

Replace Assumptions with Alignment

by [Mike Hawkins](#)



When asked “what is required to be successful?” or “what is required to have good relationships?” most people answer “good communication skills.” Of course, right? But what is good communication? What does it take to be a good communicator? Is the skill of good communication based on listening well or speaking well? Using the right words? Not being defensive? Knowing when to use the phone, email, text, or talk in person? Communication is a broad term with many elements.

For sure good communication requires being an active listener, showing empathy, seeking to understand before being understood, simplifying, and being respectively candid. But there is another element of good communication that isn’t as obvious: not leaving important details to chance. In other words, not making assumptions and taking important details for granted.

We all make [assumptions](#). We have to. There isn’t enough time in the day to fact check everything we think or do. But statistics on relationships, teamwork, business ventures, mergers & acquisitions, and organizational change highlight what we all know from experience—we often make assumptions that turn out wrong. At best, incorrect assumptions cause confusion. Worse, we get to deal with conflict and failure.

Think for a minute about a past conflict you had involving an unexpected circumstance. Maybe it was related to a project at work, a family trip, or a home remodel. Did it involve a misunderstanding or misinterpretation? Perhaps something was not initially discussed or clarified? If so, could the misunderstanding have been minimized or avoided altogether if you spent more time discussing and agreeing on the details? Or discussing alternatives and possibilities instead of assuming you’d figure them out later?

Remodeling projects often become conflicts because important details aren’t discussed. Projects at work also often fail due to misunderstandings about details related to roles, resources, priorities, schedules, and desired outcomes. Family trips too can become family disasters because key details aren’t sufficiently explored.

Good communication involves discussion and being aligned on relevant details. It requires allocating time to exploring possibilities and evaluating options. It includes agreeing on details related to what, who, when, and where. Without upfront discussion and agreement, projects become more difficult than they need to be. Like a car with its wheels out of alignment, getting there takes a lot more effort.

If you are the type of person who prefers short conversations, consider that a little more time spent upfront can save a lot of time and frustration later. You might be able to reach a basic understanding on something with your spouse, child, or colleague in a few minutes, but if important details are left out, you’ll need another discussion anyway. And if the lack of alignment on important details causes issues, you’ll not only have another discussion, you’ll get to deal with the issues.

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Avoid the extra cost, frustration, and wasted effort that accompanies misalignment by getting aligned on relevant details upfront. If you are starting a new project at work, instead of scheduling a half-hour meeting to plan it, schedule an hour. If you are planning a vacation, talk about it for several days instead of just a few minutes before booking travel arrangements. If you are remodeling your home, allocate time for thorough planning rather than a single trip to the home improvement store.

Listed below are elements you might discuss before embarking on a venture—personally or professionally. If you are a person who typically has short conversations, consider using this list to lengthen your conversations to avoid making assumptions. Depending on your circumstances, you may not need to discuss all of these elements, but don't be too quick to overlook them either. As the cliché goes, when you assume you make an a#! out of u and me.

Here is a discussion checklist to refer to in your next venture to help avoid making incorrect assumptions:

1. Vision, goals, desired outcomes, and the definition of “done”
2. Guiding values, principles, and constraints
3. Expectations, priorities, and specifications
4. Costs, budget, funding, and financing
5. Strategy to achieve desired outcomes
6. Participants or target audience
7. Schedule, timeline, or durations
8. Resources to be allocated
9. Roles and responsibilities
10. Contracts, terms, and conditions
11. Measurements, tracking methods, and follow-up
12. Ongoing communication and information sharing
13. Authorizations and authorities
14. Support needed including tools, systems, and training
15. Methods, processes, procedures, and practices to be followed
16. Policies, regulations, and laws to be followed
17. Exit plans and breakup terms

PDF version of this article: https://alpinelink.com/docs/Replace_Assumptions_with_Alignment.pdf.

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