

Advanced English 9 CP

Audino in Collaboration with Unterreiner

“The Way Things Are: How Assumptions Get in Our Way”

By Heather Adams, Director of Marketing

In their book *Unleashing the Power of Unconditional Respect: Transforming Law Enforcement and Police Training*, authors Jack Colwell and Chip Huth write:

We automatically tend to assume the following:

The way I see something is the way it is.

The way I feel about someone is the way he or she is.

The way I remember an event is the way it was.

If you disagree with me, you are stupid, a liar, or psychotic (disconnected from reality).

The irony is that this assumptive thought base (all problems and misunderstandings are external to me) IS the apex of self-imposed ignorance, deception, and even psychosis. Probably the only reason it is not considered pathological is that it is endemic.

Full disclosure: Jack Colwell is the director of Arbinger’s public safety practice. Chip Huth is a senior consultant for Arbinger and a major in the Kansas City, Missouri, police department.

In this post, I’d like to explore this idea of assumptions. Why do we make them? When are they helpful, and when are they problematic?

Assumptions are Everywhere

While driving last week, someone passed me—quite quickly—in the right-hand lane. (For you British-heritage drivers, faster drivers are supposed to pass on the left in the United States.)

That was an unsafe, overconfident, law-flaunting individual in the other car, wasn’t it?

Years ago, I had a boss who critiqued small details in the briefs and documents I prepared.

She really didn't like me. I couldn't do anything right in her eyes!

My coworker and I have an ongoing disagreement about the best way to prepare for the events we attend.

He really doesn't know what he's talking about.

In these examples, I assumed—I was convinced—that the way I saw the situation (or the person) was the only way things could possibly be.

Have similar situations come up in your life? In those situations, what did you know about the way things were? What was the truth, in your eyes?

Could there have been another way to see?

Why We Assume

We make assumptions because they are an efficient way to process the world.

As one Yale neurobiology professor explained, the brain's vast neural network requires huge amounts of energy to keep it running:

There are over one hundred billion cells in our brain and each of them makes over ten thousand connections with other brain cells. While the large number of possible combinations of cell connections allows for higher-ordered thinking, this is a big problem evolutionarily in terms of energy cost...Therefore, the brain has to encode things efficiently to save energy.

One way our brain saves energy is by making assumptions. We draw on our past experiences to find patterns in how the world works. When we encounter new situations, we apply these patterns—or assumptions—to the new environment.

This process saves us the energy of analyzing each situation completely anew. And it's often quite useful! I can assume, for example, that last week's work attire will be appropriate this week, too. Then I don't need to use much brain power to decide what to wear to work.

When Assumptions Are Problematic

As Jack Colwell and Chip Huth point out, assumptions start causing problems when we believe our way of interpreting a given situation is the only way to interpret that situation...and furthermore, that anyone who does not see things our way is somehow

“less than.” They’re uninformed, stupid, or just flat wrong.

When it comes to human interactions, every individual brings their own experiences and background to the table to inform how they see things. It is almost always a mistake to assume that our way of seeing is the only way to see.

Furthermore, when we add judgment to our assumptions and begin labeling those who disagree with us, we invite conflict. Imagine being on the receiving end of a judgment-laced comment based on an assumption. For example, you’re in conversation with someone about an event you both experienced and the other person says, “I’m absolutely positive X happened. You’re mistaken.”

How would you be inclined to respond? What type of relationship is the other person inviting you into?

But how many times do we find ourselves doing this very same thing?

Curiosity: The Way Out of Problematic Assumptions

To help ourselves avoid making problematic assumptions, we can get deeply, genuinely curious about the situation or person we’re encountering. We can ask ourselves questions like:

What might be going on for the other person?

How might they be seeing things?

What else could be true?

Simply asking questions like these helps us stay open to the possibility that our truth isn’t the only truth. With this openness, we automatically believe:

The way I see something is one way of seeing.

The way I feel about someone is the way I feel.

The way I remember an event is my memory of that event.

