



April 2010 [\(pdf - available within 24 hours of this email\)](#)

By Donna Zajonc



Question Your Assumptions

Almost daily I catch myself starting a sentence with, "I assumed that...." What I have noticed is that my assumptions usually limit my creativity. Innovation and new ideas are much more available to me if I challenge my assumptions, then notice that bigger, better and bolder ideas begin to emerge.

This is easier said than done. When my husband, David, and I went to Ecuador several weeks ago, we purposefully said we were going to suspend our assumptions and try to see the world through the eyes of the Ecuadorian people who were attending our workshop. Even with this deliberate attempt to question our assumptions about culture and leadership styles, we were constantly reminded of how much we live based upon unconscious assumptions.

I admit that questioning our assumptions is uncomfortable. There's stability in life when things turn out the way we think they should. However, we are not living and leading in a stable world, are we? Leaders today must move forward while questioning their assumptions as well as encouraging others to do the same.

Assumptions about failure are one area where most of us have pre-determined assumptions. Our internal dialogue about failure might sound something like: "Failure is bad." "If I fail I will get fired." "I will be embarrassed if others see me fail." "My future is ruined if I fail." Our assumptions about failure are usually loaded with a heavy dose of darkness.

I love the leader who has an entirely different assumption about failure and views failure as an opportunity to innovate. Statements from that leader might sound similar to: "Failure leads to innovation." "Failure shows us dozens of ways things won't work and gets us closer to how they will work." "Failure encourages taking risks and I want this team to be risk-takers" and "Failure contributes to learning."

Such a leader has challenged the conventional perspective on how failure is held in today's world. They might start a staff meeting by saying, "Who tried something new this week that failed?" Questioning the assumption about failure gives permission to routinely question assumptions. This is a valuable contribution to the work environment and creates a fun atmosphere of learning and growth.

Assumptions are like the strong undercurrents of a gentle river. On the surface the river appears to be flowing with placid, warm water. Underneath

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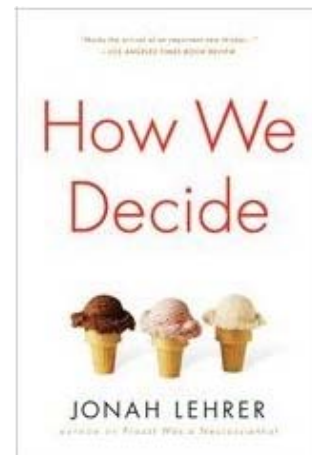
Quote of the Month

"Leaders of the past were people who knew how to tell. The leaders of the future are people who know how to ask."

Peter Drucker
Leadership Guru

Book of the Month

How We Decide



the calmer current is colder water pushing with power and force. Our assumptions lie underneath the surface of our thinking and actions. If we are unaware of the deep currents of our assumptions, we go forward with a limited capacity to respond to the bend in the river.

Our test is not to dam the river. Quite the opposite! Our task is to be inquisitive and see to the bottom of our river of assumptions.

Here are a few suggestions to help you identify and question assumptions:

Periodically question assumptions: During staff meetings, take a few moments to ask, "Before we go any further, I want to ask what assumptions we are making about this project?" Go around the table and listen to the individual assumptions each person is making about the topic. You will be amazed that some people are on totally different waves. Questioning assumptions can help reset the group and get everyone paddling in the same direction.

Avoid "why" questions and move toward "how" and "what"

questions: "Why" questions usually cause defensiveness. "How" and "what" questions tend to be more profound. Asking, "why did you assumed that?" may cause the other person to dig in and defend their assumption. "How did you arrive at that assumption" or "what are your assumptions?" are inquiries that allow the other person to follow their line of reasoning. This is much less threatening.

Mistakes are invitations: Mistakes break patterns and allow new patterns and assumptions to emerge. Welcome mistakes! Create a culture where people have fun telling stories about the biggest mistake they ever made in their life. Getting people to laugh about mistakes will transform the work environment so that questioning assumptions becomes easy and natural.

Shift your language from "yes, but" to "yes and:" Our brain believes what we say. Using "yes, but" tells our brain and everyone else that we are holding the line on our perspective. Discounting others with "yes, but" language creates a culture where questioning assumptions is not allowed. "Yes, and" language gets us closer to acknowledging the other person's perspective and says that you welcome dialogue and reviewing assumptions.

Reframe or retain the assumptions: Just because we question an assumption doesn't mean we need to throw it out the window. Once we question the assumption, we may reaffirm or only slightly reframe it. This allows us to retain the core assumption with up-to-date modifications. These slight adjustments, over time, can be huge and it is much better to catch them earlier rather than later.

True long-term transformational change comes when we look at the world with entirely new eyes. When we change the way we interpret what we are seeing in the world, we ask different questions. If we don't do this, we are sleep-walking through life, failing to see the assumptions that are holding us in check, unable to discover new, bold and innovative ways of thinking and leading.

Testimonials

by Jonah Lehrer

Lehrer's engaging book is about the internal mechanism within the brain that help explain how some decisions are made over other decisions. For example, the human brain registers bad news more strongly than good news which explains why a boss must give five compliments to make up for a single critical remark to their employee. His stories are entertaining and in the same writing style of Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* and *Tipping Point*.

[Buy online at Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

Images from Ecuador



Women's Group



Donna with Luz Haro of Ecuador's Rural Women's Association



Donna with women

[If you missed the March Issue on Experiencing Leadership in Ecuador, click here!](#)

"The first thing about Donna's presentation that strikes me is her smooth, patient and compelling teaching style, as well as her rare ability to take participant questions, both difficult and those less than thoughtful, and turn them into helpful and illustrative nuggets for everyone! Her experience as an elected official brings great credibility to our groups. Over the years, I've found that they really listen to Donna because she speaks their language, has walked in their shoes and generates real, practical learning points that undoubtedly will help our people serve their constituents so much better."

Mark Warren
Texas Association of Counties
Leadership Foundation's Leadership Training

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