



Ladder of Inference for Clarifying Issues

to Validate Our Perceptions, Decisions and Actions -- and How We Can Help to Change Ourselves and Others

Research indicates that, when people experience a recurring problem, they're usually stuck because of their own ongoing misperceptions and ineffective actions. The solution to their problem is rarely solved with a simple procedure, rather they have to change how they perceive the situation and what they're doing about it.

Experts in learning and adult education (particularly Chris Argyris) suggest that there is a chain, or ladder, of inferences that we make when we form an opinion or decide to take some action. The ladder can be used to examine how certain conclusions and actions were decided.

The ladder can be useful to help us understand our thinking and the thinking of other people. That understanding can be used to change ourselves and to change others by revealing misperceptions and ineffective actions.

Inquiry, or thoughtful questioning, is a powerful means to conduct this examination. We use inquiry to examine ourselves or others in each step of the ladder.

Note that, in most cases, the ladder is used to work backwards from a conclusion or action to understanding the process that derived that conclusion or action in the first place.

Step 1. I observe "data" from experiences (much as a videotape might capture data).

What information am I aware of, or did I see?

Step 2. I select "data" from what I observe (our beliefs affect what data we select).

What information was most important? Did I miss seeing something?

Step 3. I add meanings (cultural and personal).

How did I decide what's most important? What values or beliefs drove my decision?

Step 4. I make assumptions based on the meanings I added.

What does that important information suggest to me? How might I use it?

Step 5. I draw conclusion(s).

What am I going to believe and do with that important information?

Step 6. I adopt beliefs about the world.

What would others believe and do with that information? What values or beliefs drove their decisions?

Step 7. I take actions based on my beliefs.

What am I doing in the world because of my values and beliefs? What are others doing because of their values and beliefs ...

...values and beliefs based on what we choose to see (or not to see), what assumptions we make (or mistakenly make), and what we're going to rightfully do (or mistakenly do)?