

Beliefs, Assumptions, Perceptions, And Teamwork¹

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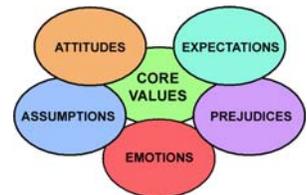
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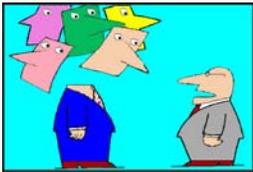
When we believe it's human nature for people to be out for themselves, we assume *everyone will be that way*, even if they are not!

What we experience—what we see, what we hear, what we taste, what we touch, what we smell—all of these are the result of what is happening, *filtered through* what we believe, assume, and think.

Belief systems are formed throughout life, from birth through early childhood, into adulthood. They form from our relationships with people—our parents, our friends, our teachers, and so on, and the ongoing experiences we have interacting with our environment. They help us make sense of and become comfortable with life. Most of them are reshaped by new experiences as we go through the years. Some, however, particularly those accompanied by strong emotions when they were formed, become unshakable anchors. Our system of beliefs, wired into our neural circuits, determines our core values, our attitudes, our prejudices, our expectations, and the assumptions we make about the world around us.



In a way, you could say that our beliefs about people and things act like “filters” to our perceptions, which affect the way we communicate with others. All together, our beliefs lead to assumptions we make about people and life. They become the thought filters of the world that we carry in our heads. They are like maps about how the world works or how we think it should work. Some of our maps are “rules” that begin with words like *you should* or *you should not*, or *you ought to* or *you ought not to*. These are the “good’s” and “bad’s” and the “right’s” and “wrong’s” that guide us in our daily choices. Other maps we hold in our head are pictures and stories about how things are or should be. These are our definitions of reality.



Our beliefs and assumptions influence how we perceive ourselves and how we see the world around us—what we see, what we hear, what we taste, touch, and smell. They define what we experience and determine the choices we make and the actions we take. Indeed, they are a very powerful influence in our daily lives.

History is alive with many illustrations of the how beliefs and assumptions influence our behaviors. Some manifest themselves as harmless superstitions. For example: *the number thirteen is bad luck*. In ancient Rome, witches reportedly gathered in groups of 12. The 13th was believed to be the devil. In today’s world, more than 80 percent of high-rises lack a 13th floor, many airports skip the 13th gate, and hospitals and hotels regularly have no room number 13. Other illustrations include such beliefs as “it’s bad luck to walk under a ladder,” “breaking a mirror will bring you seven years of bad luck,” and “a horseshoe hung above the doorway will bring good luck to a home.”



¹ From: http://www.arniedahlke.com/101115_Beliefs,_Assumptions,_Perceptions_And_Teamwork.pdf

Please take a moment to look at Arnie’s site: <http://www.arniedahlke.com>

Many beliefs have led to more drastic consequences. For example, medieval medicine was often a mix of the pagan, religion, and science. Patients with the bubonic plague were told to perform penance—the practice of confessing one’s sins and then performing a religious devotion prescribed by a priest. They were told they might be spared death if they correctly confessed their sins. Of course, this didn’t counter the plague. Another example: physicians in the Middle Ages believed that most human illnesses were the result of excess fluid in the body—so, to “cure” patients they decided to remove excess fluid by taking large amounts of blood out of the body by a method called “venesection.” This involved opening a vein to drain a substantial quantity of blood. The tool used was the “fleam,” a narrow half-inch long blade, which penetrates the vein and leaves a small wound. The blood ran into a bowl, which was used to measure the amount of blood taken. Again, no cure!²



So, what does this all have to do with teamwork?

Teams are made up of individuals. The characteristics of individual team members influence the collective behavior of the team. From a simple workgroup, to a project team, to an entire organization, collaboration and teamwork can succeed or fail as a result of the beliefs and assumptions driving the perceptions and behaviors of individuals.

Consider, for example, decision-making. Some teams find it difficult to reach a consensus because differing behaviors points of view are driving team member behaviors. One team member may look at life through a very competitive lens. For that person, it’s all about winning, about “the survival of the fittest.” Meanwhile, another team member may be more other-directed, more concerned about the welfare of the team as a whole. While the first team member is driven to “win at any cost,” the second may be willing to make concessions and do what is best for the team as a whole.



Another important element in teamwork is the way in which team members communicate with one another.



Team members with a belief system that leads them to have strong feelings about “the right way to do something” will usually be more close-minded, will tend to communicate more aggressively, and will not put much effort into understanding other viewpoints. Team members who are open to and accepting of the viewpoints of others are more likely to actively listen to and try to understand another team member who is speaking.

Still another component of teamwork is the series of processes involved in problem solving. A team with a diversity of mental filters among team members is more likely to result in innovative solutions to a problem than will a team in which team members all think alike. If all team members are looking through the same mental filter, it will be hard for them to get beyond what they all see as the normal course of action. On the other hand, a diversity of mental filters opens the door to new and innovative solutions—to “thinking outside the box.”



It All Comes Back To What We Assume And Believe!

I’m not arguing for any one belief-system as the “correct” or “best” belief-system. I *am* stressing that each of us, as an individual team member, *must be aware of our own beliefs and assumptions*—our mental filters—and their influence on our thinking, on our perceptions of issues and people, and on our behaviors. It is also important that we be aware of the differences between our mental models and those of other team members. And, in the spirit of truly understanding different points of view in the midst of team discussions, we must be willing to look at the world through the mental filters of others.



Self-Awareness Is Essential To Effective Teamwork

² These examples were drawn from: http://www.oddee.com/item_96620.aspx