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1

Challenge Assumptions

We make assumptions, and believe we are right about the assumptions; then we defend our assumptions and try to make someone else wrong.

Don Miguel Ruiz, Author

According to the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, an assumption is “something that you accept as true without question or proof.” It is amazing how many of us believe in our assumptions as absolute truth. I wonder how many of you reading this have ever stopped to think about assumptions or to deeply question and examine them and the effect they have on you, your work, and your life. Until I discovered coaching, I did not either.

Everyone has assumptions. Sometimes assumptions are good. When you are in your car stopped at a stop sign, you most likely assume the car or truck approaching you from behind is going to stop. You don't think about it. You don't brace yourself, waiting to be hit. You feel safe. You probably pay no attention to your rear view mirror and are thinking about other things. Or when you turn on the water faucet, you assume water will come out. Most of the time, that is exactly what happens, unless there's a plumbing problem or water line break. You probably formed this assumption based on a lifetime

of turning on the water faucet. You don't even have to think about what will happen when you need to fill your glass. Many of our assumptions are helpful to eliminate stress. They can keep us from having to think about every single thing, every time. Some things just run smoothly and do not require our attention. All good.

On the other hand, too many of our assumptions are negative, incorrect, and stagnating. During a coaching session, an aspiring principal told me she hoped to obtain a position in a nearby town. The economy was suffering and available positions were limited. The assumption she made was, "There are no jobs in this state." That thought (negative assumption) caused her to make very little effort to obtain the job, even though she truly wanted it. The negative assumption drove her behavior, which in this case was inaction.

Assumptions are thoughts that cause us to predict an outcome. They are usually based on a past experience or are old stale thoughts. We think we already know what will happen, based on the assumption we've made. Assumptions are not necessarily true; they rarely are. They are simply habitual thoughts that stifle us. If we don't stop and look at assumptions head-on, we will continue to let them rule us. Assumptions can stop us or stop progress toward our goals. They have a strong influence on what people think. They drive what people do or don't do. They can stop individuals in their tracks and entire teams from taking action and moving toward a change.

Assumptions can be our friend. They can also be the enemy of change.

If I assume a parent will be upset at our upcoming meeting, I will prepare for a confrontation. My defenses will be high, and I will be preparing for battle. On the other hand, if I release the assumption and focus my attention and preparation on a positive conversation, my words and energy will be more productive. If I assume I'm a poor speaker, I will run from opportunities that would require me to be heard. If my position requires me to speak in public, I might become physically ill at the thought, my fear would rise within me, causing me to do a poor job, just as I assumed I would.

Assumptions are not facts, but we often make the mistake of treating them as they are. If we don't change them, they become etched as a belief. When people keep them hidden, leaders might observe them as resistant. Instead of feeling frustrated, it is far better to learn to work with assumptions, help to reverse them, and create fresh thinking. This is really worth exploring to become adept at leading change efforts. As a leader, you must become more aware of what lies within

the minds of people and how to work with such thoughts to create shifts in thinking and thus, action.

Assumptions are thoughts we take for granted and believe them to be true. They aren't based on facts; they are based on experiences of the past. They are fiction. Assumptions inform our decision making, and this is precisely where the problem lies. They influence the decisions we make and often cause inertia. I assume how my friend will respond to going out to an Asian restaurant with me, so I decide to say nothing, instead of asking her. I assume the supervisor will be upset that I bombed my presentation, so I become nervous to meet. Or I avoid meeting.

Assumptions are a reflection of what's going on in one's mind, where we focus our thinking. When our thoughts are voiced to someone else, we now have a great opportunity to learn the person's perception. It is precisely from that perception that change efforts can start. Suppose Alex was thinking, "I'm too old to get that job. They're looking for someone fresh out of school." As a result, Alex refrained from applying for the job, even though he really wanted it. Suppose he was a great leader who could turn that school around, but his lack of initiative created a lose-lose for him and for the district. What if instead he recognized he had unique experiences from his prior roles that could indeed be of true value? If he were willing to challenge his own assumption, he might have taken action, with confidence, and pursued his goal. Stories like this happen too often. They thwart progress and inhibit organizations from achieving their goals. They cause individuals to remain locked in their self-imposed boundaries.

Negative assumptions show up as resistance and halt progress. Usually, leaders don't know why or what is going on. Why? Because assumptions are usually kept within and not often voiced. They might be discussed in the faculty room or around the water cooler but are not often shared with our supervisors. Assumptions are usually lurking silently in the one's mind versus speaking openly about them.

Let's take the example of Alice, a teacher who is asked to participate on a new committee by her principal. Alice responds by saying *no*. Just *no*. She tells the principal she can't stay late to attend the meetings or gives some other excuse. In truth, those are not really the reasons for her refusal. Deep down there was something else going on—an assumption.

Often unspoken, these assumptions are powerful predictors of success or subtle forces contributing to failure.

Linda Searby (2009)

Let's look beneath the surface. Alice has been in the school for twelve years and been on numerous committees. Nothing ever came of them, and she began to perceive them as a waste of her precious time and energy. She lost enthusiasm, stopped being an active participant, and emotionally disengaged.

Alice formed an assumption based on a past experience. Because she had a former, negative experience, she naturally thought the same outcome would occur next time. She didn't stop and think about it. She carried on as if it were the absolute truth. So her actions, or lack of action, were based on the assumption. She didn't question it. Instead, she acted as if she already knew what the result would be, just like the water faucet. She backed off, and her principal didn't really know why.

Holding on to an assumption can cause a serious drain of energy, energy that could otherwise be used for positive purposes and supporting organizational change. Stifling thoughts create just that—no movement, no action, no results.

Too often we enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

John F. Kennedy

Challenge Those Assumptions

Change can be more easily mastered by Challenging Assumptions. That's right—you must be willing to confront and challenge assumptions when they arise. An assumption can be wrong. Yet it silently drives inner thoughts and actions or creates inaction. They will stay there unless the leader or coach brings them out into the open for discussion. When the leader becomes aware that assumptions might be lingering within the mind of the employee and has the courage to confront them, there is now an opportunity to break the resistance.

Leaders can make or break a goal by becoming aware of the specific assumptions one has and assuring that the "same old" won't happen again. The leader must assure the holder of the assumption that this time will be different. This time we will do it this way or that way. Different actions will lead to different results, and it is up to the leader to reassure the employees and bring them on board to the new committee. Alice might have been willing to participate in the committee if she knew her effort would lead to a meaningful result.

Anne is a creative artist, a weaver. If you've ever been to a quality art show, you know that woven art is pricey. Anne loves to create one-of-a-kind pieces for meaningful occasions. She puts a lot of love and time into each piece. Thus, the high price. Anne was hoping to make a living as a weaver. She has been working at it for years and has yet to earn a livable income.

As her coach, I came to know my client Anne well. I learned what she thinks and believes about not only her work, but about herself. She knows she tends to be an introvert. The selling side of her business intimidates her. She would be happy as a clam to spend all of her time creating. Anne developed a deep assumption that she will never make a good living as an artist. The assumption stemmed from the fact that she hadn't make a decent living (yet).

Anne's assumption was clearly based on her past experience. It caused her to comb the want ads for jobs that will supplement her income. She had no clue how to get from where she was to where she wants to be—to earn a livable income as an artist.

I met Anne at a Chamber of Commerce meeting where she talked about her work and why she was at the meeting—to look for a job. It struck me that by networking for a job, she was acting on the assumption that she'd never make it as an artist. What if she used all that energy she expended to move her art business forward instead? If she followed her passion, this time with different actions to grow her business, she just might make it.

I offered Anne a complimentary coaching session in which I challenged the assumption. I encouraged her to imagine that the assumption is wrong. OK, maybe it was true in the past. Maybe she hadn't yet been able to pay her bills by selling her pieces, but it does not have to always be that way. I told Anne she could certainly be successful if she took different actions to get to her goal.

Anne began to reflect on her goal and her actions. They weren't aligned.

Challenging Assumptions is first about helping employees notice them and realize they are holding them back. Assumptions can be changed. They can be changed by taking different action steps than in the past. Different actions yield different results, and usually increased confidence as a bonus!

Here's another example: Linda was a coaching client, a middle-level leader, who worked in a large school district that was undergoing a great deal of change. Linda had many ideas and was enthusiastic about them. Her immediate supervisor, Jean, had a

high level of visible anxiety about the upcoming changes. In fact, Jean had a temper that became evident under stress. Linda learned to avoid Jean. Linda assumed Jean would fly off the handle when Linda wanted to discuss the team's goals and strategies. What did Linda do? Nothing. Linda learned to stay away from Jean. The result? Nothing.

In our coaching sessions, Linda recognized that Jean wasn't likely to change alone. Linda wanted to implement some new programs in her department and felt as though she was walking on eggshells around Jean. Linda fell into inaction. They were at a stalemate. Eventually, Linda realized it was she who had to look deeply at her assumptions and how they contributed to her stagnation, and that of the department and the school. Although it took a while for Linda to recognize that it would continue this way until she did something about it, once she realized that change began with her, she became open to examine what she could do.

Linda chose to have a conversation with Jean. She challenged her own assumption that Jean would never listen and began to take bold action. She approached Jean to schedule a meeting. Linda and I brainstormed what she could say that would be different from their conversations of the past, and would hopefully make a difference, and lead to progress. Within a few short weeks, Linda scheduled and had the meeting with Jean. Jean recognized the change in Linda and was, much to Linda's surprise, open to listening to her ideas.

Begin challenging your own assumptions. Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while or the light won't come in.

Alan Alda

How Assumptions Hold Us Back

Assumptions are self-limiting, first. They are negative thoughts that drive behavior. Naturally, if we buy in to our assumptions our mind is closed—closed to possibility. We are shut down and become disengaged. As a leader, you want and need everyone to be engaged, not to disengage. If an assumption is not voiced, you will never know what staff members are thinking; therefore, you cannot intervene. In a 2001 Gallup study, less than 30 percent of staff members are fully engaged at work, 55 percent are not engaged and 19 percent are actively disengaged. It gets worse over time. Among those that are disengaged, after six months, 38 percent remain engaged and after