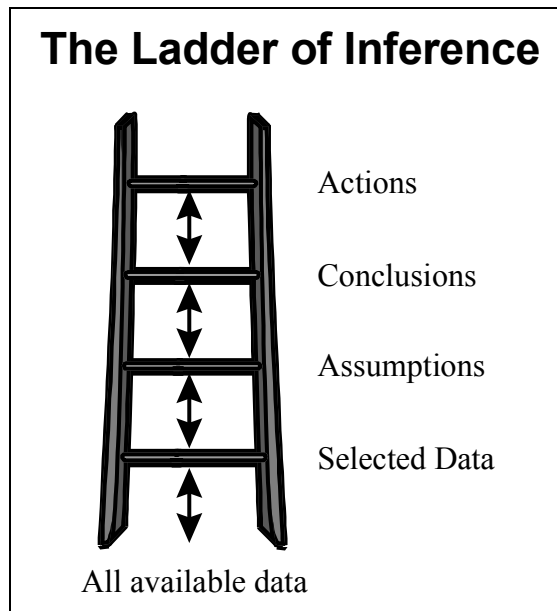


■ Ladder of Inference



—Adapted from Chris Argyris, *Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning* (1991)

What

The ladder of inference is a framework for understanding how we process objective information to arrive at subjective conclusions that lead to action.

Why

It improves decision making by enabling you to:

- Be clear with others about the reasoning and assumptions that led to a point of view you advocate
- Help others clarify the reasoning and assumptions that led to points of view they advocate
- Better understand why/how different people come to different conclusions about the same data

When

- Your view of what to do in a situation is different from someone else's and you want to:
 - Explore how each of you came to your respective views
 - Look for common ground on which to proceed

- You want to explore a decision-making process, with an eye toward improving the quality of thinking that goes into the decision

It is *inappropriately* used as a means of attacking the thinking of others, particularly in service of promoting your own point of view.

How

Understanding the Ladder

The ladder represents the mental processes used to convert data into action, each rung suggesting a different operation.

The ladder rests on the ground of all available data—the observable or objective data in the environment around us.

When we formulate decisions, we move up the ladder until we're ready to take action.

- **Selected Data**
On the first rung we select data—we pay attention to some of the information that is available to us for our decision and ignore other information.
- **Assumptions**
On the second rung, we make assumptions—based on the data selected and our past experience, we anticipate events or reactions related to our decision, for example, how someone will behave, whether or not something will work.
- **Conclusions**
On the third rung, we draw conclusions/formulate beliefs—based on our assumptions, we solidify our expectations about what will happen if we pursue a certain course of action.
- **Actions**
Finally, we take action.

What the ladder makes clear is how far we can move away from the actual data at the bottom by the time we jump into action at the top.

Using the Ladder

Once understood, the ladder becomes a vehicle for posing questions to clarify how a decision was reached. We may ask these questions of ourselves or of others. For example:

- What data were considered?
- Were there other data that could or should have been considered, for

example, were XYZ data considered? If not, why not?

- What assumptions were made? On what basis?
- What other assumptions might have been made?
- What conclusions were reached? How?
- What other conclusions might have been reached?
- Is there anything that deserves reconsideration before taking action?

The intention behind such questions is not to judge assumptions, conclusions, or actions. The intention is to help make clearer and more visible the thinking process that produced them. When mental processes are revealed, understanding is easier.

After reflecting on such questions, we may or may not decide to move back down the ladder—or invite someone else to do so—and consider other data or revisit an assumption before taking action.

Challenges

- **Spending sufficient time at the bottom of the ladder, examining the data.**

It is tempting to move too quickly to assumptions, conclusions, and action.

- **Maintaining awareness of the assumptions and beliefs under which we operate.**

Sometimes mental models and assumptions are so pervasive and ingrained in our thinking that we experience them as universally true. It is difficult to separate them from objective data.

- **Acknowledging our tendency to “jump” up the ladder and the need frequently to move back down.**

It is uncomfortable to uncover lapses in our reasoning. It is difficult not to be defensive about them. A genuine spirit of inquiry and reflection is essential.