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AA-3

Analytical Ability

Assessment item: **Separates “assumptions” from “hard evidence” in gathering data.**

Assumptions are at the root of most mistakes, yet our thinking is riddled with them. We have all experienced some frustration in communication because someone assumes information—“assumed” that the arrangements would be the same as last week, “assumed” that the time would be the same, or “assumed” that everyone has understood, etc. While this kind of confusion is irritating and frustrating, it is usually not as costly as making a decision or solving a problem based on information or assumptions that have not been challenged!

We are rarely in possession of every piece of relevant information needed to resolve issues. The temptation is strong to complete the gaps in our data by filling these “data holes” with incomplete or speculative information based on assumptions—sometimes quite reasonable assumptions, but assumptions nevertheless.

The danger is that the pieces of data based on assumptions will be mistaken for hard evidence if they are not sorted, classified, and clearly marked to remind us. If we resolve the issue relying on the assumed evidence, we have probably increased the risk considerably. That might be something we can live with because of other factors, but we should at least be aware of the risks involved in not thoroughly reviewing the evidence.

Some suggestions for enhancing performance in this area are as follows:

1. Use a visual method to display data as it is gathered. Mark assumptions or loose and untested data (versus hard or intangible evidence) with different-colored stickers or some other way to graphically distinguish these two categories of data.
2. Develop a checklist of criteria in order to verify whether or not the data can be classified as “hard evidence.”
3. Work through the “assumptions” list to see if you can reclassify some information as factual.
4. Take all pieces of data based on assumption or calculated guesses and mark them with an “R” to clearly convey that an element of risk surrounds actions based on this information.
5. Before arriving at a solution, check to see how dependent your decisions are on assumptions and generalizations, as opposed to hard facts and evidence. If they are too dependent upon the former, you may want to gather more hard data.

