



## Generalizations Are Great!

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Millions of people have been conditioned to perceive generalizations negatively. People commonly say in a dismissive tone, “oh, that is just a generalization”. Our politically correct environment has certainly contributed to this ill-informed idea; which limits our ability to learn and understand new situations. It also makes our thinking conventional and predictable. Given the fact that we live in a global environment characterized by relentless change, we need to become unconventional thinkers. Generalizations are a major component of the unconventional thinking needed to innovate.

Human behavior is not an exact science. It’s not governed by the laws of physics, which apply 100% in the entire universe. Individuals vary a lot and groups of people vary within and among countries, regions, companies, etc. Therefore, you cannot say much about people that applies 100% of the time; there are no laws of human behavior.

We are left with generalizations (theories, assumptions, concepts, stereotypes, etc.) to explain human behavior. Our lives are based on a myriad of generalizations and assumptions. We all have generalizations about everyone we know; this person is funny, he is smart, they are too serious, etc. However, sometimes they surprise us and do unexpected things.

Despite the fact that these generalizations and assumptions don’t always work, it’s still entirely reasonable to use them. As long as they work most of the time (51% >), they are valid generalizations. We could not make the most basic decisions without them. College students assume they will get a job when they graduate, but many don’t. When the light turns green, you can cross the street; but if a truck runs a red light, you shouldn’t.

Finding one case where a generalization doesn’t work doesn’t invalidate it! It’s not supposed to explain 100% of the time. There are no generalizations that apply to all people or things; that is why they are called generalizations! In fact, the only way to disprove a generalization is to demonstrate it doesn’t work most (51% >) of the time.

To use generalizations intelligently, they have to be applied to only certain contexts and/or with an understanding of their limitations. This is what makes smart people smart. If we learn how to use a PC, we can generalize what we know to use an Apple laptop. The fact that they are different does not prevent us from using old knowledge when encountering something new. We do this everyday without thinking about it when dealing with new people and situations. The ability to think unconventionally is

enhanced by the use of generalizations. Applying old information and ideas in new ways creates some of the best innovations.

For example, Cirque du Soleil did not invent the basic elements of its product, it recombined existing ideas into an innovative entertainment experience worth billions. Part of its ability to do this was generalizing the fact that many people (not everyone) like theatrics, music, stunts, etc. Therefore, use generalizations and assumptions to leverage your old knowledge into new innovative ideas.

### How to Use Generalizations

- Do not use generalizations as if they were laws of physics. They are not supposed to apply 100% of the time. Find their limitations and use them intelligently.
- When generalizations don't work, develop new explanations for what you see.
- Think of ways you can build positive customer generalizations about your brand.
- Find generalizations that you want to strengthen (e.g., Toyota quality) and others that should be weakened and proven invalid with appropriate changes (e.g., Walmart low wages).
- Try to apply what you learned in one situation to another one. If it works, you have generalized and saved time figuring out a new solution.
- Share what you have learned with others so they can benefit from your lessons.

Generalizations can save you time, money and effort when encountering new situations. They can also help you innovate. However, use them with care and attention to differences in the context to which they are applied. Even when generalizations don't work, they direct one to learning and finding creative solutions.

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