

Do brilliant categories create brilliant thinking?

Cognitive psychology teaches us that to think is to categorize. We can often trace the origin of flawed thinking, or brilliant thinking, to flawed or brilliant categorization. In Precision Q+A terms, categories are a type of assumption—we assume that it is legitimate to group certain things together and treat them as a highly-unified set. When we hear people, products, or services being clustered together in our work, however, it is usually worth our time to ask some categorization questions.

CATEGORY ASSUMPTIONS AT WORK

You are sitting in a product development meeting and you hear this assertion:

The key requirement for new products in the low-end market is easy user comprehension.

Would you agree?

Before you jump on the bandwagon, you might want to ask about at least two category assumptions, each of which may contain some risk:

- Category Assumption 1: It's valid to group prospective low-end users into one category.

What if there are at least two completely different types of users at the low end? One type might be tech-savvy and highly price sensitive, while another type might be tech-challenged but not so price sensitive. Or is it reasonable to describe a third type of user as well? Questions about categories help you examine your assumptions about these clusters of people carefully.

- Category Assumption 2: The low end is a useful way to cluster the market.

Perhaps it would be more useful to identify distinct clusters of buying activity at a variety of price points, instead of assuming the “low-end” is part of a continuum? Perhaps the low end and the middle market are too difficult to differentiate, and you would be better served by identifying various demographic groups and their buying activity instead of analyzing a low-end market segment? Questions about categories help you examine your assumptions about complex clusters of activity without oversimplifying.

PROBLEM SOLVING WITH CATEGORY QUESTIONS

Obviously the use of categories is often valid, as in: “horses run faster than dogs.” Notice that this category statement is not saying that every horse runs faster than every dog. The category assumption only goes so far as

to propose that most horses (or typical horses) run faster than most dogs (or typical dogs). A handful of exceptions does not destroy the validity or usefulness of a category.

If you listen carefully, you will often hear your colleagues begin a problem-solving session by asking categorization questions: “Is it a hardware problem or a software problem?” “Is this a finance issue or an accounting issue?” “Is this a flaw in our research or a flaw in our execution?” Because they help us group and cluster issues, categorization assumptions often provide a key to problem solving. Getting the right kind of solution requires matching it with the right kind of problem.

The difficulty lies in our inability to come up with new categorizations of issues and challenges that are dynamic and changing. Brilliant categorization of issues sheds new light on stale thinking and analysis. New categories often help people come up with new solutions. For example, you may face neither a hardware nor a software problem, but instead a power supply problem!

INDICATORS OF CATEGORY ASSUMPTIONS

Because categories are, like all assumptions, buried so deeply in our thinking, bringing them to the surface can be a challenge. One basic technique for seeing category assumptions involves becoming more sensitive to plural nouns that appear to be central to the logic of an argument. Remember those users in the low-end market? Once you have found a category by identifying the plural noun at its heart, you can break it down by asking different versions of the question “which type?” For example:

- Which types of users characterize our low-end market?
- In the low-end market, which types of users should be our primary target?

Categorization assumptions also masquerade behind what linguists call “species terms,” which are singular terms that actually refer to a whole species of things. In our horses and dogs example, imagine a biology

professor giving a lecture something like this: “the horse runs faster than the dog.” Not referring to a single horse or a single dog, the biology professor is using species terms to claim that horses as a category (or species) run faster than dogs as a category (or species).

Once you go on the lookout for them, you will begin to see common “species terms” in organizations. “The first-time buyer,” is oft invoked as a species, as is “the typical investor.” Next time you hear a claim about “the customer” as a species, stop and ask: which types of customers?

This Month's Practice

Becoming quicker at spotting categorization assumptions involves listening closely for groupings. Pay attention to plural nouns—they show you groups. Listen for species terms—they show you a whole species of things that are clustered together. And finally, amplify the brilliance of your thinking by using categories to challenge your problem solving.

PRACTICE 1: LISTENING FOR PLURAL NOUNS AND SPECIES TERMS

At each meeting you attend in the next week, make a list of plural nouns you hear as part of the analysis. Also, listen carefully for “the buyer” or “the customer” treated as a species. Then, when appropriate, ask a question about the categories by using “which type?” If you hear: “The investors were definitely sending a message,” you might ask: “Which types of investors?”

PRACTICE 2: CATEGORIES AND PROBLEM SOLVING

To solve a problem, we often must categorize it correctly. At least once this month, when you are working on a problem, step back and ask if you have categorized it in the best way. Begin like this: “Is this truly a ____ problem? Would it be better to think of it as a ____ problem?” For example, you might ask: “Is this truly an organizational change issue? Would it be more effective to think of it as a communication challenge?” Notice how re-thinking

the category of the problem itself suggests different perspectives and potential solutions. Find a brilliant new solution by looking for a whole different category of problem.

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

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