

A Thousand Words Doesn't Always Tell the Whole Story

You've heard it said, "A picture is worth a thousand words." While there is some truth to that, a picture or even a thousand words doesn't always tell the whole story. Stories need context—a description of the situation in which something happens. Everything we do in life is informed by context. So, why don't we use context very well in business?

I believe too often we are passive consumers of data. Our organizations produce hundreds of reports. We share them, either by sending them out to a specified group or placing them on a shared server. With unlimited information at our fingertips, are we stopping to absorb and truly understand what the data is telling us? And if so, how often do we know the context behind our data?

Within every analysis and report is a story. Neither is complete without context. It's what puts the real power into deriving insight. As an example, if your report shows widget sales are down this month, what is the driver behind this change. Perhaps the product is falling out of favor, or there was an inventory outage, or maybe sales always slow this time of year. What if sales slowed because customers could not get companion components sold by another company? Do you spend the time to dig deeper and challenge your analyst for context?

Finding and sharing context to answer these questions requires critical thinking skills. I recently watched a TED Talk with Susan Etlinger from IBM. During her talk, [What Do We Do With All This Big Data?](#) she explains why, as we receive more and more data, we all need to deepen our critical thinking skills. She recognizes it's hard but necessary to move beyond counting things to really understanding them. I agree.

I love this definition from criticalthinking.org: *Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.* It's perfect.

As leaders, we need to empower our teams with the tools and technologies they need to be critical thinkers. At a minimum, we need to provide them with access to a broad variety of data sources so they can combine them as needed to discover the insights.

We also need to provide the tools they need to explore the data in every possible way. This not only includes query tools for reporting, but advanced analytical tools that provide the ability to do deeper data mining, forecast future events and behaviors, and conduct what-if analyses.

With data and tools in hand, we can now make context and critical thinking a part of our corporate culture—an expectation of every team member. Only then can we hold the organization responsible to dig deep to understand the full story our data is telling us.