

Exploring Assumptions & Beliefs using the A-F Model

The exercise uses the A-F model used in 1:1 coaching. The technique can be used to surface and challenge dysfunctional assumptions and limiting beliefs in organisations. The more you practice this technique, the more you become aware of how underlying assumptions and beliefs guide discussions and decision making. It's a helpful awareness to have as you move forward on the purpose journey.

In summary A-F letters stand for

- Assumptions
- Beliefs
- Consequence
- Dispute
- Exchange
- Future Planning

Assumptions & Beliefs

Start by observing, listening, noticing:

Observe what is going on around you:

- Listen to the stories shared, the common narratives, language and symbols used
- Observe what gets prioritised in meetings, in particular all staff meetings
- Notice what people pay attention to
- Observe how different groups work across the organisation. Is it competitive or collaborative?
- Observe the reaction to a crisis or issue. What assumptions are made about people involved?
- Notice the behaviours that are rewarded or ignored
- Notice how people talk about success

Explore the operative purpose of the organisation:

- What measurements does your organisation use to define success – are these purely financial?
- If you asked a selection of people linked to but not employed by the organisation (e.g. suppliers, customers, and governing body), what its purpose was – what would their answers be?

Explore what your organisation believes motivates people:

- What measures do you use in performance reviews, what targets do you set, how do you set remuneration levels?
- Review a sample set of policies e.g. expenses policy. What beliefs about people underpin these policies?

Consequences

Start to explore the consequences of implicit and often long held assumptions and beliefs:

- How could beliefs about people and purpose be limiting the potential of the organisation? And the potential of people?
- How could a narrow focus on profit impact people's sense of meaning at work?
- If the company does have an articulated purpose, to what extent is this truly the operative purpose? If it is not directing strategy and decision making what are the consequences?
- How could assumptions and beliefs about what motivates people undermine any effort to create a shared purpose to serve society?
- What do these (implicit) assumptions/beliefs protect your organisation against? What do they protect your leadership against? (There are the hidden benefits of maintaining beliefs. Called payoffs or secondary gains, these are things that a person or organisation could lose and miss if they gave up a belief. It is important to realise that most, if not all beliefs, carry out some positive function, even if this leads to ineffective behaviour and unwanted results.)

Dispute & exchange

Start to build confidence to challenge the basis on which decisions are made.

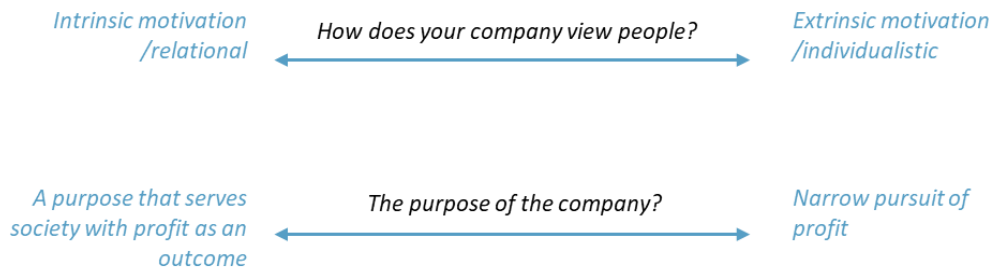
An example of how a hidden assumption can be challenged:

We convened a meeting of HR directors of FTSE 100 companies and there was an animated discussion at one point about middle management. The dominant view around the table was that purpose and change got 'stuck' at this level which is often referred to as the "permafrost layer". But one of the directors challenged this view. Her assumption is that leaders at all levels want to engage. She believed that the view that middle management were 'blockers' needs to be shifted if anything is to change. Her question was...if the middle management are frozen...then what or who are freezing them?

What was really interesting about this intervention, is that it opened up a much more meaningful, effective, fruitful conversation about the blockers that are stopping people from committing. What became immediately clear was that middle management were all too often the group that are stuck with the unresolved tension between purpose and profit. As one director noted, 'it is as if we are asking them to pat their head and rub their tummy at the same time.' People just can't commit if they are getting contradictory information.

Future Planning

Once you have explored the implicit assumptions and beliefs by which your organisation operates, start to consider where you think the organisation might be on the purpose journey.



Are there ways you can experiment with testing new beliefs in your day to day?

One organisation we work with created small behavioural experiments to test new beliefs and assumptions. For example, one manager challenges his belief about the decision making capability in this team by devolving all decision making to his team for two weeks. These experiments revealed to the group that challenging their beliefs and assumption helped to change behaviours which is key in interrupting patterns within the organisations and creating the conditions for purpose and people to thrive.