Challenge Paper Assumptions Guide[1]

The power of assumptions

The assumptions section of a Challenge Paper is often noted by our clients as the most powerful part of the paper, if not the Challenge Dialogue. Here's a poignant quote about the power of beliefs and assumptions.

> *"Assumptions guide how we behave, what we plan, and what we execute. They provide the rationale for our intended outcomes, our best-laid plans, and our expectations for success. Assumptions are deemed accurate when we achieve our intended outcomes; they are questioned when results differ from expectations. Assumptions are the basis for our beliefs, behaviors, theories of action, and change strategy."*

> From Chapter 1 "The Power of Beliefs and Assumptions" Becoming a Learning System
> by Stephanie Hirsh, Kay Psencik, & Frederick Brown
> https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/chapter1.pdf

Initially, members of the Organizing Team often struggle identifying and stating their assumptions. One way to get started is to reflect the Key Challenge and your Expected Outcomes of the Challenge Dialogue and jot down quickly some immediate thoughts using the prefix "I am assuming that… ." Don't worry about having to get them exactly stated for the moment. It is also helpful to consider your assumptions in relation to a particular aspect of your challenge. Here's some examples:

- What assumptions are you making about the subject matter and geographic scope of the challenge?

- What assumptions are you making about the expertise that will need to be included; assumptions about how you think change will happen (theory of change) – interventions, outcomes (pathways of change)?

- What assumptions are you making about the benefits of the solution you are seeking?

- What assumptions are you making about the current issues or barriers that are holding back progress on the challenge?

- What assumptions are you making about who needs to be engaged in the Dialogue?

- What assumptions are you making about how the anticipated solution will be implemented?

In the Challenge Paper, the Assumptions section is your opportunity to say the important things that "go without saying." The purpose of stating unspoken assumptions here is to test whether other team members may be operating more or less from same or different assumptions. You do this, so you don't waste time in endless "wheel-spinning" or "talking past each other", which normally results from this kind of disconnect.

In his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990) Peter Senge reminds us that team learning is enabled by open dialogue and one important skill during this dialogue is for team members to suspend assumptions and enter into the mode of genuinely thinking together – this is the CDS principle of co-creation.

The way in which we view the world greatly influences the way in which we respond to that world and to specific activities with it. This means that our priority setting, our action initiatives, and our leadership behaviours are driven by assumptions we carry in our head. Unfortunately, in most situations these

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[1] Based largely on excerpts from CDS Training Program "Module 4, Step 4 — Seek Participant Input."

assumptions are hidden from view. Sometimes we are aware of our personal assumptions and just assume that everyone else on our team or at our meeting understands your assumptions and agrees with them. At other times we are not conscious of our own assumptions let alone those of others, even though these assumptions greatly influence our behaviour and actions. So, helping groups get their different assumptions out on the table so they can be reviewed, discussed and revised, if necessary, is an important process in nurturing collaboration to accomplish complex tasks.

Getting alignment around assumptions is a starting point. The list normally ends up being a mixed bag of statements about the nature of the Key Challenge, the approach to be taken in dealing with it, how the team will work together, what it wants to accomplish. Don't worry too much about whether some background statements should rather be assumption statements or vice versa. People have a chance to react to them whatever category you have initially placed them in. The list itself will seldom appear in any final documentation of Dialogue results, but the assumptions will be woven through everything the team does and reports on. Below are some example assumptions.

When we seek feedback on the assumptions in the Challenge Paper we typically ask three questions of the Dialogue participant:

- *Which assumptions require more clarification for you to understand?*
- *Which assumptions do you strongly disagree with?*
- *What assumptions would you add to the list?*

It will be important in subsequent steps of the Dialogue to remember that this is not about defending your assumptions, but rather about expanding your thinking and creating enough common ground to make effective collaboration possible. It is important to note that the original set of assumptions will evolve over the course of the Dialogue. Some assumptions may even mature to become an operating principle.

Other references of potential interest

- Strategic Assumptions: The Essential (and Missing) Element of Your Strategic Plan by Mark Hollingsworth. November – December 2008 Ivy Business Journal. https://iveybusinessjournal.com/publication/strategic-assumptions-the-essential-and-missing-element-of-your-strategic-plan/
- Identifying Assumptions [when developing a theory of change]. Center for Theory of Change. http://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/how-does-theory-of-change-work/example/identifying-assumptions/
- Research Assumption by Dr. Jayesh Patidar. SlideShare. 2013. https://www.slideshare.net/drjayeshpatidar/research-assumption

Example assumptions

General examples

1. Changes in the external environment mean that "business as usual" is no longer an option for us—we must change how we do things.
2. Realizing this opportunity will require collaboration among several groups that are accustomed to operating in silos.
3. This is a long-term effort, but we'll need to show some quick wins in order to sustain momentum.

4. Getting participants to review and react to the assumptions of others and then to surface and articulate their own assumptions is one of the critical process steps in helping groups to prepare to collaborate. As the Dialogue evolves, you may find that some assumptions can be transformed into guiding principles. Later on, these may be used to underpin an emerging strategy and action plan.

Specific examples

Carbon as an Asset Challenge Dialogue - About the market for carbon dioxide

- **A problem that can't be ignored:** Access to affordable, reliable energy is critical to growth and global stability. Fossil fuels will be part of that mix for some time yet, even as renewable and alternative sources are developed. With growing public concern over climate change and the environmental impact of carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels, reducing emissions will continue to be a key challenge for the energy industry to address.

Greater Victoria Community Literacy Challenge Dialogue -   About the nature of and working in literacy

- **Literacy is the essential skill.** It is the cornerstone of human capital development – the foundational competence upon which the acquisition of other essential skills depends. It is difficult for those with low literacy to train or retrain.

Greater Victoria Local Immigration Partnership Challenge Dialogue - About newcomers and community

- **We need to listen and involve both newcomers and established community members** in policy planning. All points of view and types of experience are relevant. For example, recent immigrants and refugees may have faced barriers to becoming part of the community and will have ideas about how to make future newcomers feel welcome. On the other hand, established organizations, groups and individuals may know more about the inner workings of the community, and can better assist in identifying and breaking down those barriers.

Health Alliance in Southern Sudan to Translate Technological Revolution into Social Revolution Challenge Dialogue – About what's driving the early project planning

- **The new program must be big and truly innovative** and not just a continuation/expansion of what we have been doing. The idea is something worth dreaming about - based on the earth being flat and Wikinomics coming fast. The goal would be to deploy establish our own mobile equipment for comprehensive access to the internet, connecting all Community Health Workers, County Health Departments, Training Schools and hospitals. Our purpose is to disseminate health and development knowledge, including basic and continuing education and sustainable development information

Design Considerations for a Proposed Earth Observation Ecosystem Services Initiative - About the high-level drivers for ecosystem services

- **The demands for ecosystem services is sufficiently high** in some areas / cases that trade-offs among these services are becoming prevalent. In effect there is an ecosystem supply and demand gap.

Building the Case for a Global Vaccine Network; a multi-stakeholder consortium to develop a platform for evaluating vaccine antigen delivery technologies

- **Recognition of priority for breakthrough vaccines:** We assume that there now is substantial recognition among policy makers, development agencies, regional and local governments and some influential business leaders that the development and deployment of breakthrough vaccines against intractable diseases (both animal and human) is a high priority.