

LADDER OF INFERENCE

You are a regional Sales Manager and you have just read the latest sales figures. Sales in Alex's territory are down – again. It's simply not good enough. Alex needs to be fired or at the very least put on a performance plan!

In the few seconds that you process this thought, you have climbed what Chris Argyris calls the "Ladder of Inference", a common mental pathway of "increasing abstraction, often leading to misguided beliefs"¹

- Each person 'climbs' their own ladder sub-consciously in milliseconds
- We usually conduct our conversations from the top of our respective ladders



I take actions

Alex needs to be fired or put on a performance plan

I draw conclusions

*Alex hasn't been performing well.
Alex isn't up to the job*

I make assumptions and add meaning

Sales are down – again! The drop in sales is because of Alex's performance

I select data from what I observe*

Focus on Alex's figures

Observable 'data' and experiences

The monthly sales figures

I create a narrative about what I notice

* The data I select is subject to confirmation bias, based on the narrative I developed after the prior interaction

COMING DOWN THE LADDER

Improved inquiry helps untangle difficult conversations

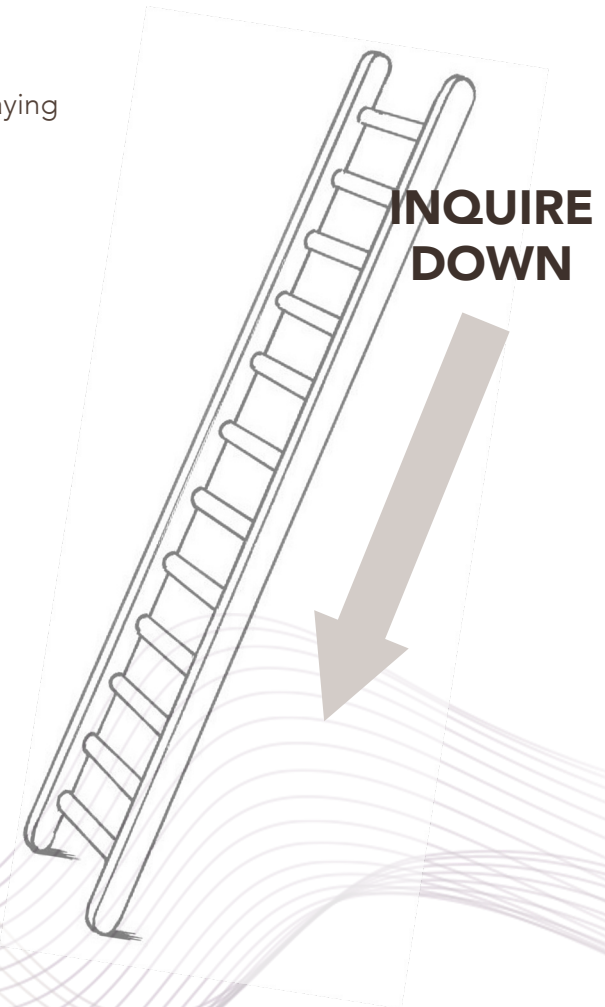
- Gently walk yourself/others down the ladder and find out what data each of you are operating from
- Ask in a way that does not provoke defensiveness or 'lead the witness'
- Draw out their reasoning. Find out as much as you can about why they are saying what they are saying
- Explain your reasons for inquiring and how your inquiry relates to your own concerns, hopes and needs
- Embed your assumption in your question for transparency

Inquire of yourself...

- *Does s/he have information I don't know about?*
- *Are there circumstances I don't know about?*
- *What don't I know?*
- *Are we starting from two different sets of assumptions?*
- *Would others reach a different conclusion due to their own "ladders"?*

Ask the other person...

- *What leads you to conclude that?*
- *Do you see it differently? Why do we see it differently?*
- *How did you arrive at this view, did you use data that I haven't considered?*
- *Can you help me understand your thinking?*
- *When you say such and such, I worry that it means...*
- *What do we know for a fact? What don't we know?*



AVOID CLIMBING THE LADDER

For improved advocacy (after you have inquired!) make your thinking process visible.

- State your assumptions and describe the data that led to them
- Explain your assumptions
- Make your reasoning explicit
- Explain the context of your point of view: who will be affected by what you propose, how they will be affected and why
- Give examples of what you propose, even if they are hypothetical
- Encourage others to explore your model, your assumptions, your data
- Even when advocating, listen, stay open and encourage others to provide different views

Test yourself first and then explain to the other person

- *Here is what I think and how I got there.*
- *I assumed that...*
- *I came to this conclusion because...*
- *To get a clear picture of what I'm talking about imagine you are...*
- *What do you think about what I just said?*
- *What can you add?*
- *Do you see it differently?*

