

Making Assumptions

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My eighth grade US history teacher used to say that assumptions can make an “ass” out of “u” and “me.” He also used to say that we shouldn’t repeat that to our parents. I often think of that play on words when my assumptions turn out to be false. When this happens, I inevitably vow to myself that I will stop assuming things to be true. Yet, in practice, I find that to be extremely difficult.

To assume is to take something for granted as a fact. We live in a world of assumptions that remain largely untested. We take them to be true based on conclusions that are drawn from what we observe. The interpretation of what we observe is determined by our past experiences. In short, our beliefs are created and limited by our personal experience.

To use a personal example, until recently my parents were the owners and managers of a small bakery. My grandparents owned it before them. The bakery was a place where my extended family and much of the community met daily to have coffee and talk. It was a typical small-town business of the time – independently owned and worth much more to the community than the money it brought in. One of the busiest weeks they ever had was the week after September 11, 2001. People needed a comfortable place to talk to one another.

My experience was created in this environment. It is no surprise then that I tend to patronize small, locally-owned businesses. I appreciate the originality, personality, and sense of history that can often be found when you get away from the highway. I also assume that most people value these businesses as well. Yet, development trends continue to prove me wrong.

The conclusion I draw – that supporting independent, locally-owned business is more fulfilling personally and better for the community – is not the same conclusion that other people have come to. Our conclusions are different because our experiences are different.

If I were to debate a person that came to a different conclusion (e.g., that supporting the new Super Wal-Mart, Chili’s, etc. is more fulfilling personally and better for the community), it is quite possible that we would both feel that: 1) our beliefs are the truth, 2) the truth is obvious, 3) our beliefs are based on real data, and 4) the data we select are the real data.

The same analysis can be applied to segments of the population that hold faulty assumptions about Wisconsin’s forests (e.g. that trees are not a renewable resource, that the state owns the most forestland, and that the quality and quantity of forestland is decreasing). What is the experience of these individuals? What observations and

conclusions led them to these faulty assumptions? How do people come to such different conclusions?

The process that we use to create a belief is called the “ladder of inference.” At the bottom of the ladder is the observable data (e.g., a recently harvested forest). As we move up the ladder, we begin to make assumptions about the observation (e.g., someone made a lot of money from that timber). The assumptions continue to build upon one another (e.g., the forest industry took everything they could, and they’ll probably sell it to a developer now and turn it into a parking lot). This continues until we reach the top of the ladder – our conclusion (e.g., trees are not a renewable resource).

The mental process happens so quickly, it often goes unnoticed. In each step up the ladder, we make another assumption based on our belief system. Over time, we begin to select data based on our beliefs, look for observations that reinforce our beliefs, and dismiss data and observations that run contrary to what we believe.

If you look, you can see this process happening as we discuss the major issues affecting the forestry community. Next month, I hope to apply these ideas to shed some light on the current discussion about global climate change. Or should I call it global warming?

Have you made any assumptions yet?

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