# Conflict Resolution through the Ladder of Inference

The Ladder of Inference is a representation of how the mind works that has been around since the early 1950s. It might be useful to people as they sort out why their communications were not successful.

The mind likes patterns. When a situation comes up, the mind looks for a similar situation from the past and what was successful. These patterns are hard to break, but looking back at how the current situation is different from the one before may help unravel the assumptions and conclusions that got in the way of a successful outcome in the present.

## Rung 1: Select Data

We can’t process all of the data around us at any given time, so we select what we think is the most important at the moment. Hint: When we are angry, have you noticed that your mind focuses completely on what is making you angry, and nothing else?

## Rung 2: Add Meaning

We analyze, interpret, infer, establish beliefs about the selected data. What we come up with may not be “the truth,” but it becomes the truth for us.

## Rung 3: Draw Conclusions

We decide how best to react based on past experiences and how we perceive the current situation. (Perceive is the key word here.)

## Rung 4: Act

Sometimes, we create a ladder of inference after thoughtful consideration. Often, we jump to conclusions based on our assumptions and act in a blink of an eye.

### Tips for Resolving the Conflict:

* Set up a private, one-on-one discussion, or with a mutually agreed upon mediator
* Acknowledge the point of conflict
* See if you can both agree to try not to get defensive
* Use “I” statements in the discussion, such as “I noticed [blank] that I concluded or assumed [blank], which lead me to feel like …”
* See if you can uncover the conclusion or assumption — perhaps on both sides — that created the conflict
* See if you can resolve the point
* Thank the person for their service and being willing to clear the air

For more on the Ladder of Inference

Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline

Paul Deming and Chris Argyris are both credited with the creation of the Ladder of Inference. If you Google Ladder of Inference, there are many references you can choose from to learn more.

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