



The Ladder of Inference was proposed as a tool for trying to ensure decisions are based on hard reality and facts rather than wrong conclusions or assumptions, its understanding can empower and enable leaders to reduce potentially very damaging business relationships. This was back in the 1970s. The Ladder of Inference describes many moves through a series of mental steps, often very rapidly, to come to a conclusion, based on 'data' received. This data can be visual, kinaesthetic, auditory or something you have read. If you've ever been accused of, or suspected anyone else of, putting 2 and 2 together and getting 5 – then applying the principles behind the Ladder of Inference will be beneficial to you.

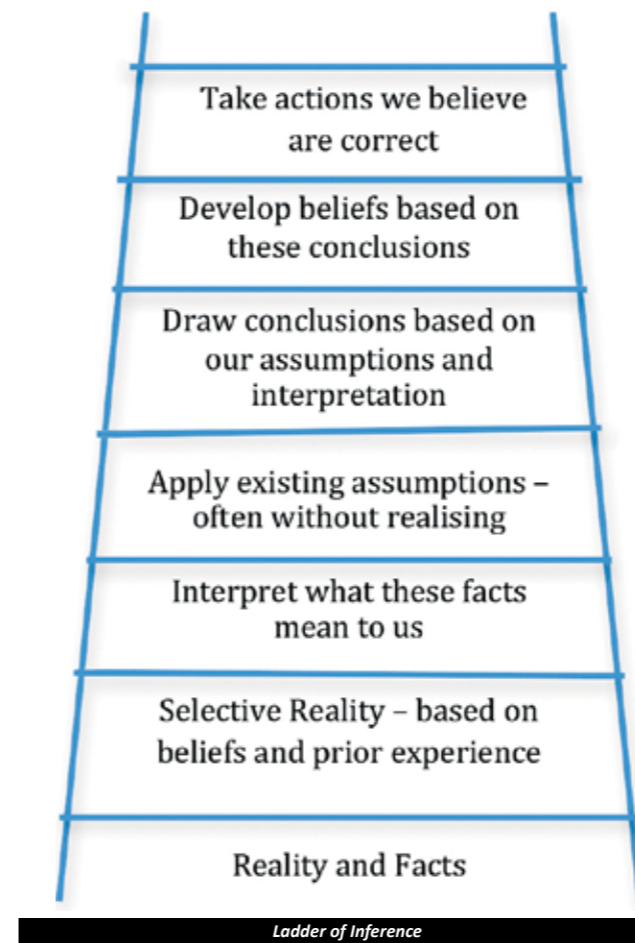
Basic Principle

It's not always easy in the modern business environment to slow down and take the time to really think about the reasoning behind decisions. However, the more that decisions can be made based on what's real rather than what's perceived, the easier it will be to ensure a business is operating at peak efficiency. Different points of view within a business can be healthy. Challenging reasoning can help move departments and businesses in new and sometimes unexpected directions, as long as those different points of view are not divisive and are based on the true facts and not prior assumptions. The former can, unfortunately, lead to conflict because of wrong conclusions being drawn.

On a more human level it can lead to hurt, blame and anger which in turn can mean a breakdown or deterioration in a relationship, which again can be damaging to a business. This can be due to the person who is using assumptions to quickly draw the wrong conclusions that in turn can affect the person from whom the data was received, who is confused because nothing detrimental was ever intended. They may not realise that only part of the data has been accessed, or the data has been misinterpreted – they only see the resultant action, and in turn, may make assumptions.

Prior beliefs and knowledge can very quickly feed the decision progress and speed up the drawing of conclusions rather than acting as a 'check' to stop and make you think whether other interpretations are possible.

Looking at the pictorial representation of this below you can see how easy it is to get trapped in a vicious circle. We can end up ignoring true facts completely. Our beliefs have a big effect on how we select from reality, and can lead us to ignore the true facts altogether. Soon we are literally jumping to conclusions – by missing facts and skipping steps in the reasoning process.



How to avoid, and help others to avoid, climbing the ladder

It is human nature to use inference based on past experiences, it's how you learn!

The key here is to do it in a way in which you ensure you have all data available before you rationally apply prior knowledge and draw better conclusions. You can also use the ladder to challenge others' conclusions in a non-threatening way, so avoiding unnecessary mistakes and conflict.

→ Become a more reflective practitioner - be more aware of how you think and make decisions. Deep-seated beliefs need to be looked at as they can become so ingrained you see them as facts, and their veracity is never questioned. Slowing yourself down to fully consider the facts before making a decision is not a bad thing to do.

→ Clarify your actions so that others understand your thought processes without having to fill in the gaps in your reasoning, which can lead to the wrong information being used as filler.

→ If you perceive a lack of clarity in data received, do not hesitate to ask questions which will explain what the reasoning was, and therefore allow you to make an appropriate response. Good questioning, which allows for the gathering of quality information, is a skill in itself.

The key here is to start a dialogue before you find yourself jumping to conclusions. There is absolutely no need to say to your colleague, 'I think we are moving up 'The Ladder of Inference'. You are not trying to blame anyone for jumping to wrong conclusions, you are aiming for complete transparency, where thinking processes are obvious, common

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ground can be found, energy injected and a way forward devised. Embedding this way of thinking into team practice will lead to healthier relationships. Taking it to the other extreme, if decision-making is not transparent can lead to collusion based on misinterpretation and prior assumptions, which can be very energy-draining in a place of work.

Examples of Practical Uses

A team leader who inherits the people they are responsible for may form assumptions very quickly based on the dynamics they can see. They may have been briefed by the previous team leader on the personnel in their team – this again may be based on limited data. Considering the Ladder of Inference could ensure these biases are not perpetuated and help build more positive relationships. Within the team, training could be given to make all members more self-aware and reduce bias. Ask a question like "Do I know

this to be true?" – you may be surprised to find how many of your decisions are based on past experiences and beliefs rather than facts and data.

If you are a mentor within a department you may find it a useful tool to use with your mentee when looking at building stronger relationships and trying to set targets which are based on where they are actually at, rather than their perception of where they are at.

It is very common to make assumptions in our relationships with family and friend. The principles behind the Ladder of Inference apply just as much here. To conclude, how many times can you think of where you've come to the wrong conclusions and then acted hastily, when in fact if you'd slowed down, and taken steps to avoid climbing the ladder you could have avoided awkward and stressful situations?

Ensuring you have all the facts and asking pertinent questions (to yourself and your teams) to clarify where necessary, will lead to actions that are positive and appropriate. **BIG**

