

As times get tougher, make your questions smarter

No matter where we live, we are all being touched by an economic downturn and changing world priorities. At work, when the economy contracts, responsibilities expand. Here at Vervago, we know that having fewer resources and more demands means expanding your creative thinking, your intellectual skills, and your repertoire of questions.

Jane, a manager in a technology company, recently got in touch to ask us this very smart question. We wanted to share it with you, because it is the kind of question you might be asking yourself now:

In my new role I oversee the work of five engineers. Two are more senior than me, one is about equal in knowledge, and two are rookies. My challenge now is to fully utilize the two people who are more senior and technically know more about the system. If all I do is direct them, the thinking about this product will be stunted. I need to find a way to ask much better questions than I have asked in the past. Are you aware of any resources that can help me?

Yesterday's "common knowledge" is fading fast. Jane realizes that if her organization and product are going to succeed, she has to use her resources in ways that sharpen her thinking and the thinking of the people who work with her. We want to help Jane, and you, ask questions that go deeper into your work; questions that create stronger and more useful answers. So, one of our primary responses to Jane is also our suggestion for deepening your skills in 2009: ***Adopt a relentless focus on assumptions!***

1. Review assumption basics

You can find a good review in your workshop materials, and you can also access an overview of assumption categories at http://www.vervago.com/skill_sharpener_september07.html.

2. Pay special attention to similarity and time/constancy assumptions

Human brains think by comparison, and most of our comparisons are outside of our conscious awareness. Once we have made a connection in our minds between two things, we often continue to treat them as similar, even if they are not. For instance, in the current economic climate, whenever you find yourself thinking about the market for your products, services, or stocks, you are in dangerous territory. Are you assuming this market is similar to the pre-subprime meltdown market? Are there things in your market that have fundamentally changed such that you cannot safely assume this market is like previous markets? Another common similarity and time/constancy assumption you might want to check now: are you assuming that your current customer concerns are similar to customer concerns you have met in the past?

These assumptions aren't just for markets or customers. Think of Jane's question: is it safe for me to assume that the way that I am managing now should be similar to the way I have

managed in the past? Her answer was no, she needed to seek out new tools to manage differently in her new role and in a new economic climate. Given the rapidly changing business and social environment, the answers to these kinds of assumption questions are probably, “no,” or an honest: “I don’t know.”

3. Recommit yourself and those who work with you to the importance of being candid.

One of your most powerful tools for dealing with assumption checks in the midst of a changing set of priorities and conditions is the ability to say “I don’t know, but let’s check into that.” If you aren’t hearing yourself, those who report to you, or your colleagues saying “I don’t know” more often these days, it is likely that too many similarity and time/constancy assumptions are piling up in your work. Whenever you find yourself comparing something to last quarter, or last year, or the last time we did this, stop. Ask: Is it safe to assume this is similar to that? Is it safe to assume it is the same now as before? Is the right answer: I don’t know?

Similarity and Time/Constancy Assumption Exercise:

Call to mind a project you are working on now. Set aside a moment to make a list of assumptions you are making as you do the work, focusing especially on similarity assumptions (this is like that) and time/constancy assumptions (the way it is now is the same as the way it was before). After you list the assumptions, make an evaluation about whether you think the assumption is valid or not. Remember to use I don’t know! For those that you don’t know about, use the final column in the table to think about how you will find data to check your assumptions.

List Assumptions: (focusing especially on similarity & time/constancy)	In my best judgment, is this assumption valid?	If I don’t know whether my assumption is valid, how will I find evidence to check it?

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If you’re looking for other forms of support as you learn to use PQ+A in a non-PQ+A world, contact QuestionMaster@vervago.com.