

**FUTURE**  
**CONSIDERATIONS**

**ASSESSMENTS,  
ASSERTIONS &  
GROUNDING**

In this article we will examine a distinction that is critical for human communication. The common lack of understanding of this distinction produces many of the breakdowns that we see in communication. Information is traditionally divided into the simple categories of facts and opinions. Compare, for example:

- Company X had a turnover of £5m last year (Fact);
- Company X is well managed (Opinion).

In this tradition, good business planning is based on facts and rational analysis with a minimum of subjective opinion. In this short article we will take a closer look at this distinction. We will offer a new understanding of facts and opinions in terms of the distinction between assertions and assessments. We claim that this understanding will create a basis for more effective communication that will be useful in developing the ability of the organization to excel at pitching.

## Assertions

While, we can use many words to make an assertion (testify, affirm, state, assure, etc.), essentially, we are saying: “X is true (and I can provide evidence).” Some facets of an assertion include:

- Assertions are statements we make about the world that can be either true or false;
- When we make an assertion, we imply that we can provide evidence that what we are saying is true;
- Assertions exist within the shared understanding of a community of people or space of social agreement. We agree, for example, to call some days Tuesday, or to speak about distance based on an accepted scale of measurement, e.g. in the UK miles and in the rest of Europe kilometers;
- They will always refer to the past and present. We can make promises for the future; we can make strong speculations (like the sun will rise tomorrow). We cannot, however, make assertions about the future because, since it hasn't occurred yet.

## Assessments

Assessments differ from assertions in that they are not evidence-based and others present would necessarily concur. Assessments:

### Are Opinions

Assessments are opinions or judgments. They are our verdicts or interpretations, our characterizations of people, the outcome of “sizing things up,” our point of view, and the decisions we make about people, events or things.

### Can refer to the future

Unlike assertions, assessments can be oriented toward the future in addition to the past or present.

### Shape the actions we take in the world

They shape our reality, our future, by providing an interpretation on which we will base our actions and decisions. For example, when we assess someone as a competent manager, we increase the responsibility that we will assign to them.

### Are not true or false - are either grounded or ungrounded

Assessments, rather than being true or false, are either grounded or ungrounded. Having a *grounded* assessment means that I have evidence to support my assessment. For example, if I have an assessment that someone is a poor timekeeper, then my grounding would be the times that they have arrived late. A well-grounded assessment is one that produces a compelling call to action.

## Grounding

There are six key dimensions to grounding an assessment. Grounded assessments are:

### 1. Made in order to take action

We make assessments in order to take action. To give context to our grounding, then, we need to make explicit why we are making a particular assessment. For instance, assessing that a business has had a bad year takes on a different significance depending upon whether you are buying stock, deciding on an employment opportunity or looking for a price break.

### 2. Restricted to a specific domain of action

An assessment is restricted to a specific domain of action. For example, saying someone is successful in business doesn't necessarily imply they are able to give sound medical advice.

### 3. Based on shared standards

Every time we make an assessment, we assume some standards. A well-grounded assessment is based on standards set by the community associated with the domain of action. For example, in a factory the standards for operating machinery safely may (among other things) specify factors such as speed, pressure, temperature, etc., as determined by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Thus, if I say, “Our milling machines are operating safely,” I am making an ungrounded assessment. If I say, “Our milling machines are operating safely because we exceed all of the HSE standards for safe operation,” I am making a grounded assessment against standards that are recognized by the community of manufacturers.

### 4. Supported by assertions about the past

A grounded assessment is supported by assertions. To ground an assessment that someone is a poor timekeeper, for example, we would provide evidence as support for our claim. By supporting grounding with assertions, I lend more credibility to my assessment.

### 5. Validated by the authority of the speaker

The validity of an assessment resides in the authority we grant the person making it. When the community has granted authority to someone to make an assessment, then that person's assessment lives as valid for the community. The clearest way this authority shows up is when it has been formally granted to someone such as the president, a teacher, judge, doctor, umpire, manager, etc.

It's important that we check to see if we have granted the speaker authority to make an assessment in a specific domain. For instance, if a stranger says, “I don't like the way you work,” you'd probably respond, “Mind your own business.” This implies, “I have not given you the authority to make this assessment.” On the other hand, if your supervisor were to make the same assessment, it would carry a different validity, given their authority.

Even if we have granted someone authority, we can still hold a different assessment ourselves. We may nevertheless choose to put aside our assessment for practical purposes, such as working more effectively with our team.

### 6. Restricted to a specific timeframe

An assessment is only useful in regard to the present and the immediate future. It is not a permanent characterization. For example, if we assess an employee as incompetent in using a spreadsheet, this does not mean they will never be able to do so. Assessments, then, often point to opportunities for learning.

## *The Benefits of Grounding Assessments*

Typically, we do not ground assessments. Grounding does not make an assessment true or right, or guarantee the outcome. Yet, when we are rigorous about grounding, we are able to coordinate action more effectively:

- We can offer colleagues more useful and direct feedback on their pitching;
- We can make better decisions on how to move with a client by bringing awareness to and grounding our assessments about the client;
- As team members we can establish a foundation for collaboration, since with shared understanding we can look together for mutually beneficial actions;
- As managers and leaders we can create more trust and certainty .

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