



IMHO:

# Facts vs. Imagination

A simple shift in understanding can positively affect the bottom line and more.

By Steven Gaffney

If only I had known.

It's a terrible thought most of us have at one point—usually when we discover a big problem that started out small.

Good news is that most problems really do start out small.

Better news is that a simple shift in understanding will empower you and those in your organization to improve communication and mend small, lurking problems before they disrupt your work. That shift in understanding can ultimately net great bottom-line results.

I was on my way to a speaking engagement recently and carried on the usual brief introductory conversation with the person seated next to me on the plane.

Since I had an extra copy of my book *Just Be Honest* (which includes how to handle “If only I had known” situations), I gave it to him before taking a nap.

When I awoke, he told me he wished he had read the book sooner, as he was preparing to announce some major layoffs at his company.

When I asked how this related to my book, he explained

how his company had just lost a major re-compete with a long-standing client. The competitor's proposal reflected what the client really wanted. The losing proposal had what the incumbent “thought” the long-time client was looking for, based on the prior working relationship.

The result? A lost contract, lost jobs, and a major loss in revenue.

This story illustrates a powerful truth we can harness to positively impact our personal and professional lives.

How often do people operate and make decisions as if their opinions are facts?

The trouble is, according to our research based on almost two decades of conducting seminars, we are typically between 50% and 80% wrong on a daily basis. Hard to believe, but we tend to remember the times we are correct and forget the times we are not. That means we are wrong more often than we are right.

Think about it. Have you seen missed opportunities because someone believes they know what their customer wants, rather than finding out what that customer actually wants?

Or have you seen project execution go awry because goals were based on assumptions rather than facts and data points?

It's a simple problem to understand, but not so simple to fix—and it's easy to blame other people.

For example, do you think of yourself as open-minded? How about those around you? Answers to a couple of questions can help gauge your open-mindedness:

- How long can you listen to a talk show host who represents views with which you disagree before you change the station?

- When was the last time you had a discussion with someone with whom you disagreed and came away from the conversation converted to their viewpoint?

Being open-minded is much more challenging than we like to admit.

Start by understanding the difference between what can be “noticed” (the facts of a situation) and what we “imagine” (our opinions, thoughts, evaluations, conclusions). This may sound simple—and it is—but think how often people operate and make decisions as if their opinions are fact, or as if what they “imagine” is correct instead of discovering the truth.

Once we develop a conclusion, we look for evidence to support it and overlook facts inconsistent with our opinions and conclusions. The misdiagnosis becomes exacerbated when the people with whom we interact have different agendas, goals, needs, and backgrounds.

Fully understanding the difference between “notice” and “imagine” and that imagination is often wrong can produce major breakthroughs.

Why? When we understand we could be wrong, we ask more questions. The more questions we ask, the more likely we are to discover the underlying facts. The more facts we discover, the better the quality of our decisions. The better the quality of our decisions, the better the quality of our professional lives.

The man I met on the plane highlights this point. He recognized the “notice vs. imagine” confusion was what had happened with his former client. He went on to tell me that if he had known about this he would have been able to save jobs and revenue—and avoid a lot of stress.

Notice vs. imagine provides an excellent reason to check in with others and ask questions. It reminds us to ask for feedback and information rather than passively waiting for others to provide it.

I heard from a manager at a large corporation who had been told to fire an employee who was performing poorly. He decided to ask the person what was going on. It turned out this person's son had just undergone open-heart surgery.

The employee had never said anything to his boss because he preferred not to discuss his personal life. Clearly, the facts surrounding this employee's situation did not resemble what the boss had imagined.

It is critical to remember that even though employees may not ask for help, you can always talk to them.

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## Taking It Home

By Cairine Caughill

“Notice vs. Imagination” isn't a theoretical strategy for improving communication, it was something to take home from Las Vegas and apply. The results?

- Greg Dudeck, manager at Dudeck Roofing and Sheet Metal, Inc., says he instantly recognized ways he could improve his own communication strategies. “Sometimes I jump to conclusions when I am on a job site or going through the shop.”

He says he is trying harder to explain himself more thoroughly and ask for feedback. “It is hard to change. After 32 years of working with people I am pretty set in my ways, but I think my efforts are appreciated.”

- Brad Matulevich, a third-year apprentice from Washington, D.C., has become more aware of the importance of honest communication. “If you don't tell people what you want, you don't get it,” he says.

“People do a lot of imagining. It's easy to go into a situation with your own beliefs and not allow anyone to alter them, regardless of how productive the changes could be.”

- Joe Toso, president of Tri-Metal Fabricators in British Columbia, agrees it can be tough to keep an open mind. “Sometimes we hide in our own little environment and don't find out what's going on out there.”

He thinks honest two-way communication makes a big difference. “It's useful to REALLY listen to other people and be willing to implement their good ideas, not just think you have all of the answers yourself.”

- Bryan Hunckley, a third-year apprentice from Cleveland, says putting Gaffney's ideas into practice has been challenging. “It's easy to revert to old ways. We have to work together and keep the fire under our feet.”

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*Caughill is a freelance writer based in Ontario, Canada.*

*Order a CD on Notice vs. Imagination from [stevengaffney.com/success-store](http://stevengaffney.com/success-store). Mention Partners in Progress for a 20% discount.*



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This concept can be applied to other areas of life. The following story is from one of my seminar participants:

*“A while back, my husband and I ordered pizza. After 45 minutes we called to find out when we could expect delivery. We called again after an hour and finally, after an hour and fifteen minutes, we called and cancelled our order.*

*“As we were walking out the door to go grab a bite, our pizza delivery lady showed up with our pizza. My husband and I told her that we had cancelled our order and now no longer wanted the pizza. She apologized for being late and told us we could have the pizza for free. We told her, ‘No, thanks. We decided to go out to eat.’*

*“All of a sudden she started to cry. ‘My father died last week and today is the first time I’ve really felt that he’s gone,’ she said. She couldn’t stop crying while she told us how she kept getting lost in our neighborhood all night even though she delivers pizza there all the time.*

*“She said the people in the last home she delivered to yelled at her for being late, and she felt terrible about that, too. I threw my arms around her and hugged her tightly. My husband stepped up and did the same. We paid for the pizza and invited her in to have dinner with us.*

*“A couple of weeks later, there was a knock on the door and there stood Vicky the pizza lady. She told us she wanted to buy us a gift, but there was no gift that could ever express the appreciation she felt for our kindness that night. Instead, she told us, when she drives by our home she sends good wishes our way.*

*“One night my husband and I were driving home, and we happened to be behind Vicky. I’m sure she didn’t know we were there. When we turned onto our street, we watched her drive by and wave toward our home, throwing good wishes our way.*

*“Vicky gave us an immeasurable gift...she gave us an unforgettable life lesson.”*

It is easy to make assumptions and draw faulty conclusions based on a lack of information. Maybe someone who is not returning our calls is not trying to be disrespectful. Rather, it is possible he didn’t receive the messages because he was out of town and did not change his voice mail accordingly.

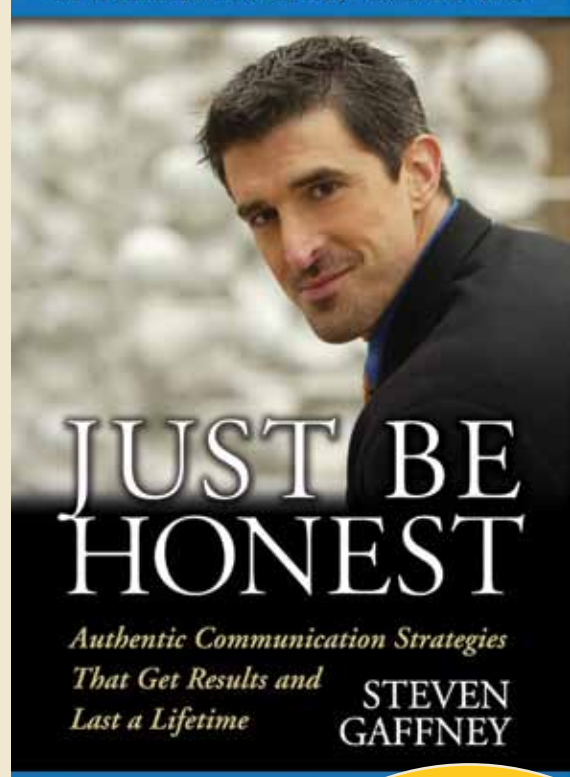
Maybe she did receive our messages but was embarrassed to call and let us know she is behind schedule. Or maybe he did not do what he said he would do, and by not calling he is avoiding the anticipated conflict.

Maybe when someone snaps at us, it has nothing to do with us. Maybe instead she is having a problem at home (e.g., an elderly parent is sick or a child is not doing well in school). Maybe he is under stress or feeling extreme pressure over work issues.

I am not making a judgment about the behavior being right or wrong; I am saying things are not always as they appear.

Understanding the difference between “noticing” and “imagining” enables us to be open-minded and get the information we need.

From the creator of the life-changing Honest Communication Results System™ and “The Fish Isn’t Sick... The Water’s Dirty”™ communication seminar.



Imagine a workplace and home life where everyone understands they might be wrong—or is at least in need of more information.

People would be more likely to check in before making decisions or drawing conclusions. They would be more likely to give others the benefit of the doubt.

The outcome would be open lines of communication, less defensiveness, more appropriate expectations, greater collaboration and teamwork, improved sales, and better-executed programs. Organizations would be more efficient and more profitable.

I’ve seen all of these things happen in real life. In my honest opinion, it’s possible to make them happen in yours. ■

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*Gaffney, one of the keynote speakers at this year’s Partners in Progress Conference, is a leading expert on honest, interpersonal communication, influence and leadership and has authored several books. Visit [stevengaffney.com](http://stevengaffney.com) to find out more about Gaffney’s seminars, speeches, coaching services, or products.*

Watch Steve Gaffney’s full Partners in Progress presentation on the Partners in Progress website at [pinp.org/conf12/index.cfm](http://pinp.org/conf12/index.cfm). His handout is also available.