

Ladder of Inference

I take ACTIONS based on my beliefs

I adopt BELIEFS about the world

I draw CONCLUSIONS based on the assumptions

I make ASSUMPTIONS based on the meanings added

I add MEANINGS (cultural and personal)

I select DATA from what I observe

I OBSERVE data and experiences

(with my 5 senses)

Note:

Effective Communication starts at the bottom and works up.

(adapted from Peter Senge-The Fifth Discipline)

*The map
is not the
territory.*

Understanding Different Kinds of Conversation

(which occur in social settings and in business meetings)

Debate (*from the Latin word meaning “to beat down”*)

Good for intensifying polar opposite positions on issues
Listening primarily serves as time to formulate a better argument

Discussion (*from the Latin word meaning “to break apart”*)

Good for intellectual analysis and dissection of a problem
Listening primarily to find weaknesses in the arguments of those who disagree with you...

Deliberate (*from the Latin word meaning “to weigh out”*)

Good for making balanced decisions in groups
Listening primarily serves to reach a compromise in balancing competing interests to reach a “fair” decision

Dialogue (*from the Latin words “DIA” meaning “through” and the word “LOGOS” which means “meaning”*)

Good for developing shared vision; increasing shared meaning;
exploring one’s own mental models; generating completely new understanding and new ideas;
Listening primarily serves to provide clues to one’s own mental models and to stimulate new understanding

Dialogue *balances* advocacy (“I think that...”) with inquiry (“I’m not sure I understood what you meant by...”)

Guidelines for Having More Effective Conversations

1. Listen carefully to both the words and the meaning

(Remember that more than 90% of the meaning of a spoken message comes from “body language” and other non-verbal cues. This is why face to face contact is so important in the initial stages of team building).

2. Listen with respect for the validity of the speaker’s perspective;

3. Attempt to build on the comments of speakers who speak before you; avoid inflammatory language.

4. Suspend judgment.

5. Seek first to understand-then to be understood

(Balance advocacy and inquiry)

6. Avoid starting a sentence with “You...”; rather send clear and honest “I messages”.

7. Express feelings as well as ideas.

8. Have the courage to discuss the “undiscussables”.

9. Trust the process; developing shared trust and understanding takes more time at the beginning but leads to better solutions in the long run.

10. Start at the bottom of the “Ladder of Inference” and work upward; cover all the steps to minimize misunderstandings.

Another Learning Tool

“Left Hand Column-Right Hand Column” Exercise

The purpose of this tool is to explore the unexpressed thoughts and feelings which can provide clues to roadblocks and bypasses which prevent team learning by preventing important thoughts and ideas from emerging in the conversation. Typically, these thoughts are the ones expressed to trusted colleagues in the bathroom or to wives at home when the days events are being discussed.

Left Hand column

[Write down what you were thinking but did NOT say as this was occurring]

Right Hand Column

[Write down what was said in the meeting or conversation]