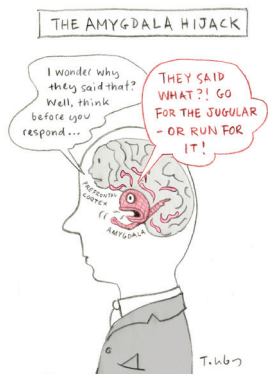


# Climbing the Ladder of Inference



HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED THIS?

THE EXPERIENCE OF GOING FROM 0 TO 100 IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE.

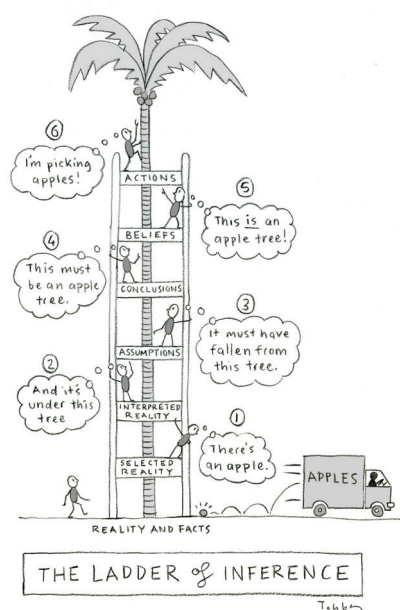
## What is the Ladder of Inference?

The Ladder of Inference describes the thinking process that we go through to arrive at a decision or an action. As a consequence of the fast pace of the modern workplace we process millions of thoughts per day. In doing so we have to 'think on our feet' and this can mean we move through this mental pathway at speed, and often we do so unconsciously.

Colloquially speaking, the Ladder of Inference is often described as:

- Jumping to conclusions
- Putting two and two together and getting five
- Catastrophising
- Fast forwarding the video

It is a better outcome for us if we **pause** and **consider** the best next steps.



## Consider this example

Kim is making a presentation to the team which she has put a considerable amount of effort into. Everyone seems engaged except for her boss Tom, who she notices is not paying attention and yawns intermittently. While everyone else asks questions and makes encouraging remarks, Tom is busy doodling on his notepad and appears uninterested. At the end, Tom pipes up and asks Kim a question that was clearly answered in the presentation. In addition, he says "I think you need to get on with writing a formal report".

This annoys Kim. She finds herself responding in a manner that on reflection may have looked defensive. Tom notices but chooses to let it go through to the keeper because he knows that Kim has put a lot of time and energy into the presentation and was quite nervous.

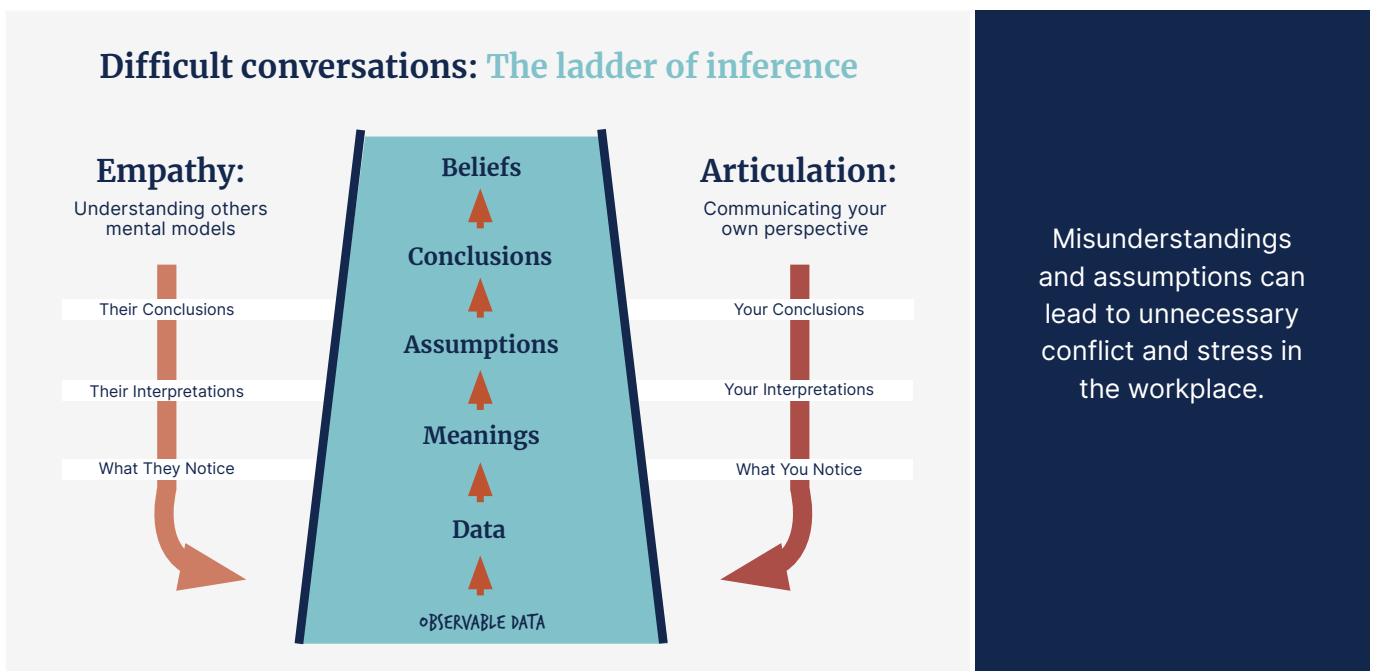
Everyone shuffles papers and moves on to the next item on the meeting agenda. Kim feels dismissed and is now thinking that Tom is trying to clip her wings. She disagrees with the idea of needing a written report and decides she will not "get on with it!". Kim walks away feeling despondent, and is wondering if Tom is the great leader he was purported to be.

Kim has climbed the ladder of inference and arrived at the conclusion that Tom is trying to undermine her and left her feeling like her presentation was inadequate.

# This is human behaviour common to all of us

Taking a speedy climb up the ladder of inference can happen to all of us. It is what usually follows this very normal response that is the challenge, as we often are faced with a misunderstanding, an unnecessary conflict, and at worst decisions based on assumptions rather than facts.

Our reaction to a situation starts at the bottom of the ladder and moves its way up. As you go up the ladder, more data gets added at every rung. The additional data that gets added on the upper rungs is not necessarily based on the facts. As the diagram shows, the further up the ladder we go, the further we are moving away from reality.



## A change in response can have a significant impact

Let's consider how this situation could have played out differently if Kim did not climb the ladder of inference.

### Tom's story

The real story in Tom's case is that he was tired and unable to concentrate. He has a newborn baby at home and his sleep is suffering. He tried to cover himself by writing things down while people were asking questions and then, embarrassed that he had nothing else to contribute he asked for a 'full written report' so he could catch up later in his own time.

Tom is new to the role and struggling to find a balance between work and his situation at home.

Kim always appears calm and does great work. Tom feels a bit unsettled as he feels like he is not on top of his game.

### How observations help Kim to respond better

Kim sees Tom yawn and assumes he's bored. She decides to check her assumption against the observable data.

**Kim:** "Tom, sorry to be direct, but are you bored?"

**Tom:** "Sorry, we had a very bad night with the baby, I'm having trouble concentrating"

Kim now understands and offers to provide Tom with a written version of her presentation so he can catch up later. Kim realises that Tom was not critical of her work, just not at his best. Kim has three children and she understands it can be tough.



## How can we use the Ladder of Inference to our own advantage?

Knowing that we all can do this from time to time, we can stay aware of our thought processes. The ideas below will support you to interact authentically with the people around you. In other words, you can learn to pause, stop your thoughts from spiralling out of control, promoting a sense of calm not drama.

1. Stay aware of your own thoughts and reasoning processes
2. Be transparent with others about your thought processes
3. Seek to understand, ask questions to ascertain what is going on for others
4. Take time to plan your conversations where there is something at stake for you, others or the business

Create habits that will support you to remain conscious of your Ladder of Inference by asking yourself these questions:

- Am I drawing the right conclusions?
- Why did I assume that?
- Is my conclusion based on fact?
- Do I really know what the other person is thinking and feeling?

It is also useful to regularly check and identify which rung of the ladder you are currently on. If you realise you are too high up already, and moving towards assumptions rather than fact-based decisions, consciously move back down to the facts and start your thought process again based on the observable facts.

## Does the Ladder of Inference feel familiar?

Let's face it, we've all done it. Identifying the problem is a big part of creating the solution. And the solution is more effective communication and improved engagement within the workplace.

Organisations are complex and we are all keen to be seen to be being our best. But as you can see, if we don't keep checking our thought patterns - staying conscious of the way we move from observable data to conclusions and actions - we can misinterpret a situation and create a narrative that doesn't actually exist.