



How to Aim for the Obvious and Find Unexpected Benefits

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(*through a partnership with KnowledgeAdvisors, a Chicago-based learning analytics firm).

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My first employer after graduate school was a major oil company in downtown Chicago. I was a statistical analyst in credit operations, responsible for studying data from the collections department. One of my first projects was to determine how the styles of the agents affected the collection rate from delinquent payers. Were the tough, high-pressure, threatening agents more successful than the sweet-talking, gentle and friendly ones?

Shortly after I concluded the study, I attended a cocktail party at the home of my husband's graduate school advisor. The advisor's wife, Edna, was a brilliant, tough, outspoken woman. She politely asked me about my new job and duties. I told her about the study and our findings. With the pride of finally having applied theoretical statistics to real-world examples, I revealed our discovery that the "nice" agents had greater collection rates than the "nasty" ones. Edna looked at me, rolled her eyeballs and said, "Peggy, come on now. Did you really have to spend all that effort to get such an obvious result?"

I stammered and quietly said, "I guess not." After a few awkward moments, I politely excused myself and hid amongst the other graduate students. That conversation has stuck with me until this day. Was my study all for naught because the findings were so self-evident?

Fast forward 30-plus years. I recently completed a major evaluation study for a large consumer products firm. The study evaluated the impact of coaching training on specific business results. We learned that more than half the participants could attribute concrete and significant business outcomes to their training. In addition, we also learned that participants whose managers consistently reinforced the new behaviors reported more significant business results than those with non-reinforcing managers.

My 30 year-old conversation came flooding back to me. Was this yet another eyeball-rolling moment? How do I present these findings to the client and not cause him to wonder why he had paid me to reveal something so obvious? I slept on the results and looked at the findings several times. I suddenly realized that both studies had merit and that perhaps the findings weren't as self-evident as they appeared.

I reflected on the credit collections example. Didn't the conventional wisdom suggest that tough, threatening agents collected more delinquent payments than their nice counterparts did? My study turned that "wisdom" on its head through a statistically sound analysis of credit collection behaviors. If I hadn't withered from Edna's comments, perhaps my colleagues and I could have revolutionized the credit collections industry. Edna's rolling eyeballs had blinded me to the value of my work.

As for the coaching example, we had suspected at the outset that participants whose managers reinforced the coaching skills were more likely to derive the greatest benefits from the training. However, this suspicion had never before been quantified. We now had data from a rigorous and defensible study that confirmed what we had believed all along. Moreover, we also learned that the "reinforced" group was 3-5 times more likely to deliver significant results than the "non-reinforced" group. This result, in and of itself, was highly valuable to my client.

Instead of eyeball-rolling, my client was squinting, deep in thought about the deployment of the training. He nodded when we recommended shifting from a pull approach (where interested employees sign up for the training) to a push process (where the skill-building cascades from the top). He smiled when we suggested the organization integrate the skills into its HR processes. And he was elated when we said, "Treat the training as a strategic enabler, not as a tactical blip on the training radar screen." Although the conclusion seemed self-evident, the client now had solid data for his data-driven senior leaders.

If you are embarking on an evaluation study, self-evident findings may be just what you are aiming for. These results, by definition, make sense. Because the findings are intuitively obvious, they can be very appealing to senior managers who aren't comfortable taking action solely based on gut feel. Sometimes, self-evident just needs a bit of evidence. And that's worth what the client pays for it.