

THE OTHERS

*How Assumptions Limit
Our Ability To Lead Change*

by Joe Smerkers

Many years ago I enlisted in the armed services. Little did I know at the time that I would learn something early on that would profoundly affect the rest of my life.

It was 1968. I was twenty-one; living in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; spending most of my time on the beach; hanging around with friends who were much like me. We were all tanned, college educated and well-groomed. And, while I may question them today, we most certainly had shared vision, purpose and values.

Then the day came to leave for bootcamp. It's hard to remember exactly but I suppose there were about ten of us from South Florida. We flew from Miami to Atlanta and took a shuttle to Charleston. It was at the Charleston airport that I first noticed *the others*.

They were sitting across from me. About twenty of them. They were from Cleveland, Philadelphia, Detroit and all the other places up North that I had read about and seen pictures of on television.

I could tell they were different from me. They looked different. They talked different. They wore different clothes. We must have sat there for a couple of hours waiting for the bus to arrive. They in their group, I in mine.

I had lived in the north until I was fourteen but I had forgotten. When I saw them I remembered. I knew what they were like. I knew what they thought. I knew how they lived. I knew why they joined. I knew what they thought of me.

It was late when the bus came and all of us got on. I don't remember much about the ride except that no one talked much. We were pretty tired by now.

Finally we reached our destination, Parris Island. Yes, for any of you that want to know, all the stories are true.

A drill instructor got on, and herded us off. First we got rid of our jackets, bags, and sweaters. Then we went to the barber shop. No one asked what we wanted. Buzz and we were gone. Sometime later we lost our remaining clothes and put on fatigues. One by one through the gauntlet we moved. One by one we all ended up in a small gymnasium. Each in our turn came in and sat down on the bleachers. Some on one side of the gym, some on the other.

It was then that it hit me. *They* were gone.

You know, the ones with the long, straggly hair that were not as smart as me. The ones who were going to cause trouble. The ones who were unmotivated. The ones who had the bad attitudes. The ones who were lazy. The ones who couldn't work well as a team player.

They were all gone. Disappeared. All that was left was a bunch of frightened young men. Equal in their abilities, fears and aspirations.

That was a long time ago. And I have recounted this story hundreds of times in my mind and to others. But somehow when I get tired or things don't go right I forget what I learned in that gymnasium.

I forget that *the others* had not changed at all. What had changed were my own assumptions as to what *they* were like; what they wanted; and what they could do. And if my assumptions hadn't changed how I behaved would have, and I would have been the worse for it. You see, once I started to think that *the others* had something to contribute, I started to see potential in listening to them; to understanding their point of view; to watching how they did things. I started to learn from them.

The Marine drill instructors held none of my assumptions. They saw all of us as raw, lowly recruits with equal potential. They *knew* that each of us could be a leader, a contributor in the

Marines. And they were right. I spent eight weeks on Parris Island and most of the leaders in our platoon were those who, a few weeks before, I had written off as misfits.

How do our assumptions affect what we do every day, how we interact with *the others* in our current lives? Why is it so hard to respect those who think differently, act differently, look different? How do John and Mary emerge as leaders, as contributors, if we assume they can't? How many outcomes are the result of our own assumptions rather than the abilities and actions of others?

Look around at your next staff meeting and imagine a leader in every seat. How might you interpret what they say differently? How might you react differently? What new ideas might arise?

Imagine at the next confrontation with a major customer that they are not out to get you, but are sharing their concerns and expectations openly and honestly. What new synergy might develop?

Imagine at the next collective bargaining negotiation that all parties see one basket and truly desire to reach a fair agreement. How much could be saved? What new performance improvements could be realized through cooperative rather than adversarial relationships?

Imagine that the people who work with you can get the job done. You don't have to be there. You don't have to have that meeting. How might the time saved help you put some balance back in your life?

Imagine at home that your spouse has something meaningful to contribute and that your problem child is actually behaving well, if not exactly like you would. How might the stress level change?

Imagine that your children's teachers are doing their best and have your children's best interests at heart. What could you do to support them?

Imagine the possibilities, if we looked at our own assumptions rather than trying to manage, control and manipulate the behaviors of others.

I am not about to sit here and tell you that I am perfect at any of the above. But I am trying. The realities we face every day put enormous pressure on us to produce; to make things happen. The notion of setting aside time to rethink our own fundamental assumptions is outside our 'latitudes of acceptance.' If we change, our experiences tell us that they, *the others*, will not hold up their end of the bargain. We will lose everything; we will perish if we trust them.

It is safer to continue to struggle, to fight, to compete. We can deal with the stress. That's part of the job. We can deal with the unbalance in our lives. We don't have a choice. We can find better people. There's lots of them out there. We can work more hours. It is what's expected. We can explain our losses. It was their fault. We can play for time. It has worked in the past. We can take stock in our titles. I must be good.

But we can't take that first step. We are afraid of what we might find. We know down deep somewhere inside that it has been us along. We are the creators of our own destinies. Not our competitors, not our peers, not our employees. Just us. And it is up to us to change.

Imagine the possibilities when we do.