



A neon piece by Bruce Nauman, which shows him experimenting with modern materials and art forms, despite their limitations

What Connects Intellectual Humility, a Jazz Icon, and Unbiased Products Together?

The answer, as I see it, is an appreciation for limitations.

In other words, understanding the restraints of knowledge, talent and data can be a facilitator for greater personal development, musical novelty, and innovative product design.

The hard truth about a soft skill

Psychologists define [Intellectual Humility](#) as “(a) having an accurate view of one’s intellectual strengths and limitations and (b) the ability to negotiate ideas in a fair and inoffensive manner”. Other researchers describe [this concept](#) as not “using one’s knowledge or expertise as an advantage over others”(essentially, you’re not what the English call a “clever clogs” — or smarty pants). The benefits are noteworthy: to be intellectually humble is to [become a better learner](#), [have a wisdom boost](#) and [a potential job at Google](#).

Great things come in small (vocal) packages

Billie Holiday’s voice is bar none one of the most remarkable in jazz history. Described as

having a [contralto](#) vocal style, Holiday's [finite range](#) was strained by years of alcohol, drug, and domestic abuse. That said, what blossomed from that [small voice](#) was a [slow and rough quality](#) that revolutionized jazz standards (which at the time were often upbeat and light). In working around her “vocal shortcomings”, Lady Day left behind a [defining](#) and [influential](#) legacy.

Information is not complete knowledge

In designing better products, Andrew Chen — Rider Growth Team Lead at Uber — advocates for entrepreneurs to be [“data-informed” \(and not “data-driven”\)](#) which means *“you acknowledge the fact that you only have a small subset of the information that you need to build a successful product”*. The difference, as I understand it, is that being data-informed takes a more holistic (rather than a myopic) view of metrics which is inherently limited, or as Chen puts it, *“systematically biased: a reflection of the product strategy you have in place”*.

Dogmatism reinforces divisiveness

The allegory of [the blind men and an elephant](#) is a warning against intellectual orthodoxy. As the parable goes, a couple of blind guys who have no idea of what an elephant is, come in contact with the said creature. Each man feels a different part of the same animal (the side, tusk, tail, legs, etc.) and then vehemently disagree with their assessment of the mammal.

Restraining ourselves from the natural inclination to be gung-ho about the knowledge we have on any subject matter, opens us up to new ideas, aids in the discernment of different perspectives, and hopefully, make us a reservoir of reason in this contentious climate.

A path less traveled

My overall point is that recognizing limitation, in all of its permutation, is a valuable muscle worth exercising.

Adopting this mantra (i.e. whatever you know about a person, place or product is just one piece of a larger — conceptual, ideological and/or political — puzzle) is no easy feat — it requires a steady diet of humble pie. But, it can be done.

If you remember nothing at all, remember this: nothing should be considered the be-all and end-all. You'll be richer for it!