

Crossing the Desert: Observations to Insight

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It separates the strong from the weak. It humbles and tempers the traveler like cleansing fire. And it focuses those who survive in a way that they never imagined possible. Crossing the desert and living to tell the story is an important part of any hero's journey.

It is also a pivotal moment in your innovation journey.

You have gathered the data. There are piles of pdfs, interview notes, videos, and recordings. On the wall, you've distilled that data into an archipelago of Post-it observations. The big islands seem to want to tell you something; you strain to hear, but can't quite make it out.

That was the easy part. Now what does it all *mean*?

Good question. Observations are just that: observations. They are what you observe from the data, taking the form of things people say, do, think, and feel; answering the question of "what". Insights answer the question of "why" and don't come directly from the observations. This is where the team works together to overlay their knowledge of the world around the customer to synthesize a new picture of the customer and their motivations. A story or two might help illustrate.

In the classic jobs-to-be done example, a fast food chain observed that a lot of adults were buying shakes in the drive-thru lane every morning. This was a menu item marketed as an evening treat for children. Through asking very specific questions of these customers and observing the circumstances of their orders, the insight was that these were busy people, on their way to work, using the shake as a filling meal replacement that could be eaten with one hand, so that they could consume it without slowing their commute. Boom! A meal category is born.

In another case closer to home, a business partner and I saw that some employees were passionate about referring friends and family to the company, and did it regularly, while others did only sporadically, or not at all. Through a couple of dozen interviews, we were about to build a formula to predict a person's propensity to refer. It was a groundbreaking insight that helped to shed light on why different employees behave the way they do.

Great insights surprise you. They are a reflection of your success in shedding your own biases during the research. While not directly actionable, insights usually point to opportunity areas where you could deliver value to your customer. Actually driving that value, however, is rife with risk. Those risks take the form of behavioral assumptions that you can test. For example: an insight from the employee referral work referenced above was that a lack of open jobs or knowledge of those jobs was keeping employees from referring. So, the opportunity area was to give these people an avenue to get more of what they are passionate about—referring! But without specific jobs open, would employees still refer?

To be able to move forward, we have to know if employees will engage in the behavior of referring, to get the value of the great feeling they get when they help out a friend or family member. We could spend a lot of money and build a platform, or we could do something simpler. We sent a form to the group of passionate referrers that we had studied. The form gave the employee the opportunity to refer up to three people, tell us what kinds of jobs they'd be good at, and why that person is so great. The result of the experiment? Over 80% returned the form, and asked what the next step was. We showed that there was an untapped resource hidden in our midst.

Insights, like lenses, both narrow and sharpen our focus on areas of potential value and help us to understand the assumptions we should test. Great insights energize teams and demonstrate progress to stakeholders. And they lie just out of sight on the other side of the desert.