
Do you shoot first and ask questions later?

We make assumptions all the time: yellow lines across the factory floor mean it's safe to walk there; a colleague says you'll have the report by close of business, so you assume you'll have it by 5pm; we assume that the person we are talking to is listening to what we are saying and the idea we are presenting is the one the listener has received.

Assumptions are a necessity in everyday life but there are occasions when unchecked assumptions can compromise workplace safety. Here are three common situations where asking questions before you pull the proverbial trigger can maintain the health and safety of your workplace:

1. Someone approaches you about a co-worker's bad behaviour.
2. You feel such strong emotions towards an event, issue or person that it clouds your better judgement.
3. An initiative or project is not producing the desired result.

In each situation it may appear helpful to act (or react) quickly based on the information at hand, but doing so may result in adverse consequences.

Before you scratch that itchy trigger finger, let us look at each situation and assess what could happen if we don't ask questions, and then identify the questions we need to ask in order to act appropriately.

Co-worker's bad behaviour

Alex comes to you, the health-care manager, to complain that Ralph "isn't doing his job". Alex says that Ralph is supposed to listen and respond to patient feedback. Although it seems that Ralph is listening to the feedback he isn't doing anything about it. Alex feels this is affecting the quality of care that she and her co-workers are able to give.

How should you proceed?

When someone complains about the

behaviour of a third person, managers often respond by taking over the problem. If we were to approach Ralph in this situation without clarifying things first, we could end up disciplining someone unduly.

First, it is necessary to ask Alex:

- Have you tried to get clarity from Ralph directly about what he is doing?
- Can you give me an example of when this situation has happened?
- What would you want Ralph to do differently?
- Have you done anything that you think might have escalated the situation?
- How can I help?

Also, ask yourself:

- Did I witness the behaviour?
- What is Alex asking of me?

By asking these questions you are helping Alex to take responsibility for the way she feels, ensuring her assumptions are reasonable, and helping her decide how to proceed.

Asking these questions also allows you to avoid reacting inappropriately to hearsay and they empower Alex to deal with the situation professionally.

Most importantly, when the governing priority is getting the full scope of a situation before reacting, the health and wellbeing of staff and clients improves.

Strong emotions clouding judgement

Richard and Joe work together on the factory floor operating heavy machinery. They chat all day long but today is different. Richard starts talking on a topic that Joe feels particularly strongly about. Richard is



ask the expert

by Joe Moore



I only wanted to catch the lift... not a virus

unaware of Joe's strong feelings and makes some snide comments, as he always does, assuming that Joe will feel the same way – not so. Joe feels angry and upset, and his first instinct is to take his focus off the heavy machinery that he is operating and put Richard in his place.

How should Joe proceed?

To consider the alternatives, put yourself in Joe's position: you can't stop yourself from experiencing emotions, but you can control how you react to them. Not only must you react professionally, but you need to react safely as well.

Ask yourself:

- Why am I feeling this way?
- Is Richard really trying to offend me?
- What information is Richard missing that may have affected his comments?
- How can I deal with this situation safely?

The conversation Joe has with himself helps him to work out his expectations of Richard and decide if those expectations are realistic. Because of his strong emotions toward the issue, acting based on his initial assumptions could have caused a dangerous situation for him and his co-workers.

Taking the time to think calmly and ask the right questions to keep emotions in check helps keep the workplace safe.

Not producing desired results

Your company is dealing with an ineffective employee-feedback system. The system is intended to provide a way for employees to report unsafe practices or conditions so that measures can be taken to fix things. You've "fixed" the system multiple times but it is obviously still flawed and not being used to its full potential.

How should the company proceed?

The information that is meant to be gathered through the employee-feedback system is integral to maintaining a safe work environment and someone could get seriously hurt if it isn't done properly. Acting on your assumptions so far has failed to fix the system and resulted in some major health and safety concerns.

When solving problems like this, it's imperative to hold a strategy meeting which

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produces results. Prepare for the meeting by asking yourself:

- Who can offer the best insight into this problem?
- What is the best structure for the meeting?
- Do we have a clear understanding of what the problem is?

At the meeting, ask participants:

- What do you think is the primary problem with the system?
- How can we solve this primary problem?
- Who will take responsibility for each step of the action plan?
- Does everyone understand the next steps?

After the meeting, ask yourself:

- Did everyone attend?
- Did we get a clear picture of the whole problem?
- Did we solve the problem?
- If not, have we set a time for a follow-up meeting?
- Do we have a concrete action plan and timeline to move forward?

One person cannot solve a problem that affects a diverse and complex workforce. Time wasted due to one person "fixing" the problem, or an ineffective meeting can translate into serious consequences.

Moral of the story: Assumptions will always be a part of everyday life. The key is remembering to keep the "safety catch" on and ask the right questions before you pull the trigger. Most of the time you'll find that you don't need to take a shot.

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ProActive ReSolutions is a global firm that offers employee training and incident-management services to organisations worldwide. Through these methods, it helps companies create respectful workplaces and reap the benefits of increased productivity and an engaged workforce.

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