



Observations and Assessments:

Transforming Toxic Thoughts into Effective Communication

By Fred Kofman

Learning to distinguish between observations and assessments, and checking assessments in conversation, helps us to become aware of our own frames of reference and those of others. It also helps to resolve breakdowns in communication and reduce misunderstandings and allows us to act in ways that generate effective action.

Observations

- Observations are descriptions that a community—such as a culture, a society, a committee, an organization, or a family—has agreed upon as factual. These descriptions are also witnessable by other members of that community. Examples of observations are: "The table is 50 inches long," or "Alice is the Vice President of Marketing."
- Observations are either true or false. They are true if they are witnessable by another member of the community and false if they can be disputed by any member of the community. Every time we make observations we commit ourselves to providing evidence for what we are saying (e.g., a witness who will concur with our statements).

Assessments

- Assessments are statements that express the opinions, judgments, interpretations, projections, or attributions of a speaker or speakers.
- Examples of assessments are "The table is too long" or "Alice is a visionary thinker."

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- Assessments always relate the past, the present, and the future. The assessment, "Arthur is unreliable" is our present opinion of Arthur based on some past behavior we have witnessed or heard about (e.g., Arthur has been late for the last three meetings or Arthur missed an appointment), which we then project into the future and

therefore we begin a meeting without Arthur because he has been late for the last three. Of course, the future may not bear out our assessment. Our observations about Arthur's past attendance do not guarantee that he will be late for the next meeting. Sometimes we limit our capacity for effective action in the future by attaching ourselves too rigidly to the past.

- Nonetheless, assessments allow us to deal effectively with the future. For example, if I assess that more people will purchase cars with air bags, I may then decide to

increase the number of cars that are manufactured with air bags. If I am responsible for managing a project, and I assess that Steve is an effective team leader, then I may promote him to that position. Or, if I assess that it will rain this afternoon, then I may decide to cancel my plans to play golf.

- Assessments are either valid or invalid. A valid assessment is made by a person who is given authority by a community, or ourselves, to make assessments in a particular domain. For example, players and coaches on both teams of a football game invest the referee with the authority to assess whether a play is fairly executed or whether it warrants a penalty flag. The fan can certainly

have her assessment, but only the referee has the authority to move the ball back ten yards. A jury can declare a defendant innocent or guilty of a crime because our society and our judicial system gives them the authority to make that judgment.

- By checking or grounding our assessments we speak, listen and act more effectively in the workplace.

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Checking an assessment

1. Remember that an assessment is your opinion of an event, person, place, or thing and not an observation. Often we will listen to assessments as if they were observations or speak our assessments without making it clear that they are our opinion and not the truth. Conversations become troublesome when the speakers begin to argue about assessments as if they were observations.
2. Consider whether you have authority or permission to make this assessment. "You're not performing adequately" might be a permissible comment from a boss, but we may not have the authority or permission to say this to a peer.
3. As the recipient of someone's assessment, consider whether you gave permission and authority to the person who is assessing you. When we give permission to someone to make an assessment of us, we commit to take the speaker's assessment seriously and allow them to influence us.
4. Assess for the sake of some future concern or action. Always ask yourself, "What do I want to have happen as a result of this assessment?" Be aware of the set of standards from which you are making an assessment, and check that the standards are applicable. For example, before criticizing an employee for being improperly dressed for work, you may want to check to see that today is not a casual dress day. Always ask yourself, "What are the standards of the assessment?"
5. Constrain your assessment to the relevant domain of concerns. If one of your direct reports spent 100 hours on a writing project, you may assess him in the domain of writing, but not in regards to his overall competence as an employee or person. How we assess ourselves and others has enormous implications for our general well being.
6. Provide observations to substantiate your assessments. Always ask yourself, "On what data or observations is the assessment founded?" For example, I have assessed Bob as a "good" employee, because he has met his time and quality goals.
7. Recognize that sometimes it is impossible to ground assessments precisely. It is always better to admit this and share the assessment as an ungrounded one. For example, if I had difficulties finding data to support my opinion that "The report is not acceptable," I may say, "I have difficulty with this report. It is hard for me to be concrete about what I find problematic, but I am not fully satisfied. Maybe we can go over it together and discuss some of the points that make me uncomfortable."
8. Check the assessment against its opposite. For example, let's say I assessed that "Sam is a poor speaker" based on one business meeting we both attended. If I checked the opposite assessment "Sam is a good speaker," I may find that in previous meetings Sam received praise for his verbal presentation.
9. When expressing your assessments (especially if they are "charged"), share and identify your reasoning, your observations, your standards and your future concerns. Displaying your reasoning and your emotions allows the other person to understand your position and to inquire deeply into your perspective.
10. Take your assessments lightly. Reconsider your assessments often, and always remember that you might be mistaken.