# Tools for Conflict Resolution and Communication:

The Ladder of Inference and the Behavior-Impact Feedback Model

Managing conflict effectively requires clear communication around issues that are usually difficult to talk about. There are two tools for communication that can make discussing conflict and other difficult subjects easier, and I frequently introduce them in difficult conversations that I am facilitating.

The Ladder of Inference

Developed by management theorist Chris Argyris, the ladder of inference simply maps out the natural human process of observing the world, making sense of it, and then acting on it. In interpersonal conflicts we argue about differing conclusions, yet we rarely take the time to explore *how* we came to those conclusions. It is in that "making sense of it" stage where people often discover the source of misunderstanding and the opportunity for creative problem solving in most conflict situations. The ladder of inference facilitates this by mapping out the process of moving from what we observe to what we conclude (a simplified graphic of the ladder is included below, but there is a bigger version at the end of the document).
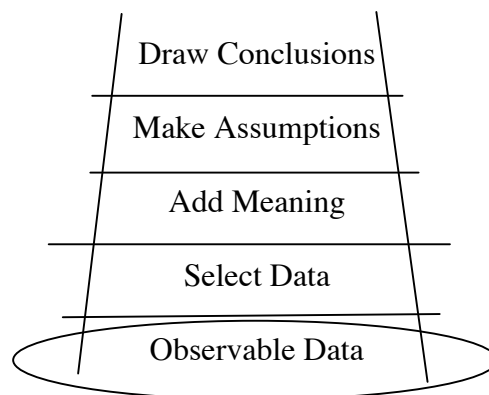
At the bottom of the figure is a "pool" of observable data, as a video camera would record it—all that people could possibly see, hear, feel, or experience. Moving up the ladder, our first step is to select data out of that pool. No matter how hard we try, we cannot notice everything, or even remember all that we notice. Our next step up the ladder is to add meaning to that limited collection of data, and also make assumptions about it. This is the critical step of interpreting what we see. Based on personal and cultural backgrounds, different people will add different meaning to the same observable event. Furthermore, we use assumptions to fill in the gaps of what we either did not notice or did not remember. For example, when we observe someone doing something that hurts us, we often quickly assume that their *intention* was to hurt us, when often that is not the case. The final step up the ladder is to draw conclusions about the situation.

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Note that our actions tend to be based on our conclusions (even though we rarely explain how we reached those conclusions).

For people in organizations to use this model in conflict situations, they must take the time to work their way "down" the ladder of inference in both the statements they make and the questions they ask. If you have a conflict with someone, pay attention to how you came to your own conclusion, and when you have a conversation with the other person, use the ladder to both explain your side (here's what I noticed, here is how I interpreted it, so that's why I am now concluding…) and to ask questions about the other person's side of the ladder. Perhaps they noticed things you did not? Maybe they put a different meaning on the action you took? The more you explore this, the easier the conflict will be to resolve.
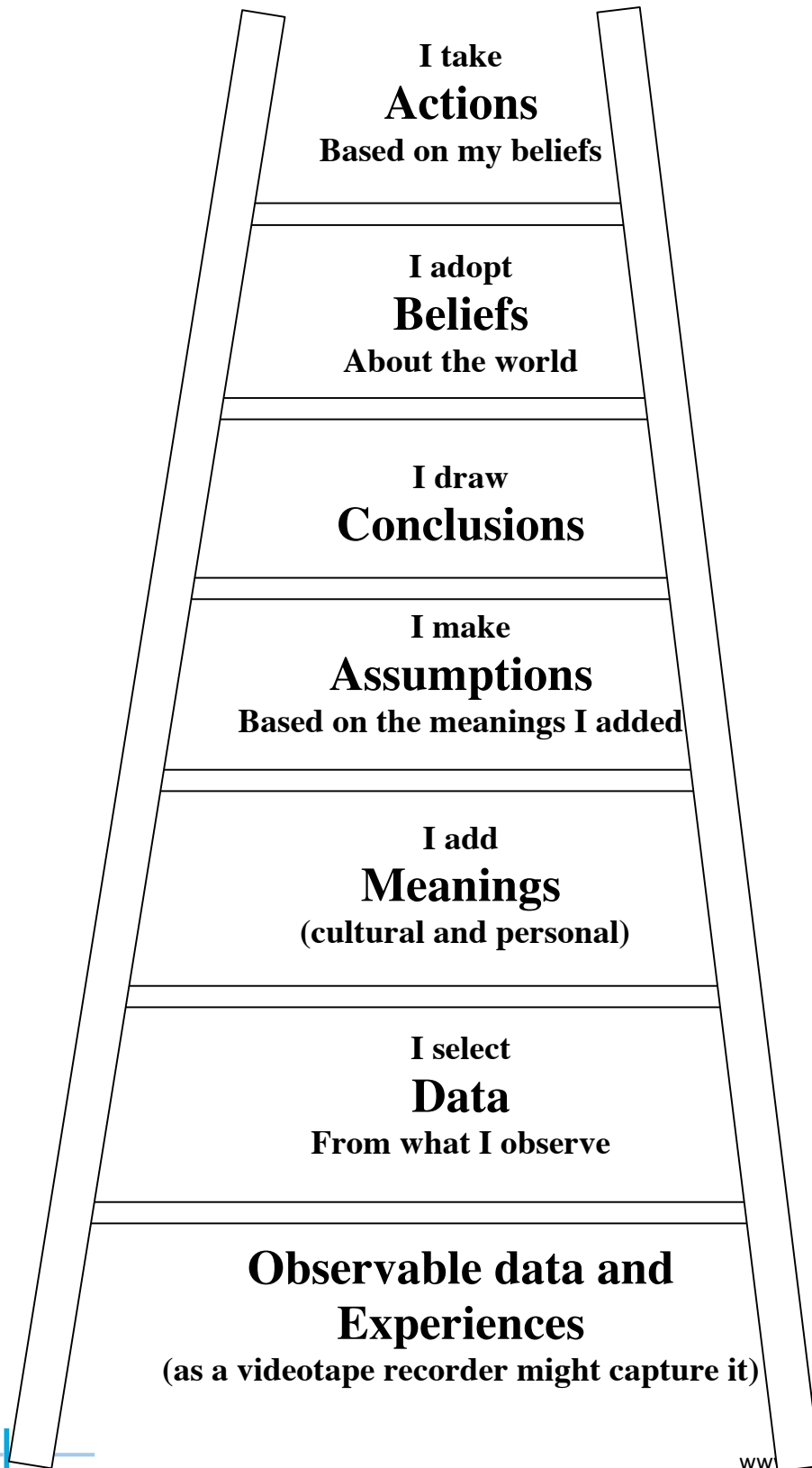
The Behavior-Impact Feedback Model

Related to the Ladder of Inference is another communication tool that is useful specifically when you need to have a conflict conversation where someone is doing something that is upsetting to you (and you'd like them to do it differently!). Approaching that person with an adversarial, I'm-right-you're-wrong attitude will put them on the defensive, which will only make matters worse. On the other hand, if something is bothering you, you should be able to tell that person in a productive way and at least make a request about how you would like things to be done differently in the future.

The model for doing that is the Behavior-Impact Feedback Model. It is a simple (and ancient) formula for communicating about tough issues. The structure relates to the Ladder of Inference because it focuses on specific behavior (the observable data) and the meaning/assumption part that is often lacking in difficult conversations. The model has also been called the "when you, I, because" model, as you can see from the basic structure:

When you [do something]
I [react this way]
Because [of my assumptions, history, etc.]

There is also a fourth part where you can make a request about how you would like to see it done differently in the future.

The Ladder of Inference

I take
Actions
Based on my beliefs

I adopt
Beliefs
About the world

I draw
Conclusions

I make
Assumptions
Based on the meanings I added

I add
Meanings
(cultural and personal)

I select
Data
From what I observe

Observable data and Experiences
(as a videotape recorder might capture it)

Source: Peter Senge et al., *Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, p. 243

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Behavior-Impact Feedback Model

When you [do something]...

Make sure you focus on observable behavior during this part. Describe what the other person actually did or literally said—not your conclusion about what they meant or intended.

Example: When you promised me you'd be home by 7:00 and then showed up at 8:00 and did not apologize or explain what happened…

I [react this way]...

Make sure you describe the feelings that are generated, as well as the conclusions that you come to based on what you saw. It's a good idea to present your conclusions as questions rather than statements of fact.

Example: …I get really mad. I feel disrespected by your broken promise, and I wonder if you care about my feelings or my need to maintain a set schedule…

Because [of my assumptions, history, etc.]...

Make sure the other person knows WHY you came to those conclusions. This is not meant to justify them, it is meant to further clarify your conclusions. This is a great opportunity to share what assumptions you have about the incident that may not be obvious to the other person.

Example:…Because I had counted on that time to do some important work, and in my family we were taught nothing was more important than keeping promises—no matter how small…

An alternative [to your action that would not have generated by reaction]...

This step is "optional," in that after the last step, it may be appropriate to hear a response from the other person (where, hopefully, they would use the same format). However, at certain times, it is helpful to make a request of the other person for the next time this happens. Make sure it is framed as a REQUEST, not a demand.

Example: …Next time, I would request that if you are going to be late, you call me BEFORE the time I expect you home and provide some sort of explanation. I am sure your reason is valid, but it helps me to know ahead of time.