



# Getting deeper into the why through eliciting desired thinking

| By Marta Villanueva

## snapshot

The author explores using the Thinking Skills Model as a qualitative research framework.

**A**s market researchers, our goal is to uncover the insights beneath the opinions and stories. However, in our efforts to illuminate the what and why, we often pay less attention to the how. Understanding how consumers think can lead to even more powerful insights and discoveries.

The more we know about different types of thinking, the better we can encourage participants to engage in relatively uninhibited expressions of experiences and emotions to provide a better springboard for deeper sharing and theme identification. By leveraging creative thinking, we can uncover the latent emotions and motivations behind thoughts and behaviors.

Creative thinking leaders Puccio, Mance and Murdock in *Creative Leadership*<sup>1</sup> said it best: “Creativity ... is a result of both thinking and emotion; it is a matter of both the head and heart.”

### The Thinking Skills Model

How do we elicit desired thinking from respondents in a qualitative setting? I believe that our most powerful tool for guiding these explorations is a concise framework based on over 50 years of research, the Thinking Skills Model. When we tie this proven framework to our tools, processes and methodologies, we are able to take

our insights to the next level.

This framework is particularly suited to qualitative research. Learning the framework will put you in control of the thinking you want to elicit from respondents, making your discussion richer, deeper and focused. Within this framework, we can use our tools and skillfully craft strategies.

Qualitative becomes even more strategic when grounded in research and proven thinking, and through the application of the three model categories/phases (Figure 1): clarification of challenges and goals; transformation into new views and possibilities; and implementation of emergent concepts.

The framework is both structured and flexible to accommodate cycling through the different stages. It is structured, because it has stages and tools for each stage. It is flexible, because you can go in and out of the different stages as needed (it is not a linear process). In each of these categories, different tools provide keys to eliciting greater insight.

### Diagnostic thinking

The center of this framework is an executive function: diagnostic thinking. As part of the qualitative process, or prior to basic project engagement, it is critical to identify the key components of the situation, along with how clients or their customers understand them. Diagnostic thinking provides an overview by organizing large volumes of data.



[quirks.com/articles/2016/20160706.aspx](http://quirks.com/articles/2016/20160706.aspx)

Just like understanding the situation and background to determine research study objectives before recommending a methodology, diagnostic thinking places focus on reviewing data, facts or findings that define the current situation. It lets respondents and/or clients consider the cause-and-effect relationships between the problem and possible solutions.

Diagnostic thinking tools address questions such as: What is the nature of the problem? What might be the causes of this problem? What are the patterns or themes to the situation? What might be stopping forward movement?

Using tools within this mind-set empowers respondents to identify patterns, allowing us to see and organize the big picture, helping you decide on the next steps.

### Thinking skill objective 1: clarification to deepen understanding

Clarifying the problem, either prior to beginning a project or as part of the process, is useful to understanding the ultimate goal. Clarification may even be the entire focus of the qualitative project.

Clarification uses two types of thinking. When a client requires clarification research, visionary thinking is needed to help respondents provide rich exploratory responses and stretch their imagination from the existing situation to their desired future state.

Once vivid images of the desired outcomes are articulated, we can then switch to strategic thinking, to help respondents articulate the unmet needs that must be addressed on the journey to a "better" experience.

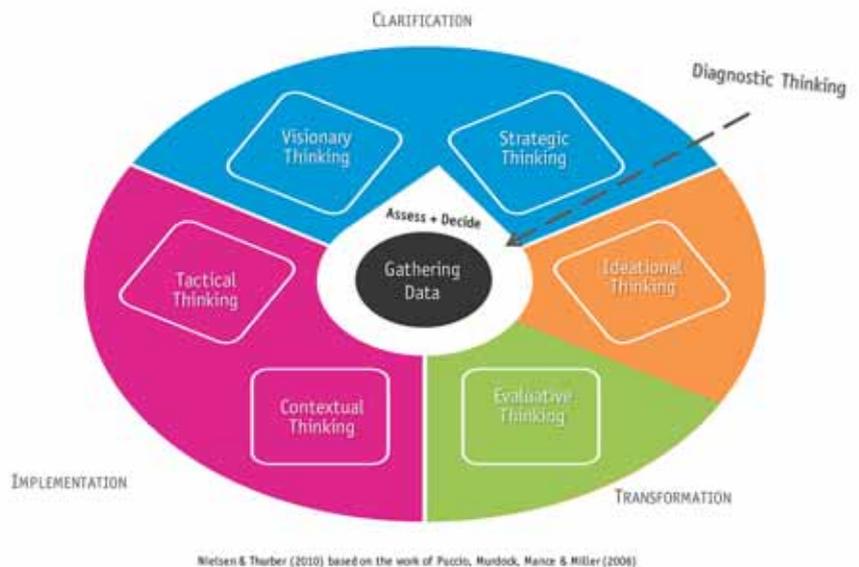
The idea is to understand barriers and begin to see ways to overcome them. Eliciting strategic thinking can also help identify what is required to motivate change.

### Thinking skill objective 2: transformation from ideas to solutions

In the transformation phase, we want to elicit ideational thinking to produce new and useful ideas, stretching the imagination and putting aside judgment to reach for many ideas. At this stage, the ideas may simply be rough in form or what I call "clues."

We then use evaluative tools and tech-

Figure 1



niques to structure and shape the ideas. For this, we need to elicit evaluative thinking, which promotes moving from ideas to workable solutions. Refining ideas can convert them into feasible solutions. Eliciting evaluative thinking can empower respondents to provide clear direction on stimuli or ideas.

It is important to recognize when your clients benefit from exploring in a quantity-focused, anything goes, list-generating style (ideational thinking), versus focusing in a consensus-building style (evaluative thinking).

### Thinking skill objective 3: implementation to activate solutions

Once customer needs have been clarified and concepts have been transformed, we move to the implementation phase. This phase uses contextual tools to understand reactions to potential action plan components.

Eliciting contextual thinking encourages respondents to explore bonds and barriers relevant to a product or concept in order to build understanding of the factors that could support or hinder success. Most importantly, eliciting contextual thinking can help provide clients with concrete feedback.

And finally, while in the implementation space, we need to elicit tactical thinking to plan the steps needed in the implementation of new strategies or concepts.

Eliciting tactical thinking empowers respondents to come up with specific

steps to activate a specific idea, product or plan. Tools that achieve this goal successfully drill down to how respondents conceive of each element or aspect, either currently or conceptually.

### Case study: packaged goods company

The following example shows how eliciting desired thinking can get us deeper into the why behind it all. A major packaged goods company wanted to find out how to increase consumption for its product. Putting on a diagnostic mind-set helped uncover that the optimal methodology would explore product usage deeply and in-the-moment. One of the objectives was identifying the visual identity that would most resonate on the packaging.

Target consumers were recruited to participate in a digital diary, leveraging their diagnostic thinking for one week, exploring both the in-store and in-home product experience. The digital diary also elicited strategic thinking in uncovering the product bonds and barriers. They were then invited to a one-on-one discussion at a facility.

The two thinking skills in the clarification category (visionary and strategic) benefit from one of my favorite tools: storyboarding. In the initial visionary phase, the storyboarding exercise helps to identify what respondents would like to have in place of what already is. Eliciting visionary thinking empowers respondents to bring the product wishes to life in a vivid way.

When we move to the strategic phase, storyboarding helps close the gap to identify steps between the current and desired states. Regardless of whether we are using our imagination to stretch or delving into the specifics of how to make this a reality, this exercise invites us to use many tools of creative expression – crayons, markers, scissors, glue, magazines, picture cards or journaling, to name a few.

Respondents in this study were given the challenge of creating a story around making the once-in-awhile product their go-to product. In creating this story, respondents were asked to depict the emotions and to describe all the challenges they faced along the way. The hero(es) in this journey must overcome the challenges, rise to the occasion and bring us to the happy ending. After creating the story, the participants were asked to give it a snappy title that captured the essence of the storyline.

Using this rigorous structure to spark imagination and adding visuals, a number of engaging metaphors emerged.

Being purposeful in eliciting the desired thinking led to great insight into the existing situation. It resulted in ways to overcome the existing barriers to growth, giving the brand critical insight into winning communication messaging and visual identify. Without eliciting desired thinking, it would have been difficult to get focused, rich and below-the-surface responses, delving more deeply into uncovering the why behind the consumers' thoughts through leveraging the how.

### Exercise the control

Placing client goals into the Thinking Skills Model enables you to design as well as select the optimal tools to manage thinking and exercise the control needed to achieve project success. Based on project need, you may

focus on just one of the seven areas or step directly through clarification, implementation and transformation, exploring and formulating throughout each of these phases.

Using the concepts in the Thinking Skills Model enables deeper understanding and provides actionable solutions. When eliciting desired thinking, respondents are empowered to provide focused and rich responses. They are given the structure to tap into cognitive thinking and they are provided the flexibility to bring it to life in their own special way. 📌

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### REFERENCES

Puccio, G., Mance, M., and Murdock, M. (2011). *Creative Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.