

Key Assumptions Check

*A **Key Assumptions Check** is an explicit exercise to list and challenge the key working assumptions that underlie the basic analysis.*

The process of conducting a Key Assumptions Check is relatively straight forward in concept but often challenging to operationalize. You need a structured process to draw out your key assumptions. In developing a list of key assumptions, it is important to work from your prevailing analytic line or lead hypothesis.

The key to conducting a Key Assumptions Check is to be open-minded. It also pays major dividends when you can involve others less familiar with the topic who can openly challenge the key analytic assumptions of the group. Keep in mind that many “key “assumptions” turn out to be “key uncertainties.” Based on facilitator experience, approximately one in four key assumptions usually collapses on careful examination.

The Method

- Gather a small group of individuals who are working the issue along with a small number of “outsiders” who can come to the table with an independent perspective.
- At the outset, the group must agree on a definition of a key assumption. An assumption is a supposition of something as true in order for another condition or development to be true; it can also be a fact or statement that analysts tend to take for granted. The latter are often generated by culture bias or analytic mindsets and are difficult to uncover.
- On a whiteboard or an easel, list all the key assumptions that underlie the analysis.
- After developing a complete list, go back and critically examine each assumption.
- Encourage the participants to ask themselves the following questions. You may want to display this list on another easel, on the whiteboard, or provide it as a handout.
 - How much confidence do I have that this assumption is valid?
 - Why do I have this degree of confidence?
 - Under what circumstances might this assumption be untrue?
 - Could it have been true in the past but no longer be true today?
 - If it turns out to be invalid, how much impact would this have on the analysis?
- Try to place each assumption in one of three categories:
 - Basically solid.
 - Correct with some caveats.
 - Unsupported or questionable.
- The unsupported assumptions often are better characterized as Key Uncertainties.
- Refine the list of key assumptions, deleting those that do not hold up to scrutiny and adding new assumptions that emerge from the discussion.
- Periodically check the key assumptions lists for continued validity.
- Ask the group if it would be appropriate to take the list of key uncertainties and reformulate them as collection requirements.
- After the session, circulate a final list of key assumptions, caveated assumptions, and key uncertainties.