

Checking Assumptions: Seeing beneath the surface

As Precision Questioners we learn how to manage some common illusions. First there's the pervasive illusion that "I'm not making any assumptions." No! Assumptions are inherent in the way we use language and necessary for the human mind to function in highly complex environments. Second is the illusion that surfacing assumptions is easy, with the riskiest being the easiest to identify. No! Seeing and understanding our assumptions is one of the most difficult cognitive skills to develop.

Imagine everyday thinking like a large mountain lake, where the water is very deep. Serious risks reside in the depths, but looking for assumptions is like trying to see the bottom from a boat floating on the surface. You might think of assumptions as the fish at the bottom of a lake. As long as the boat is moving, seeing below the surface of the water is almost impossible. In a similar way, at the speed of discussion it's very difficult to see beneath the familiar surface of our thinking. When we want to really examine assumptions with care, we need to "stop the boat" - that means pausing in the rush of ideas and looking into the murky depths. Assumptions slowly come into view. In this skill sharpener, we will call these long, deep looks down into the depths of our thinking "assumption checks." They are crucial for analyzing risk in a thoughtful way.

HOW TO DO AN ASSUMPTION CHECK

Do an assumption check in three phases. First phase: brainstorm assumptions you are making. Use the types of assumptions listed on the PQ+A toolkit as useful prompts. Call out as many assumptions as you can see in your thinking. The challenge is to see when you are drifting into easier forms of analysis and to push yourself to see many different assumptions of many different types. Repeat phrases like "Am I assuming ___?" or "Are we assuming...?"

Second phase: Evaluate the assumptions on your brainstormed list. Take a look at each assumption you generated and ask three questions about it:

1. Is this assumption likely to be false or mistaken in some way?
2. If this assumption is false or mistaken, how much harm will result?

3. If I don't know whether or not this assumption is valid, would it be a good use of resources to investigate it further?

Third phase: Action based on unwarranted or risky assumptions. Sort out from your long list of assumptions those that are likely to be false or mistaken, and that if you find they are not valid will have significant consequences for your work. Make an action plan for investigating those assumptions further to get a broader view of you're the risk inherent in your thinking.

WHEN TO DO AN ASSUMPTION CHECK

As you can see from the metaphor of looking for fish in a deep mountain lake, checking assumptions is time-consuming and difficult. Assumptions allow us to function by taking things for granted, and much of the time we are doing quick glances at assumptions. The following situations indicate that it would be useful to "stop the boat" and look into the depths to understand your assumptions, and the risk they are masking, more fully:

- When you are tasked with a risk analysis
- When you are presenting a risk slide for an executive review
- When you expected things to be easy but they are surprisingly difficult
- When you expected things to be difficult but they are surprisingly easy
- When you experience a mistake or re-work
- When you are doing a post mortem of a project
- When you are entering a domain of unusually high complexity

This Month's Practice

EXERCISE 1

As you sit in meetings and presentations this month, listen for someone who believes he or she is presenting the solution to some kind of problem. In your notebook, ask assumption questions related to the solution. Begin each with: "Are you assuming...?" The goal is to get to twenty assumption questions. If you need assistance, look at the categories of assumptions on the PQ+A Toolkit, or look back at your workshop materials.

EXERCISE 2

Using the list of situations that indicate the value of checking assumptions, identify where in your work it would be a good idea to schedule a meeting with your team or with your PQ+A partner and "stop the boat" and spot assumptions lurking in the depths of your thinking.

We're here to help. If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at QuestionMaster@vervago.com.

You may also join our LinkedIn group for Precision Q+A alumni by visiting us here at [LinkedIn](#).