours ago [-]

> I also anticipate that I'll be told the only way is for me to be more vocally confident in myself

If you know better you should be more vocally confident in yourself.

The world is full of people who bullshit. You should not hide from it, and you should not deny it.

>the same individuals tend to put down others who are more humble/less confident in their skills, directly or subtly.

They also need to learn that the world is full of these kind of people. If you want't to help build their confidence , you can explain how the 'master' is overestimating his/her skills.

reply

▲ singularity2001 24 minutes ago [-]

Fire them

reply

▲ slamdance 2 hours ago [-]

Remember, we're ALL learning all the time, always progressing in knowledge and ability. Or at least we SHOULD be.

So lets take something simple. Tying your shoelaces. When a 5 year old does it while singing the bunny song, they feel they have it down pat. SO when a 3 year old sees it, they must be true, until they see the NBA ballers do it without missing a step or 3 seconds off the shoes.

The point is that being a "master" actually depends on the viewpoint of the person(s) they're interacting with. In this case, you or the other person feel they are better, being bringing down. IMO, the best way to handle these situations is to humbly remind everyone that we're all still learning. There is always someone feller out there, there is always a better or more efficient way to do things. Correcting someone while teaching them (and without insults) is optimal (especially if you're not the expert who thought you were, either). Doing it this way brings both the bragadocios and the meek to the same plane and does it without bruising egos. It works even better when these two personalities are on the same team - But this is just my experience.

reply

▲ Insanity 1 hour ago [-]

+1. That seems to be my general way of thinking as well. When you are going to work in a team, it's best to leave your ego at the door and realise that we all suck at something.

What does the NBA ballers thing refer to? They tie their shoelaces whilst walking? Is that actually a thing? (I'm European and Basketball is not as big here, I've never actually watched a game.)

reply

▲ gadders 2 hours ago [-]

Point them to this page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunning%E2%80%93Kruger_effect

:-)

reply

▲ It's nnq 1 hour ago [-]

It's easy if you're the one putting forward the task for which mastery of X is needed: (1) add clear bad consequences for failure; make it sure that the job is "so easy" for "someone master at X"; make it obvious that failing can only occur through their fault; add that "this is an expected task" and its bad execution could threaten the future of all; hint at ways of future public shaming in case of failure, preferably in a humorous way ;), (2) add an anticipated performance quotation "someone knowing X should be able to do it in N days easily" and (3) add some VERY desirable reward for task completion, that includes social status increases, but it's also conditioned on a performance metric like time/budget spent, not just "task completion".

The above will discourage anyone faking competence. The high reward that includes peer recognition will attract the truly competent ones.

Also it may help if you try to understand the problem better. Try and figure out what are the motives of the persons over-selling themselves.

There are on one side desperate extroverts who really need/want a job/project that requires them to have mastery of X, or they really want the client for whose projects mastery of X is required. So they play the "fake it till you make it". Of course, this is the optimistic perspective, some "just fake it", some become locked in ever making it because they've faked it. I'm an introvert but I've played this game once myself - never again! (The insane amount of work that I had to do while also learning something I claimed to know, in a "jump straight in" way that slowed my learning paradoxically because I did not have the time to sit and learn the fundamentals was horrible and nerve wrecking.) -- There's nothing to do about these people than avoid them, they'll learn their lesson and move on!

Then there are the "chronic deceivers". They cannot be dishonest in one aspect alone. -- So deal with them just prove to the others... that they are untrustworthy. You can toy them into saying contradictory things if you're clever and have the time to waste. Or maybe ask them for help on something in front of other people in a way that if they say "no" they are either _assholes_ or they don't really have knowledge of X - both outcomes helpful.

Then the ones that also falsely believe themselves to have mastery of something. -- Just make it obvious to others that they are clueless and stupid in general.

reply