Ladder of Inference

Many of our big decisions at work feel instant: we see something, and a moment later we know what to do. Between the two, however, the mind climbs a ladder of steps so fast that we rarely notice it. The ladder of inference, a model proposed by Chris Argyris and popularized by Peter Senge in The Fifth Discipline and its Fieldbook, slows the climb down so that we can check each step. In this video, Talal, a regional sales director at a medical-equipment distributor, uses it to rethink a hasty judgment about a colleague.

1. The Seven Rungs

The bottom rung is observable data and experiences: what a camera would record. On the second rung we select some of it. On the third we add meanings, personal and cultural. On the fourth we make assumptions based on those meanings. On the fifth we draw conclusions, on the sixth we adopt beliefs about the world, and on the seventh we take action. The whole climb is very fast, and other people see only the top, our action. The ladder is not a flaw, because we need to climb quickly in order to act at all, but the risk is a climb that we cannot see.

Example: A manager sees a customer looking at a phone during a presentation. She selects that detail, adds the meaning of boredom, assumes the offer is weak, concludes that the deal is lost, believes that this kind of customer never buys, and ends the meeting early. A camera would have recorded only a customer looking at a phone.

At work: On three Monday mornings in a row, Salma, a senior key-accounts manager, arrives about ten minutes late to the sales meeting. Talal climbs: he selects the lateness and forgets her record, adds the meaning of disrespect, assumes that she is losing her drive, concludes that she is not committed, and believes that she does not work in the spirit of the team. Then he acts: he removes her from the pitch to the hospital group, the biggest of the quarter. Nobody asks her anything.

2. The Reflexive Loop

Beliefs do not simply sit at the top. They loop back down and steer which data we select next time. Once Talal believes that Salma is not committed, he notices every late arrival and every short answer, and he misses her strong results. This is the reflexive loop, and it confirms itself: we believe what we see, and we see what we believe.

Example: A hiring manager believes that graduates of one university are weaker. In every interview he notices each mistake of those candidates and forgets the same mistakes made by others, so his notes about them grow longer and his belief grows stronger without any new evidence. Soon he rejects two strong applicants from that university before the second interview. That is exactly the reflexive loop at work.

At work: After two weeks, Talal's notebook lists five small complaints about Salma: a late arrival, silence in a meeting, a slow reply, a missed call and a short email. It lists nothing about her best quarterly results or the clients who praise her. The data he selected were chosen by his belief.

3. Walking Down the Ladder

To check our own thinking, we walk down one rung at a time and ask a question at each. What is the observable data, as a camera would record it? Which data did we leave out? What meaning did we add, and could another meaning fit? What are we assuming, and is our conclusion the only one that fits the data? Which belief is steering us, and what evidence would change it? We write the answers down, because the jumps become visible on paper. We also separate facts from interpretation with simple words, such as I noticed before I think.

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Example: A founder believes that a supplier does not care about his company. When he writes down the observable data, he finds two shipments that were two days late and one call that was not returned, and nothing else. Little data supports such a strong conclusion. Writing the facts down is exactly what walking down the ladder means.

At work: Talal writes: Salma arrived about ten minutes late on three Mondays. The data he left out are that she has the highest sales in the team and that she answered every urgent client call. The meaning he added was disrespect, but another meaning may fit, that something makes Monday mornings difficult for her. His conclusion, not committed, is a guess and not a fact.

4. Walking Down Together

The ladder is more useful when we share it. Advocacy means stating our view and the data behind it, and inquiry means asking the other person about theirs. We say what we noticed, say that we have drawn a conclusion that may be wrong, and ask what is happening from the other person's side. Useful questions are: what did you see that led to that view, can you walk me through your thinking, and what would change your mind? Then we listen for the data on their ladder. The tool has limits: it needs a few calm minutes, it must never become an accusation, and it fails when we ask questions only to prove that we were right. Sometimes the first reading is right, and the conversation confirms it.

Example: In a project review, an engineer says that the test results are missing from the report, that he assumed the tests were not run, and asks whether they were. The reply is that the tests were run and the file was saved in the wrong folder. The question puts the data first and the assumption second. That is exactly what walking down together means.

At work: Talal asks Salma for ten minutes. She explains that every Monday morning she holds a call with a client in another time zone, the only hour in which they can both talk, and that she joins the sales meeting straight afterwards. Talal never saw these calls because they were not in the calendar. They agree to put the call in the shared calendar and to start the meeting ten minutes later. Salma leads the pitch to the hospital group, and the contract is signed the next month. This story is an invented illustration.

Conclusion

The ladder of inference reminds us that between what we see and what we do there are seven quick steps, and that only the last one is visible. The reflexive loop makes our beliefs steer what we notice, so walking down, one question at a time, is how we test them. Sharing the ladder with the other person, through a clear statement of the data and a real question, turns a hasty judgment into a conversation. A quick check before any big decision is this: if a colleague asked for the observable data, could we state it in one sentence?

Sources

- Asana: The ladder of inference (opened: seven rungs, origin with Chris Argyris, reflexive loop, questions for walking down; Asana says Peter Senge popularized it in his 1994 book The Fifth Discipline) – https://asana.com/resources/ladder-of-inference
- Toolshero: Ladder of Inference (opened: developed by Chris Argyris, climb happens imperceptibly fast, reflexive loop, lists Senge's The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook in its references) – https://www.toolshero.com/decision-making/ladder-of-inference/
- Wikipedia: Chris Argyris (opened: names the ladder of inference and high advocacy / high inquiry dialogue among Argyris's key concepts; supports the words advocacy and inquiry only) – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Argyris
- Wikipedia: Ladder of inference (opened: a model of cognition and action created by Argyris; it does not list the rungs or mention Senge) – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ladder_of_inference
- Senge, P., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R. and Smith, B. (1994), The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Doubleday (Rick Ross, The Ladder of Inference). Book not opened; chapter credit from search results.
- The example questions in Part 4 (what did you see, walk me through your thinking, what would change your mind) are the author's suggested wording, not quotations from a source.
- Names and events in the story are invented for teaching.

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