

Assumed Innocent

Hidden and unexamined assumptions can ruin your day

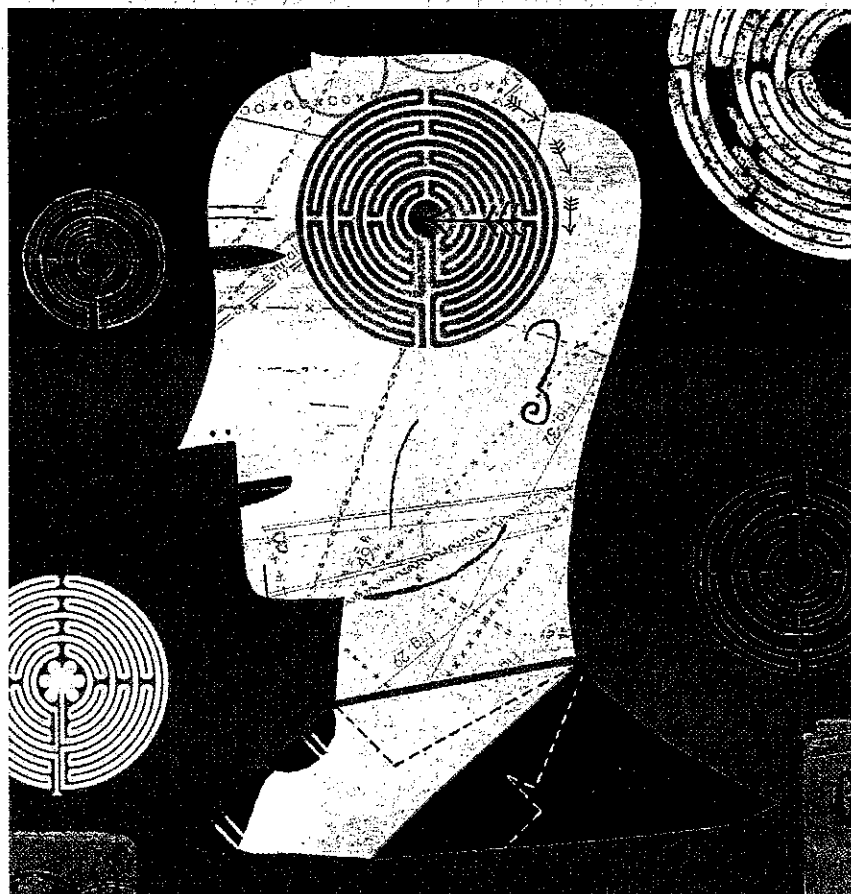
By Dayton Fandray

THE EVOLUTION OF the modern skyscraper was facilitated in large part by the development of the elevator. But if you have ever worked in a modern high-rise, you know that the invention of the elevator was at best a dubious blessing. Nothing can ruin a promising day faster than cooling your heels in some cavernous lobby, hoping to squeeze into a spot on the next stuffy, overcrowded elevator.

So you can imagine the chagrin a group of real estate developers felt when shortly after a large-scale high-rise project was completed, the tenants started pounding on their door, complaining about the slow elevators. The developers called in their engineers, whose recommended solution was to upgrade the elevator system with more efficient machinery, at a price tag of some \$300,000. The developers decided there had to be a better, and cheaper, answer. So they called in psychologist and business consultant Edward de Bono.

De Bono's solution was as simple as it was elegant. He suggested that the developers install floor-to-ceiling mirrors on the walls between the elevators. The mirrors were installed — at a fraction of the cost of upgrading the machinery — and the complaints stopped. Distracted by their own reflections, riders no longer seemed to care about the time they spent waiting for the elevators to arrive.

This story is in fact apocryphal, but it endures as an urban legend because it illustrates an important point. The assumptions we make — in this case, the



engineers' assumption that an ideal solution had to be mechanical in nature — are the natural enemies of creative thought. They short-circuit our imaginations and lead us inevitably to think in terms of common solutions when faced with uncommon challenges.

"It's not just that people are making decisions based upon assumptions that they're not even conscious of, but they're not necessarily correct assumptions," observes Jeffrey Pfeffer, Thomas D. Dee II Professor of Organizational

Behavior at the Stanford Graduate School of Business in California. "It would be helpful if people would question their assumptions and spend more time learning about how things really are, as opposed to making assumptions and going off without testing them."

The best way to avoid making hidden or unwarranted assumptions is to ask a simple one-word question: "Why?" If you answer this question honestly, you will have taken a big step toward detecting the potential flaws in your logic. ➤