The Ladder of Inference shows how you can move from data you observe (bottom rung of the ladder) to beliefs and actions based upon assumptions (top of the ladder) very quickly.

Every day, you meet people and process experiences by making inferences and developing beliefs about the world. There's so much happening around you at any given time that eventually you naturally begin to take mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. Oftentimes you can move up and down the Ladder of Inference so quickly (within seconds) in your mind that you barely notice it has happened.

Over time, the beliefs we consistently inform what data we choose to “select” the next time around. In this way, each cycle up the ladder builds on itself. This is called a reflexive loop.

Take Actions based on beliefs

Adopt Beliefs about the world

Draw Conclusions

Make Assumptions based on meanings

Add Meanings (Cultural & personal)

Select “Data” from observations

Observable “Data” and experiences

Example:

“Sarah thinks what I am saying is useless”

“I will not invite her to the next session”

Sarah’s organization doesn’t care about youth in this community”

What actions or behavior changes happened as a result of these beliefs?

What beliefs about their community did you adopt based on this encounter?

What conclusions did you draw about them based on your assumptions?

What assumptions did you make?

What cultural or personal meaning did you draw from those things?

What are 2-3 things that stood out to you about that encounter?

Describe a recent negative experience with a community member or student.

*The Ladder of Inference was developed by Chris Argyris and was later adapted by Peter Senge to help explain mental models in his book The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organization
User's Guide to:
Ladder of Inference

What is this?
The Ladder of Inference explains how we select data, attach meaning to that data and move to action. Because of our biases and limited perspectives, we can move in error based out of an incomplete or wrong understanding of reality.

How could this show up in my work?
Remember a time you jumped too quickly to a negative conclusion and later regretted it? You probably climbed up the ladder of inference without stopping to slow down. We all do it. Unfortunately, it’s part human nature. However, by being mindful of our biases, we can counteract systemic prejudices and create better outcomes for our communities.

Framework in context:
Study this image. After seeing a scene of this man sitting on a bench, three different people could notice very different sorts of data and come to completely different conclusions based on their inner ladder or inference.

As an individual, it is important to understand what biases you are holding since these impact which data you will select or filter out. They also can influence how you analyze the problems in your community and create strategies. As you move through the Equitable Results Sequence, stop often to check your assumptions using the Ladder of Inference. Next time you notice yourself reacting negatively to your experience, pay attention.

Your biases and limited perspectives allow you to only see certain parts of others’ experiences and can lead you to draw conclusions that may be very different from reality.

Notes:

Go on the portal to learn more! strivetogetherportal.org