Assumptions: The Hidden Failure Behind Repeat Problems

By Caroline Riedel

The Moment That Changed How I See Repeat Problems

Early in my career, I kept hearing about an operator who was "notorious" for causing 14–16 hours of downtime on a critical manufacturing line because he "didn't care about cleaning the equipment properly." The reputation had followed him for years. No one wanted to work on the same shift as him. Operators and supervisors prepared themselves for the possibility of long downtime whenever he was scheduled on their respective shift. If the line went down, the assumed reason came fast. It sounded familiar. It sounded confident. And it gave the team something to act on during their frustration as they braced for many hours of physical labor to get the line started again.

The downtime didn't happen often, but when it did, the reaction was immediate. Within minutes, everyone agreed the operator had caused the issue. Same symptom, same frustration, same assumption.

When I finally spoke with him, the truth was completely different. He did care. He believed he was cleaning the tooling correctly. No one had ever explained or shown him the specific details of what "proper cleaning" required. He wasn't careless; he was unclear.

That moment stayed with me because everyone was so sure they were right about the cause. It was the first time I saw how quickly assumptions can harden into "facts" and how easily teams can think they know the problem with absolute confidence and no evidence at all.

How Assumptions Become "Facts"

If you've spent any time working in operations or quality, you've seen this pattern. A problem appears, and within minutes someone offers an explanation that sounds clear and decisive. The team rallies around it because it gives them something to act on and a way to move quickly toward a solution.

In many organizations, the person who speaks with confidence or simply the loudest voice, ends up setting the narrative. Their explanation becomes the truth, not because it's accurate, but because it's useful. It creates direction, reduces uncertainty, and feels like progress. Once that tone is set, people stop questioning whether it's correct. They stop looking for evidence. They start solving the problem that was stated most confidently or forcefully, instead of the one that truly exists. This is how assumptions quietly become "facts."

The Pressure of Urgency: The System Rewards Motion, Not Understanding

When teams are under pressure, the system rewards whoever moves the fastest, not whoever understands the problem best. Production is behind, customers are waiting, leadership wants updates, and the clock is ticking. In that environment, speed becomes the metric that matters. Pausing to verify details feels like slowing down. Asking clarifying questions feels like resistance. Evidence gathering feels like a luxury.

So, teams default to the quickest explanation that allows them to act. Assumptions harden into "facts" because they enable motion, and motion is what gets rewarded. The irony is that the push for speed creates the extra work and delays everyone is trying to avoid.

Familiarity: "We've Seen This Before" (Even When We Haven't)

When a problem looks like something the team has dealt with before, people assume it's the same issue. Familiarity creates a shortcut that relies on memory and experience instead of evidence. You've heard it: "It's the same thing as last week." "We already know what caused this." "We've seen this a hundred times."

Experience becomes the default explanation. The team moves forward as if the cause is already known, even when the details or evidence don't match. This shortcut is comforting. It reduces the stress of not knowing and allows the team to act quickly. But it also blinds them to what's truly happening. Unverified experience is simply another form of assumption.

The Blame Shortcut: When Opinions Fill the Gaps

Once blame enters the conversation, the need for evidence disappears. If someone says, "This is operator error or lack of training," the team stops looking for what's true and starts defending what they believe. The explanation becomes a shield, not a hypothesis. And when people feel the need to defend their position, assumptions multiply.

Blame is the fastest shortcut of all, and the most expensive. It shuts down curiosity, verification, and problem solving. And it makes the problem far more likely to return.

The Operational Cost of Assumptions

Assumptions don't just distort conversations. They distort outcomes. They create wrong fixes, rework, repeat problems, lost production time, quality escapes, firefighting cycles, erosion of trust between teams, and a culture where a "quick fix" matters more than accuracy.

Every one of these costs is familiar to anyone who has spent time working in operations or quality. And every one of them can be traced back to the same root issue: teams are solving the wrong problem with absolute confidence.

When "More Inspection" Becomes the Default Fix

In another plant I supported, a recurring defect kept showing up on a high-volume line. Every time it appeared, the response was automatic: "We need more inspection checks." No one questioned it. No one asked whether the checks we already had in place were catching anything. The assumption was simple and familiar: if defects are getting through, the answer must be to look harder and look more often. So, the team added more inspection checks.

Operators were spending more than half the shift inspecting parts. Quality was overwhelmed with data that didn't reveal anything new. More checks, but no reduction in defects. Management was frustrated because defects continued to reach customers, straining customer relationships.

Weeks later, someone finally stepped back and asked a different question: "Why do we think more inspection is the proper solution?" When the process was investigated further, it became clear the cause of the defects had never been studied. It was easier and quicker to simply add another inspection check. But because the team assumed inspection was the answer, they kept adding checks instead of understanding the cause. They never solved the true problem, and the real issue continued to stay hidden.

The Hidden Failure Behind Repeat Problems

Teams don't struggle because they lack tools. They struggle because they treat assumptions as facts. When confidence is mistaken for accuracy, when speed is mistaken for progress, when familiarity is mistaken for evidence, and when blame is mistaken for truth, the real problem stays hidden. And when the real problem stays hidden, it returns.

Repeat problems aren't always caused by technical or equipment failures. But when teams rely on assumptions instead of evidence, they end up solving the wrong problem with absolute confidence. The failure to gather facts and evidence significantly increases the likelihood that the issue will return.

A Better Way Forward

Teams don't need more tools, forms, or checklists. They need to start with what has been verified, not what is assumed. They need the discipline to pause long enough to tell the difference between what has been verified and what is only being treated as true. They need the courage to question explanations, even when they sound familiar or are delivered with confidence. And they need clarity to confirm the problem before trying to fix it.

When teams slow down just enough to understand the situation, they stop fixing the same issue again. Clarity replaces guesswork. Evidence replaces assumptions. Understanding replaces speed for the sake of speed. When teams stop treating assumptions as facts, they stop fixing the wrong problem. That shift is what breaks the cycle of repeat problems.