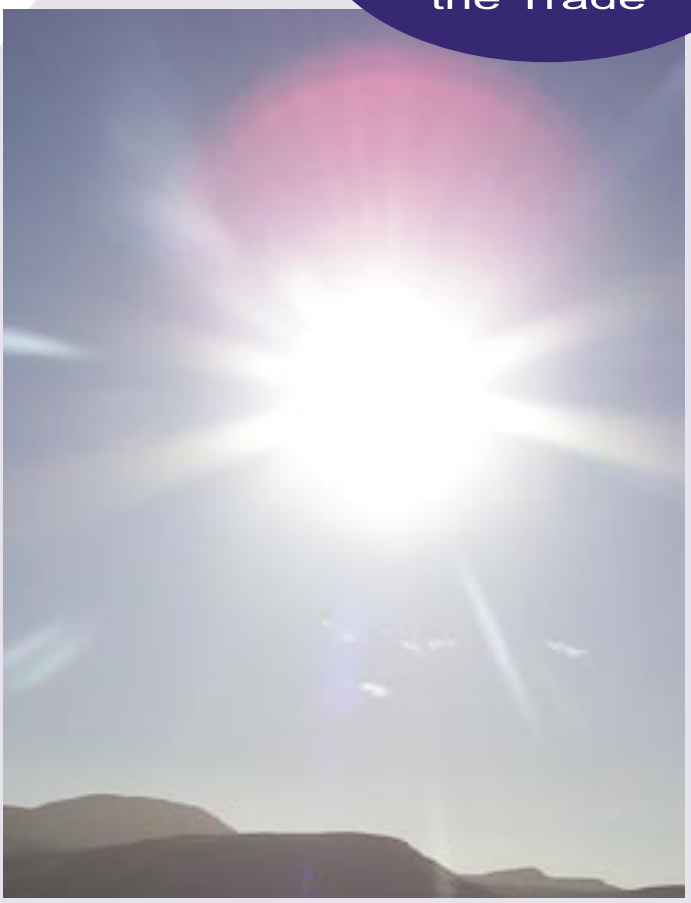
Up and Down the Ladder of Inference

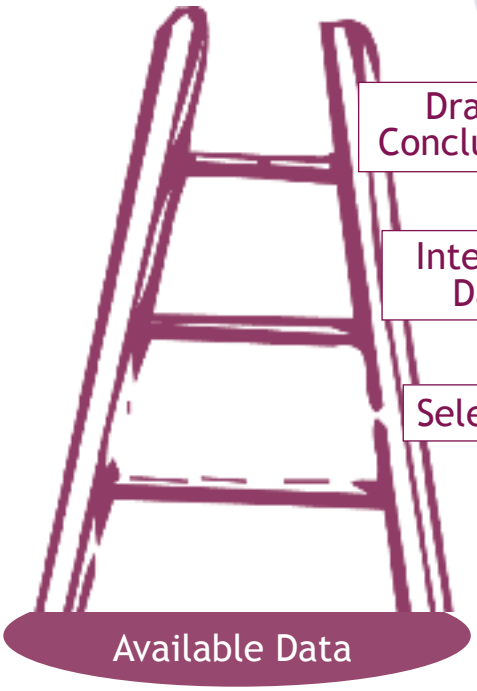
by Bob Larcher



Introduction

I can still remember when I first discovered the Ladder of Inference and Advocacy and Inquiry. I was with a group of consultants who were very up to date with all the latest management models and theories; they were discussing the importance of communication and kept on referring to the above two concepts. Being relatively pragmatic and not too interested in theory, I listened with interest, trying to understand what they were talking about. All of a sudden it dawned on me, "it seems to me that we are talking about how to avoid jumping to conclusions by asking questions and by stating beliefs". Yes, I suppose we are, was the unanimous reply. As a colleague once said "there is nothing more pragmatic than a good theory" and this is an excellent example.

Initially developed by Chris Argyris and used by Pete Senge, the Ladder of Inference attempts to explain how, when faced with a "situation", we tend to behave or "jump to conclusions".



The Ladder of Inference

If you ask the average person "why they behaved in a particular way?" when faced with a given situation, they would probably say that "it seemed obvious to them" or that it "was instinctive". The Ladder of Inference model suggests that we all have a "data bank" of experience in our head (and maybe in our bodies) that we refer to when anything happens and that we go through a number of steps in order to reach our conclusions. As we compare what is happening to us in the current situation with our stored experience, we make assumptions based on our experience and hence we come to conclusions and then act accordingly. The steps are shown above.

Unfortunately this step-by-step process is usually short circuited by the fact that, since the process happens so quickly, what may seem perfectly

Draw conclusions. Actions

Interpret data. The analysis of the selected data

Select data. The selection of the appropriate data for the given situation

Available data. The information, facts, and sensory stimuli that surround us in our everyday world

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clear in our own mind is obvious only to us. What actually happens is that as there is more data than our minds can hold we tend to register only some of the available data and ignore the rest. We "select" (although not necessarily consciously) what we deem to be significant or important, or data that in some way catches our attention. Once we have selected data, we begin to add meaning to it. We interpret (make assumptions about) what we see, hear, read, feel and we impose our own interpretations on the data and then draw our conclusions from it. We lose sight of how we do this because we do not think about our thinking. Hence, the conclusions feel so obvious to us that we see no need to retrace the steps we took from the data we selected to the conclusions we reached. When we state our brilliant idea or act in what we believe is the appropriate manner, we might not mention the reasoning that led us to that idea or action, we might not cite the facts that we've selected and that have influenced our conclusion. Our conclusions may seem so clear, so obvious, and so valuable to us, but not, unfortunately, to others.

We each have our own, different, data bank, based on our different experiences and hence our different perceptions of the same piece of information. It is easy to imagine three different people looking at the object on the right and arguing that it is "obviously a vase" or "anyone can see that it is two faces" etc.

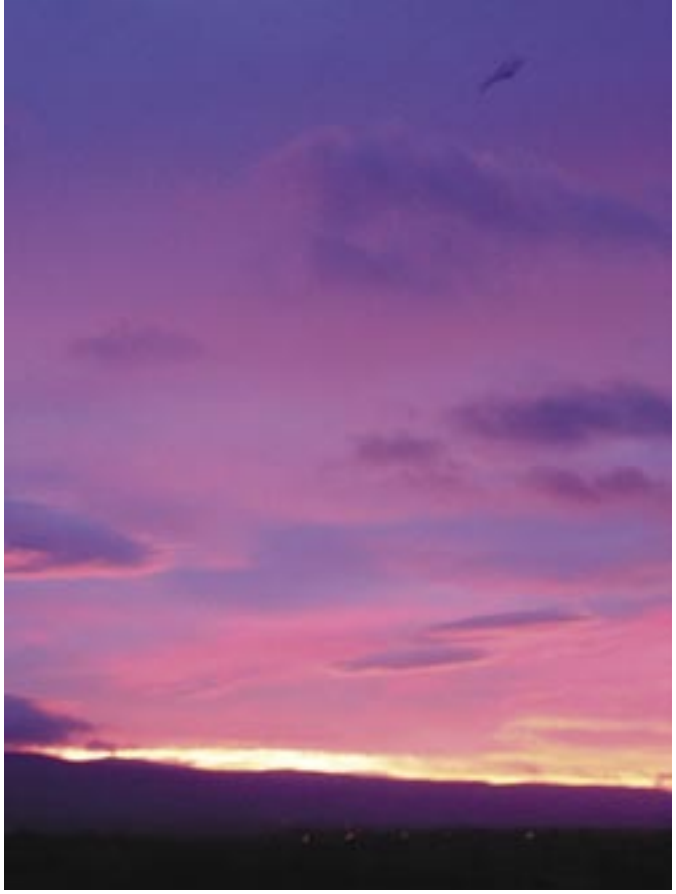
In a recent "blind rope square" exercise (you know the type) one person was convinced (assumed) that the other group members were all in a line, which they were not, that the rope was not tangled, which it was, and that there were ten people in the group – there were in fact eleven. The person's tenacity in trying to solve the problem based on at least three wrong assumptions was admirable but caused a lot of frustration within the group; it also turned what was meant to be an after-lunch "energiser" into THE exercise of the seminar.

In order to avoid each of us jumping to "our own conclusions" and assuming that others have come to the same conclusion, we need to descend the ladders and try to understand the different viewpoints and assumptions of others.

Advocacy and Inquiry

This is where Advocacy and Inquiry plays an important role. Advocacy is about making statements, saying what you think, giving your point of view etc. Inquiry is about asking questions in order to understand the other's point of view. The use of Advocacy and Inquiry, used in the right proportions. should promote mutual learning.

- High advocacy, low inquiry, is one-way communication - even if both people are doing it! It can be useful for giving information. But it doesn't necessarily lead to exploring different points of view or agreeing to a common action.
- High inquiry, low advocacy, is one-way communication in a different sense; the speaker does not state his or her views. It is useful as a way of finding out information, however, it can create difficulty when the speaker has a hidden agenda and/or is using questions to get the other person to "discover" what the speaker already thinks is right.
- Low inquiry, low advocacy, is also one-way; here, people watch but contribute little. This is okay when being an observer is useful. It can create difficulty when people withhold their views on key issues and cover this up by staying on safe subjects.
- High advocacy combined with high inquiry fosters two-way communication and learning. I state my views, and encourage you to inquire into my views, and I invite you to state your views and I inquire into your views.



High	Explaining Imposing	Mutual Learning Over Engaging
Advocacy		
Low	Observing Withdrawing	Interviewing Interrogating
	Low **Inquiry** High	

The grid below sums up the four "approaches" mentioned above and, in red, indicates how the "extremes" of each approach may be perceived, i.e. too much Inquiry, asking too many questions, may lead a person to feel as though they are being interrogated.

Conclusions

This has been a brief introduction, or hopefully a reminder, of two key frameworks, that we as facilitators should have in our tool box. I feel that they are particularly appropriate in our type of work, i.e. experiential outdoor learning; where many of the exercises that we use are very "immediate" and often rely on "spontaneous" decisions based on feelings and incomplete information – fundamentally flawed or misunderstood assumptions can lead to an experience you never forget. The use of these two models during reviews (and during the exercise itself) can lead to learning you never forget. ■

References
1. Chris Argyris. Overcoming Organizational Defences, 1992
2. Pete Senge. The 5th Discipline Fieldbook, 1994
3. The Action Design website: www.actiondesign.com/resources/concepts

Author's Notes
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Photos: Sunburst and sunrise by Fiona at IOL, high ropes activity by Karen Stuart.