

## Category Review - Asking Questions about Effects

Do you ever catch yourself asking—or answering—a question like this:

The marketing manager asks: “How will moving into the high-end market impact us?”

The marketing lead answers: “We have forecasts that show sales at triple our current rate.”

We hope not! But the reality is that, when asking questions about effects, most of us are like this manager and lead: we speak as if the future can be reduced to a single outcome. This can be a dangerous simplification. Precision Questioning (PQ) invites us to enter a more complex world, where we take into account a range of cases and time spans.

The following 3x3 matrix is an effective tool for strengthening our ability to ask precise questions about effects. It forces us to become conscious of two things: our degree of optimism and our time frame.

	Best Case	Worst Case	Most Likely
Short Term			
Medium Term			
Long Term			

Here's how it works. When we are analyzing a recommendation, the matrix keeps asking us: what cell are you in? Are there other cells you need to consider? In PQ terms the question that the marketing lead is answering seems to be something like this: “If we move into the high-end market, what do you forecast as the best case scenario for sales, in the short term?” Is that what the manager intended to ask? Is it the only scenario the manager cares about? Probably not, but as we say in PQ: when you ask an imprecise question, you will receive an imprecise answer.

This PQ effects matrix is a powerful antidote to our natural human tendency to think about the future as if it were fixed and to think about effects as if they were singular. When an effects question is worded precisely—as in “Short term, what's the best case for revenue?”—everyone involved begins to see that there is a range of pathways leading into the future. We realize that each cell in the matrix has a story to tell. When cells remain empty, we need to slow down and ask ourselves: is our analysis of the data complete? Can we trust our method of making projections? Is our risk analysis accurate? The matrix helps us check all three things.

Besides helping us make better decisions, the nine questions in the matrix sensitize us to potential problems down the road. And they also can guide us as we prepare presentations for senior management, presentations that are expected to be objective and thoughtful.

Keep the effects matrix in the back of your mind and before long questions like these will be second nature: Is that the best case scenario? What is the worst case? Given our data, what do you predict is most likely to happen in the short term? How will that be different over the long term? That's PQ.

### **Exercise**

1. In your current work, identify a decision you are about to make, an idea you are about to implement, or an ongoing project that needs review.
2. Draw a 3x3 effects matrix on a piece of paper or create a 3x3 table on your computer.
3. Review your decision, idea, or project by looking at it from the vantage point of each cell in the matrix.
4. As you fill in the cells one at a time, identify key unknowns. Decide which unknowns need to be acted upon.
5. Before making your final decision, review the matrix as a whole and then check three things: Is our analysis of the data complete? Can we trust our method of making projections? Is our risk analysis accurate?