



SURVIVAL SKILLS FOR SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS

Ladder of Inference

Communication is the key to critical thinking and successful relationships. Being aware of our thought processes is an important part of successfully communicating – both for what we say and what we hear.

The Ladder of Inference (developed by Chris Argyris, detailed in *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge) describes the process that many of us use unconsciously. We add potentially incorrect meaning to a conversation or experience by making assumptions, drawing conclusions and then adopting beliefs or taking actions based on these assumptions and beliefs.

It is our beliefs (conscious and subconscious) which influence the selected data and experience we pay attention to, and the meanings which we give to it, which are frequently based on our assumptions:

STEP 1:

Our brains pick up pure data – just like a photograph. Everything is captured. At this moment, there is no meaning to it. It's just data. Then we go into the subconscious process:

STEP 2:

From what we observe (step 1, data) we start to filter and select specific pieces of it.

STEP 3:

We start to add meaning to the data, based on our experiences and beliefs about the world.

STEP 4:

We make assumptions from the meaning we have added to the data.

STEP 5:

We draw conclusions and create beliefs.

STEP 6:

We adopt those beliefs.

STEP 7:

We take action based on those beliefs.



TRY THIS EXERCISE

A simple test of this is to give three people exactly the same picture and ask them to tell you what it's all about.

You will get three different stories. **It's not the picture that tells the story, but us interpreting the picture**, based on our experiences and beliefs.

DEVELOPING OUR CAPACITY FOR CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking means developing our ability to consider all aspects of a situation, to discern our own internal responses to information and situations, to form an objective analysis and evaluation before taking action.

Here is an alternative ladder process to consider, either to evaluate a current situation or to apply to a previous situation to gain insight.

- 1. Observable data** Notice the totality of the situation without narrowing it down – what do you see, hear, sense? Take account of all the information presented to you.
- 2. Select data** What data and information do you automatically assess first?
- 3. Add meaning** Notice or write down your initial thoughts and feelings about the situation – and begin to look at what beliefs, ideas or generalisations are behind these. What meaning or meanings are you attributing to this situation based on the information you have so far?
- 4. Draw conclusions** Notice what conclusions you are drawing from the meaning you have added to the data. Does the meaning come from this current situation or are you attributing meaning based on previous experiences?
- 5. Adopt beliefs** What beliefs about the world and this situation have you developed because of these conclusions?
- 6. Take action** Notice what actions you are thinking of taking or have taken in the situation. Can you identify how this has been influenced by your beliefs?
- 7. Assumptions** Do you notice any assumptions you have made in this situation, based on these beliefs?

Do this exercise without judgment. How we attribute meaning and make assumptions is an unconscious process. This exercise will help you to identify and bring your awareness to your current thinking so you can identify where you would like to make changes to how you assess situations. It can support your development of self-awareness, which also enhances better decision making.