Assume Your Way to Great Leadership
by Sue Pivetta

In our 9-1-1 training classroom, we had a huge poster on the lab wall. On the poster was a simple red circle with a big red X in the middle of the circle. Under the big X was the word ASSUME in black, bold letters. That's correct—we were taught never to assume. To assume is to believe, and then to act on those beliefs. Today, can we set the NO assuming rule aside for a brief moment, using this stimulating workplace as a study of both management and leadership assumptions?

Maslow's Enlightened Management
Thirty-six years ago, renowned psychologist Abraham H. Maslow spent the summer sabbatical at a small technology company, observing his ideas about motivation being put to the test. In it he wrote about "enlightened management," describing the type of workplace that would be most conducive to the workers reaching a point of self-actualization (happiness). If we adhere to the concept that management is hardware and leadership is software, what he is really writing about is leadership—although he calls it management.   In his theory contribution, he wrote about trust among workers and management, the need for honest recognition, and the importance of continuous improvement.   These things are well known as leadership needs in our communications centers. This study is about Maslow's findings with a twist toward 9-1-1.

Enlightened management *assumes* that everyone prefers to be a prime mover rather than a passive helper. This may go against many of those who study this profession—who report that since there is little upward mobility in the ranks, comm centers should hire people who are okay with status quo. If you study humans at all, there are few people who are okay with status quo, especially highly intelligent individuals, decision makers, quick thinkers—which describes any person who is successful at answering 9-1-1 lines and dispatching emergency units. So, with that in mind, let's say we agree with Maslow and explore some of his theories.

Assume everyone is to be trusted. This does not assume that everyone in the world is to be trusted—just that no one is to be mistrusted. It assumes the reality of individual differences while believing people selected for 9-1-1 are fairly evolved types of people, relatively mature, relatively healthy, relatively decent. By definition it also assumes good environmental conditions: in the comm center, for people to be at their best, we are assuming there are no manifest negative environment surroundings that discourage 'their best'.

Assume everyone is to be informed as completely as possible of as many facts and truths as possible, of everything relevant to the situation. There is the clear assumption in enlightened management that people need to know—knowing is good—truth, facts, and honesty tend to be curative and healing. Comm center managers therefore have systems and processes in place that allow for the loop of information to be

continuous, regardless of the shift a worker is on and regardless of a person's ranking in the center.

Assume in all your people the impulse to achieve; assume they are for good workmanship, are against inefficiency and wasting time, and want to do a good job. All fairly healthy people will have such impulses, and for management to believe this is to create an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and self-actualization (the ultimate goal, meaning happy at work). Assume that if this is not true, it is not the individual but the atmosphere that is the inhibitor.

Assume there is no dominance-subordination hierarchy in the jungle sense or authoritarian sense (or "baboon" sense). The dominance is of the "chimpanzee" sort: older-brotherly, responsible, and affectionate. Where the jungle view of the world prevails, enlightened management is practically impossible. Authoritarians must be excluded or they must be converted for a true management/leadership balance. True authoritarians believe their own theory is necessary and generally cannot re-learn servant leadership values and ways. Usually these types of leaders must be purged from agencies for enlightened leadership to prevail.

We must assume people in organizations are not fixated at the safety-need level. They must be relatively anxiety free, they must not be fear-ridden, they must have enough courage to overcome their fears, they must be able to go ahead in the face of uncertainty. On the whole, where fear reigns enlightened management is not possible. In emergency communications work, there are so many negative experiences in dealing with the worst every day. With that, 'extra' negative influences take 'extra' care to remain objective about the good in the world. Systems, processes and ways for telecommunicators to remain healthy emotionally and physically are recognized as necessary. Fear within the agency is an additional burden.

Assume everyone can enjoy good teamwork, friendship, good group spirit, good group homonymy, good belonging, and group love. Talk about identification with the group, and if this group is not believed to be 'respected' through a lack of valuing by responders (whether true or not), or by those who decide the level of pay or benefits, a major human need is not fulfilled. A leader who provides a high level of team respect and valuing gains credibility.

Assume hostility is primarily reactive rather than character-based; it will be for good, objective, present, here-now reasons, and it is therefore valuable rather than evil. It is therefore not to be stifled and discouraged. Certainly, this freedom to express reactive hostility will make for increased honesty and an improved situation rather than the kind of permanent strain that comes when justified resentments and irritations cannot be expressed openly. The same thing is true with a good manager or floor supervisor; the better the manager, the more freedom people will feel to express irritation and disagreement. This is not including ongoing pervasive negative attitude (another article).

Assume that people can take it—that they are tough, stronger than most people give them credit for. People *must* be stretched and strained once in a while in order to not get slack and bored. It makes life in all its aspects more interesting if one works at concert pitch, at one's highest level once in a while. Furthermore, we can assume that many people *want* to take it, to be stretched and challenged. Assuming that because there is little upward mobility in a comm center and then assuming those who work there do not need it, is a wrong assumption. Besides, there are many ways for an enlightened leader to create stretch in an agency without upward mobility.

Enlightened management assumes people are improvable. This does not mean they are *perfectible*. Furthermore, it does not exclude their having the vision or hope of perfection. All it says is that people can be better than they are by at least a little bit, and providing training or opportunities for growth are appreciated—providing the opportunities are not a 'waste of time'.

Assume that everyone prefers to feel important, needed, useful, successful, proud, and respected, rather than unimportant, interchangeable, anonymous, wasted, unused, expendable, and disrespected. And this can cause a reverse impact when the telecommunicator struggles to gain this feeling through designing or reporting the work as being elite-ist (not everyone can do this, many fail, etc.). Workers should not be put upon to prove their worth.

Assume that everyone prefers or perhaps even needs to love his boss (rather than to hate him), and that everyone prefers to respect his boss (rather than to disrespect him). It is true that if a group is not 'going anywhere' they do not need a leader. Good leadership and management feels like a safety net, that no matter what, a worker's worst fears (lawsuit, equipment failure, disaster) are in safe hands. Fear generates negative feelings towards leader/managers.

Assume that growth occurs through delight and through boredom. Creativity and a delight in novelty, in new challenges and new activities, in variety, and in activities that are not too easy would seem to be icing on the cake. But all those sooner or later become familiar, and therefore uninteresting and even boring, so that the search then begins anew for additional variety and novelty—work at a higher level of skill. In this sense, creative leadership equals a continual attention to this as a staple in the diet.

Conclusion
Maslow's theories can be further explored in his works: Toward a Psychology of Being or, The Human Side of Enterprise. But all in all, these theories may lighten the heavy perception that people are difficult to motivate, to lead. First, study the assumptions offered and answer, "Is this what I believe for myself?" What would be the harm in making the assumption that most people are indeed like you? And, if you can agree that all of the above assumptions would be true for you, then of course this example is what you as a manager/leader can provide to those you serve. And although we were ALL taught not to assume in 9-1-1, maybe this is the "assumption exception." Assume the best in your people, and then assume yourself to great leadership.

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