

THE POWER OF ASSESSMENTS AND ASSERTIONS



The Outer World and the Inner World

An important distinction that is often overlooked when people communicate with one another is that of assessments and assertions. Assertions are statements of fact; they can be proven true or false with solid evidence, so that there is no question about their veracity. For example, if we said “it is 40 degrees outside,” everyone would agree that we can prove that statement true or false by putting a thermometer outside and seeing what the temperature is. An assessment, on the other hand, is an interpretation we make. Assessments are neither proven true nor false; they are opinions or interpretations. To follow the same example, if we said “it is cold outside” there would be no way to prove our statement true or false because “cold” is relative. A temperature that one person considers cold may be considered neutral or warm by another person—or even by the same person in a different context. In the fall, the first time the temperature drops to 40 degrees I am likely to comment that it is “cold” outside; in the spring, the first time the temperature rises to 40 degrees I am likely to say that it is “warm” outside.

This seems like a very simple distinction, but in fact the differences between the two types of statements may be more subtle than you think. Failing to understand and use this distinction skillfully is a source of significant breakdowns in communication and loss of productivity in organizations.

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One of the key differences between assertions and assessments is that assertions reflect the world outside of us. Their meaning does not depend on a human mind at all—the outside temperature is what it is regardless of whether anyone is thinking about it. Assessments, on the other hand, are a reflection of the emotions and thoughts of the person making the statement. Saying it is “cold” outside reflects how a particular person experiences the air temperature. To hold that an assessment is “true” is therefore not useful—in fact, conflicts and breakdowns in trust often arise because people are unwilling to accept that their assessment is an interpretation they are making, rather than the truth. People will argue endlessly about whether a project “went well” or “went poorly,” without recognizing that neither of these statements is true or false. Each is just an interpretation made from a particular perspective. One person may say the project went badly because the team that carried out the project says they are all exhausted, demoralized, and resentful because of what it took to complete the project. Another person may be looking at the customer experience, and say that the customer is very satisfied and that the project is already leading to more and larger contracts with the customer, and therefore the project went well. Neither person is speaking the “truth” about the project; they are each speaking their interpretation—their assessment—of how the project went, based on their particular values and their point of view.

The realization that assessments reflect the inner world and can reveal more about the person speaking than what it is they are speaking about, can be both humbling and liberating. It is humbling because it means that where we may have once held that we had the “truth,” that we were “right,” we now have to accept that we only have a point of view, and anyone else’s point of view is just as legitimate for them as our point of view is for us. It is liberating because we no longer have to prove our point of view—we can accept that our point of view is entirely legitimate for us, regardless of what others think. Further, we are liberated from the burden of proving others wrong. When someone speaks an assessment with which we don’t agree, we are free to be curious about it and learn why they see things the way they do. We don’t have to give up our own assessment while learning about theirs. What we are learning about is them and how they see things. Their assessments in no way diminish our identity or stature in the world.

A manager in a global distribution business summarized this well when she described her experience with this distinction:

“Prior to my team learning to use assessments effectively our staff meetings sometimes felt like drawn-out arguments. People competed with one another to see who could make the best logical argument so that their assessment (though we didn’t know that word then) would be accepted as ‘right.’ Emotions could get pretty strong, though they were never talked about, and sometimes there was a lot of fallout—resentment and hurt feelings were common, and these sometimes affected people for days. As we developed our ability to recognize and accept assessments for what they were this happened less and less often. We also started to trust each other more, which was a surprise to me—prior to these conversations I had thought our trust level was pretty high. But I understand now that trust is affected by how willing you are to really understand another person—if someone holds back on saying their own ideas in order to understand yours, you start trusting them more. Using assessments effectively has been one of the most important lessons I—and my team—have learned.”

While there is great power in mastering this distinction, doing so can require considerable effort and humility. Key capabilities that we must develop are:

- ▶ Ability to clearly distinguish assessments from assertions—both in our own speaking and in that of others
- ▶ Sufficient self-awareness to notice the assessments we are forming, and notice when we are devoting our attention and energy in a conversation to crafting our rebuttal rather than seeking to understand the person we are talking to (this is where effort comes in)
- ▶ Willingness to give up our belief that our perspective is the “right” one or the “true” one (this is where humility comes in)
- ▶ Willingness and ability to shift our attention to what the other person is saying rather than what we are thinking (requires both effort and humility)

When we learn to see assessments for what they are, accept that our own assessments are just our interpretations, and accept others’ assessments as interpretations that are valid for them, conversations that previously would have led to conflict, resentment, and wasted energy become opportunities for deepening our insight into ourselves and our understanding of the person with whom we are speaking. Conversations about differing assessments can become highly productive because we each learn to see more of the situation than we had previously seen, and the blending of our perspectives can lead to new interpretations and new possibilities—much like blending two colors of paint can yield a new color. Conversations that previously left us feeling drained and estranged from the person we were talking with can leave us feeling energized and aligned.

Assessments, Emotions and Decisions

Given that this is such a simple distinction, and that it is so powerful, it would seem reasonable to expect people to pick it up quickly and put it right to use. However, while it is simple conceptually, developing skill with it is not easy because assessments are deeply tied to our emotions. While it is our intellectual brain that often drives the creation of language, assessments are generated in response to emotional experiences more than intellectual experiences. Consequently, assessments are the meeting place of emotions and language. Our emotional brain operates much faster than our intellectual brain, and will override it in difficult situations. Practice at recognizing and managing our emotional state is therefore essential for becoming skillful with assessments.

Because assessments are so closely coupled to our emotions it requires more than an intellectual analysis to manage our use of assessments. Assessments often feel like assertions—our emotions tell us that our assessments are the *truth*, and we often feel compelled to fight to the bitter end to defend them. That is because our identity—our sense of who we are, and our public image—is both formed and revealed by the assessments we hold. When we state that certain foods are “good” or “bad”; that certain movies, books or television shows are “enjoyable”; that certain politicians “should” be elected; and that certain religions beliefs are “right” or “wrong,” we are creating our sense of ourselves, and are establishing our public image. If someone argues with us about our assessments—especially if they imply that our assessments are “wrong”—we may feel attacked, as though they are saying that there is something wrong with us. While this is not the interpretation we might make intellectually, it is how it can feel—and the felt truth is much more powerful than the thought truth.

This emotional aspect of assessments leads to a profound insight: that every decision we make is based on assessments rather than assertions. Because we live in a world that has placed such high value on the intellect and on data (“just give me the facts”), it is challenging to accept the idea that assertions (facts) do not lead to



decisions. But imagine standing at the bus stop and finding that there is a \$100 bill lying on the ground. It is not the data—the fact of a \$100 bill at our feet—that induces us to pick it up. The assessment that \$100 will somehow improve our life induces us to pick it up. To see this more clearly, consider that many of us will not pick up a penny we see lying on the ground. We may not pick up a nickel, or a dime, or a quarter. Perhaps we would pick up a dollar. The point is that there is a threshold where our assessment of the value of the money lying on the ground changes, and when the assessment changes, their decision changes. When we assess that there is a sufficiently positive outcome we will take one action; when we assess there is not a sufficiently positive outcome we will take a different action.

This has very real implications for all aspects of our lives, and provides a rationale for investing in the effort of developing mastery over the use of assessments. If our decisions are based on assessments, and assessments are deeply influenced by emotions, then awareness of our emotional state and the assessments it generates is vital for making effective decisions—whether they be decisions about how we raise our children, how we lead our team, or how we relate to our customers. High performance organizations are organizations of people skilled in managing emotions and in generating useful assessments.

Assessments and the Future

The relationship between assessments and decisions reveals another distinction between assertions and assessments. Assertions deal with the past and the present—how things were or are. Those are the only things about which we can have the certainty of proof. Assessments, on the other hand, are deeply related to our concerns about the future. The assessments we make determine the future we will create. When we assemble a project team, we do so based on our assessments of potential team members. When we assess a particular person to be a “good” project manager we are likely to turn to them when we need a project manager. How useful that assessment is will be determined by how effectively they manage our project.

The purpose of our assessments, then, is to move us toward a desirable future. However, there’s a catch—human evolution comes into play here and it does not always serve us in the modern world. Much of human history was lived in a hostile environment where our assessments of others led to life and death decisions. In that environment it is far safer to assume that someone is dangerous and to not trust them. We are wired for that environment, and when someone responds to us in even mildly challenging ways it can stimulate considerable defensiveness. In today’s environment it is usually much more effective to respond to someone with an assumption that they don’t intend to harm us. People with whom we disagree at work, or with whom we quarrel in our personal lives, are not life threatening, and in most cases it would serve us better to respond to them with a willingness to engage, understand, and find common ground. But our emotional brain does not distinguish between the jungle and the office so it takes effort and practice to learn to manage our emotional responses to others so we can formulate effective assessments. By *effective* assessments I mean assessments that create the future we desire. We therefore don’t know about the effectiveness of an assessment until we discover the outcome it produces. Developing the capability to anticipate outcomes and make effective assessments is a lifelong effort; no one is perfect at it, but practice and effort lead to steady improvement.

To recap what I have said so far about assertions and assessments:

- ▶ Assertions are statements of fact; they can be proven true or false with demonstrable evidence
- ▶ Assertions reflect the external world
- ▶ Assertions deal primarily with the past and the present

- ▶ Assertions are largely generated in the intellect—they are the result of measurement and analysis; that part of our brain works relatively slowly
- ▶ Assessments are statements of interpretation or opinion; they are neither true nor false
- ▶ Assessments reflect the internal world—our emotions and our beliefs
- ▶ Assessments are relevant to the future—we make them in order to shape our actions to create a desirable future
- ▶ Assessments are largely generated in the emotional brain, which operates about 30 times as fast as the intellectual brain, and is wired to assume the worst—that a person is untrustworthy, that a situation is dangerous

Most Of What We Speak, Most Of The Time, Is Assessments

As you begin paying attention to the types of speech acts you and others use in your day to day conversations you may be surprised to discover the prevalence of assessments. We live in a time when “just give me the facts” is a common demand, and a time when there are vast numbers of assertions available to us (most of the data stored in computer systems around the world represents assertions), and a culture in which emotions, intuition, and opinions are not valued as highly as data, so it can be disarming to discover that human beings speak (and think) in assessments way more than assertions.

When people first discover this, they sometimes say “we have to stop doing that” or “we’re going to really work to get rid of all the assessments and just work with assertions.” If they continue paying attention, and are open to learning, they discover along the way that it is not possible to do that, because human beings are assessment machines—we are wired to generate assessments rapidly and continuously. This is actually a good thing, because it is our assessments that give us the ability to navigate the world and to make effective decisions. Computers that operate only with assertions and with predetermined logical steps are incapable of making decisions. Data does not lead to decisions. Assessments lead to decisions. The assertion that a product sells for \$100 does not lead to a decision to buy it. The assessment that the value the product will create is or is not worth \$100 leads to the decision. This is a critical insight that reveals the importance of being aware of and able to manage our emotional state, because it is our emotional state that generates, through assessments, the decisions we make. Lack of awareness of our emotions can lead to poor decisions and poor relationships with other people—and the quality of decisions and relationships directly define the performance of individuals, teams, and whole organizations.

In a curious way, the oceans of data we have created have led us full circle to recognizing how important assessments are. Leaders today can get vastly more data than they can possibly hold in their minds and analyze. Our intellectual capacity is simply not able to process all of that data, so we are left with what we had before the information revolution—our gut instinct, our emotional sense of a situation, our intuition. This is not to say that all of that data is useless. Data has enormous value; assertions can profoundly influence our assessments. Knowing that the last five projects led by a particular project manager have been completed on time and within budget helps you form an assessment of that person as a project manager. But the notion that enough data eliminates the need for assessments is a myth. Data can be useful for influencing our emotions and assessments, but in the end it is our assessments that determine our actions. And there is no guarantee that the data will influence us in a useful way. Sometimes even in the face of data that strongly suggests a particular direction, we know in our gut that an alternative decision is the right way to go.



Grounding Assessments

An apparent paradox arises when we consider that assessments are neither true nor false, and that they are also the basis of our decision making. If an assessment is neither true nor false, then how do we decide which assessment to use when making a decision? While assessments cannot be proven true or false, it is possible to provide grounding for them. Grounding an assessment means providing our reasons for holding the assessment.

There are a number of ways of grounding assessments, but three in particular are broadly useful. The first of these is to consider the future the speaker is intending to create by speaking the assessment. Recall from above that the reason we make assessments is to determine which actions will lead to a desirable future. When you hear someone speaking an assessment, one way of determining whether you consider the assessment grounded is to reflect on the reason the person is speaking the assessment. For example, a supervisor talking to an employee respectfully about a behavior change that the supervisor believes would improve the employee's performance would, by the criteria of concern for the future, be considered grounded. Alternatively, the supervisor may be berating and shaming the employee, and their intention may be to make themselves feel powerful and the employee feel belittled, in which case we would consider the assessment to be ungrounded.

A second way of grounding assessments is to examine how well the speaker specifies the domain of the assessment. The domain refers to the context in which the assessment is being held. For example, to say that "You can't trust Jose," has no context around it—we don't know whether the speaker believes that Jose tells lies about his past, or cheats on his wife, or will steal our car if we let him borrow it. On the other hand, to say "You can't trust Jose to finish his projects on time," has a well specified domain—that of finishing projects. When assessments are spoken without a clearly defined domain it is best to hold a healthy skepticism about them, because we have no way of knowing whether the domain we would assume is the domain meant by the speaker.

A third way of grounding assessments is the use of assertions to support our assessment. For example, if we say "Sophie is an excellent project leader," we could ground the assessment with assertions like "On the last six projects she has led, the project team members have given her ratings of 8 to 10 on a ten point scale of whether they would like to work with her again, and all six projects came in ahead of schedule and under budget." These are assertions—measurable statements that can be proven true or false. Backing up an assessment with assertions is an effective way of helping people understand why we hold the assessment, and influencing them to also hold the assessment.

The most effective grounding of assessments happens when we combine two or three of these approaches. Providing supporting assertions in combination with concern for the future and/or specifying a clear domain is particularly powerful because it creates a context that everyone can agree on, since assertions can be proven true or false. It is important to note, however, that no matter how grounded an assessment is, it remains an assessment and is therefore neither true nor false.

As we develop skill in listening to and speaking assessments we may notice that some people attempt to ground their assessments with other assessments. If someone says "Megan is irresponsible," and they then ground that assessment by saying "she is lazy," and then ground it further by saying "she's careless," we may begin to question whether there is anything to the assessment. This is like building a house on sand—the foundation is always shifting, and we begin to suspect that if we push hard enough it will all come tumbling down.

Grounding assessments is an important practice for both listening and speaking. Grounding our assessments gives people confidence that we arrived at our decisions carefully and is an effective tool for getting people on board. This is an important capability for leaders and for members of teams.

Mastering Assessments

It is important to be conscious of what is happening inside of us as we generate and speak assessments. Likewise, it is important to be aware of and understand, as best we can, what is happening inside of the person with whom we are speaking. These are complex and dynamic processes that change in real time as we interact with one another. Sometimes our assessments are forming as we speak them; often we may be forming assessments as we listen to others speak their assessments. Developing our awareness of and ability to manage assessments is thus a lifelong journey; it will pay off in every relationship we have, be it at home, at work, in a social setting, or anywhere else.

Developing skill with assessments requires learning in four areas:

- ▶ Awareness of and ability to manage your own generation of assessments
- ▶ Awareness of and ability to manage your responses to the assessments of others
- ▶ Awareness of, and skill at discovering, the reasons that other people have the assessments they do
- ▶ Awareness of, and skill at responding to, the assessments of others

While there is certainly an intellectual component to assessments, they are largely triggered and shaped by what happens in our bodies and our emotions. Developing sufficient awareness to effectively manage assessments is not, therefore, an intellectual exercise. The intellect is always playing catch up with our physical and emotional sensations. To the degree that we are aware of our physical and emotional responses to an event we will have choice over what our intellect generates from that event. To the extent that we are not aware of our physical and emotional responses our intellect will run the course they dictate.

Summary

Mastering assessments is a lifelong challenge. No one ever achieves it completely, but it is possible to have vastly greater choice over our assessments than many people realize. Some key benefits to adopting practices that develop our assessment skills include:

- ▶ We generate our sense of the world, and of other people, through our assessments. In a very practical sense, our assessments create the reality we experience and the future we create. Mastering our use of assessments gives us greater power to create the world, and the future, that we desire.
- ▶ By being aware of and managing our assessments we become more effective as leaders, team members, family members, community members and friends.
- ▶ The ability to listen well to others, and to be aware of and understand the source of assessments in ourselves and in others, enables us to establish relationships with them in which all individuals and all perspectives are honored. This enables us to produce trust and engagement in difficult situations that would otherwise derail the conversation and leave behind a residue of hurt feelings and low morale.



- ▶ The honest sharing and respecting of different assessments leads to a richer perspective on a situation, often generating new possibilities that could not have appeared from just one person’s point of view.

Communication breakdowns frequently occur because we confuse assertions and assessments—we treat an assessment as though it is “true,” and therefore we discount or ignore other people’s assessments. Developing a culture in which this distinction is understood and practiced is critical to developing high performance communication.