

## Leadership Lessons From Grilled Cheese Sandwiches

### How Assumptions Become Obstacles

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Grilled Cheese Sandwiches and Leadership...?

Is it possible to say "Grilled Cheese" without smiling? I can't, and most of my informal research subjects were unable to contain their smiles. I'll bet you have fond memories of this timeless American icon – the grilled cheese sandwich. I can recall from my childhood, and as recently as last week, the satisfaction and pleasure derived from indulging in this soul-warming staple. Of course, my picture wouldn't be complete without the "M'm! M'm! Good!" bowl of soup. I'm sure I'm not alone. Cafés and cafeterias still find this pairing a very popular selection on their menus.

Recently, I came across an interesting leadership insight concerning the challenges and consequence of assumptions. While the warnings and admonitions against assuming are commonplace and widespread, this counterproductive propensity still persists. Most leaders have heard the witticism, "Don't assume, it can make an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me'." This threat of becoming more equestrian-like may actually prevent a few leaders from using assumptions as a preferred modus operandi, yet, on many levels, assumptions still reign and continue to derail leadership effectiveness.

Are you familiar with the "Grilled Cheese Sandwich Test?" Image your perfect grilled cheese sandwich. How would you describe it? How thick is it? What kind of cheese and what type of bread? Got it? Interestingly, Morris Massey produced a training film many years ago entitled, *You Are What You Were When*. Where did you learn to define that picture as your "perfect" sandwich?

If you were to strike up a conversation with a stranger about grilled cheese sandwiches, in all likelihood, you would use your "picture" as your point of reference. How different is your picture from the picture used by the listener? Odds are the listener's picture would be different, even significantly different. But, because of assumptions, you believe the two of you are talking about the same, even the identical thing. This is where Yogi Berra would say, "It's the same, but different."

Leaders who fail to clarify their communication will find their teams in chaos. Via the "Sandwich Test," it becomes clear that assuming can lead to miscommunication, mis-conclusions, and mistrust. As a result of new levels of stress, the interpersonal relationships often deteriorate to clashes, conflict, and cubical combat.

What are the assumptions that you've made regarding your direct reports' understanding and interpretation of the organization's mission and vision? When you speak of increased productivity, what does that mean to your team? Have you clarified for them the specific behaviors that will lead to the increase and the specific measures of that increase?

The challenge of managing assumptions is not limited to conversations about productivity. Assumptions must be managed in all arenas of team interactions and operations.

Don't assume your picture of a grilled cheese sandwich is the universally agreed upon and accepted picture. Questions abound - Wheat or White? American or Swiss? Diagonal or Horizontal? What you think is the norm, may not be at all what comes to mind for others. Ask a friend to fix you a grilled cheese sandwich, and see what you get.

Actualizing Leaders have learned, "Assumptions will rob the team of accuracy, accomplishment and achievement."

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