

How to prevent the premature closing bias to distort analysis

When a big business meeting discusses a small proposal

Consider yourself to be a project leader in a business meeting, with some big shots being there with you. The next item on the meeting's agenda is your proposal for empowering your company's customers and employees with easy access to market data. Your proposal is a response to a clear executive question in a previous meeting. Now you and they reconvene, and they are curious to hear what you propose.

The data to be shared are already in the public domain. Hence, there are no concerns regarding confidentiality. In addition, your company owns the copyrights of the data so there are no legal issues either. Today the data are scattered and thus inconvenient to locate. Your solution will create a service that delivers convenience in data collection to your customers and employees.

Given that the investment is moderate, you have a solid business case. Much time will be saved that today is wasted in collection. Operational cost will also be modest. Governance is simple too. A staff department will get the responsibility to keep the system up to date. This department will also manage the service requests any future beneficiaries may have.

In summary, the objectives that implementing the system will deliver are:

- to share the data as and when they become available, so to be timely
- to share all the relevant data that we can find, so to be complete
- to check all data by a sort of quality assessor, so to be accurate

Normally, nobody objects a cost-effective, data-driven, advanced-technology-based solution to cut data overload and deliver need-to-know data to executives, employees and customers that need and work with it. As so often, however, there was a catch...

Recognizing a calamity in the offing but seeing no way to stop it

The proposal was delivered by a young female who is respected as a tech-savvy expert. Moreover, she is a gifted presenter. So, what can still go wrong? For derailing her good proposal, only one word was enough though. It simply happened, no matter how well the proposal had been prepared and no matter how much the decision-makers had initially had positive intentions.

The word was 'Twitter'. Once the bird entered the room, the window of opportunity to reach a decision closed. Our expert presenter proposed to have 'the system' being operated on Twitter. What happened?

The word Twitter unleashed all kind of silent assumptions in the audience. The fact that Twitter may have been a suitable tool to deliver the 'how' element of the proposal didn't matter anymore.

Twitter was by some – and here’s the catch - *only* perceived for what it is now notorious for: a source of brief and rarely nuanced political messages. Why would our company want to identify with the image of Twitter: we are nuanced, right? And: what does this staff department think: that they can send all kind of statements to the world?

As a participant in the meeting the moment the word Twitter was mentioned I knew no consensus would be possible anymore. Withdrawing the proposal and delaying the execution had become inevitable. Having studied decision-making before, I sort of recognized the script of what happened¹. We saw a typical pattern of biased thinking. A single word appears on stage. It means so many different things to different participants as to guarantee confusion. All the different participants upon hearing the word prematurely closed their minds, locked up in their own and exclusive prejudiced meaning of the trigger word.

The word Twitter caused them to already have an opinion, no matter what facts they would be confronted with. They needed no more facts, no more insights; they had already made up their minds. Solid opinions – and very different ones at that – suddenly populated our meeting room.

The presenter attempted to still position Twitter as the preferred technical solution for the realization of the system we all agreed we needed, but it was too late for rationality.

What to do to avoid the premature closing bias to affect your proposal?

There are no easy answers on how to prevent this sort of thing from happening. Different settings may require different approaches. Different people in different circumstances may react differently and show aptitude to control their biased thinking reflexes. Having said all this, there may be some ideas that may be generally helpful below.

Start with acknowledging that there are and always will be biases. Different participants that will join in a meeting will have different instant reactions to one and the same word and subsequently prematurely close their minds differently. The word Twitter provides an example that shows that what could well be a knowledge management tool by many participants was perceived as a one-liner, one-way communication instrument. Such differences exist. When time permits it is commendable to approach at least some of the participants to the upcoming meeting in advance to check what they think and what implicit criteria they have in mind to judge a proposal they will be facing. When in doing so you uncover some of the decision-makers’ *silent assumptions* your mission is already partly accomplished before the meeting.

Subsequently your presentation should clearly split the ‘what’ and the ‘how’. The ‘what’ should meet the requirements of your brief. The meeting should agree to the ‘what’ prior to moving to the ‘how’.

Finally, there is the 'how'. Now one of the questions is: what 'trigger words' to avoid? The only thing that matters regarding the 'how' is the solid evidence that the 'how' solution meets the 'what' requirements. The best project leaders that I know prefer to get a sharp definition and a clear approval of both the 'what' and the boundary conditions within which the 'how' should be realized. The rest of the 'how' they don't wish to discuss. They know the 'how' for themselves, otherwise they wouldn't have been project leader.

By focusing on the 'what' and avoiding executives to get involved in the 'how', you may keep biases like premature closing out. But don't put that on Twitter too early!

Note

- .1. Elgersma, E. (2017), The Strategic Analysis Cycle – Handbook, LID Publishing, London, p. 438.