



Clarify and Test the Working Assumptions

Assumptions are suppositions or premises incorporated into thinking and regarded as true. If made unwarily, reached without positive proof, or not tested with others presumed to also hold them, they may be entirely invalid and lead to misdirection, confusion, conflict, blocked progress, inappropriate conclusions, unwise plans and initiatives.

A Moment of Clarity

Six senior leaders were recently tasked with identifying cost-saving projects within their respective divisions. The first to do so, a mentoring client of mine, proposed a well-researched project for initiation within his. To succeed, this required the support of his divisional leader colleagues who would, however, receive no direct benefits to their divisions. They all declined cooperation, despite the proposal causing few demands on their own resources and no extra personal effort. For my client, it was a *Holy cow! You've got to be kidding, right . . . ?* moment. Annoyed and hurt, (*Gutted!*), he foresaw the possibility of retaliating by withholding support from any proposed projects requiring his cooperation. Such is the reality of much so-called teamwork in the workplace.

Insights from Reflecting on Experience

His story arose during a routine *What . . . ? So What . . . ? Now what . . . ?* mentoring session and became the trigger for a significant milestone in his development as a leader. As I questioned and listened to him, he reflected that –

- He'd approached this task with a pan-organisational, *we're-all-in-together* premise that went something like: *Because the whole organisation will benefit from savings in my division, any reasonable proposal will naturally attract the enthusiastic support of my peers, especially if it causes them no problems.*
- He had held this premise in his unconscious, not bringing it to awareness until he learned of his colleagues' disinclination to cooperate.
- He had assumed this and hadn't checked for proof to validate it. Accordingly, he'd not limited his research entirely to his own area but had included a study of services originating in his division and affecting all divisions. He had wasted considerable effort.
- There'd been many earlier occasions when his colleagues had shown greater interest in maintaining silos and protecting their own patches than in pan-organisational cooperation. He'd nonetheless kept making the same invalid assumption.
- His belief in the assumption was stronger than the (unexamined) evidence contradicting it.
- He held and worked from a range of other assumptions about his own and co-workers' approach to responsibilities that he'd never before brought from his unconscious to his awareness. Most of them he had never checked for validity. Many, he now realised, were inappropriate.

When Unsafe Assumptions are Most Likely

Unsafe assumptions about others are often made at the start of relationships: *I want this job/relationship/challenge/task/project/responsibility and you want me to get on board. Let's not concern ourselves with the detail while we're both of us maximising the attraction, minimising the differences and over-stimulating the adrenalin.* At times like this we're likely to overlook some rather important differences with the potential for harsh landings, later; differences in our values, principles, perspectives and practices for leading, managing, solving problems and differences, for instance. When those variations eventually become clear, we may experience *Holy cow . . ! You can't be serious . . !* moments.

Those assumptions are made at many other times too, and even though the parties have significant experience of one another: at the start-up phase of a major project, as meetings begin, at the point we're asked to accept a new or greater challenge, or when we are required to work with our colleagues or managers in a different way, for example.

Part of the Problem You Can Solve

My discussion with the client I mentioned earlier revealed that he's often made unwise assumptions when receiving directives from his CEO to *Do something to solve these problems; or Get on to this urgently and sort it out for me; or Step in and get this under control.* In those circumstances his self-delusions had ranged from *I know exactly what problem is being referred to – the CEO and I would define it identically; I have a very clear picture of the issues and causes I must address and the time-frame, priority, personnel, methodology, approval procedures, cost and other conditions and parameters the CEO has in mind.* That these were unwise assumptions causing wasted effort was made clear each time the CEO rejected his ideas and solutions because *That's not what I had in mind; or You can't do it that way - the Board would never agree; or You were taking so long, I got someone else to do it.*

My client had identified a potent source of insight into the current problem; his own part in creating it. That's something that required no-one's permission to change but his own.

There's a lot to be gained from working hard to first access and articulate, then to clarify the working assumptions underlying the parties' approach to any form of collective venture or cooperation, including teamwork and meetings, working-parties, project work, planning and problem solving. This effort can avoid a great deal of wasted effort, especially when combined with a methodical approach to problem-solving.¹

My Recommendation

Bring your own and others' assumptions into awareness, from wherever they are currently held vaguely or imprecisely in the sub-conscious. Discuss them with your co-workers until you reach agreement wherever you can, and an understanding of the implications of disagreement, where you cannot – before you go ahead with multiparty ventures.

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NB: See also, in the Thriving Workplace subscriber library, [Assumptions Underlying Continuous Improvement](#).

¹ Conventional workplace problem-solving involves focusing on possible solution to ill-defined or undefined problems, without exploring the real causes. Combined with hidden or unclear assumptions about the criteria to which any solution must conform, the process ensures the eventual re-surfacing of the problem(s) in the same form or different guises.