

Top Five Assumptions to Leave Behind

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It is tough to get rid of an assumption once it is firmly planted in our brain, regardless of its accuracy. Similar to the old saying, "Don't confuse me with facts; my mind is made up," we only see validation and ignore situations and evidence that confront or disprove our assumptions. If everything around you is changing and you are not, the risk of getting left in the dust is pretty high.

I started with a list of fifteen assumptions and quickly decided that most readers would not make it past five. This is the short list of five assumptions which negatively impact a leader's success. I've seen each one multiple times with multiple leaders.

"My people are just happy to have a job." Maybe that's so, but maybe it's not. Do you really know? My exec recruiter contacts are hearing from growing volumes of educated, successful professionals at all levels who are looking to get out of the companies they are in as soon as the marketplace improves. Mostly these are based on work environment, not compensation issues. Some of your top leaders at various levels may be on the list.

"Generation _____ is lazy, selfish, not committed" etc. etc. From 60 minutes to the nightly news and the Wall Street Journal to Business Week and HBR, over the past few years, we have been bombarded with information about the differences between generations and how we have to adjust our leadership approach to get results through them. Good people doing great work exist across generations. Effective leaders know their people as individuals and lead/manage them as individuals. To do otherwise is lazy leadership. Judge people based on any sort of negative group stereotypes and bingo, you will find what you're looking for and in the process make it more difficult for good people to be successful.

"Multi-tasking is a solution to head count reduction." More with less is an endemic business mantra and last year, it got worse. In many companies, entire departments and teams have been decimated. Some restructuring has brought efficiency, but dumping good people has been a painful reality for many leaders and the most common reality is simply more work with fewer people. Let's stop pretending. The work of three people is not going to be done by one. One person still does the work of one; although the work may be comprised of one-third each of the work that used to be done by three people. There is a correlation here between texting and driving and the outcome of other on-the-job multi-tasking. While you may not crash the car, you may be not be doing any of the multi-tasking tasks well. The customer on the other end of the phone knows if you are also writing e-mail or otherwise distracted.



"I need to make the decision when subordinate leaders disagree." You may think this expedient and maybe it is in the short run. Beware, this creates a culture where others don't learn to make collaborative decisions. You are paying leaders to make decisions. Expect them to do so. Facilitate them through log jams. Don't assume their accountability.

"It just business; it's not personal." Oh really? You can't have it both ways. Calling it "just business" does not negate ownership of a decision and its impact. One of the most frequent things I hear from senior leaders is a desire for a stronger sense of accountability and greater ownership from subordinate leaders and other employees. Sounds to me like an expectation that people make it personal. You want people to feel that their work is an important part of who they are? You want them to be proud of the company and proud of their contributions? It's personal. Your leadership actions impact people and that's personal.

Challenging assumptions is a significant look in the mirror. It takes a good talent for introspection to seriously consider how our perspectives may be causing behavior that impedes success. Maybe none of the five I've listed are pertinent for you. If so, what assumptions do you hold that may be getting in the way of your success?



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