LUCID
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THOUGHT

To make an ass out of you and me?

"I'm assuming that all your assumptions are correct…"
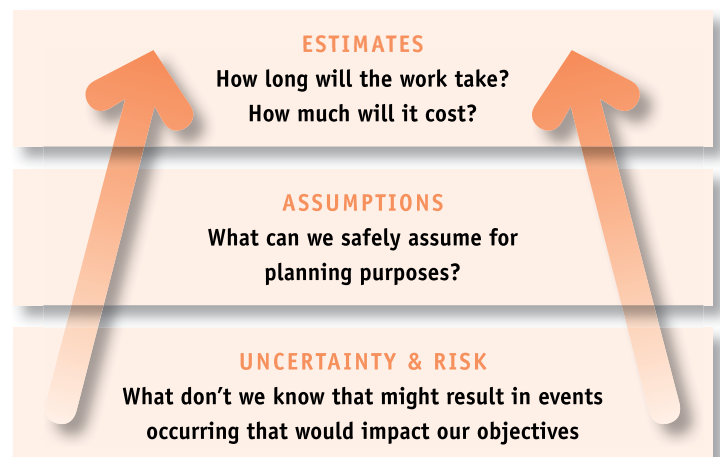
"So am I…"
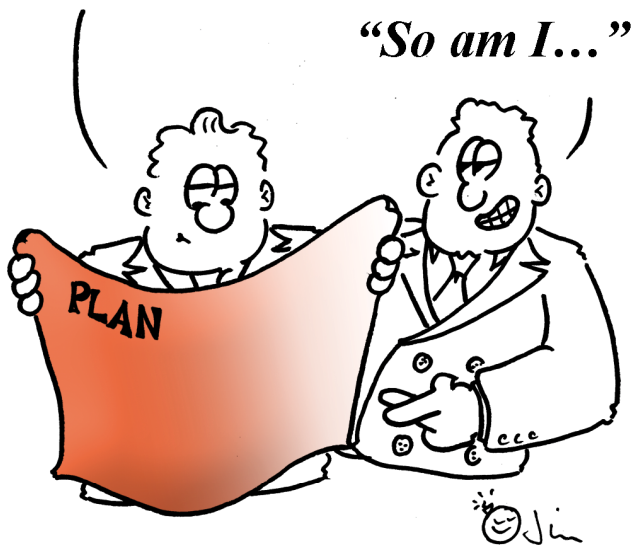
This month's Lucid Thought was inspired by conversations we had recently while working with project managers at the European Space Agency in Madrid. These conversations revealed, for them, the critical role of stating and validating assumptions on projects.

The title of the Lucid Thought is a play on the word assume (ass-u-me) and is a saying that has been around all of our working lives, with an unknown (at least to us) provenance, – it certainly does tell the story. To assume blindly, arrogantly, without checking out and validating what we are holding to be 'true' for planning purposes is very likely to result in you, or others looking 'ass-like' – like the allegedly unintelligent and stubborn animal from the horse family.

According to the on-line Virtual Thesaurus, an assumption is **"a statement that is held to be true and from which a conclusion can be drawn"**.

When managing projects many assumptions need to be made due to the inherent uncertain nature of accomplishing deliverables within cost, time and quality constraints across organisational boundaries. In such circumstances, project plans represent our **'most educated guess'** at the time, and the limits of our uncertainty need to be expressed explicitly if we are to proceed responsibly. Embedded in this statement is the belief that estimates, assumptions and risks are all connected, and need to be explored systematically and in relation to one another.

ESTIMATES
How long will the work take?
How much will it cost?

ASSUMPTIONS
What can we safely assume for planning purposes?

UNCERTAINTY & RISK
What don't we know that might result in events occurring that would impact our objectives

Creating Value by Shedding Light on Managed Change

Assumptions are typically stated as part of the business case, or other 'initiation' type document for the project (a project brief or proposal to a third party). This is a useful way of exposing the premise on which the project will build, so that stakeholders can challenge the assumptions early if they have differing views.

Some organisations have a structured approach to stating and assessing assumptions as part of their risk management processes. Assumptions that are judged to be unstable (likely to change or not be 'true'), and sensitive (would impact objectives if they were unsound) are 'converted' to risks and managed through the risk management process. This is a useful way of connecting risk identification to core project planning processes.

Our view though is that a focus on assumptions has much more power than an element in a business case or the risk management process; understanding the assumptions that various stakeholders are making gives us real insight into how to work with various project players to manage the project.

One of the reasons why talking about and exploring assumptions is really powerful is that the word seems in practice to be more neutral than the word risk. This is one of the core principles on which the ABCD risk management process (promoted by the company De-Risk) is based; that stakeholders are much more likely to engage in useful conversations about the assumptions they are making than to talk about the risks they perceive.

Raising assumptions as a project manager is also a great way of revealing, exposing or un-masking the views of other project players, be they sponsors, users, team members or contract partners. The very nature of assumptions is that they are 'taken for granted'. Left unexplored, these become embedded in the mindset of an individual as being 'true' yet these perspectives may not be shared - the result being a myriad of different unexplored perspectives that eventually will collide creating tension and conflict.

Another danger is that assumptions become presumptions, this latter word being defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as **"the taking of more than is warranted... over-confident opinion or conduct".** We all know that as long as viewpoints are unchallenged, there is a chance they will be become fixed and difficult to shift. This goes for our opinions about the project, or about stakeholder viewpoints. Un-validated assumptions are dangerous and we should work hard to make sure we don't slip into thinking they are acceptable without evidence. It is particularly important to validate assumptions about other people, their motivations and values, so we don't fall into irresponsible and counter-productive stereotyping.

So our top tips about dealing with assumptions are as follows:

1. Reflect on your own assumptions, and state them.
2. Seek out others' assumptions, and understand them.
3. Resolve differences in perspective as early as possible, it will be more difficult later.
4. Convert unstable and sensitive assumptions to risks and manage them proactively.
5. Make it your business to understand the assumptions held by stakeholders as the project progresses, this is a key way of keeping communication open and reducing surprises.

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