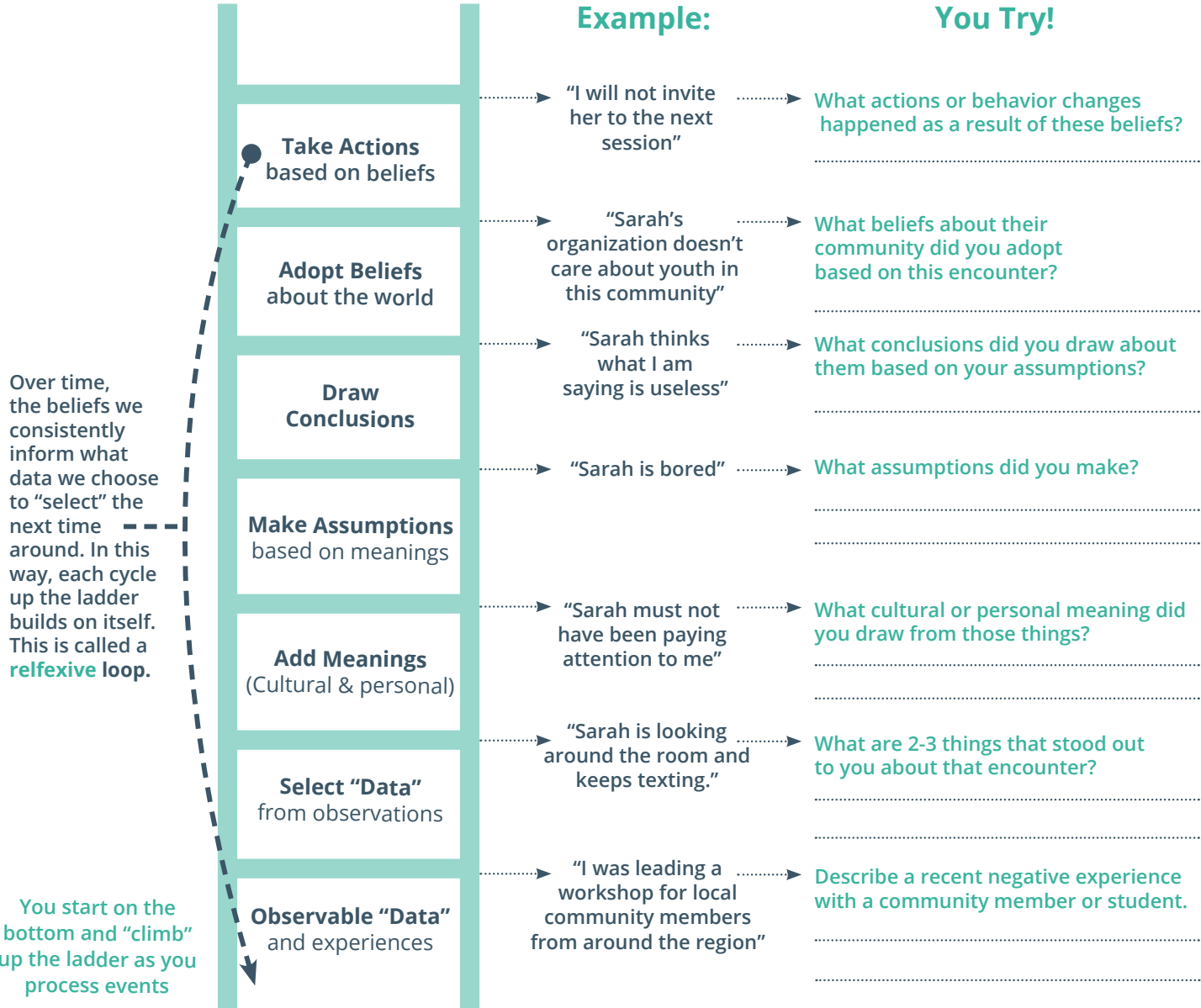The Ladder of Inference shows how you can move from data you observe (bottom rung of the ladder) to beliefs andactions based upon assumptions (top of the ladder) very quickly.

User's Guide to:
Ladder of Inference

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.

Example: You Try!

Take Actions based on beliefs

"I will not invite her to the next session"

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

Adopt Beliefs about the world

"Sarah's organization doesn't care about youth in this community"

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

Draw Conclusions

"Sarah thinks what I am saying is useless"

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

Make Assumptions based on meanings

"Sarah is bored"

What assumptions did you make?

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 **relfexive** loop.

Add Meanings (Cultural & personal)

"Sarah must not have been paying attention to me"

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

Select "Data" from observations

"Sarah is looking around the room and keeps texting."

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

You start on the bottom and "climb" up the ladder as you process events

Observable "Data" and experiences

"I was leading a workshop for local community members from around the region"

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

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Hey you!
Grab a pen and fill in the work areas.

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 a 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.

"He looks **scary**. That hat is suspicious I wonder if he's thinking of hurting me."

"Why is he sitting here instead of at work? He's probably **unemployed**."

"He looks **cute**, and dresses really nice. Love that watch! I wonder if he's single."

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: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Where does this fit in the Equitable Results Sequence?

1 Whole and program population with awareness of the disadvantaged

2 Targeted and universal factor analysis

3 Targeted and universal strategties

4 Performance measures centered on equity

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 commmunity 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.

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