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Don't Hurt Your Business with Faulty Assumptions



Assumptions — preconceived notions, taken as fact without proof — are a surefire way to derail both communication and productivity.

Assumptions — these mental shortcuts — are often incorrect, and they could be costing you business.

A 74-year old farming friend of mine went into a car dealership to buy a truck. He purchases a new truck, with cash, about every 5 years. A few weeks ago I went with him. He was completely ignored by the sales staff, who were mostly paying attention to their phones. He returned to the receptionist, who also ignored him while she answered emails. This is a guy buying a \$55,000 truck, and he could not get anyone to give him the time of day.

Was it because he looked like a farmer and they assumed that he wasn't in their target demographic? Was it because of his age? Was it a just terrible sales staff?

A military friend told me that she is relocating to Texas. She called 5 real estate offices explaining her status, and that she wants to buy a house in San Antonio. It has been 7 weeks. To date, NONE have returned her phone call.

Is it because she is military, and they assume she is impoverished? Or were all five offices simply incompetent?

These sales teams made assumptions, and it cost them business.

The truth is, we often rush to judgment, but it can be harmful and costly.

It Starts with the Brain

The human brain, according to the practitioners at [Harley Therapy](#), is built for making assumptions: “It searches for patterns, or what cognitive scientists call mental models, to make it a more efficient machine.”

It’s a mechanism that helps us navigate the world more effectively. By making regular assumptions, like “the sun will rise in the morning” or “I’ll be able to get food from the grocery store,” we can plan our lives based on past experiences where the results were predictable. Patterns reduce stress and free up our brains for other challenges.

By adding culture, environment, and upbringing into the mix, we can see how larger assumptions form. Again, from Harley Therapy: “The assumptions we make come from our culture and our families, and from what we were taught to think as a child.”

When Assumptions are Wrong

Making assumptions about people based on their affiliation, or our own preconceived notions can create discord and confusion.

“Our ability to categorize and evaluate is an important part of human [intelligence](#),” says Mahzarin Banaji, a psychology professor at Yale, who researches stereotypes. She [cites her own reaction to unconscious bias tests as a personal example](#) in Psychology Today, noting that it is discouraging to think that we are bias-free when we are not.

Many people simply don’t realize that they are making assumptions, and leaders need to be especially mindful of how unconscious bias, even by the most well-intentioned teams, can be present and that it can be harmful.

This also leads into stereotyping, where we might apply a generalization or an unconscious bias about a group of people or to an individual, even though that assumption might not be true.

Much like forming simpler opinions about likely outcomes, stereotypes are a mental shortcut that help us navigate the world more quickly, according to [Saul McLeod](#) of the University of Manchester: “The use of stereotypes is a major way in which we simplify our social world since they reduce the amount of processing (i.e., thinking) we have to do when we meet a new person.” Stereotypes are learned, and they can be replaced when we refrain from leaping to a conclusion based on appearance or demographic.

Examples such as, “older people aren’t good at technology” or “women are too emotional at work” can lead to actions that are unfair.

While assumptions and stereotypes can be a benefit, as well act as a base in our biology, applying them to individuals can lead to a host of negative outcomes, and cost sales.

Making assumptions can disadvantage members of a team based solely on a group affiliation. When applied in an office setting, these kinds of interactions, born of complacent thinking and a lack of understanding, run the risk of creating an atmosphere which diminishes trust and divides teams.

Correcting the Issue

A business is more apt to thrive when its members can communicate and trust one another. By keeping an open mind, acknowledging biases that we all may hold, and avoiding the temptation of jumping to conclusions, you, as a leader, can set an example for your team that others can follow.

We really don’t know what someone else is thinking until we ask. We need to take the time to get to know others as the individuals they are.

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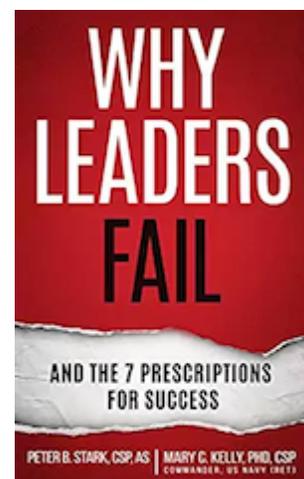
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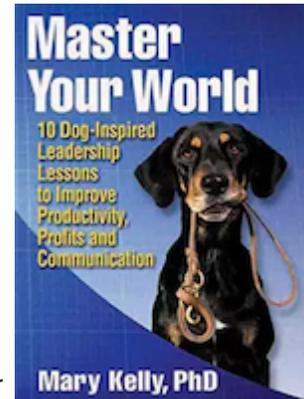
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