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Can Leadership Overcome Our Brain's Patterns?



We all make assumptions. This aspect of human nature that has helped our ancestors stay alive during the primitive years and beyond. Assumptions allow us to predict future behaviors and patterns based on what we've previously experienced. We rely on our judgment to make the right call. But that doesn't mean we always get it right. When we step back and analyze some of our deeply held views, we might realize that some of these so-called "facts" are false beliefs.

Brains Love Patterns

Our brains use patterns, routines, and structures to make us more efficient. When we wake up in the morning, we have a routine. We get up, shower, get dressed, brush teeth, eat breakfast, drink coffee, then drive to work. We do all this without really giving any of it too much thought.

Most of our morning routines are second nature. When we don't have to think about the things we do automatically, the advantage is that we have more time to think about other things, which can help us be more effective. Mark Zuckerberg says the reason he wears a gray tee shirt every day is because [he doesn't want to waste valuable thinking time making decisions that don't matter](#).

One of the benefits of spending 25 years in Navy uniforms was not spending much time on daily wardrobe decisions. Now I have to think about what to wear. Does that jacket go with those earrings? Do I need to wear heels today? Can I haul boxes of books in a skirt?

This autopilot behavior is also present in our [cognitive functioning](#), where our brains are subconsciously forming judgments and making decisions based on patterns that have been

determined by life experiences. The problem with this is that fleeting judgments are often wrong and, at times, can be damaging.

Get It Right

Harvard professor [Robert Kaplan](#) says “most decisions are based on an underlying assumption. Positions articulated in a debate are based on assumptions. The problem is that, too often, in business, the assumption is never made explicit, or if it is, its accuracy is never questioned.”

Kaplan notes that most of the worst business decisions he made are due to faulty assumptions and that business leaders should reevaluate some of the assumptions that govern critical business decisions.

We, as leaders, need to question why we are making the decisions we make to assure that those decisions are based on facts, and not on false assumptions.

Foster Better Relationships

If we are constantly assuming that we know how other people think and feel, we tend to stop actively listening and communicating.

You have observed this with some married couples who have been together for a long time. They interrupt each other and finish each other’s sentences. They think they know what the other is thinking or feeling. Often, they are right. This can be endearing. But it can also be irritating when they are wrong.

When people interrupt each other because they think they know what the other person is thinking, it is presumptive, and a bit rude.

This can have a negative impact on those around us, and can lead to feeling misunderstood. Good [communication](#) is key to great relationships, both at home and at work.

How to Stop Making Assumptions

Here are four steps to help:

1. Acknowledge Assumptions

The first step involves paying close attention to our thoughts in different situations. We all make assumptions – we just need to be aware of them. Once we are aware, we can analyze their validity and either accept them or discount them.

2. Stop Assuming It Is About You

For instance, if a partner or a colleague isn’t very talkative, we may be inclined to assume they are angry with us. But this may not be the case. They might be tired, preoccupied, or maybe under the weather.

The reason your employee is a little short this morning may be that they hate their job, but it could also be nothing to do with you or work at all. Maybe they had a flat tire on the way to work, maybe their child has a cold and they were up all night, or the dog threw up on the carpet as they were walking out the door.

Once we stop assuming that the behavior is somehow related to us, we can ask clarifying questions and be helpful.

3. Challenge Assumptions and Default to the Good

When we sense that we are about to make an assumption, try isolate the behavior. We often make assumptions based on our interpretations of the behavior, and not the intentions. Default to a less judgmental reason for the action.

1. "They are late again because they hate their job." Maybe they were late because they were on a client call from home.
2. "They ran that stop sign because they are a jerk." Maybe they are new to the area and didn't see it. Maybe the stop sign is new.

We often project our patterns on others because we think we know. Like the couples who finish each other's sentences, we are often wrong.

4. Practice Nonjudgmental Listening

Start an honest and open dialogue with a spouse, partner, friend, or colleague, and focus on really listening to their perspective. Ask open-ended questions, such as, "What did you mean when you said...?"

The act of mindful listening is helpful because it requires us to focus on the present moment. This is tough, especially if we are thinking about what we are going to say next in response. We might notice some assumptions sneaking into our thoughts as we formulate our next statement. When this happens, we can stop and refocus for a moment. Ask why we have this view, and determine if we can identify the feeling that goes with it.

Once we start to question our cognitive processes, we are able to discern what is accurate, what is helpful, and what is not.

This is important at work, because when we have more relevant information, we can make better decisions and appropriate actions.

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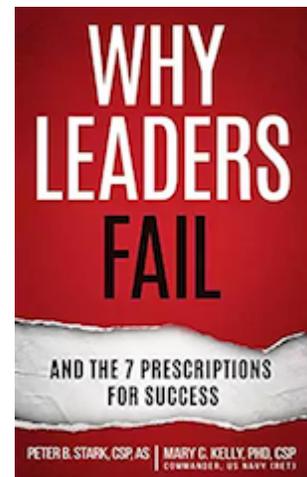
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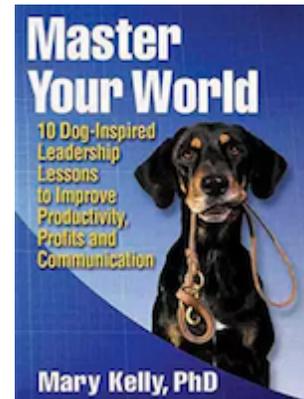
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