

The Ladder of Inference

Source: R. Ross, *The Ladder of Inference*, pp 242-246, in Senge, P., Kliener, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R., & Smith, B. (1994). *The fifth discipline fieldbook; Strategies and tools for building a learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.

Although we all observe objective data, we are selective in what we retain and how we process what we see. The methods we use to select and process data is based on the assumptions and inferences we are making about a particular situation, as well as the beliefs and values we've developed and hold regarding the world. This creates what is called a "reflexive loop" (Isaac, 1992).

Our beliefs and values affect how we select and process "data" (how and where we focus – or do not focus - our attention). The portion of the observable data which we "selectively see" further contributes to the meanings, assumptions and conclusions which are part of our pattern of reasoning. Untested or inaccurate assumptions and inferences may lead us to take actions (or hold beliefs) which are inaccurate, since we are using "selective" data to guide our thinking.

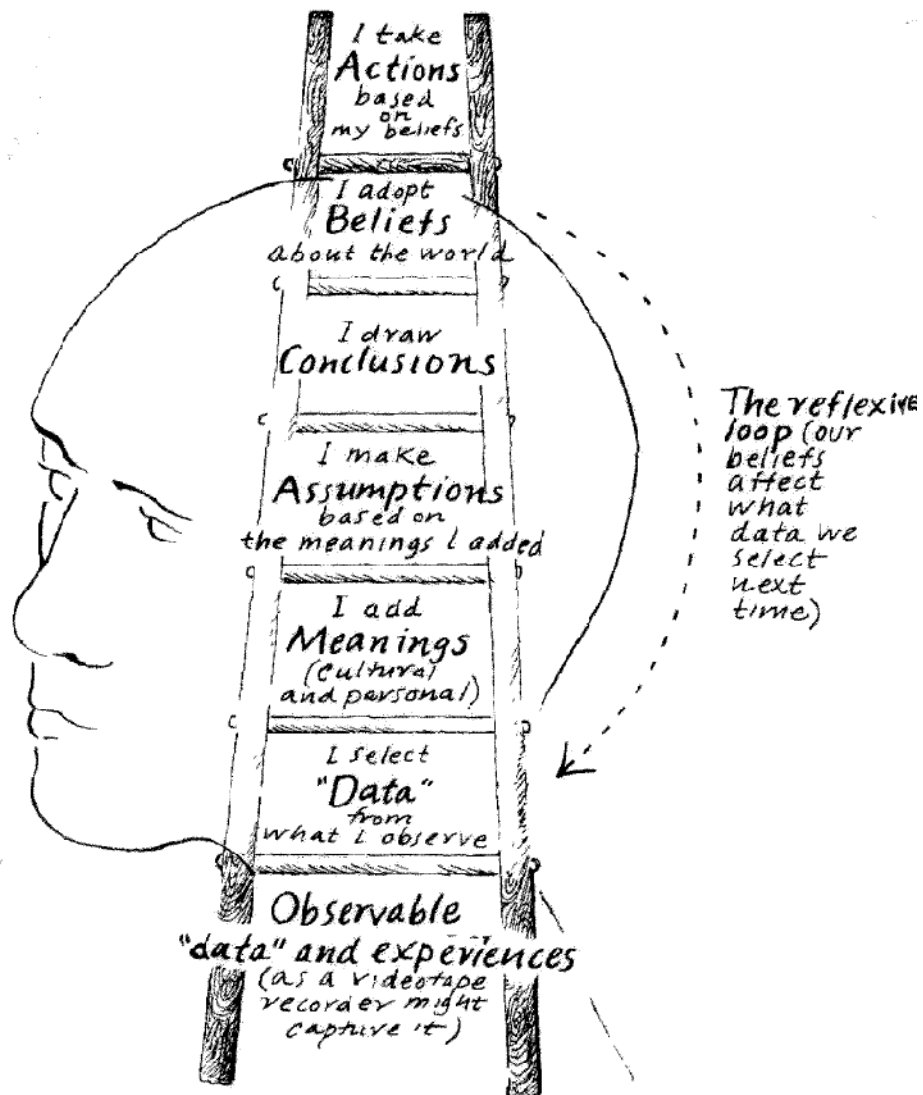


Illustration from *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, page 243.

Strategies for Testing your Inferences and Assumptions

<p>Be more aware of your patterns of thinking and reasoning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start noticing what “gets your attention” and where you pay less attention. • When you get close to making a decision – take a few moments to reflect, review and trace your reasoning and the steps you took that lead you to your conclusion and decision. • Reflect on the beliefs and values that you hold very deeply. In what ways do those beliefs and values consistently influence your thinking and the decisions you make?
<p>Make your thinking process more visible to others</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State your assumptions and the data that you used to develop your assumptions (“Here is what I think, and the reasons that lead me to this conclusion.”) • Reflect on and state your assumptions (“From what was happening I assumed that...”) • Be more explicit in explaining your reasoning (“I came to this conclusion because ...”) • Ask others to comment on your reasoning and assumptions (“What, if any flaws do you see in my reasoning.” or “How do you see the situation?”)
<p>Inquire about the thinking and reasoning you observe in other people</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’m interested in understanding how you reached that conclusion.” • “What data seemed most important to you?” • “Tell me more about how you got from point A to point B as you were thinking about this issue.” • “I am unsure of what you meant when you said_____. Please explain a bit more so I’m sure I better understand your point of view.” • “What do the rest of you notice as you look at the data?”