Article

Are Assumptions Making an Ass of You and Me? Less Ass, More Ask

Tracey Ezard

If we dig down under the layers of misunderstandings, there usually lies a big mess of assumptions and erroneous beliefs. Something challenging happens with a team member and we can assume the worst. We see the world with our own map, filling in any details we are not sure about by our own meaning and conclusions. This can be dangerous territory for leaders and teams. Lack of clarity and understanding can mean we barge straight into dialogue that is driven by sketchy information at best.

Basing our assumptions about a situation on little bites of information can lead to firmly held and potentially damaging beliefs. Sometimes we head into conversations simply to tell people what we believe and what they need to do about it. If we are on one track of belief and heading for one outcome, the conversation can turn for the worse very quickly. Instead of having an exploring conversation to get more insight and information, we storm in on our high horse with major assumptions and judgments driving the very one way conversation.

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Assuming we've got it right, that we know what people mean and that their perspective must be the same as ours are all recipe for disaster. In fact, it makes us look pretty 'ass' like if we launch into a tell and yell situation based on flimsy snippets of information that is driving our behaviour. We need to railroad those assumptions into a more useful track - one that explores the situation and displays a willingness to being open to influence. Then we can gain far better insights and understanding to base our beliefs on. We also set up a partnership conversation rather than hierarchy - creating a space of curiosity not judgement. Less ASS, More ASK.

Ask - Railroad Assumptions into Something More Productive

TIPS FOR TESTING ASSUMPTIONS

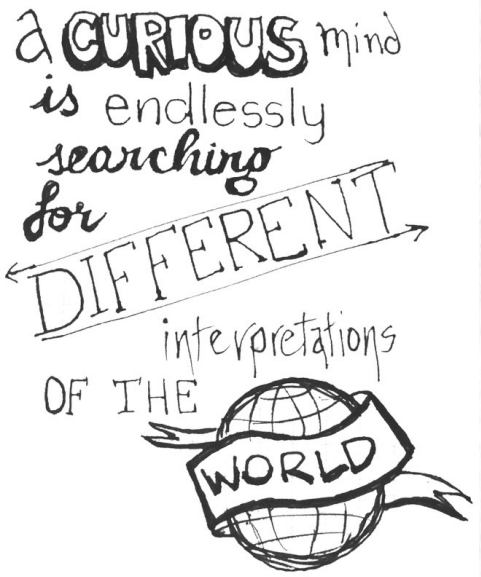
1. **STOP!**
Identify where assumptions and fixed beliefs might be having a negative impact on your work.
Knowing when a lack of information or data might be driving either a confirmation bias or simply a critical gap in understanding is the first step to being able to address the issue. Heightening awareness of beliefs that may be fixed before you have explored what lies beneath, or you've simply held that belief for a long time without question allows us to open up thinking.

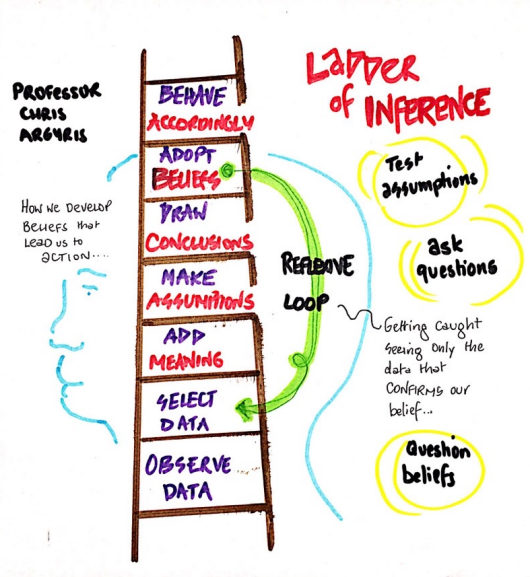
2. **THINK WELL!**
Assume positive intent first (i.e. mistake rather than malice; positive intent rather than harm; lack of clarity rather than withholding information) Most assumptions arise simply by not having the right conversations, rather than being driven by any Machiavellian agenda. It primes our conversations for trust if we test our assumptions rather than believing them to be truth.

3. **ASK! Simply asking clarifying questions that can lead to a deeper understanding.**
Authentic dialogue is always the best antidote for major assumptions or beliefs that are railroading progress or certainty. Be curious about finding out more about what people are thinking and feeling.

Questions for greater clarity:

1. I'm keen to make sure that we are on the same page. Can we discuss in greater detail what you are needing from this?
2. What specifically would this look like?
3. What do we all mean when we say .....?'
4. Is this what you mean?
5. Can you clarify for me what you mean by the term....?
6. What exactly would you expect from me/us in this process?
7. Do you mind if I test out my assumptions with you?





LADDER OF INFERENCE

Professor Chris Argyris (1923 - 2013) former Professor at Harvard Business School and Yale University identifies how humans come to their beliefs via assumptions in his model The Ladder of Inference.

The Ladder journey travels like this:

- I OBSERVE data (see hear feel)
- I SELECT data from what I observe
- I add MEANING (cultural, personal, cognitive)
- I make ASSUMPTIONS based on my meanings
- I draw CONCLUSIONS
- I adopt BELIEFS about the world
- I BEHAVE accordingly

This ladder often occurs in the blink of an eye. It is also something that drives our behaviour throughout the day. Imagine heading out to work in the morning. You step outside and observe the grey clouds, that it is June and so draw a very quick conclusion that grabbing your umbrella would be a wise decision - and behave accordingly.

Or a team member says to the team: 'We need to ensure we make this a high quality report'. No further clarification is made. A new team member goes about doing that and behaves accordingly, basing their work on their assumption of what high quality looks like to them. This team member is missing some vital data at the base of the ladder - what her/his new team identify as the criteria for high quality.

This ladder can also lead us to fixed beliefs that mean we can get caught in what Argyris calls 'The Reflexive Loop', which we mean we can ONLY seek the data that confirms our belief.

This is also known as 'confirmation bias' - the tendency to search for or interpret information in a way that confirms one's preconceptions.

Assumptions can lead to misguided beliefs. Thriving teams make sure they clarify assumptions to ensure consistency, understanding and certainty. To do that, they have authentic conversations.

What ASSumptions are railroading you?