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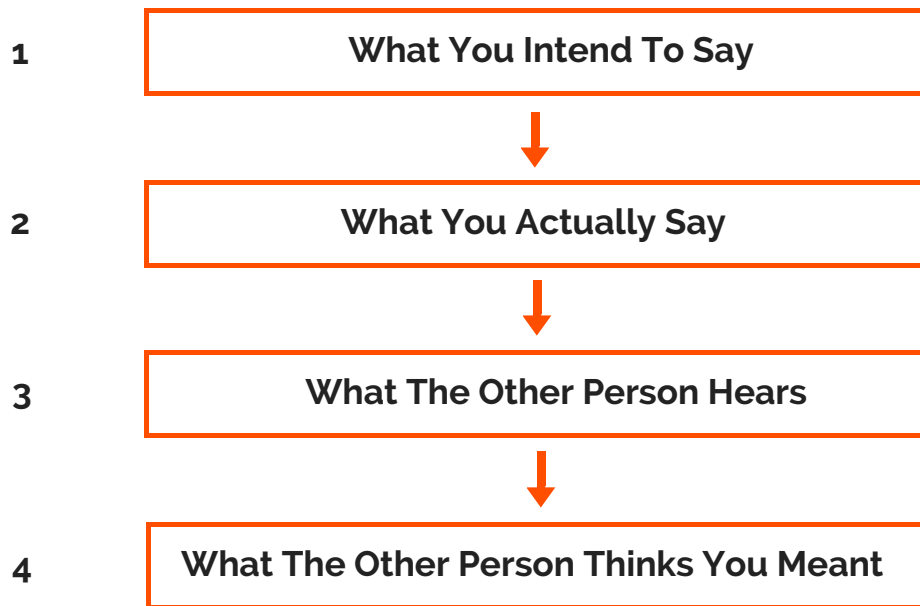
CERTIFICATION PROGRAMME

The Ladder of Inference

Created By Kain Ramsay

THE LADDER OF INFERENCE

1   **What You Intend To Say**

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2   **What You Actually Say**

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3   **What The Other Person Hears**

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4   **What The Other Person Thinks You Meant**

Have you ever been accused of 'putting two and two together and making 5'? When someone else thinks you've jumped to the wrong conclusion?

We're always under pressure in today's fast-moving world, to act now, rather than spend time reasoning things through and thinking about the facts. Not only can this lead us to wrong conclusions, but it also causes conflict with others, who may have drawn very different conclusions on the same matter.

To maintain the respect and trust in any relationship (personal, intimate or professional), it's crucial that our decisions and actions are founded on reality (and not upon a misinterpretation of the facts).

In the same way, when you accept or challenge someone else's conclusions, you must be confident that their reasoning, and yours, is firmly grounded in the facts. The 'Ladder of Inference' helps you to do this.

Sometimes known as the 'Process of Abstraction', this tool helps you to understand the thinking steps that often lead an individual to jump to the wrong conclusions. It, therefore, helps you focus on hard reality and facts.

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THE LADDER OF INFERENCE

The Ladder of Inference details the thinking process that individuals go through (often without realising it), to get from the facts to a decision or action. These thinking stages can be referred to as rungs on a ladder and are shown in the image below.

Starting at the top of the ladder, we have 'what we intend to say' or plan to say before we've even opened our mouths. From there, there is 'what we actually say' which nine times out of ten is not an accurate representation of what we mean to say (because we're imperfect communicators). Then there is 'what the other person hears', which again might be far removed from what we've actually said and depends on the degree of which the other person is listening or paying attention. And lastly, at the bottom of the ladder, there is 'what the other person thinks we mean.' At this stage, the other person may jump to conclusions or makes assumptions about what they think we mean by what we've said.

An example of an assumption could be if an individual takes negative feedback from a colleague to heart and assumes that their colleague thinks they are awful at their job.

This can create a vicious cycle. A person's beliefs can have a huge effect on what they choose to take from what we say and can lead them to completely ignoring the facts of what was said. Soon they are jumping to conclusions – by missing the facts and skipping steps in this reasoning process.

The Ladder of Inference can help people learn to get back to the facts and use their beliefs and experiences to positive effect, as supposed to allowing them to narrow their field of judgment. Following this reasoning process can lead people to better results which are based on reality, and therefore help them to avoid unnecessary conflict and mistakes.

How to use the theory

The Ladder of Inference helps people to draw better conclusions. We can also use it to help challenge or validate other people's conclusions. This reasoning process helps us to remain objective and, when working or challenging other people, reach a shared conclusion without any conflict.

You can use the following steps to challenge thinking using the Ladder of Inference:

1) Stop! It's time to consider your reasoning.

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2) **Identify where on the ladder you are. Are you:**

- being selective about what you hear?
- Interpreting what you think the other person means?
- Making or testing assumptions?
- Forming or testing conclusions?
- Deciding what to do and why?

3) **From your current 'run', analyse your reasoning by working back up the ladder. This will help you to trace the facts and reality that you are actually working with.**

At every stage, ask yourself 'what' you are thinking and 'why'. As you analyse every step, you'll probably need to adjust your reasoning. For example, you may need to extend the information you have selectively heard or change some assumptions.

The following questions will help you to work backwards (coming up the ladder, starting at the bottom):

- Why have you chosen this course of action? Are there other measures you could have considered?
- What belief lead to this action? Was it well-founded?
- Why did you draw this conclusion? Is the conclusion sound?
- What are you assuming, and why? Are your assumptions accurate?
- What data have you chosen to use and why? Have you selected data rigorously?
- What are the real facts that you should be using? Are there other points you could consider?
- With this new sense of reasoning (and perhaps even a wider field of data and more considered assumptions), you can now work down the ladder again – step-by-step!

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Tips for Using the Ladder of Inference

You can use the 'Ladder of Inference' at any stage of your thinking process. If you're asking any of the following questions, the model may prove a useful aid:

- Is this the 'right' conclusion?
- Why am I making these assumptions?
- Why do I think this is the 'right' thing to do?
- Is this conclusion based on all the facts?
- Why does she believe that?

When you're working through your reasoning, watch out for rungs that you tend to jump. Do you tend to make assumptions too quickly? Do you tend to choose only part of the information? Consider your tendencies so that you can learn to consider this stage of reasoning more carefully moving forward.

Try explaining your reasoning to a friend or colleague, as doing this will help you to ensure that your argument is sound and of rational judgement.

If you are challenging someone else's conclusions, it is of particular importance to be able to explain your reasoning to enable you to explain it to the other person in a way that helps you avoid conflict and reach a shared conclusion.

The Ladder of Inference was first put forward by organisational psychologist Chris Argyris and was also used by Peter Senge in 'The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization.'

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