

## Category Review: Assumption Questions

Assumption questions are the most difficult to learn and some of the most valuable in the Precision Questioning Toolkit. They are challenging for two reasons. Few of us have received any training about assumptions in our formal education. To make matters worse, assumptions are, by their very nature, difficult to discern, particularly in fast-paced discussion. In Precision Questioning we define an assumption as a *hidden* part of a statement that is *essential* to its truth. It's easy to see why questions that expose assumptions are so valuable: they help us discover a statement's hidden cogs - cogs which, if broken, will crash our thinking.

### The Nine Categories of Assumptions

The best way to build skill at recognizing assumptions is to learn how to identify common categories. Here are the most useful categories, with an example of each.

1. An **existence** assumption is an assumption that something exists.

Example: When a person says, "The solution to the morale problem is..." they are assuming that a solution exists. They are also assuming that a morale problem exists.

2. A **uniqueness** assumption is an assumption that there is only one of something.

In the above example, it is assumed that there is one solution and one problem.

3. A **measurement** assumption is an assumption that something is measurable.

Example: Someone claims that they have found the solution to a morale problem. This assumes that there is an accurate way of measuring changes in morale.

4. A **possibility** assumption is an assumption that something is possible, or feasible.

Example: When somebody says that they are trying to solve a problem, they are assuming that finding a solution is possible, or that under the circumstances it is feasible. It could be that the solution is too expensive, or would take too long to implement, to be a viable solution.

5. A **value** assumption is an assumption that something is good or bad.

Example: When someone says, "This isn't a problem, it's an opportunity," they are trying to put a positive value on what was assumed to have negative value.

6. In our statements to other people we always make **audience** assumptions. These are often about shared meanings, shared values, or shared background.

Example: A team is discussing its marketing strategy for target clients. They are unable to agree. Someone asks, "What assumptions are we making about our target clients?" Suddenly the group realizes that lack of agreement stems from divergent assumptions at this level.

7. Language forces us to categorize. A **category** assumption is an assumption that we have categorized something correctly.

Example: A team leader tells his manager there is a “morale problem” on his team, when it could be that low pay or high turnover is the actual problem.

8. Human thought is guided by similarities or analogies, the vast majority of which are unconscious. These can be expressed in **similarity** assumptions.

Example: A company is trying to create a marketing strategy for Shanghai. Someone says, “As we learned in Beijing... .” This assumes that the two markets are not fundamentally different.

9. A **time constancy** assumption is an assumption that things will stay the same over time.

Example: In 1977, Ken Olsen, the founder and CEO of Digital Equipment Corporation, said, "There is no reason for any individual to have a computer in his home." He assumed that the nature of computers would not change with time.

### Building Skill at Spotting Assumptions

The workbook you received at the PQ workshop contains an exercise called “Practice 20 Assumptions.” This drill is one of the most effective of its kind. Aim for mastery.

Because they are hidden in the cracks of our awareness, spotting assumptions can be very difficult as we speed through everyday thinking. These two exercises will help you slow down and identify new layers of assumptions.

<p><b>Exercise 1.</b> Isolate a statement that is pivotal to an issue you are thinking about. Write it down. Perform an assumption check on it. Focus on assumptions that involve risk or that might be controversial.</p>	<p><b>Exercise 2.</b> In team meetings, managerial reviews, and conversations with customers, look for recurring patterns of assumptions, patterns that are associated with the particular topic.</p>
<p>What is the statement?</p>   <p>What assumptions does it contain?</p>	<p>What is the topic of discussion?</p>   <p>What assumptions do people always seem to be making?</p>