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Description:

The ladder of inference is a visual representation that describes, “how we make sequential (and sometimes untested), subjective interpretations of inferences from a set of observations, and then commit to act based on those inferences.”

It is essentially a tool of meta-cognition, helping us think about how we think. Though originally crafted as a literal ladder, the diagram (attached) has been redrawn into a circular diagram, indicating the reinforcing and regenerative nature of this structure.

Uses:

This tool helps us gain insight into our thought processes and reveal steps in how we reason and arrive at conclusions. By drawing attention to alternative perspectives, we can uncover inconsistencies between **Real Data & Experience** and **Selected Data & Experience**. It can also remind us of the importance of checking out perceived causal relationships and testing hypotheses.

Materials:

- A stack of file cards containing written observations that include real, objective data
- A flip chart containing the attached model and pens

Instructions:

Learners are organized into small groups of 4-5 per group. A randomly selected participant or volunteer selects a card containing an observable experience representing the first rung, the proceeds to process through the rungs in the ladder. Others observe the process that follows, and if time allows, the process can be repeated with other members of the group:

- The participant reads aloud the observable experience.
- At the second rung, the participant creates a story, theory or interpretation about what is happening based on the first rung.
- At the next rungs, the participant affixes meaning based on the experience, making assumptions and attributions about others, and making further interpretations of the events faced.
- Next, conclusions are drawn and decisions made about the problems that have been constructed and possible solutions.
- These conclusions inform beliefs.
- On what began as the top rung of the ladder, we act – or in this case, speculate what actions might occur next.

It is the job of the facilitator to provide enough guidance for the process to move along. At the same time, periods of quiet reflection and patient persistence are necessary. For optimal results, this process should culminate with a period of group reflection.

Note: the Ladder of Inference was initially developed by Chris Argyris and presented by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. As indicated earlier, later interpretations featured a circular model indicative of how each action builds upon the actions that preceded it. In practice, beliefs often detour around actions (e.g., testing a hypothesis) and around real data and experience, going directly to selected data and experience (as shown in alternative route in the second model). The tendency is to select data that supports and strengthens our beliefs. This shortened path is the basis for the common observation that we tend to “short circuit” reality based on our beliefs.

Tips:

- Remember that others can make inferences about the exact same situation that are both different and legitimate.
- Be willing to accept that we often short-circuit reality by stepping from beliefs to **selected data & experience** without the benefit of acting on our beliefs and creating a new set of **real data & experiences**.
- According to Gene Bellinger of outsights.com, “people have to be willing to be somewhat open so they will provide you with the information. Persistent patience is something that proves most helpful.” (interviewed on January 29, 2002).

References:

Action Design. (1999). *The Ladder of Inference: An Introduction*.
http://www.actiondesign.com/resources/concepts/ladder_intro.htm

Mitchell, R. C. (1994). *Ladder of Inference Model*.
<http://www.csun.edu/~hfmgt001/ladder.htm>

Senge, Peter et al (1994). *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. NY: Currency/Doubleday
<http://outsights.com/systems/loi/loi.htm>