

Let me explain this framework by providing an example. A high school principal asked me to observe a teacher who had been struggling with management. We entered the classroom and stood at the back. Ms. Smith was at the front directing a whole-class discussion of a text. She asked a question, and twelve students raised their hands. She called on a girl sitting in the front row. She asked another question. A boy shouted out the answer. The teacher ignored him. He shouted it out again. She called on a girl in the back. The teacher asked another question and called on another girl. One of the boys got frustrated and said, "How come you don't call on me? I keep raising my hand. Why do you always ignore me?" Ms. Smith quietly redirected his behavior. He groaned and put his head down on the table. The teacher asked another question and called on another girl. Several boys in the back mumbled to each other, "See, she always calls on girls." Under his breath, one of them called the teacher a bad name.

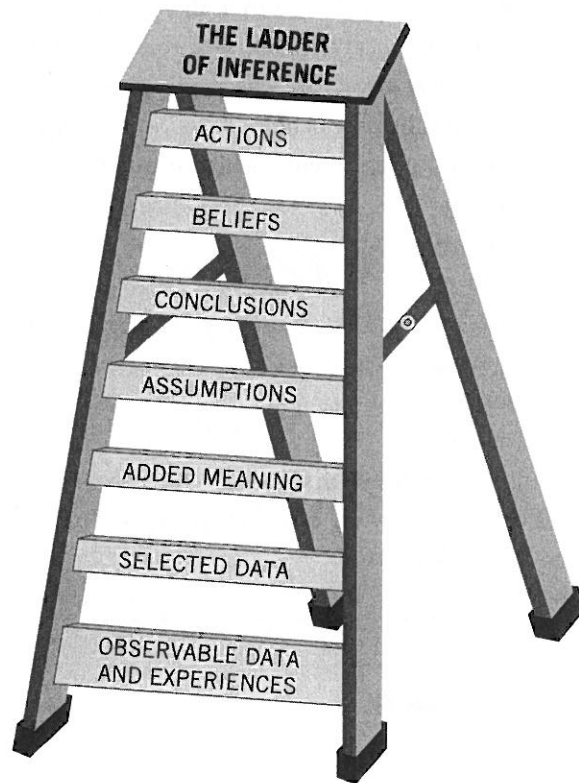


Figure 3.1. The Ladder of Inference

described, or you might have some questions about what I shared. Let's use Argyris's Ladder of Inference, shown in Figure 3.1, to trace how the principal arrived at his decision.

The principal and I left the room. "Wow," the principal said. "Those boys were so disrespectful. I can't believe she let them get away with behaving like that—she's so weak. She needs to get tough and institute detention. That kind of talking back can't be tolerated. She's going to lose control. They can't be allowed to run the room. I'm going to insist that she implement a tough behavior management program immediately." The principal intended to take actions to move the teacher into this management program that afternoon. But before he could send her an e-mail requesting an emergency meeting after school, I asked if we could debrief and explore how he'd arrived at that decision.

You might have arrived at a different conclusion based on what I

Visualize a ladder. On the first rung of the ladder is *observable data and experiences*. What is captured on this level is what a camera would record—a massive amount of data. If you could see a video of the classroom we were in, you'd also see the student work posted on the walls, the piles of boxes in the back of the room, the sunlight streaming through the windows, the torn jeans of the kid in the front, the teacher's red earrings; you'd hear the questions the teacher asked, the articulate responses by the students, the chuckles from some boys, the train passing outside, and so on. Because our brains cannot make sense of so much data, we need to sort. This is where things get interesting; this is where the principal started climbing up the ladder to his conclusion.

On the second rung of the ladder, the principal *selected data* from what he observed. Because of what he already believes, because he's seen some of these actions before in this class or elsewhere, he filters out most of what's going on and selects certain data points. In this class, the principal noticed that the boys were shouting out, criticizing the teacher, and calling her names. He's just ascended one rung.

On the third rung of the ladder, he *added meaning* to what he observed. Meaning often arises from our own cultural backgrounds and experiences, and/or the culture of the structure or organization in which we are working. According to the principal's cultural background, students must respect their teachers. They must *never* talk back to them, they must always raise their hands, and so forth. When they demonstrate this behavior, it means they don't respect their teacher. By adding meaning, he's ascended another rung.

On the fourth rung of the ladder, he *made assumptions* based on the meanings he had added. He assumed that the boys had no boundaries in class and that their behavior was not kept in check.

On the fifth rung of the ladder, he *drew conclusions*. He concluded that the boys are out of control. Without realizing it, the principal moved farther up the ladder.

On the sixth rung of the ladder, he *adopted a belief* about the boys (that they are unruly, disrespectful, and don't take learning seriously) and about the teacher (that she is weak and losing control of her class).

And on the seventh rung, at the top of the ladder, he *took an action* and was just about to mandate that Ms. Smith institute a tough behavior management plan immediately.

What could happen next is actually what propels someone up the ladder again. The principal's belief that boys are not serious and are out of control will influence him the next time he's observing a class—his attention will be drawn to how boys behave. Unconsciously, he's going to focus on data points that affirm his belief system—this is just what our brains do. Most likely, he'll constantly see the same thing: unruly boys who need discipline. This translates into a generalized belief about boys, and his actions will emerge from this belief.