

## Ladder of Inference

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#### CONCLUSIONS, ACTIONS

- I can't work with Chris; he is totally unmotivated; it's time to get rid of him.

#### JUDGMENTS, ASSUMPTIONS, OPINIONS

- I think he is totally disengaged and does not care about the team.

#### SELECTION OF DATA

- I see that Chris came in 20 minutes late to our staff meeting again and didn't apologize or explain why

#### OBSERVABLE DATA AND EXPERIENCE

- (I have 2 years of experience with Chris)
- Plus, I see he comes to a meeting late yet again.

BETTER COMMUNICATION. BETTER RELATIONSHIPS. BETTER CARE.



As humans, we are hard-wired to leap to assumptions in ways which create tension with others, especially under the pressure of stress and complex problems.

This hard-wiring derives from ancient parts of the brain which evolved early on to generate automatic survival reactions--flight, fight, or freeze.

Difficulties in modern social situations can activate these pathways and drive us in nanoseconds, outside of our awareness, to

faulty interpretations not infrequently accompanied by strong emotions.

This happens to everyone. We cannot stop our brains from this quick process. But, we can modify it. One way is through stopping, even for a few seconds, to observe the mind.

The Ladder of Inference (1, 2) is a tool to make visual these rapid movements of the mind and help us pause for reflection before we take action. The bottom rung of the ladder represents all the observable data in a situation. Our hard-wiring leads to rapid selection of part of the data, then "up the ladder" to judgments or assumptions, and finally to conclusions and action at the highest rung. Such actions are at risk for being unproductive or counterproductive for work relationships and problem solving.

The Ladder can be divided into as many as 7 or more steps to represent schematically the brain's information processing. There is not one right number of steps. I use four because that is all I can remember in the midst of conflict which is when I use the tool to mentally orient myself. In the example shown above, my brain causes me to get very negative about a colleague, Chris.

- **At the bottom rung is all observable data** I could consider from my working relationship with Chris or even just for this one day.
- **At the next higher rung, the brain selects data out of this pool.** This day, Chris is late to a meeting and does not apologize. Because this has happened before and/or because I am particularly sensitive that day, my brain immediately focuses on that one piece of data.
- **From selected data, the brain moves to judgments, assumptions, and opinions--i.e.** making meaning out of the selected data. In this case, I assume Chris is totally disengaged and not committed to the team.
- **At the highest point of the ladder are conclusions and actions.** I am gripped by my interpretations to the point that I don't think I can work with Chris. Or, I might withdraw

from him, disrupting the flow of work between us. Or I might publicly attack him for his "bad attitude" (an interpretation which has not been checked out).

If we keep the ladder in mind in the midst of conversations, we can step back to observe our own thinking. We can shift to asking ourselves questions which move our thinking back to data and experience opening us to more choices for communication and action. We can ask:

- What am I thinking?
- What interpretations and judgments have I made?
- On what data am I basing these conclusions?
- What is my reasoning?
- What other data am I not considering?
- What else could be going on?
- What other interpretations are possible here?

I can then use these same questions with others if I sense they have moved up the ladder. Research from Gervase Bushe (3) suggests that about 80% of conflicts at work occur because people have not checked out their experiences with each other--i.e. moving down the ladder with each other to share observed data and experience. When such sharing does occur, the conflict often either goes away or the issues are entirely different from what was expected.

Though simple in concept, asking questions and sharing experience in this way can be demanding because we may be gripped by strong emotion or the stakes may feel high or we might have a strong need to be "right" at that moment. Then it can be hard to own our contribution to the tension. Slowing down to reflect can require a good deal of self-regulation of emotion and thought.

The Ladder of Inference reminds us to treat our strongest conclusions as just theories to be tested. Our first conclusions are all too likely to put us at risk for becoming part of the problem.

**References: "Ladder of Inference"**

1. Attributed to Chris Argyris and Donald Schon. See a brief history of the development of the Ladder of Inference in Smith, Diana Mclain **The Elephant in the Room** 2011, pgs. 275 - 276
2. Thanks to the American Academy on Communication in Healthcare for the Ladder of Inference image.
3. Bushe, Gervase **Clear Leadership**, Davies-Black, Nicholas Brealey Publishing 2010

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## About Neil Baker M.D

Neil Baker M.D. works with healthcare leaders and teams to enhance impact through *In-the-Moment Leadership and Team Strategies*. This means focusing on immediate work challenges—using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult--as opportunities to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress to results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the

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Neil J. Baker M.D.

University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Quality at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for ten years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at [neilbakerconsulting.com](http://neilbakerconsulting.com).