Take the acorn test and challenge your assumptions

Science has developed powerful thinking tools now widely used in our society. While the scientific method seems obvious to us, and is taught to us at a young age, a technique like logic is not an inherently human characteristic — it is something we have learned.

By the time we reach adulthood, the processing part of our thinking is well developed. We use logic, deduction and induction often without thinking about it.

Let's say I offer you a hard, green apple. You take a bite of it. The apple is very sour. Then I offer you a second apple, once again hard and green. Again you find that the apple is sour. If I offered you a third hard green apple you will likely turn me down. You have used induction to create a rule you can use.

We have to be careful, however, when we create these types of rules. For example, I may observe a cyclist disobeying a traffic law — ignoring a red light. Then later I see a second, and maybe a third cyclist, do the same. By induction, I conclude that all cyclists are inconsiderate, irresponsible twits who ignore the rules of the road. If we create such a rule in science and technology, we keep on performing experiments to test the rule, logging statistics on our observations. Good scientists will look for data that proves an exception to the rule to find its limits.

Outside of science and technology, however, our human tendency is to do the opposite. Once we have established a belief such as the one about cyclists, we tend to notice evidence that supports our rule and ignore evidence that contradicts our rule. So if there are five cyclists waiting at a red light, we notice the one who jumps the light, reinforcing our belief about cyclists being inconsiderate and irresponsible. Yet this is not an accurate picture of reality.

If we draw conclusions using our rule, we are not thinking as effectively as we

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could. The problem is not with our logic; it is with the rule and its application. If all cyclists disobeyed traffic signals, our conclusions would be accurate.

Here's a simple tool that you can use in many situations as a check on your input processing. It's called the ACORN test, and it's a quick statistical analysis

The ACORN Test

Always	**100%**
Commonly	**80%**
Occasionally	**50%**
Rarely	**20%**
Never	**0%**

of your raw data. Use it to consciously process your input information and rules to ensure more accurate analysis of situations.

When you find yourself using the words "always" or "never", mentally run the situation through the ACORN test. If "always," is it truly 100 percent of the time? If "never," is it 0 percent? Maybe it is closer to "Commonly", "Occasionally", or "Rarely"? (These equate to percentages of 80 percent, 50 percent, and 20 percent.) The statistical percentages for the middle three are not that important; the point is to analyze the situation.

Let me give you an example. If you have a colleague who is "always" late, ask yourself if they are late 100 percent of the time? The answer is most likely not. It may turn out that when you consciously review your observations, you find that it is more accurate to say they are commonly late, around 80 percent of the time, or occasionally late — around 50 percent of the time.

Induction and the rules we create help us make sense of the world, however we must use them carefully. Use the ACORN technique to verify your data. Bring more of your processing into the conscious part of your brain. Then you're on your way to Thinking for Results.

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