

Agreement is not alignment.

Find the hidden assumptions inside approved scope.

A practical field guide for project managers | PMI Global Summit 2026

The Assumption Gap

People can approve the same outcome while expecting different behaviors, capabilities, or prerequisites. A hidden assumption influences delivery but has not been validated, documented, or assigned to an accountable owner.

This guide focuses on the Assumption Gap. The wider framework also addresses lost decision rationale and lost context at handoff.

01 / LISTEN FOR THREE SIGNALS

1 Scope Silence

Expected current behavior is not specified. "Everyone knows that is included."

Ask: What happens today that we have not explicitly written down?

Seek: Current-state rule or workaround + confirming owner + test case.

2 Legacy Equivalence

Sameness is assumed, rather than demonstrated. "The new system will work like the old one."

Ask: Which exact behavior must be demonstrated or proven?

Seek: Scenario demonstration + configuration or design proof.

3 Unstated Dependency

A prerequisite has not been confirmed. "That team will take care of it."

Ask: What must be true, by when, and who has confirmed it?

Seek: Named owner + timing + agreed handoff or approval path.

START WITH WHAT MATTERS

Prioritize assumptions that could change outcomes, acceptance, cost, compliance, or dates.

One assumption. One clearer decision.

Use in a scope review, backlog refinement, vendor discussion, or handoff.

02 / RAISE IT WITHOUT BLAME

NAME IT

State what is being treated as true.

FRAME IT

Connect validation to the outcome it protects.

ANCHOR IT

Record the confirmed answer where delivery can use it.

YOUR REUSABLE SENTENCE

"We are assuming [X]. To protect [outcome], I'd like to validate it before [decision point] and record the answer in [artifact]."

The PM facilitates; the accountable business or technical owner validates. If evidence changes the approved baseline, use your normal decision or change process.

03 / USE THE SPONSOR ASSUMPTION MAP

Copy this record into your existing project tools, or write directly below.

SIGNAL	Scope Silence / Legacy Equivalence / Unstated Dependency
ASSUMPTION TO TEST	We are treating the following as true:
QUESTION TO ASK	What specific question would confirm or challenge it?
EVIDENCE / OWNER	What proof is needed? Who confirms it, and by when?
ANSWER LIVES IN	Link the confirmed answer, decision, and evidence.
RECORD THE RESULT	Confirmed / Disproved / Still open Next action + date

Choose a useful home: behavior or rule → requirement + acceptance test; capability → design + proof; prerequisite → dependency log + handoff; uncertainty → risk register + action.

CLOSE THE HANDSHAKE

Can the receiving owner explain the assumption, evidence, decision, and delivery impact? If it is still open, retain an owner and due date.