

Assumption vs. Exploration Power Tool

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, I have focused on innovation within the scientific field. A key aspect of a scientist's work involves formulating assumptions and subsequently testing them to validate uncovered facts. This exploration often results in either the confirmation or invalidation of those assumptions, frequently leading to new discoveries. In my coaching, I've noticed that many clients hold assumptions but fail to act on them. As a result, the same assumptions resurface in session after session, hindering progress. I think it is crucial to explore these assumptions to facilitate advancement. The goal of this power tool is to help reframe existing assumptions by encouraging exploration and generating new insights.

What is Assumption

According to Cambridge dictionary an assumption is "something that one accepts as truth, although there is no proof" (Cambridge dictionary).

When we make assumptions, it's often because our minds are already set. This can come from previous experiences in life, personal intuition, beliefs coming from family and friends. Many of our assumptions come from our culture, from the way we were brought up, educated or from the social context. We take these assumptions without having facts or questioning them and taking them as the truth.

While making assumptions can sometimes help us in taking quick decisions it can also lead to misunderstandings, wrong decisions, stereotyping, prejudice and limiting beliefs.

The problem making assumptions is that we are likely to believe they are true, when, in fact, they may not be as there is a lack of evidence (The Robesonian, 2023). Making assumptions make us avoid responsibility, keep us stuck in the past, as they rely on old information.

If we don't question our assumptions, we may stagnate, and no innovation or growth might be possible.

So, what are the reasons we are making assumptions?

- It reduces the amount of mental energy to make sense of the world around
- It helps us making quick decisions with limited information
- It facilitates communication
- It helps predicting
- It allows to make rapid judgements and decisions without expending significant cognitive resources.

Even in coaching I used to have my assumptions based on my personal experiences. But when I questioned them and went to the coaching with a feeling of curiosity and exploration, I realized that it always led me to new discoveries and paths.

What is Exploration

According to Cambridge dictionary exploring means “travel through (an unfamiliar area) in order to learn about it”. It also means to “think about, talk about, or study something, or to experience it, in order to find out more about it “(Cambridge dictionary). Merriam Webster defines investigate and examine as synonyms to exploring (Merriam Webster).

This means that when we explore we learn something, we grow, we get more understanding. You might never have the full facts, but you can enlarge your understanding.

The benefits of exploring:

- Leads to a deeper understanding
- Brings more information and facts
- Can lead to new discoveries
- Leads to personal growth
- Enhances self-awareness. Clients can gain deeper insights into their beliefs, values, and thought patterns, which can lead to personal growth and development.
- Improved decision making. It can lead to make more informed choices. Either through validating the existing assumption with facts or taking another path.

- Can help address misunderstandings and conflicts, whether in personal interactions or organizational contexts. It fosters empathy and understanding among individuals.
- Facilitating change: change requires a shift in mindset. By examining and restructuring assumptions, clients become more open to change and better equipped to navigate transitions in their lives.

In summary , exploring assumptions in coaching enriches the coaching experience, promotes personal growth, and empowers clients to overcome obstacles, leading to more meaningful and effective outcomes.

How can a coach support the client to shift perspective from Assumption to Exploration

- **Active listening:** identify assumptions in their statements.
- **Identifying common patterns:** giving exercises like journaling where the client will identify common patterns.
- **Open ended questions:** creating awareness through powerful open-ended questions.
- **Possible questions:**
 - What facts do you have to prove this is true?
 - Where do you think this assumption comes from?
 - What would life be like if the opposite of this assumption were true?
 - What if this assumption didn't exist at all?
 - How is this assumption serving you?
 - How is this assumption holding you back?
- **Support client in identifying the way to explore the assumptions:**
 - How could you prove that this assumption is true?
 - How could you test that this assumption is valid/ not valid?
 - Who and what could help you to identify if this assumption is valid?
- **Support the client in gaining insights from his exploration:**
 - What did you learn about your assumption?
 - Which parts were validated?
 - Which parts were invalidated?

- What did you learn about the situation?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- What of this learning can you implement for the future?

Coaching Application

I would like to bring here two cases where assumptions were reframed through exploration.

Case 1

A young graduate who came to me for support in seeking employment. During our first session, I encouraged him to seek feedback from family, friends, and colleagues regarding what they perceived as his strengths. The responses were consistent: they emphasized his exceptional interpersonal skills. However, as we reviewed this feedback together, a noticeable shift occurred. He fell silent, his expression clouded with discomfort. It was evident that he was struggling with this realization and that something stirred deep within him. Recognizing the need for reflection, I allowed him the space to process his thoughts, understanding that such moments are crucial for personal growth.

When he finally opened, he revealed a significant revelation: while he acknowledged his emotional skills, he struggled to accept them as strengths. His upbringing had instilled in him the belief that emotional competencies were weaknesses, and he feared that the professional world would share this view. This internal conflict was a barrier to his job search, preventing him from fully embracing who he was and what he had to offer.

During this coaching session I was able to use the above-mentioned questions and collaborated in coming up with a plan to explore these assumptions by reaching out to Human Resources Managers across various companies to understand better the market's perception of emotional skills. This exploration proved to be transformative. The feedback he received was positive. Human Resources professionals reaffirmed that skills like empathy and emotional awareness were becoming increasingly valuable in the workplace. They

noted a growing demand for these skills within Human Resources roles, where understanding and connecting with people is paramount.

This revelation was a turning point for him. His self-confidence increased and he began to see his interpersonal skills as assets rather than liabilities. The exploration of his assumptions not only increased his self-esteem but also opened doors to new job opportunities that aligned with his strengths.

Had he not entered this exploration he would have remained trapped in his assumptions, which would have led to prolonged periods of sadness and anxiety. It would have also hindered him to present his true self during interviews and ultimately diminished his chances of success in the job market. By confronting and reframing these assumptions, he was able to cultivate a sense of pride in his abilities and find new opportunities for his job search.

Case 2

A manager who came for support in managing his team, as he was facing difficult situation with some team members. He felt that some team members were criticizing him behind his back and doubted his leadership. This assumption weighed heavily on him and affected his interactions with his team and his self-confidence.

During our coaching sessions, we worked on a plan for him to hold one-on-one meetings with each team member. He aimed to explore their feelings and gain insight into the current dynamics within the team. To his surprise, these conversations revealed that many team members actually appreciated his leadership style. Furthermore, the conversations sparked valuable ideas on how the team could work for efficiently together. He was able to build a stronger relationship with the team.

Through this process, the manager realized that he had been working under a false assumption. Had he continued down that path without addressing his concerns, it could have led to frustration and negatively impacted his leadership effectiveness.

Self Application

At the beginning of my studies at ICA I used to coach based on assumptions. What the client was telling me sounded often very familiar to things I had already experienced and sometimes solved. It took me time to stop these assumptions and start to see the client as a own self with own experiences and solutions.

Sometimes when looking for a question I started with an assumption, but then my next question to myself was: Is this an assumption or is this question based on curiosity and my wish to explore further. If it was an assumption I asked myself : What makes me assume this. And based on my response, change my question to a more curious and exploratory question.

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