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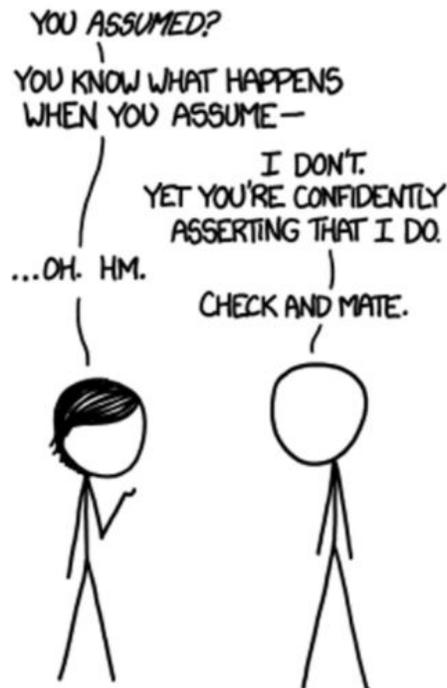
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THE ASSUMPTION TRAP

November 2021

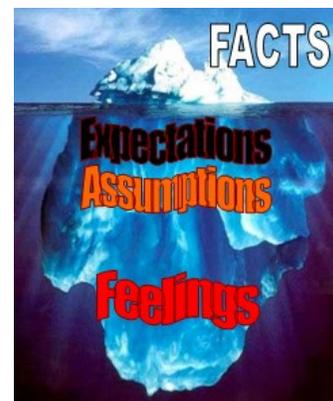


In the last week or so, I have talked with so many people who are struggling with what I am naming, “The Assumption Trap”.

Here are three stories and some suggestions for avoiding these kinds of traps and some others as well.

BEFORE YOU “ASSUME” TRY THIS CRAZY METHOD CALLED “ASKING.”

**CLEAR EXPECTATIONS
+
CLEAR COMMUNICATION =
CLEAR OUTCOME**



1. Assumptions that make holding your direct reports accountable more difficult

I spoke with a leader of a new team who called a mandatory staff meeting and was disheartened when several staff members didn't bother to show up. So what was the assumption? This is the part that makes assumptions so difficult. She assumed that "mandatory staff meeting" was clear enough. What wasn't clear was that there was a previous culture where staff meetings were casual and people showed up randomly. What to do? The discussion we had from there was about taking inventory of her own expectations – what does she expect of her direct reports – right down to the basics of showing up on time for work, being present at staff meetings unless they have previously communicated with her to be excused, turning in reports before or at least by due dates, and the list goes on. **The bottom line is that it is much easier to hold direct reports accountable to expectations if you have first communicated the expectations, no matter how elementary they might seem. What is elementary to one isn't to another.**

2. Assumptions that make teamwork frustrating

A professor shared with me that she has heard students in their graduate program say they hate working on teams because it is such a hassle getting other team members to do what they are supposed to do. Isn't that a sad sentiment to hear expressed? Teamwork is so critical in today's work world. Well, what were they expecting from those other team members? What were they "supposed to do"? What

To assume is to limit the mind to one way of viewing, when by nature our perceptions should be infinite.



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assumptions do you have for your teammates? What do you expect of them? These thoughts are assumptions unless they are communicated. When I work with teams, I often talk about creating team agreements. I have used team agreements very successfully, particularly with teams struggling through a lot of conflict, but they are just as valuable to avoid conflict. So I was thinking about this dilemma and what kinds of things I would suggest for a team agreement in that environment. We're talking about students, not employees, and everyone's grade being contingent on the work of the whole team. While this was an educational environment, I can see the same situation easily happening in the workplace. So, I might suggest having the team not only discuss, agree and document what they expect from each other, but also how they will hold each other accountable. One way would be to agree up front, that if a team member doesn't carry their weight on their assigned part of the project to the quality standards and intermediate benchmarks and timelines set by the team to assure satisfactory completion by the final deadline, that the team can vote to take over that team member's part and remove their name from the project. That means no credit or no grade for that person from the professor, or in the work environment, not only no recognition by the boss for that person, but potentially discipline or loss of their job. What would you do? What other ways would you put teeth into team agreements to hold people accountable? And just as importantly, what would you include in a team agreement? **For teams to work effectively, expectations not only need to be communicated, but agreed to by the whole team.**

3. Assumptions that create conflict even when no one did anything wrong!

An individual shared with me that she made a presentation to their volunteer board about her part of an assignment only to be chastised by a teammate who wasn't yet finished with her

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part. So what was the assumption here – it was about what information would be given, at what time and to whom. The other person felt caught off-guard, because if the first person was presenting their part of the project, the other person felt that they looked bad by not presenting theirs at the same time, even though no deadline had been agreed to. The first person thought they were doing a good thing by giving folks some advance notice about the project. So, in this situation, no one did anything wrong, but it still created conflict because there was an unspoken assumption and quite frankly, one that no one might even have thought about until it happened. **So, the fix – sharing information is another critical point of any project – what should/shouldn't be shared by whom, to whom and when?**

Almost anything can be an assumption regarding our work with others – because, what is one person's expectation can be a totally different expectation for another person. So, in working with others, a foundational piece of team-building, whether it's for a group or just two people working together, is to take time to talk about each other's expectations with respect to the work you are doing.

Here are some questions that might help you avoid some “Assumption Traps”.

- What have you experienced in the past about what made working together successful that you want to carry into this project?
- What didn't work successfully in the past, what did you learn from it and what do you want to carry into this project to try and avoid those issues this time around?
- What are your respective roles? Who is responsible for what?
- What are the rules you all want to follow or need to follow and why?
- What things need to be done the same way consistently by everyone because of a specific reason and what's the reason?

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- What things do we have leeway to do our own way?
- What are the rules of communicating with each other?
Email, phone, text, etc. and what kinds of things do we need to communicate about and in what situations.
- What are our expectations of each other?
- What are the goals, the benchmarks, etc. for the project?
- How do you define quality standards? What other measurements are you using?

I could keep going, but hopefully this will help you start thinking of other questions you want to add to the list.

The key to avoiding “The Assumption Trap”, is to share expectations and your mental pictures of how you see things playing out. Oftentimes, assumptions are actually things in our minds that we just fail to communicate.

Good luck!

If you have a new team that has come together and would like some assistance in team building, please call me. It’s one of my specialties and I love helping teams move to higher levels of synergy and performance!



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Joy is a conference speaker, team and leadership development consultant, customized trainer and facilitator and a Certified Professional Coach with expertise in

personal career coaching, job offer and salary negotiations and executive coaching.

As an Insights Discovery® licensed practitioner, Joy provides clients the added value of the Discovery® Portfolio of tools when working with individuals, teams, leaders and organizations to create inspiring visions for collaborative, cohesive teams to produce superior results.

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