

Assume Nothing

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When I moved to Hong Kong almost five years ago, I was surprised at the behaviour of some sales people.

For example, in one computer mall, I was looking for a UBS memory stick for my computer, so I asked the sales person to help me find one that would suit my needs. He found me a stick that matched my specifications, and the price was clearly stated on the box.

I thought for a while, wondering if it was what I really needed. The sales person interrupted by saying, "Oh, and you get a 10 per cent discount."

I didn't ask for a discount. In fact, I didn't expect one. Price wasn't the main criterion for me. More important was that the product matched my needs. A 10 or 20 per cent higher or lower price didn't matter.

But once I'd decided to take the product, I happily accepted the discount. Was it necessary for the sales person to offer me a discount? Absolutely not.

You see, when I didn't immediately say that I'd take the device, he wrongly assumed I hesitated because of the price.

How often do you make assumptions and how often do they prove to be wrong or land you in trouble?

In today's fast-paced world, it's impossible to communicate without assumptions. The question is how safe those assumptions are. When should we be particularly mindful about our assumptions, and how can

Assume Nothing

we deal with them better to minimise, if not avoid, miscommunication?

If you want to become a better communicator, you need to become more sensitive about your own – and, perhaps, other people’s – assumptions.

I find it useful to deal with assumptions in two ways.

First, I try minimising wrong assumptions. This is useful during important conversations, such as job interviews. The key is to first become aware of your assumptions. Before you say anything that might be decisive, check if you might have any underlying assumptions that aren’t safe.

For example, if a potential employer asks about your strengths, you might assume that what’s important are your qualifications and experience.

But that’s just an assumption. Maybe it’s more important if you’re a good team player or that you possess a high self-drive. You may have these qualities but not talk about them because of your wrong assumptions.

If you want to play it safe, you should first clarify if your assumption is correct. It takes three steps to do this.

1) Become aware that you’ve made an assumption.

Check if it’s a safe assumption. If it’s not safe enough, then simply

Assume Nothing

ask. In this example, you could ask the interviewer if you should talk about strengths related to your background or about certain traits and characteristics that you consider particularly strong.

2) The second strategy I use is to identify and deal with wrong assumptions.

Checking and clarifying all our assumptions would be too time consuming. That's OK, as long as we develop a sensitivity about wrong assumptions. What I mean is that it's useful to be able to sense when we've made a wrong assumption.

3) To do this successfully, however, we need to closely monitor the verbal and non-verbal responses we get.

For instance, I recently said to one of my friends that I found his new hairstyle really interesting. It was meant as a compliment. I had assumed that "interesting" would have a positive connotation for him. But from his facial expression I could tell (another assumption, but quite a safe one) that he wasn't pleased. Obviously, "interesting" didn't sound attractive to him.

When you notice that an assumption appears wrong, it's important to respond right away. Before explaining what you meant, first apologise and acknowledge the other person's feelings. Only when you feel that the other person is ready to listen to your explanations, should you share them.

In most cases, wrong assumptions aren't major problems as long as

Assume Nothing

we become aware of them and take appropriate action right away. However, in some critical situations, assumptions should be minimised. This requires self-awareness, which can be developed by monitoring yourself.

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Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to assist his clients in becoming excellent leaders for the benefit of all stakeholders. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of over 100 articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" (see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm>) which got published in August 2005. Charlie's articles got printed in publications like Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today, SCMP, Effective Executive and CareerTimes.

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