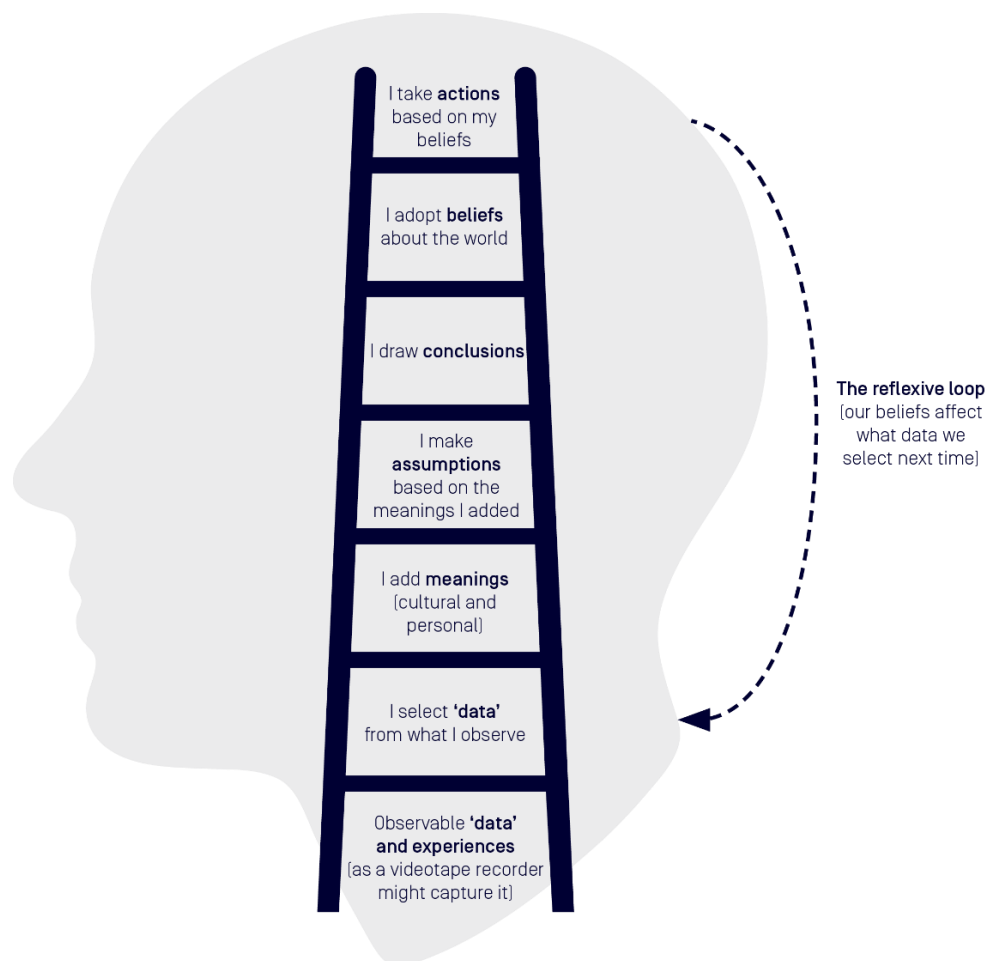




The Ladder of Inference User Guide

The Model



The Ladder of Inference is a way of representing the thought processes that can go on in our heads as we try to make sense of the events we perceive around us. The rungs on the ladder represent steps that we take in our thinking. These steps often happen very quickly, without us being aware of them.

Further detail about each step from the bottom up is below.

Data	This is what we have noticed out of the events going on around us. It is not the full picture, being influenced by factors like where we are in relation to those events and our level of awareness.
Meanings	Having noticed the data, we attach significance and relevance to the data. Those meanings we attach are influenced by things like our culture and the way we make sense of the world.
Assumptions	Having attributed meaning to the data we noticed, we start to make assumptions, for example filling in gaps from the data (things we didn't see but which 'must' have happened to complete the story forming in our mind) or inferring others' motivations or intentions.



Conclusions	After the assumptions give us a more complete (but untested) story about what is going on around us, we can form conclusions about, for example, why something happened or what is going to happen next.
Beliefs	Having reached our conclusions, we form beliefs about what is happening and what is needed from us.
Actions	And then we act based on what we believe to be true.

The actions we take might be based on thinking that has distorted our understanding of the situation, meaning we might take actions that are not only unhelpful but actively damaging to relationships or our ability to achieve our goals.

The Ladder of Inference model also illustrates a reinforcing effect of our flawed thinking as our beliefs about the current situation inform our longer-term thinking about the individuals involved, people in general, organisations, what 'always' happens in such situations, and so on. That then affects the data we notice in situations in the future that appear to be similar, making it more likely that we will see 'patterns' emerge and make our climb up the ladder even faster next time.

It is important to realise that the thinking processes reflected in the Ladder of Inference are not always going to be unhelpful. For example, our brains might use the same processes to recognise a few data points that represent a potentially dangerous situation and allow us to act to avert it or to remove ourselves from harm's way. We are not trying to stop these processes, but to become more aware of them and to better enable ourselves to challenge the thinking before we act.

How we use the model

When we are ready to act, we can use the Ladder of Inference model to recognise the thinking processes that have helped us to get to that point and we can interrogate that thinking to be sure that we are going to act on an accurate perception of the world. If we are already taking action that seems not to be having the expected effect, we can interrogate our thinking to figure out whether we need to do something other than what we are doing.

In either case, we use the model to climb down the rungs of the ladder to understand where our thinking processes have gone awry.

Over time, as we become more familiar with how to question our thinking, we might start using the Ladder of Inference much sooner in the process, even as we are starting to 'climb'. For example, we might recognise that we have formed a conclusion about why someone has just said something and realise that this conclusion relies heavily on assumptions rather than genuine evidence. That realisation can stop us from going on to form a belief or to then act based on this flawed understanding.

Why the model is useful

The Ladder of Inference model helps us make our largely unconscious thought processes visible to ourselves, so we can test our view of the world. By helping us to recognise errors in our thinking, the Ladder of Inference helps us to avoid holding misinformed beliefs and acting unhelpfully on inaccurate understandings of the people and events around us.

What it looks like in practice

Using the Ladder of Inference can be as simple as asking yourself questions like, "Why do I believe that?" or "How might I be wrong about this?" You can then use the model to take yourself back through your thought processes, to identify the conclusions that sit behind your beliefs, the assumptions that inform your conclusions, and so on.

Don't get too caught up in trying to neatly distinguish between the thought processes represented by the rungs. It matters less that you can identify what is a conclusion and what is an assumption, for example, and more that, before you act, you use the model to really understand how closely – or not – your beliefs reflect



what is really going on. If you're not sure how closely your beliefs reflect reality, that's a good sign to get curious, using the Ladder of Inference frequently to learn more about how you think.

Contextual scenario

The conversation below represents a fictional reflective feedback conversation between Tracey, a Coach Developer and Simon, a Basketball Coach, after Tracey observed him coaching his community U15 girls' match. This draws on the example provided in the video animation.

Coach developer – Tracey guides reflection	Relevance to the ladder	Coach Simon – reflects and gathers his insights
Hey Simon, great game! The girls fought back so well after getting behind.		I know Tracey! I am really proud of the way they played for each other.
I noticed a big shift in the defensive pattern after that time out you called. What happened?	Recognising the impact of his flawed thinking	Oh, that was when I realised that I was watching a different game and I asked the players to help me out.
What do you mean?	Realising he was at the top of the Ladder	Well, I realised I was getting really agitated and cranky with Chloe, our power forward, and I remembered that Ladder of Inference you explained to me last week.
Ah, the Ladder of Inference. One of my favourites! What was going on?		Well, I saw the other team's power forward score a basket with nobody marking her, so I looked for Chloe who was meant to be marking her. Chloe was metres away, just standing there.
Oh, that would not have gone down well with you.	Assumption Conclusion	No, it didn't. I assumed that she had deliberately allowed that uncontested basket and concluded that it could only have been because of laziness.
Oh no! She's one of your hardest working players!	Reflexive loop Belief Action	Well, it wasn't the first time there'd been a basket scored without a defender pressuring the shot, so I'd had a loop in my head going for a while, convincing myself that Chloe must have been lazy today. But it gets worse. To round off my climbing of the ladder, I then acted on that belief, yelling at Chloe to stop being lazy. She heard me, got mad at me, which made me angrier, and so on.
Yes, it was hard to miss that tension on the court. What happened to calm things down? How did you climb down the ladder?	Climbing down	I realised that I was at the top of the ladder with no understanding of how I got there. And being at the top of the ladder seemed unhelpful to me or the team. So, yes, I climbed down.
How did you do that?	Helping others to see your Ladder of Inference	I called the time out and apologised to Chloe, for my outburst; I told the whole team that I had been thinking in unhelpful ways and Chloe bore the brunt of it. I pointed out that I knew the team would work hard to avoid an opponent scoring an uncontested basket, and the most helpful reaction to that from me was curiosity. I asked the players what I was missing.
That showed maturity and self-awareness. What did they say you were missing?	Testing the accuracy of his thinking	They told me that the other team were screening us aggressively and quickly getting themselves open, so when I saw what I thought I saw, I had not seen everything and my climb up the ladder started.



Once you had that fuller picture, what did you do?		That's where the change in defensive pattern came from. We adjusted for the other team's tactics, stopped them scoring, and scored a few baskets of our own in a row to come from behind and get the win.
Great work, Simon! Knowing about the Ladder of Inference won't stop you from climbing it occasionally, but it will help you to find your way back down. That time out gave you space to be curious, to climb down the ladder, and to make explicit those thought processes so that their accuracy could be tested.		Thanks for telling me about the Ladder of Inference. It might just become one of my favourite things too!

How to know if it's working

We will know that we are making good use of this model when we are shaping our beliefs by testing with others the accuracy of the conclusions we draw, the assumptions we make, and the data that we've drawn from events.

Other useful tips

If you realise you have climbed the Ladder of Inference to an unhelpful outcome, be gentle with yourself. Don't get upset, frustrated, or angry; this is a process that has been at work in your mind since you could think, and it will take time to build your capability to stay aware of the process so that you can be more intentional with your thinking and actions. Website team to add URL link to action learning guide once created

Self-reflection and action learning

Use the [Action Learning Guide](#) to practice applying the models and techniques in your specific context and situation.