

Check Your Assumptions

- Joe Chee, UUCPA Conflict Resolution Team

In the book “Difficult Conversations” by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen, the authors observe that when we are in conflict situations with another person or a group, a common mistake we make is assuming we know the intentions of others when we really don’t. To make matters worse, we often decide someone’s intentions are bad if we are unsure or don’t know the person well.

Did he raise his voice to hurt my feelings or was he trying to emphasize a point? Was her comments about an event meant to be a personal attack or an attempt to make the next event of this type better? Did they make the suggestion because they doesn’t trust me or because they person wanted to help me be successful?

Our beliefs about the intentions of others are important because they affect how we interact with the person or group that we are in conflict with. If we assume hostile intent, we are likely to take a defensive or aggressive stance to protect ourselves. This can then lead to escalation and make the situation even more intractable.

Because intentions are invisible, we usually infer them from people’s behavior and what we know of them. Unfortunately, our beliefs about the intentions of others are often wrong because we base them on very limited information. People’s intentions are complex and we often act with mixed intentions. In addition, sometimes people act from good intentions that lead to undesired or negative outcomes.

In conflict situations, we should be aware that our assumptions about the intentions of others may be incorrect and that we tend to assume the worst when we are unsure. One way to find out more about someone’s intentions is to be curious and ask the person about what motivated them to say what they said or do what they did. You may be surprised by what you hear.

The UUCPA Conflict Resolution Team was formed to help our congregation deal with disagreements among members. If you would like help with a church-related issue, please send an email to conflict@uucpa.org or speak to a member of the team. The current team members are Joe Chee, Richard Duda, Susan Owicki, and John Pierce.