

RESOURCE FOR A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Middle managers were meeting to make recommendations about clarifying their role in the organization. When the group saw problems in the whole organizational system, they leapt to conclusions about top management. Yet when middle and top managers met together, they quickly discovered shared perspectives.

We can all think of times when we leap to conclusions that bypass key facts. These leaps cause communication blocks and poor decision-making. The ladder of inference is a tool that helps us see the distance between facts and conclusions.

Here's how the ladder works. On the bottom rung are facts. Say Joe wasn't here on time for three project meetings. We move up a rung on the ladder when we add meanings, for instance, "Joe knew about this meeting." More sweeping conclusions push us higher: "He came late on purpose," and "Joe doesn't favor this project." Finally, perched atop a series of inferences, we adopt beliefs that drive behavior. "I can't trust Joe to support the project so I'd better not include him in the next one."

The ladder of inference reminds us to:

- Ask what's behind others' thinking. How did we get to that conclusion? What assumptions are we making? What are the facts?
- Reveal our own thinking. Along with asserting, "I believe we should move ahead to buy this product," we can make our reasoning visible. "We should move ahead on this deal, and this is why..."

The ladder of inference is useful as a coaching tool. A manager made different decisions about two employees in almost identical circumstances. When we explored his thinking, he noticed he had chosen one course for a man and another for a woman. He realized he was acting on beliefs about women and men that made him see identical circumstances differently.

In team building and conflict management, I use the ladder of inference to create dialogue and work through communication blocks. Marketing folks can't understand where manufacturing is coming from. Both groups need to talk about the circumstances, values and priorities that drive their decisions and modus operandi.

Both parties need to "deconstruct" their own thinking. They can depict a ladder of inference by actually writing down their beliefs, assumptions and perceptions and then asking what information supports these conclusions. See *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Peter Senge, et al, Doubleday, 1994) for other ways to discover inferences.

Why do we not regularly reveal and question assumptions?

- Creatures of our organizations' culture, we want to fit in.
- Assuming the role of expert, we make sweeping claims.
- Not realizing that we are reinforcing the status quo, we fall into the habit, for example, of making blanket statements about other departments

Changing our habits requires effort and will create discomfort in some. At the same time, by revealing, challenging and sharpening the quality of our thinking, this tool of the learning organization improves dialogue, decisions, and the organization's agility.

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Upcoming

"Negotiating an End to the Pay Gap"

presented by Merryn Rutledge, with Christine Moriarty, Moriarty Financial Services

Equal Pay Rally Day sponsored by Vermont Business and Professional Women and Governor's Commission on Women

April 8, 11 a.m.
State House, Montpelier
Call 802 828 2851

A client writes...

"I wanted to thank you again for the wonderful work you did at our meeting...you did a great job not only of preparing for the day, but of facilitating a very large group..."

Dianne Maccario, Director of Academic Services
Community College of Vermont