



## THE LADDER OF INFERENCE AS A DE-ESCALATION TOOL

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Over the past 40 years, there has been a growing body of research about resilience. The definitions above capture what most of us imagine resilience to be. But what are the traits that make someone resilient? And are there any particular traits that are especially important to introverts as leaders?

We've all heard the phrase "jumping to conclusions," but have we really stopped to think about how that jumping happens? It's a phenomenon that we've all experienced: We see something, we label it with a judgment, our brains quickly search for evidence that supports or refutes what we see, and we draw a conclusion. All of this happens in a split second, without even being conscious of it. The end result is often an assumption, which can lead to misunderstandings, communication breakdowns, or worse. But what if understanding our thought processes could help us manage conflict?

Turning inward usually isn't our first impulse when conflict arises; we usually want to look at external factors (i.e. the other person!) to assign blame. However, the source of conflict begins within us. It starts with how we choose to respond to events. And that's where the Ladder of Inference is a useful framework for reflection on our responses.

The Ladder of Inference was first put forward by organizational psychologist Chris Argyris and popularized by Peter Senge, author of "The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization". It's a tool that outlines the mental steps we go through, often without consciously realizing it, to get from an observable fact to a judgment or action.

Each step of the ladder, from the bottom to the top, represents a stage in our thinking process. I'm going to use a very simple scenario to lead us through the ladder, so that you can get an idea of how it works. A listener to my podcast, "[How Can I Say This...](http://HowCanISayThis.com)," submitted a question that offers a perfect example. The listener was dealing with two members of a sports club who weren't getting along. I'll share the scenario from Berta's perspective (and I'm fictionalizing some of the story in order to demonstrate the Ladder). Berta is a woman in her early 40s who is a member of sports club with Anton, who is approaching 80. Berta is getting annoyed by Anton's clumsiness. He's always dropping equipment, tripping over things, and generally being disruptive while she's trying to work out. She now dreads going to the club. Berta starts to being passive-aggressive towards Anton, which results in Anton refusing to talk to her. Berta even considers quitting the club.

If we take this through the Ladder, we see this:

1. **Observable Facts/Reality: What you would see if you were filming the scene through a video camera, with no interpretation or judgment.** Berta works out at the same time as Anton, when it's not as crowded at the club. She sees Anton tripping and dropping things. Sometimes he stops to pick up what he drops, and other times he doesn't seem to notice. There are other people who don't put things away, there are rough edges of the carpet that can cause one to trip if they're not watching. Anton sometimes does his routine in a random manner.
2. **Selected Reality: What you choose to see based on past experiences or biases.** Berta notices Anton's behavior because he's older than most other members, and he reminds of her father, with whom she has a strained relationship.
3. **Interpreted Reality: What you infer from that selected reality.** Berta sees Anton's behavior as rude and disrespectful.
4. **Assumptions: Speculation based on interpreted reality.** Berta decides Anton is unlikely to be able to change his behavior, and to confront him about it would be a waste of time and only upset her.
5. **Conclusions: What you decide is true based on your interpretation and assumptions.** Berta concludes that she will simply avoid Anton for now and look for another club to join, even though it'll be further away and more expensive. It's just not worth it.
6. **Beliefs: The bigger story or lesson you take away from the situation and apply in other places.** Berta is confident that old people generally don't care what others think, and there's no point in trying.
7. **Action: The choices you make based on what you now believe is true.** Berta switches to a sports club that focuses on people training for serious athletic competition, which translates to most of the members being the same age range as her or younger.

The first six rungs, from observable fact to the formation of a belief, are very closely related and can be climbed in a matter of seconds. Before you know it, you've taken action that may not be necessary or advisable! Stopping the escalation up the ladder requires paying special attention to rungs one, two, and three, from observed reality to selected reality to interpreted reality.

By stepping back and noticing where your filters and biases are coming into play, it's more likely you'll be able to see the possibility of a productive conversation, rather than a tension-filled conflict.

Here are a few ideas on how you can use the framework of the Ladder of Inference to get control on your thought processes:

**Practice recognizing when your conclusions about someone or a situation are based on inferences and judgments, rather than facts.** In Berta's case, she's labeled Anton's behavior as rude and "clumsy," which limits her ability to see the situation objectively and takes compassion off the table.

**Work from the personal assumption that you don't have all the facts and may have blindspots that prevent you from accurately assessing a situation.** Ask yourself, "What am I not seeing?" or "What else do I need to know before drawing a conclusion?" Berta didn't notice that each time Anton comes in, he sometimes needs help remembering where the sign-up sheets are and the names of the front-desk people.

**As you notice what conclusions you're drawing, make a habit of backtracking and identifying how you got there.** What evidence do you have that supports your conclusion? What examples or data led you to a particular belief? Notice if that data is objective and complete, or if it's been filtered and selected because of confirmation biases that have you only seeing what affirms what you already believe. Berta would benefit from stepping back, setting aside her annoyance, and observing Anton as he interacts with others and does his routine.

**In a conversation with someone who has pushed your buttons, try to listen more than you talk, and ask questions for clarification.** Start by assuming best intent, that their behavior isn't intentionally malicious or rude. As you listen, paraphrase what they share with you to make sure you understand their perspective. If appropriate, ask them to outline their own thought processes, and be willing to share yours. Berta could ask Anton, "Is everything okay? I notice that you sometimes drop your weights and don't put them back." That would give Anton an opening to share that he's been diagnosed with early stages of dementia, and while he's fine to go about his daily activities, he's starting to experience disorientation and forgetfulness.

It's also helpful to remember that each of us is carrying around and climbing our own Ladder of Inference. Just as you're drawing conclusions about another person based on biases and history, they're drawing conclusions about you! It goes both ways. By engaging in conversation that's been informed by reflection, you can try to figure out what ladder each of you has been climbing.

Listen to [the podcast](#) where Judy and Beth discuss the sports club situation, and while you're there, take a look at other episodes of the "How Can I Say This..." Podcast.

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