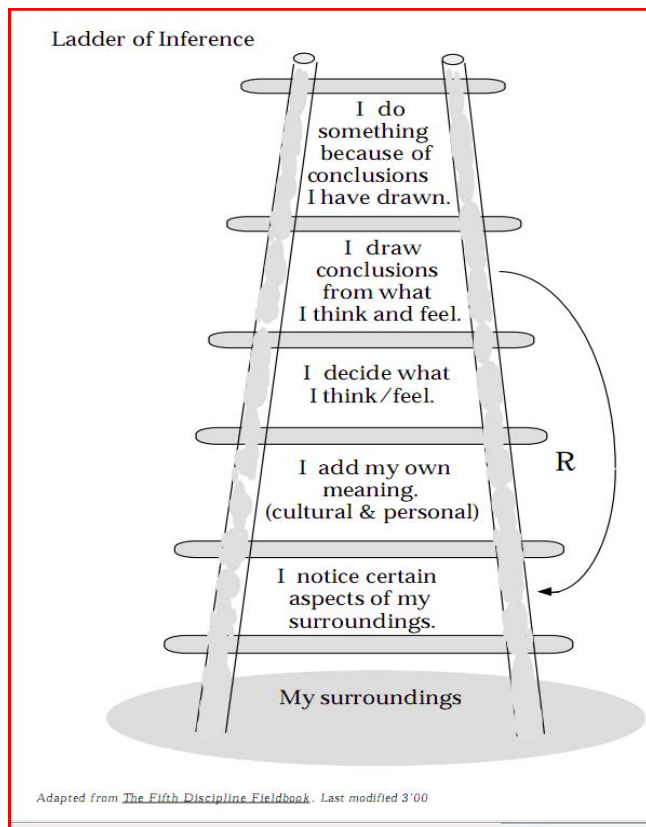# CORO NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Ladder of Inference and Protocols for Skillful Inquiry

*Adapted from sources: Argyris, C. and Schön, D. (1996) *Organizational learning II: Theory, method and practice,* Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley. Senge, P. *et. al.* (2008) The Necessary Revolution. How individuals and organizations are working together to create a sustainable world. Doubleday 2008.

The ladder of inference is a well-known model that describes how people process and use data and information – and take action based on their conclusions. Our existing beliefs and assumptions shape how we see the world and how we respond to new information.

The **R** on the ladder diagram depicts the responsive loop that happens when we draw conclusions about our surroundings. For example, imagine a housing provider in your community who refuses to believe that people can move directly from shelter or streets into housing and you are a *housing first* provider. What would help you and the housing provider move forward in your community planning discourse?

Ladder of Inference

I do something because of conclusions I have drawn.

I draw conclusions from what I think and feel.

I decide what I think / feel.

I add my own meaning. (cultural & personal)

R

I notice certain aspects of my surroundings.

My surroundings

Adapted from *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. Last modified 3'00

Guides for walking down "the ladder"
Draw out people's reasoning

Use questions and inquiry

Help make the thought process visible

Ask for contexts and examples

Listen for new understanding

Building Effective Communication Skills: The move up the Ladder of Inference takes milliseconds. It happens all day long. It's happening all the time – when we interact in meetings, when we read the news. It affects the way conversations evolve as others climb their own Ladders of Inference. To move communication down the ladder and advance conversations that may have "scaled the heights:"

1) Make your thinking process visible to others by explaining your assumptions, interpretations, and conclusions. Reveal where you own thinking may lack clarity and invite dialogue.
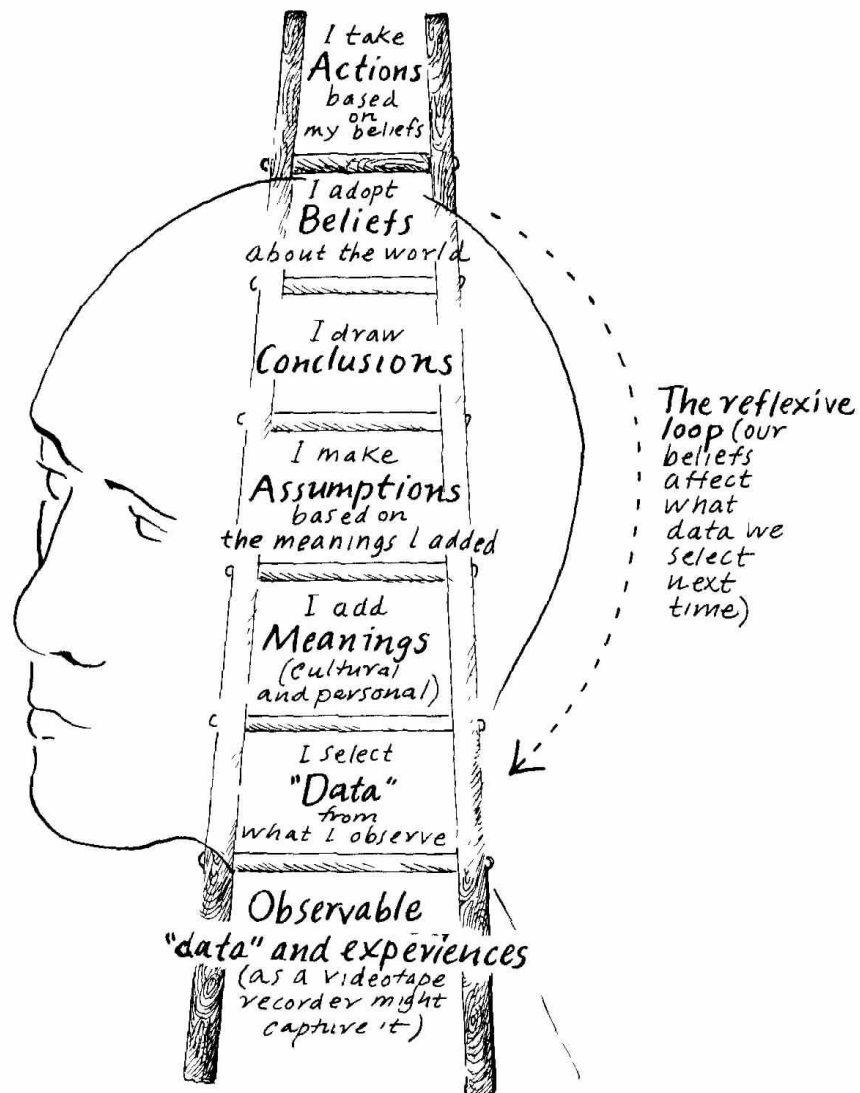
2) Use respectful inquiry to help others make their thought processes visible. Use open and nonjudgmental questions, rather than questions that exhibit a bias. Ask for context and examples, defuse antagonism. "Can you help me understand your thinking here?"

Protocols for Improving Your Inquiry Skills

– How to ask others how to make their thinking process more transparent

What to Do	What to Say
Gently guide others down the Ladder of Inference and find out what their assumptions might be.	"What leads you to conclude that?" What data are you thinking about that supports that? "What experience have you had with your conclusion?"
Use nonaggressive language particularly with people not familiar with these skills. Ask questions in a way that does not provoke defensiveness or "leading the witness."	Instead of "What do you mean?" or "Where's your proof?" you can say, "Can you help me to understand your thinking here?"
Draw out people's reasoning. Find out as much as you can about why they are saying what they are saying.	"What is the significance of that?" "How does this relate to your deepest thinking about homelessness in our community? "
Explain your reasons for inquiring and make it clear how your inquiry relates to your own conclusions and concerns.	"I am asking about your assumptions here because…
Test what others say by asking for broader contexts or for examples.	"Can you describe another community where these same effects occur?" Is there data I am not aware of?"
Make sure you understand what others have said.	"Am I correct that you are saying . . . ?" "What I hear you saying is . . . "
Listen for new understanding that may emerge. Don't concentrate on preparing to destroy the other person's argument or promote your own agenda.	"Do you see it differently?" Have you considered….?"
Reveal where your own thinking lacks clarity. Rather than making you vulnerable, it defuses the force of advocates who are opposed to you and invites improvement.	Even when advocating, listen, stay open, and encourage others to provide different views.

Ladder of Inference

I take **Actions** based on my beliefs

I adopt **Beliefs** about the world

I draw **Conclusions**

I make **Assumptions** based on the meanings I added

I add **Meanings** (cultural and personal)

I select "**Data**" from what I observe

Observable "data" and experiences (as a videotape recorder might capture it)

The reflexive loop (our beliefs affect what data we select next time)

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Developed by Chris Argyris and further described in *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge.