

Encountering sloppy hallway thinking

At a recent Precision Q+A workshop, a participant asked how to respond to inaccurate comments made in passing—what we call “sloppy hallway thinking.” Imagine the Director of Human Resources encountering an employee in the company kitchen, and the employee remarks: “Everybody’s leaving.” For the Director, not responding to this comment is risky, because it may leave the employee with an inaccurate picture. But responding with precise questions about data is also problematic. When she encounters sloppy hallway thinking, what’s a truly masterful questioner to do?

The same kind of dilemma as that facing the Director of Human Resources arose for another client of ours, who told us a story about responding to sloppy hallway thinking about safety. She is the compliance officer for her firm, and she began to overhear comments like: “This is an unsafe place to work.” As someone who looked at a lot of safety data, she believed that these statements were untrue. But, as a savvy executive, she also knew that significant safety risks could lurk in unknown spots. Hallway thinking, even if sloppy, could help her see hidden risks before they became major problems. She didn’t want to close off the discussion with her response, but she also didn’t want to leave the employees with the impression that the company was unsafe.

Especially difficult to manage are the sloppy hallway thinking moments when someone presents a hasty generalization on the spot. A hasty generalization is a large-scale conclusion generated from a small amount of data. We might also refer to this as the “N of 1” problem. We tend to draw conclusions about what is happening that are based on our limited experience. Recall the times you’ve said something to yourself like: “New Yorkers are so rude,” [when you’ve simply encountered one rude person who may or may not even be a native of New York.](#)

Because these generalizations from small data surround us all the time, engaging them with precision feels like a double bind. For the compliance officer, if she pushed against a comment like: “This is an unsafe place to work” with a Basic Critical Question (BCQ) such as: “How many specific unsafe conditions have you seen?” she might come across as defensive or aggressive. If she didn’t respond at all, however, she might inadvertently spread the sloppy thinking around, creating an inaccurate picture of an important aspect of her company.

QUESTIONS THAT OPEN UP THE THINKING

Using questions to analyze hallway thinking is tricky, in part because these conversations are more informal than most meetings. Beginning a conversation about sloppy hallway thinking calls for questions that draw out the other person and open up the thinking. These often take

the form of a very general BCQ, such as: “Really, what makes you say that?” or a question of clarification such as: “Really, what do you mean?” These general forms of the BCQ or clarification open up the thinking for further discussion.

The compliance officer who replies to the hallway comment: “This is an unsafe place to work” with a gentle: “Really? Tell me more about why you think so,” opens up the sloppy hallway thinking in ways that may allow her to probe for credibility. She can gently assess the accuracy of the claim, without putting the speaker on the defensive. She hasn’t let the sloppy hallway thinking pass by unremarked. Likewise, she hasn’t lost the opportunity to understand whether or not the issue is as dire as the statement indicates.

WHY PAY ATTENTION TO SLOPPY HALLWAY THINKING?

Most people who receive training in statistics come to understand that it is best not to trust hasty generalizations or conclusions based on an N of 1. But people who understand outliers and the hidden dimensions of organizational dynamics can see that hallway thinking is an opportunity to get under the surface of what is happening and spot potential problems while they are small.

Instead of dismissing sloppy hallway thinking as irrelevant, we ask ourselves: what if a deeper issue lurks beneath the claim? The generalization could be a signal pointing to other issues at play in the organization. ([Click here](#) for a discussion of the power of paying attention to small signals in the midst of complexity). It is unusual for most of us to have hard data right at hand when we think about issues like safety and turnover. Instead, we create narratives to explain what is happening. These stories may be based on small sample sizes, but they can still have great importance.

When we encounter hallway thinking, we want to listen and respond with questions that draw out the story that is developing in the speaker’s mind. This combination of careful listening and questioning can accomplish two

things: it might improve our understanding of the problem, and it may make the other person feel better about the situation.

People familiar with Precision Q+A will find help developing questions that open up the thinking by looking at different categories of questions. Some of the useful precise questions that may help deepen a discussion of sloppy hallway thinking include the following types:

- Clarifying Slippery Terms: “Is it possible that your concern over our safety is actually a concern about unclear policies, or is it more a concern about incomplete execution of existing policies?”
- Category Assumptions: “It sounds like you’re upset that Vijay and Susan are leaving the company. What else is on your mind about this transition?”
- Driver/Inhibitor: “What circumstances do you think led to Lin’s injury? What steps would you like us to take to prevent future incidents?”

- Effect: “What do you think is the impact on the morale of those of us who are not leaving the company?”
- Action: “Are there specific concerns you’d like me to bring to the next Safety Committee meeting?”

THE DANGERS OF SLOPPY HALLWAY THINKING

Sloppy hallway thinking is seductive. Just as gossip can fuel negativity, entertaining our restless minds and distracting us from our work, hasty generalizations can fuel toxic stories. “Everyone’s leaving” creates a lot of space for speculation and disdain; “our turnover rate has stayed within one standard deviation of our industry’s mean for the last five years” drains away the empty narrative. Work is social, and we are social creatures, so we have to challenge ourselves to resist turning complex issues into fodder for oversimplified discussion. Precision Q+A helps us resist the lure of oversimplified stories and overgeneralized claims. We choose to value the complexity instead.

This Month’s Practice

Encountering sloppy hallway thinking can provide us with rich opportunities to use both our analytical and social intelligence. We want to understand the reasoning behind the claims we are hearing in the hallway, and we want our colleagues to feel someone is listening to their concerns. Use questions to open up the thinking, even as you challenge the oversimplification.

PRACTICE 1

For one week, listen for sloppy hallway thinking around you. Make a list of the sloppy hallway thinking you hear. Watch especially for generalizations from small samples, or the “N of 1” problem.

Make sure to include your own statements and thoughts on your list. Each time you write down an instance of sloppy hallway thinking, brainstorm questions that might have helped open up the thinking.

PRACTICE 2

After observing sloppy hallway thinking for a week, make an intention to act the next time you encounter it. Deliberately choose an occasion to discuss a sloppy hallway statement. Use the kinds of questions you have been brainstorming to open up the thinking. In order to soften the impact, try starting with general questions, especially BCQs or clarification questions. Work toward more precise questions with careful listening and responding to the other person’s concerns.

Don’t be afraid to ask about the possibility that the issue has been oversimplified. While you are asking questions, maintain your awareness that the sloppy hallway thinking may be hinting at deeper issues that are worth your attention.

We’re here to help. If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at QuestionMaster@vervago.com.

You may also join our LinkedIn group for Precision Q+A alumni by visiting us here at LinkedIn.