

February 2012 Assumptions

Whether we're aware of it or not, we make and act on assumptions throughout our waking hours. In many circumstances this very human tendency serves as an invaluable shortcut. A fast-moving car comes into view as I begin crossing the street; I assume it might not stop for me; I retreat to the sidewalk. Taking action based on my assumption avoids a potential accident.

John enters the office and doesn't respond to my "Good morning." I assume he's sulking about our disagreement at yesterday's meeting and I decide not to assign him to the group tasked with following up yesterday's work. I'm taking action based on my assumption.

But if I had checked out my assumption I would have learned that his day started with a distressing breakfast table argument. Arriving at the office, he was replaying the argument and hadn't even heard my greeting. My decision to remove him from the project, based on a faulty assumption, would deprive the department of the contribution that John's healthy skepticism could bring. Furthermore, it would send a counter-productive message to John and to everyone else involved: *disagree with the manager at your peril!*

So how do we as managers and supervisors reap the benefits of our assumptions while at the same time avoiding the potential hiccups of mistaken assumptions? It's not realistic to refrain from deciding anything without first conducting a full-scale investigation. Whatever your workplace equivalent may be to getting out of the way of an oncoming car, DO IT! If you make a wrong decision because of a mistaken assumption, you can sort it out afterwards. If, however, it's the "removing John" kind of assumption: CHECK IT OUT before taking action.

**It is always better to ask than to make assumptions.
Don Miguel Ruiz**

There is no standard formula for how to check out assumptions. It depends on the situation and on your history with the individual. In this situation I want to know if in fact John was and still is upset about our difference in opinion and – if so – what the implications are for the project. Here are a few options for opening a brief conversation that would lead me to a decision based on information rather than guesswork about John's state of mind.

"Well, John, looks like it isn't a good morning for you."

"What are your thoughts about the next step after yesterday's meeting?"

"Since you have doubts about the project, how do you feel about staying involved?"

"I'm not used to starting the day without a 'good morning' from you. What's up?"

You are called upon to make decisions throughout your work day, and the shortcut of counting on assumptions to guide you probably works well for you much of the time. But there may be some cases where solid information would have taken you in a different direction. Here's an experiment you might want to try: for one hour zero in on every decision you make. Ask yourself *"Am I deciding based on an assumption? If so, might I have made a different or better decision if I checked it out? And if so, how could I have done it?"*

**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**