

A Mental Trick to Help with Challenging Conversations



For the next few days, pay attention to how you react to things your colleagues say and do. Tune in to your body, because it will give you the clues: When does your heart race? What makes you clench your fists? When do you raise your voice? When do you aggressively lean into the table, and when do you shut down and back away?

Each time you feel yourself reacting, stop and think about what's going on with you. What are you assuming or inferring that is leading to the negative

reaction? Notice that the most intense reactions are triggered when you assume things about the other person's character or motives or make inferences about what the person thinks of your character or capability. Did you assume that your teammate is a jerk, or stupid, or out to get you? Did you interpret his comments as suggesting that you're not smart enough, not likeable, or not going to make it? Just becoming aware of your negative assumptions will be a valuable (if somewhat uncomfortable) step.

Once you're aware of your default conclusion, try a more productive hypothesis. The simplest approach is to replace an assumption about the person's character with an attribution about the situation. Instead of "He's a jerk for pointing out the mistakes," you might instead think, "Maybe the importance of this presentation caused him to have especially high standards." This will make you more generous and empathetic and generate a better conversation.