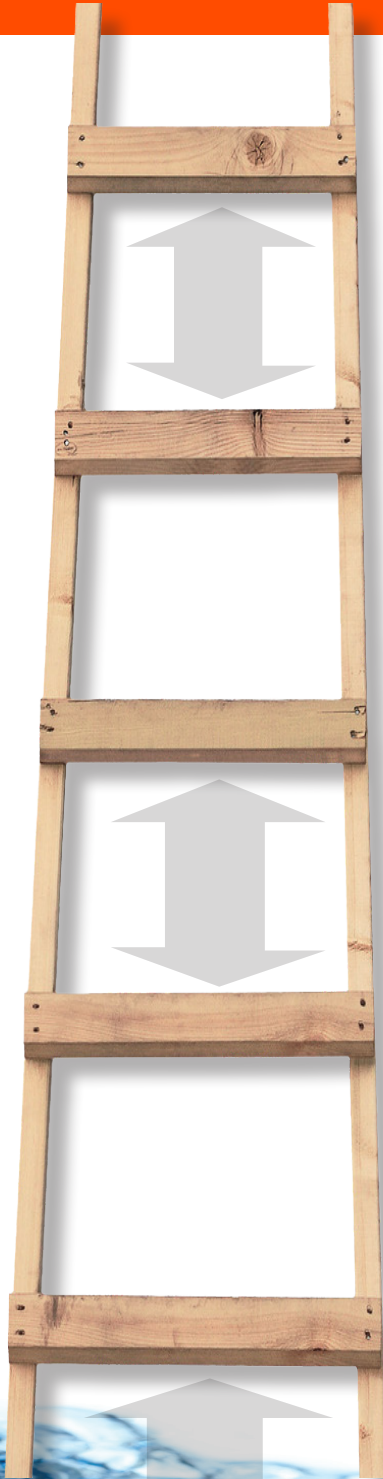# the ladder of inference

ATTITUDES • BELIEFS • ASSUMPTIONS

DRAW CONCLUSIONS
DECIDE ON ACTION
Based on how we've explained and evaluated the situation.

EXPLAIN AND EVALUATE
Try to explain why something happened

INTERPRET DATA
We add our own meaning to the data, based on our beliefs, assumptions, fears, experiences, etc.

PARAPHRASE MEANING
From the data we selected, we put into our own words what we have seen, heard, or read.

SELECT DATA
The data we select is highly influenced by our mental models and beliefs. This is sometimes done consciously. More often it is done unconsciously.

POOL OF AVAILABLE DATA
All directly observable data including words, tone of voice, body movements, reports, charts, numbers, etc.

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the ladder of inference

MassIngenuity®

The Ladder of Inference illustrates the automatic, unconscious process of our thinking.

HOW WE THINK

- Our thinking is skilled (automatic, a habit). Our skills at reasoning are both essential and get us into trouble. We jump to the top of the Ladder of Inference without knowing it.
- We select what to attend to and what to ignore.
- We don't realize we are making interpretations (moving up the Ladder) because we do not think about our thinking.
- Our conclusions feel so obvious that we see no need to make our reasoning explicit.
- We look for data that confirms our perspective, beliefs and assumptions.

THE IMPLICATIONS ARE

- If we climb the Ladder of Inference without testing our views, we can create misunderstandings, preventing us from working through issues quickly and effectively.
- When people disagree, they often hurl conclusions at each other from the tops of their respective ladders.
- This makes it hard to resolve differences and learn from each other.
- When people have different perspectives, we can see them as climbing different Ladders of Inference. People climb their ladders so quickly and skillfully that they do not notice themselves making inferences. Their conclusions seem obvious to them, not an interpretations of reality but reality itself. This makes it difficult to have a productive conversation across perspectives. It is as if people stood at the top of their respective ladders and hurled their conclusions at each other.

SO WE NEED TO LEARN TO

- Explain and test our views and assumptions, allowing us to update them and learn.
- Probe others' thinking using high quality questions.
- Develop a shared understanding of differences in order to make better decisions.

Based on the work of Action Design, Chris Argyris, Monitor Company, Inc. and Catalyst Consulting Team

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