

APPENDIX G

Assumption Ladder

When to Use

Use when speaking to lay out your thinking to increase buy-in. Use when listening to walk someone down the Ladder to get a better idea at how they arrived at their conclusion(s). The Ladder is a universal (Emotional Intelligence) tool. It helps with: Self-Awareness, Accurate Self-Assessment, Empathy, Service Orientation, Communication, Influence, Leadership, Conflict Management, Change Catalyst, Teamwork and Collaboration, and Developing Others.

Unlocking the Key

Communication is the mechanism to deliver your thoughts to others. The Ladder is about your thinking process and how you arrive at and deliver your thoughts to others. It is important to look at how you arrive at your thoughts and then to discover how you deliver them to others to be most effective.

Mental Models

It has been stated that we have as many as 60,000 thoughts a day. Ninety-five percent of those thoughts are the same ones we had yesterday. Why is that? The same thoughts keep recycling, and that is one reason why we use only 5–10 percent of our brainpower. These same or similar thoughts form patterns

or clusters of our beliefs, yet leave out a plethora of other possible views. These become “mental models” or deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action.

The mental models we carry around are usually invisible to us and others, yet are very powerful in their influence over our actions and responses to everything that occurs in our world. Often these mental models hold us prisoners to the “same old story” and prevent us from having the kind of open mind necessary to support new learning to help us grow and advance in our careers.

Leaders need to be explicit in their thinking. It is common to take shortcuts when you think and speak. But these shortcuts create confusion. People don't have the benefit what building blocks you crafted to support your thoughts and decisions. So isn't it natural that people may have a difficult time following your ideas or suggestions? Thus, our buy-in from others can be minimized.

Key Examples

The Assumption Ladder is a modification of Chris Argyris's Ladder of Inference, introduced in Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*. I have been using it in organizations for

over 10 years with great success. When I return a year later and do follow-up assessments on the changes that have taken place, the Assumption Ladder is usually the tool that gets rave reviews. It has staying “power because it is visual, makes sense to people, brings self-awareness to their thinking process, and helps in communicating their ideas.

The goal is to walk yourself and others up the Ladder. It allows everyone to lay out their thinking process and mental models. When you invite people up the Ladder, see if they agree with your data, selection of data, assumptions about the data, conclusions, and then the actions you suggest. If they know how you arrived, they may be more willing to go along with you. Or they may disagree, but it is more constructive to disagree with your selection of data and your assumptions than to argue with you about your conclusions.

Browsing through books in a bookstore provides a good example to illustrate walking up the Ladder. People often “thin-slice” or take a small piece of data and then make assumptions and generalize from that. Apparently, the average person picks up a book and spends about 8 seconds looking at the front cover and 15 seconds reading the back cover. Portrayed on the Ladder, this process would look like:

Data: The book is on the shelf with hundreds of others.

Selection of data: The cover or spine speaks to you and you pick it up, spend 8 seconds on the front cover and 15 seconds reading the back cover.

Assumptions:

- *“This looks interesting and can help me in work.”*
- *“The price may be too expensive for me; I wonder if I can get it used?”*
- *“The testimonials indicate that this book is very special and unique.”*
- *“I always get books that I don’t read; is this going to be another one?”*
- *“Maybe I should look at more of the book.”*

Conclusions: (Depending on which assumptions are followed.)

- *You pick up the book and start opening up the pages and look at the table of contents for more data.*
- *Assumptions are validated as you see chapters and charts that are useful and you say, “Yes, I need this.”*
- *You conclude that this book is not useful.*

Actions:

- *You close the book and walk up to the checkout to buy it.*

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• *You close the book and put it back on the rack.*

“Ladder Carrier” and use terms that will help the team visualize the Ladder.

Practicing the Key

It is a good idea to introduce the Ladder as a tool to enhance communication and understanding of others’ view-points. To utilize the Ladder to its fullest, you, the leader, a facilitator, or another leader should bring the Ladder into your conversations. This person can be the

• *“You are up on the Ladder on this one.”*

• *“Can you make your thinking more visible?”*

• *“What are your assumptions in this decision?”* **SOME POINTERS**

Dos and Don’ts when Using the Ladder

DO	DON’T
Get people to hold your ladder as you go up	Use the ladder as a weapon
Open up for multiple viewpoints	Try to knock others off their ladder
Invite others to challenge you	Get defensive
Practice walking up and down the ladder	Expect this to be easy
Listen and inquire versus just advocating	Advocate without inquiry

Some Pointers

1. Once a decision or conclusion is made, it becomes a force that looks for self-validation, and it is hard to entertain new data or ideas.

2. The Ladder slows down the thinking process, and with more people commenting on the data and their assumptions you can get more creative and make more sound decisions. Your team can also help ensure quality decisions.

3. If two people are at the top of their Ladders, you get debate and disagreement. If both people are low on the Ladder, you will get more of a dialogue before people are fixed to their positions and defending them.

4. The Assumption Ladder Applications Tool gives you sentence stubs to walk up and “down the Ladder. It is especially helpful when a direct report or client is at the top of the Ladder and you want to

find out how he or she arrived there. It gives you an opportunity to insert a new selection of data, which opens up thinking and other viable possibilities.

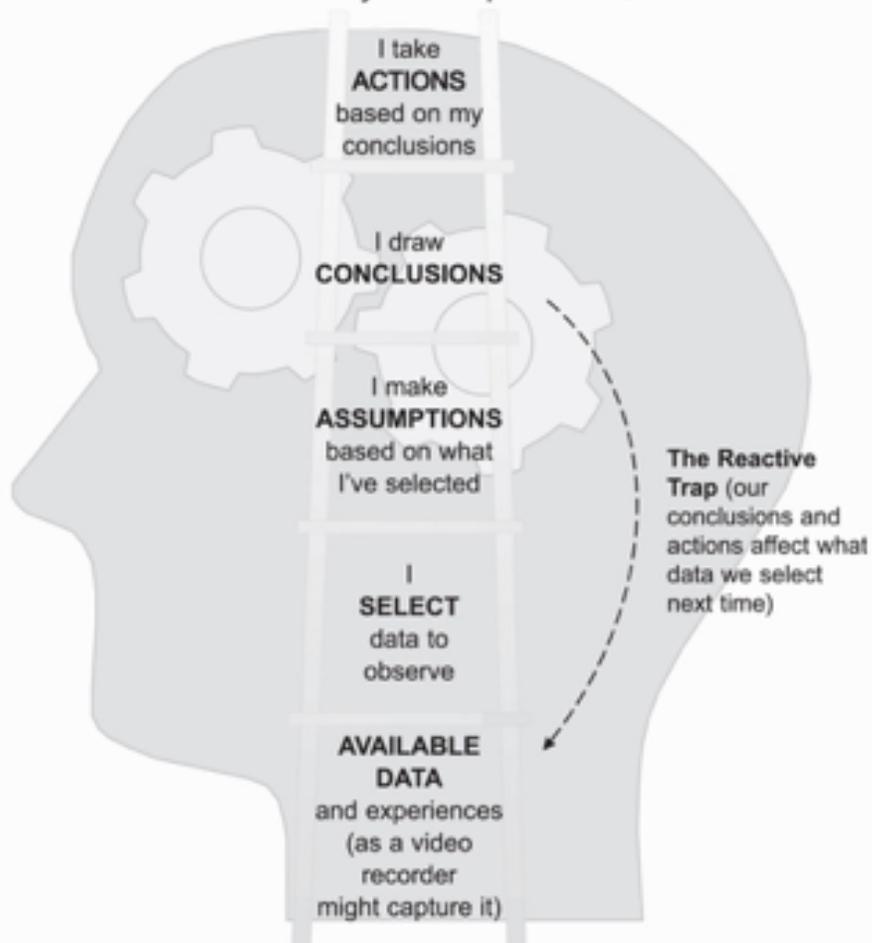
For Yourself

1. Keep the Key out on your desk as a reminder.
2. Look at the Ladder when you have to explain a decision to your team.
3. Do your best to understand others' thinking by asking them questions that walk them down the Ladder.

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Assumption Ladder

The goal is to make your thinking visible to others as you walk up the ladder.



Assumption Ladder Applications

Below are some examples of sentences and sentence stubs that will help you walk up or down the ladder.

As a Listener:

I hear your actions.
 What are they based on?
 How did you arrive at these plans?

Tell me what conclusion you are drawing...
 Could it be possible that...

Tell me what your assumptions are...
 I'm curious, tell me more...
 Is that the only way to look at it?

What piece are you looking at?
 I see you're focusing on...
 What is standing out to you from the data?

Give me all the facts...
 What are all the findings?

As a Speaker:

Therefore, this is my plan...
 These are steps I am taking...

It's obvious to me...
 Therefore, I feel...
 As a result...
 To summarize...
 Here we go again...

So, I'm assuming...
 Here's what I attribute...
 The next step for me is...

I am focusing on this piece...
 Here's what I see happening...
 Here's what I'm selecting...
 This stands out to me...

Here are all the facts...
 Here are all the findings...

Pay attention to intentions / Make your thinking visible