

A detailed illustration of the Nativity scene. The Virgin Mary is seated in the center, holding the infant Jesus on her lap. They are surrounded by Joseph, the three wise men, and shepherds with their sheep. The scene is set in a stable with a star visible in the sky above the manger.

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# Assumptions for Successful Learning-Sharing- Growing

**Peter J Hercock**

**Monaco Business Services**

**Paper presented to NZOQ Annual Conference October 22-24, 2008,  
Queenstown, New Zealand**

## **INTRODUCTION**

*We rely on assumptions to live.*

*We assume the aircraft is really going to Queenstown, the white liquid in the container is milk, the car approaching the intersection from the opposite direction will stop at the red light so we can turn safely to our right in front of that car.*

*Assumptions are at the heart of our learning-sharing-growing. We make assumptions about our own and others' intentions, expectations, trustworthiness, interest in the topic, and about adults as learners. Whether we are conscious of them or not, assumptions impact on learning-sharing-growing.*

*This paper identifies and examines some particular assumptions that lead to successful learning-sharing-growing. By becoming conscious of these assumptions we will be less likely to use any that impact negatively or at worst make an "ass-out-of-you-and-me".*

*Knowing and managing our assumptions as leaders, managers, coaches and trainers can improve the quality of learning-sharing-growing for individuals, groups and the organisation as a whole.*

## **DEFINITIONS**

The key definitions for this paper include assumptions, emotional intelligence, learning-sharing-growing and success.

*Assume:* to accept that something is true without checking or confirming it.

*Assumptions:* are propositions that are taken for granted, as if known to be true.

*Ass* - An offensive term that deliberately insults somebody's intelligence, consideration for them, or general value<sup>6</sup>

*Emotional Intelligence:* the ability to effectively express and manage one's emotions and relationships with others. It is built on three key competencies self-awareness, self-management and self-discipline of one's thinking and emotions<sup>14</sup>.

*Learning-sharing-growing:* Is a free and forthright lifelong exploration of issues, problems, points of view, experiences,

feelings, ideas and relating these to others' viewpoints, experiences, propositions, ... learning to do or be something we were not before. It frequently requires a letting go of a perception or habit an adjustment of our environment, admitting our limitations or inconsistencies. It is change. It is about choice and having choices. It cannot be imposed successfully<sup>4</sup>.

*Success:* Is an achievement of an intent, goal or purpose<sup>6</sup>.

### VALIDATING ASSUMPTIONS

For assumptions to be true they need validating.

James & Constance Messina (2008)<sup>12</sup> remind us that we do check the validity of our assumptions when we apply them – a 'reality check'. Those that are valid tend to go unnoticed as the expected and desired outcomes happen. However, it is usually a memorable experience when an assumption is not confirmed by reality! For example the plane lands in Christchurch, the white liquid is not milk, the car 'runs' the red light and hits us.

As leaders and trainers of learning-sharing-growing experiences, we need to check the validity of our assumptions before we apply them. We can do this – firstly by acknowledging we have them; secondly by naming them and

making them explicit; thirdly by checking if they will deliver our outcomes; fourthly by adapting or replacing those that will not achieve our purposes.

It takes time with good self-awareness and self-management skills or Emotional Intelligence, to stand back and validate our assumptions in this way.

### EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence includes the ability and skill to stand back from your performance, to know your assumptions and evaluate them against your desired outcomes and end results. Empathy is a quality underpinning this intelligence.

Stephen Xavier (2005)<sup>14</sup> and Daniel Goleman (1998)<sup>10</sup> in describing emotional intelligence include these three ideas:

- Self-awareness as the ability to recognise one's own moods, emotions, beliefs or thinking and motives.
- Self-management is the skill to focus on what will be the best 'response' for the other person, yourself, your organisation and the overall situation and result. Standing back, even for a few seconds, to decide on your response.
- Self-discipline is needed to prioritise your emotions and thinking to focus on your goal or end result.

### CHOOSING ASSUMPTIONS FOR SUCCESS

So choosing and validating assumptions for successful learning-sharing-growing requires of us a level of emotional intelligence. We may have to discard ones that proved unfounded or no longer valid and taken on new ones that enable successful achievement of our desired outcomes – all in the interest of others learning, sharing and growing.

This paper focuses on three interrelated groups of assumptions that have been validated in reality and are at the foundation of many current workplace ideas and practices about learning.

**The first group** are from Malcolm S. Knowles.

Chris Lee (1998)<sup>11</sup>, in an article about Malcolm S. Knowles 1913 -1997 considered by many as the father of adult education, draws attention to Malcolm's five basic assumptions about adults as learners:

1. **Self-concept.** Adults have a deep psychological need to be self-directing. They resent and resist situations that do not allow for self-direction - for example courses in which the trainer and the design push trainees into the dependent role of children.
2. **Experience.** Adults have accumulated a reservoir of experience that serves as a resource for learning, as well as a broad base to which to relate and build on new learning.
3. **Readiness to learn.** Adults become ready to learn things that they need to know or to be able to do in order to fulfill their role in society - that of worker, spouse, parent, etc. In other words, they need to know 'why' they need to learn and how the learning will help them.
4. **Problem centred focus in learning.** Adults seek the skills or knowledge they need to apply to real-life problems they face.
5. **Motivation.** Adults are more motivated to learn by internal factors, such as increased self-esteem, than they are by external rewards like pay rises and promotions.

**The second group** is from Gerald Pine & Peter Horne (1969)<sup>13</sup> who describe thirteen assumptions that are either principles or conditions for learning in Adult Education. They include these principles:

Learning is an experience which occurs inside the learner and is activated by the learner.

People learn what they want to learn, see what they want to see, and hear what they want to hear. Learning cannot be imposed.



- Learning is a cooperative and collaborative process.
- One of the richest resources for learning is the learner.
- The process of learning is emotional as well as intellectual.
- The processes of problem solving and learning are highly unique and individual.

Conditions for Learning includes an atmosphere:-

- Which encourages people to be active and take part.
- Which emphasises the uniquely personal and subjective nature of learning.
- In which people can make mistakes.
- In which people are encouraged to trust in themselves as well as in external sources.
- Where people feel they are respected and are accepted.

The **third group** comes from my own practice in leading learning-sharing-growing meetings and are founded in the assumptions in the first two groups.

1. The brain that does the working does the learning – involve people.
2. People choose to learn – help them choose. Build their confidence.
3. Adults learn from what they know already, connect and build from what they know.
4. Start by treating the person as an equal with knowledge and skills already but needing to know and willing to learn new information.
5. Assume that every person present will give of his or her best.
6. Learning also occurs from around the periphery of the context not only from the leader.
7. People will remember what they have said and done more than they will remember what you have said even when what you say is brilliant! Get them naming what they are learning and saying it to others.
8. People learn from THEIR questions - so create situations for people to ask, clarify and answer their questions. Until a person's questions are answered they cannot take the next step in learning very easily.
9. Don't move people from a listening mode into expecting them to ask questions immediately – make a gap – prepare them and pause.
10. Summarise what they are learning frequently in different ways during the session. Appeal to whole person's ability to learn - hearing, sight, smell, feelings, touch.
11. An overview is essential – how does/where does this new information fit into the big picture? Begin with the End – make it the reference point throughout.

12. People must have and know a first step towards change before they can.
13. Praise and encourage all the way through the learning process – what may seem a small step to you could be a big step for them.
14. Adults learn best by 'doing' – trying out and putting into practice as soon as possible. Encourage them.
15. Feedback that is constructive, consistent, specific, relevant and affirming is best and will lead to the behaviour wanted.
16. People have different learning styles – hearing, seeing, doing etc – and will vary in how long it takes them to learn and change behaviours. Normal is everyone!
17. Show and illustrate one step at a time – as much as the learner can handle. Get them to do it and explain to you why they are doing it. When they understand 'why' it makes it easier for them. Praise and encourage them.
18. Repetition is the key to leaning and training – sometimes new information needs to be heard at least six different times before it becomes part of a person and can influence their behaviour. Encourage them.
19. Assume that you will need to give instructions three times.
20. Make sure you are sincere – your genuine concern and care for the people you are working with your intent will 'speak' loudly.
21. Whatever is going on in your mind is what you are attracting.
22. We are like magnets - like attract like. You become AND attract what you think.
23. People think about what they don't want and attract more of the same.
24. You attract your dominant thoughts. Choose your thoughts carefully.
25. The quality of your listening will evoke the words.

### CONCLUSION

Clearly, there are many forces and influences at work when people are learning-sharing-growing. Improving their experience is not as simple as only making changes to your assumptions. However, your assumptions about learning-sharing-growing will impact dramatically on the way you work with others, your expectations and the type learning processes you will use.

Come to know and compare your current assumptions with those that have a success focus. Choose to use them. Be aware of and avoid any assumptions that leave "u-and-me" feeling worse, put down and marginalised.

Try applying these criteria for testing your learning-sharing-growing assumptions:

- How will it enhance their learning-sharing-growing?
- How will it enable the key people to be in charge of their own learning-sharing-growing?
- How will it allow them to use their experience, reflect on it and build new knowledge and skills?
- Will it enable them to resolve a real-life problem they face?
- How will it enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence?
- Will all participants be able to contribute their way?

Knowing, validating and managing our assumptions as leaders, managers, coaches and trainers can improve the quality and success of learning-sharing-growing for individuals, groups and the organisation as a whole.

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