

Your Colleagues Often DON'T Think Like You Think

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Have you heard of the “false consensus effect”? Probably not, because it’s one of those rather obscure psychological terms that is not part of our daily vocabulary. However, the concept is one that insidiously seduces leaders into behaviors that hurt their organizations and even specific individuals.

Just what is the “false consensus effect”? Let’s break it down. Unexpected outcomes occur because you have a characteristically human presumption that you are representative of the rest of the population. That is, you assume that most other people, being logical and rational as you are, have similar opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and values. You imagine that in any given situation, they would behave as you would.

Unfortunately for you and others affected by you, this subconscious, timesaving assumption is usually wrong. When you evaluate it consciously, you realize that your thinking and behaviors don’t represent a consensus of all other people. Their perspectives and experiences are not just like yours.

When making decisions, however, the presumption allows you to operate essentially on autopilot. “So what’s wrong with that?” you might ask. “How does this concept hurt me as a leader?”

Because the false consensus assumption is hidden from view, it is rarely identified as a contributor to less-than-excellent practice in your organization. Let me identify several examples.

Delegation. When I work with organizations, I hear complaints of poor delegation. As I dig into the specifics, I often find that some important expectation was not passed along. No one intentionally withholds information when delegating a responsibility. However, you often presume the person accepting the task knows the circumstances and will act as you would act. This assumption causes you to shortcut the very explicit sharing of information the individual needs to perform the task.

Feedback. When you believe that what you are doing is proper and in the best interests of the company and the people involved, you don’t slow down to ask for feedback. Since you are not hearing any complaints, you presume that what you are doing is acceptable and supported by the people involved. Why ask for feedback if you expect you will learn nothing new? You presume that the people who might provide that feedback would themselves be taking the very actions you are currently taking.

Servant leadership. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” presumes that others think and want the same things you think and want. However, it is far better service to give unto others that which they prefer. Many times, they want something different from what you would want. This applies to both your external, paying customers and to your internal customers, your employees. To presume that they want what you want often delivers something far less satisfying than what they prefer.

Developing future leaders. Do you truly know what each person under your authority desires as far as future career growth? When was the last time you asked? Have you explicitly looked for opportunities to develop your future leaders in ways they desire? Or do you never think about intentionally developing their future leadership skills, presuming their development will occur naturally or assuming their aspirations are similar to what yours were? Unfortunately, I’ve encountered many managers who were pushed into positions of responsibility that they never wanted; they accepted the positions to please their bosses. Many others, of course, are never encouraged to grow beyond their current competencies.

Effective organizations thrive when the above activities are robust. How can you minimize the influence of the false consensus effect? First, be aware that your brain has a tendency to simplify the way it processes information. (Look up and study “cognitive bias.”) To prevent assumptive mistakes, be intentional about seeking the perspectives of others and revealing your own thought processes.

Dennis Hooper is an Executive Coach in Atlanta, helping organizations build future leaders, improve processes, and establish healthy cultures. Contact Dennis at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com or call 404-575-3050. His leadership articles are at www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives.