

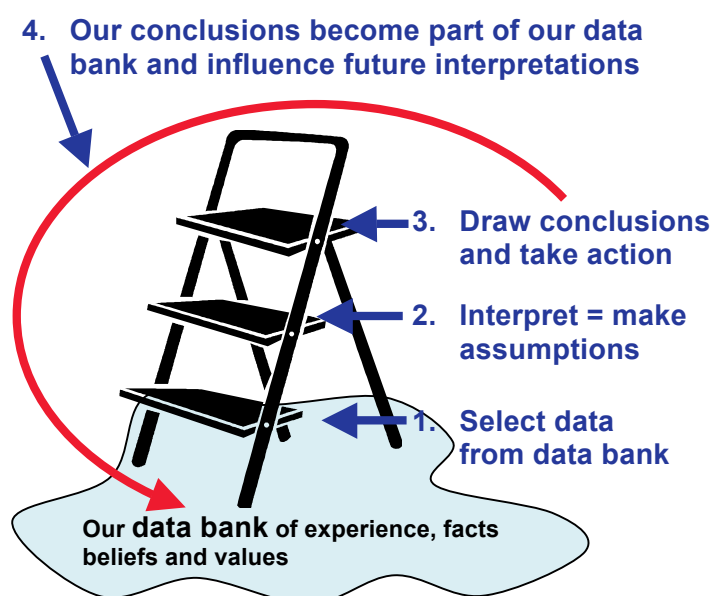


Suspending assumptions - Ladder of inference

Leadership Dimensions	Inspiring shared purpose	Leading with care
Engaging the team	Holding to account	Connecting our service

The **Ladder of inference** is a model that was first developed by organisational psychologist Chris Argyris in 1992¹ and later used by Peter Senge in his book, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*.²

The ladder depicts the unconscious thinking process that we all go through to get from facts to a decision for action. It attempts to explain how we tend to behave or "jump to conclusions" when faced with a "situation".



1. We **select** 'facts' (although not necessarily consciously) from our **data bank** of experience, facts, beliefs and values.
2. Once we have selected data, we begin to **add meaning to it**.

We **interpret**, that is, **make assumptions** about what we see, hear, read, feel and we impose our own interpretations on the data.
3. Then **draw our conclusions** from it.

We lose sight of how we do this because **we do not think about our thinking**.

The conclusions feel so obvious to us that we see no need to retrace the steps we took from the data we selected to the conclusions we reached.
4. Our conclusions become part of our data bank - whether 'true' or distorted, **they will influence future thinking**.

How assumptions can cause miscommunication

When we state our brilliant idea or act in what we believe is the appropriate manner, we might not mention the reasoning that led us to that idea or action. Our conclusions may seem so clear, so obvious, and so valuable to us, but **not, unfortunately, to others**.

Remember the story of the man who borrowed the plough from his neighbour. When he finally returned the plough, he assumed his neighbour would be angry (conclusion) because he knew ploughs were important to farmers (fact) and that he should have returned the plough sooner (personal value), so he knocked on the neighbour's door, threw the plough down, exclaimed something like "You can keep your useless plough!" and stormed off, never considering that his neighbour might not have been concerned about the late return of the plough at all.

We each have our own different data bank, based on our different experiences, and hence our different perceptions of the same piece of information.

In order to avoid each of us jumping to 'our own conclusions' and assuming that others have come to the same conclusion, we need to descend the ladder and try to understand the different assumptions and assumptions of others.

¹ Chris Argyris. *Overcoming Organizational Defences*, 1992

² Pete Senge. *The 5th Discipline Fieldbook*, 1994