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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.

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

Linda Searby (2009)

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.

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

three years, only 22 percent are fully engaged at work (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003).

Imagine that everyone in your organization has let go of assumptions. What might be different? What opportunities might now exist? When you are instrumental in changing assumptions from negative to positive by changing no to yes, you will facilitate the unleashing of stuck, blocked energy and propel people to take steps and action toward the results you seek.

Attitude and outlook are one key to creating lasting change or achieving any challenging goal. You can have a boatload of education, content knowledge, and experience in the world, yet if you harbor the

My guess is that well over 80 percent of the human race goes through life without a single original thought.

H. L. Mencken

wrong assumptions, you stifle progress and are doomed to failure. A study of successful people by the Carnegie Institute concluded that 85 percent of success could be attributed solely to mental attitude ("Chicago Lakes Football," n.d.). A coaching approach style of leadership shows you how to work with mental attitude one person at a time.

Assumptions Become Reality

The big trouble with assumptions is that they rule us and limit us. When I assume half the students in my class will not be successful, I will make far less effort to teach them than if I truly believed in their potential. Few teachers would come out and tell a colleague this, yet the thought might be there, the belief might be present and limit their efforts on the job. The students suffer. The system suffers. All students deserve a teacher who believes in their unlimited potential.

Assumptions create expectations. Expect to find a great new job and you are more likely to find one. Expect to fail and you surely will. Our outer life is truly a creation of our inner beliefs. When we give ourselves permission to take a hard look at our thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs, we set ourselves up for the breakthroughs in thinking we'll need to get to the next step, the next level, or finally make the change we want.

Thinking for Success

I recently visited the Sistine Chapel. Of course, I heard about Michelangelo's paintings since I was a small child. Finally, I had a chance to see his amazing work, the incredible height, and wondered how he

possibly did this. I tried to imagine all the people who might have tried to stop him or told him he couldn't do it. What kind of person was he? What personal strength and stamina did he have to resist the naysayers and pursue his goal anyway? Most people would assume it was impossible and not attempt it. I think about the millions of people who are touched and inspired by his paintings every year and wonder—what if? What if he assumed they were right, that it was too dangerous or too difficult? What if he let himself be led by their limits and fears? What if there was no Sistine Chapel? What if you give up on your goal?

Our mind is such a powerful organ. It has been my observation and experience that leadership workshops and training programs often fall short of providing practical insight into what is needed to overcome resistance. It takes a great deal of courage and personal stamina to be willing to banish your own assumptions. As a leader, it takes new insights into why people resist and most importantly, how to work with that resistance with each person.

Identify an assumption you hold or heard:

Questions to ask yourself:

What if it was untrue?

What would happen if you let go of it?

Assumptions are the termites of relationships.

Henry Winkler

All change starts with opening our eyes and mind. The problem with assumptions is that we allow them to become etched in our belief system. Once they are embedded and lurking in our mind as truth, we shut down and allow them to take over. They are truly damaging, not in the same way as deep psychological problems. They are immobilizing, negative thoughts that need to dissolve so the mind is wide open to reconsider its thoughts.

Change Your Thoughts at Any Time

I am a strong believer that the thoughts locked in our inner mind are the single most critical factor in causing resistance to change or in achieving personal or organizational goals. Leadership programs need to consider how they will teach leaders techniques and skills for unlocking and changing negative thoughts into positive ones. They need to offer skill building and a coaching approach to achieving change from the inside out.

One's thoughts do not have to be permanent. I've heard so many people ruminate on age-old thoughts that they believe are so embedded in their bones that they don't realize they can be changed. We can change our thoughts at any time. The thoughts we had yesterday don't have to be the thoughts we have today or tomorrow. We can simply change them. Everyone can do this.

Leaders need to develop the skills to support and help people change their thinking. We can't magically change other people. They have to do the work. They have to be willing. Leaders can acquire the know-how to support it. You don't have to throw up your hands in frustration that nothing can be done. Changing thinking requires a willingness to observe, reflect, and consider new possibilities.

Leaders also need to know how to guide others to change their inner thoughts.

Here's a guiding thought—what you think about, you create more of. The more you think about something, the bigger it gets. So if we dwell on our assumptions, our outer actions will reflect them. What we think about expands. Let's work with this thought. Changing thoughts is a matter of creating new ones to replace the old ones. We want to intentionally shift from negative to positive, from old to new, from thoughts that stagnate to thoughts that empower. We do this by mentally creating a new thought instead. (See Chapter 3: Awareness of Limiting Thoughts.)

How to Challenge and Banish Assumptions

A coaching approach style of leadership means helping others notice when assumptions arise and how they can negatively impact an outcome. One of the most powerful things leaders can do is ask challenging questions that inspire discovery, new insights, and new action. You can ask powerful and probing questions that challenge an assumption when you hear one. Those questions would help people think about their presuppositions and unquestioned beliefs. It is critical that leaders of schools and other organizations achieve the insight and know-how to uncover, challenge, and banish assumptions. Challenging Assumptions requires awareness and an open mind.

Challenging and letting go of assumptions begins with a willingness to become more reflective, become willing to let go of our “rightness,” and revisit the thoughts we are holding on to. Examining your own thoughts and beliefs is an act of courage. Cracking open a closed mind takes insight, willingness, skill, and practice.

Scientific research is based on proving or disproving an assumption. Everyone is familiar with that process and agrees it is useful. It teaches us to question why something happens or prove otherwise. In science, we don't believe assumptions until the experiment proves the truth. When we Challenge an Assumption based on a thought we have, we can help people prove or disprove their thoughts.

Sharing personal thoughts with another can feel risky. As a leader of change, are you willing to get beneath the surface and learn what one thinks? When someone reveals a negative assumption, what will you do with this new information? How will you respond? How might you respond if you are trying to lead someone to an outcome?

Some guiding principles that will help you Challenge Assumptions are to adopt a sense of curiosity and wonder. Strive to gain a deeper understanding of why one thinks a certain way, from a discovery perspective, not from a judgmental one. Be willing to challenge the status quo and help others unlock old thoughts and courageously open their mind to new possibilities. Other helpful concepts are to unleash creative thinking. Seek ways and opportunities to encourage relaxation and help others find time to daydream, to ponder. Our best ideas emerge when we are in a relaxed state.

Here are some sample comments and questions you can use to challenge and banish assumptions:

- I notice you are assuming that . . .
- Where might that assumption come from?

- How did you arrive at that assumption?
- What if that assumption was untrue?
- What might happen if you chose a different action or thought?
- How can you verify or disprove that assumption as truth?

Same Action → Same Results

or

Different Action → Different Results

Tips for Success

For people new to the coaching strategies in this book, it can feel uncomfortable to engage in the type of dialogue that “goes inside” one’s thoughts and mind, at first. Feel free to practice these strategies in advance with someone you are comfortable with. In addition, here are some tips to help you be successful:

- Suspend all judgment. You will be more successful with a non-judgmental approach. Suspending judgment can be difficult. It is an opportunity for you to let go and be open to receive the conversation that will follow.
- Build trusting relationships. Success in challenging assumptions will depend on the quality of the relationship between the people involved. The relationship needs to be based on openness, honesty, and trust.
- Listen deeply for assumptions.
- Tell the person when you hear an assumption. By doing so, you are creating awareness.

“I hear an assumption that you think we will waste money on that project.”

- Ask open-ended questions that challenge current thinking. Open-ended questions get to the heart of one’s thoughts and cause them to question assumption and reconsider them.

“What led you to that conclusion?”

“Why do you think it will happen that way?”

“What if you tried another approach?”

“What makes you think that?”

- Help people rethink the issue. Help them envision possibilities and different outcomes.

“We will research best practices before we invest.”

- Help them create new and different actions to assure yielding different results

“What can you do differently?”

“What can you do that you haven’t done before?”

What the caterpillar calls the end of the world the master calls a butterfly.

Richard Bach

Summary

Achieving successful change can be more easily accomplished by paying attention to assumptions. Keep in mind assumptions are usually hidden and people will likely reveal them to their supervisor or leader only when the relationship supports honest, open communication without repercussion. In normal, everyday conversations, we are not typically used to another person challenging our thoughts and beliefs. It takes a high level of trust, a fair amount of skill, and a well-developed relationship to have the courage to challenge thoughts and beliefs and inspire a different outcome. A leader with a coaching style of leadership will develop these characteristics and successfully challenge and banish assumptions.

Challenging and banishing assumptions is achieved by first creating awareness that assumptions exist. Developing a trusting relationship first will enable leaders to learn the assumptions that are silent or hidden and lead the way to questions that challenge thinking. The key to banishing assumptions is action. Moving out of inaction or stagnation is accomplished by helping others notice that assumption might be false and new and different actions can lead to a new and different result.

I discovered it wasn’t a matter of physical strength, but of psychological strength. The conquest lay within my own mind to penetrate those barriers of self-imposed limitations and get through to that good stuff—the stuff called potential, 90 percent of which we rarely use.

Sharon Wood, first North American woman to climb Mt. Everest, 1986