

Making Assumptions Within an Organization

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Introduction

Organizations cannot operate without assumptions. People must interpret incomplete information, anticipate what colleagues will do, and decide which facts deserve attention. The problem begins when provisional judgments become invisible certainties. An assumption may concern a person's motivation, the meaning of silence, the urgency of a deadline, the proper use of authority, or what counts as reliable evidence. Repeated assumptions become routines, and routines can become culture. The six-month internship I completed in a security firm provided a useful setting for observing this process because security work combines hierarchy, uncertainty, confidentiality, time pressure, and judgments about risk. The experience showed that assumptions can support coordination, but untested assumptions can also produce bias, rumor, conflict, and unsafe decisions (Schein & Schein, 2017; Argyris, 1990).

Assumptions About Reality and Truth

An organization needs a shared method for deciding what is real and what will be accepted as true. Some decisions rely on direct observation, some on expert analysis, some on authority, and others on group consensus. In the security firm, a report from a supervisor often carried more weight than the same observation from a junior employee. This hierarchy could speed action, but it also created the risk that status would be confused with accuracy. External reality included events that could be independently checked, such as access logs or camera recordings. Social reality included negotiated meanings, such as whether a behavior was "professional." Individual reality included personal experience and interpretation (Schein & Schein, 2017).

A disciplined organization distinguishes facts, interpretations, and predictions. For example, "the employee arrived ten minutes late" is an observation; "the employee is irresponsible" is an interpretation; "the employee will fail in a critical incident" is a prediction. When these levels are collapsed, a minor event becomes a permanent identity judgment. Managers should ask what evidence would change their conclusion, whether alternative explanations have been considered, and whether the same behavior is judged differently across gender, religion, ethnicity, or rank (Argyris, 1990).

Assumptions About Time and Space

Time communicates priorities. Organizations differ in whether they focus on immediate performance, long-term continuity, or lessons from the past. Security operations require rapid response, yet an exclusive focus on the immediate can discourage prevention, training, and reflection. The internship revealed that urgent requests regularly displaced important but less visible tasks. This created a cycle in which teams reacted to recurring problems without addressing underlying causes. A healthier time orientation preserves capacity for after-action review, maintenance, professional development, and scenario planning (Schein & Schein, 2017).

Space also expresses organizational assumptions. Office location, seating, access restrictions, closed doors, and meeting arrangements signal who is trusted and who may speak. Physical distance may protect confidential work, but unnecessary separation can reinforce status barriers. In remote and hybrid organizations, digital space performs the same function: permissions, channels, response expectations, and visibility determine who receives information. Leaders should design space around legitimate security and coordination needs rather than using privacy as a default justification for exclusion (Schein & Schein, 2017).

Assumptions About Human Nature, Activity, and Relationships

Managers often hold implicit theories about whether employees are trustworthy, motivated, competent, self-interested, or dependent on control. A leader who assumes people avoid work may rely heavily on surveillance and punishment. Employees then conceal mistakes and limit initiative, appearing to confirm the original assumption. A leader who assumes good intentions without establishing controls can be equally unrealistic. Responsible management combines trust with verification, clear standards, and proportionate accountability (Schein & Schein, 2017; Schneider, 1995).

Assumptions about activity concern the ideal relationship between people and their environment. Some cultures value doing, competition, and measurable output; others value development, reflection, or maintaining relationships. Security work can reward vigilance and decisive action, but constant alertness without recovery increases fatigue and error. Assumptions about relationships determine whether authority should be hierarchical, collaborative, individualistic, or group-oriented. The firm's formal hierarchy was necessary during incidents, yet training and problem solving improved when junior staff could challenge plans respectfully (Schein & Schein, 2017).

Religion, Gender, and Other Identity Assumptions

Religion was a frequent topic during the internship, but conclusions were often based on stereotypes rather than individual behavior. Coworkers sometimes inferred availability, values, dietary practices, or political views from a religious identity. These shortcuts could create exclusion even when no hostile intent existed. The same mechanism affected assumptions about gender: confidence might be interpreted as leadership in one employee and aggression in another. Identity categories can be relevant when employees request accommodations or report unequal treatment, but they should not be used as substitutes for evidence about competence, commitment, or character.

How Assumptions Become Organizational Culture

Assumptions spread through stories, jokes, promotion decisions, informal warnings, and explanations of past success or failure. New employees learn which questions are safe, which mistakes are forgiven, and whose account is believed. When a rumor reaches management and triggers action without verification, it teaches employees that informal narratives have institutional force. Conversely, when leaders investigate fairly and correct misinformation openly, they establish a norm of evidence and procedural justice (Schein & Schein, 2017; Schneider, 1995).

Culture is therefore not changed by telling people to “stop assuming.” Leaders must alter the processes that allow assumptions to harden. Recruitment criteria should be job-related; evaluation standards should be explicit; incident reviews should separate causes from blame; and promotion decisions should be documented. Employees need protected channels for raising concerns, and managers should acknowledge uncertainty rather than presenting every judgment as settled fact (Schein & Schein, 2017).

Testing Assumptions in Practice

A practical method begins by naming the conclusion and tracing it backward. What action is being considered? What belief supports it? What observations support the belief? Which data were selected or ignored? This resembles the ladder-of-inference approach: people move rapidly from observations to meaning, assumptions, conclusions, and action. Slowing the process creates space for alternatives (Argyris, 1990).

- State the observable facts separately from interpretation.
- Ask at least one plausible alternative explanation.
- Check whether the standard is applied consistently across people and groups.
- Invite the affected person to provide information before making an adverse decision.
- Use small tests or pilots when a belief concerns a process rather than a person.
- Record the decision and revisit it when new evidence appears.

- Correct rumors publicly enough to repair their organizational effect.

Psychological safety is important because assumptions remain unchallenged when employees fear embarrassment or retaliation. Safety does not mean the absence of standards. It means that questions, uncertainty, and good-faith disagreement can be expressed while accountability remains clear. Leaders model this by asking, “What might I be missing?” and by rewarding employees who identify weak assumptions before they become costly errors.

Reflection on the Internship

The internship taught me that assumptions are most dangerous when they feel ordinary. They can fill information gaps quickly, but speed should not be mistaken for truth. I also learned that managers’ assumptions have greater consequences because they influence assignments, evaluations, discipline, and access to opportunity. The appropriate response is neither to eliminate intuition nor to investigate every minor thought endlessly. It is to match the level of verification to the potential harm of the decision. A casual scheduling preference requires less evidence than an accusation affecting employment or reputation.

Decision Biases That Reinforce Assumptions

Several predictable biases make organizational assumptions resistant to correction. Confirmation bias directs attention toward evidence that supports an existing belief. Fundamental attribution error encourages managers to explain another person’s mistake through character while explaining their own through circumstances. Availability bias makes vivid recent events appear more common than they are. In-group favoritism increases trust in people who resemble decision makers, while attribution based on gender, religion, accent, or job rank can turn stereotypes into self-fulfilling expectations.

These biases do not mean that every judgment is invalid. They mean that high-impact decisions need safeguards. Structured interviews, predefined evaluation criteria, independent review, and comparison of similar cases reduce the influence of intuition that cannot be examined. Data should support judgment rather than disguise bias with numbers.

From Individual Reflection to Organizational Learning

An employee can test a personal assumption by asking questions and seeking evidence, but some patterns require institutional action. If multiple employees report that one group receives fewer assignments or harsher discipline, the organization should analyze records rather than treating each

concern as isolated. Learning systems should aggregate near misses, complaints, turnover, and process failures while protecting confidentiality.

Leaders should close the feedback loop. When employees share information but never hear what changed, they learn that voice has no effect. A concise explanation—what was examined, what was found, what action is being taken, and what cannot be disclosed—builds trust without exposing private details.

Practical Example

Suppose a supervisor assumes that an employee who rarely speaks in meetings lacks initiative. Before acting, the supervisor can examine written contributions, completed assignments, meeting design, language comfort, and whether interruptions prevent participation. The employee may be highly engaged but prefer preparation and written analysis. A fair response could include advance agendas and several channels for input, followed by evaluation of actual contribution.

This example shows that testing an assumption can improve both equity and performance. It replaces a personality label with observable behavior and gives the organization better information about how to use talent.

Conclusion

Underlying assumptions shape how organizations define reality, use time and space, interpret human nature, and structure relationships. They can support coordination when they are explicit, evidence-based, and open to revision. They become harmful when stereotypes, hierarchy, or rumor turns them into unquestioned truth. Organizations can improve by separating observation from interpretation, documenting standards, inviting challenge, testing beliefs, and creating psychologically safe channels for correction. The most mature culture is not one without assumptions; it is one that knows how to examine them before they control decisions (Argyris, 1990; Schein & Schein, 2017; Schneider, 1995).

References

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