

Managing up

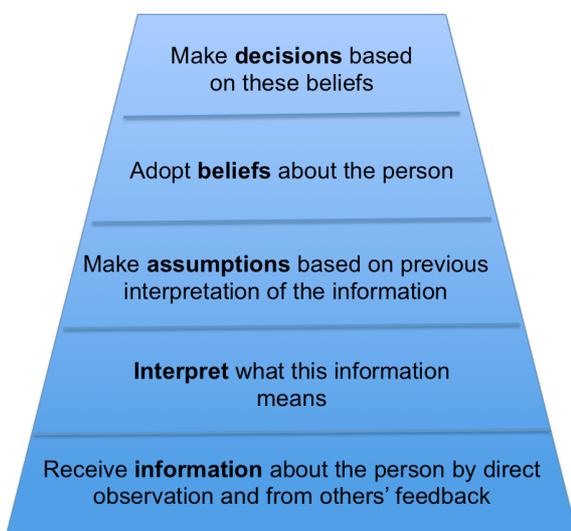
My clients and I have learned the key to managing up successfully comes from using the ladder of inference to influence what someone crucial to your career believes about you. And therefore how that person makes decisions about your progress in the organisation.

In the **Fifth Discipline** Peter Senge wrote about the importance of basing decisions on considered reasoning and reflection – and not acting on assumptions or in haste. Senge used the ‘ladder of inference’ as the theoretical underpinning of his prescription for making wise executive and other decisions. In today’s fast-paced world there is always pressure to act now. Making quick decisions often seems more virtuous than taking the time to gather and test the relevant facts and form a measured view before acting. In other words it’s all too easy to run up the ladder of inference, form erroneous beliefs, and make poor decisions.

The ladder of inference

Here’s why the ladder of inference is important to understand, and how the theory of the ladder works.

The ladder of inference explains the thinking process a person goes through, most often without being aware of it, to move from the facts of a situation to making a decision. The stages of the process are like the rungs on a ladder – the person moves up from one to the next in rapid succession.



Commencing on the first rung, the person starts with the facts and reality as they perceive it. In the managing up situation, **information** flows to the decision-maker from [1] their own observations of you, e.g. participating in meetings, when you are making presentations to a senior committee, and in one-on-ones, and [2] from what others say about you in formal and informal ways.

To this ‘data’ the person adds their own **interpretation** and makes it meaningful to them by drawing on their own frames of reference and underlying values. Thus if you don’t make strong eye contact with three managers who are senior to you, one may interpret this behaviour as lack of assertiveness, another as furtiveness, and the third as shyness. Each is starting to move up their own ladder of inference about you.

Based on his interpretation, the first manager makes adverse **assumptions** about you. Remember, an assumption is something that is taken as true without the truth being tested or verified. Thus if your lack of eye contact is interpreted as you not being an assertive person, the assumption might be *‘she is not up to promotion to sales director role because in our company the role requires a high degree of self-confidence with the sales force and major customers’*.

This sequence of Information > Interpretation > Assumptions about you becomes a generalised belief about your performance. The assumption about your lack of assertiveness turns into a **belief** that not only do you lack the confidence to act autonomously with your major customer, it also explains why you have procrastinated about making decisions about a seeming under-performer on your staff. It is starting to become generalised about all your managerial behaviours. This belief about you is damning. And, tragically, only you know it’s not accurate!

The real facts are these. The major customer refuses to accept your authority in pricing negotiations because your predecessor on the account always involved the sales director. And that staff member is under-performing because of temporary circumstances in their private life you know this will pass and he will soon soar to achieving top results. The trouble is you have never shared these two facts with your boss.

So when the time comes for the **decision** on who will be appointed to the plumb job of sales director, you're overlooked.

Use the ladder of inference to manage up

Understand – and always remember – that managers above you are as subject to succumbing to ladder of inference errors of judgement as you or anyone is. They make assumptions, and often don't stop to test them. Under pressure they too readily accept the assumed truth, and allow it to strengthen their beliefs about you. This is known as confirmation bias; they see and hear those things that confirm to them your weaknesses and prevent them from taking a balanced view of the whole you and the situation.

The longer you have allowed this to go on, the stronger the beliefs will be. And, if the beliefs are even in part erroneous, they will be increasingly detrimental to you. How often have you heard some one say "I had to leave my organisation to get a promotion elsewhere. And when I came back to an even bigger job, the boss said to me *I am impressed by your leadership capability*". The boss's ladder of inference had blinded him; and while in the organisation you had not helped him correct these false beliefs about you.

The way to prevent this occurring is not difficult. But it does require you to remember the ladder of inference mostly operates subconsciously. Therefore you need to be seen in concretely positive ways. Ensure the information that reaches your superior directly or indirectly is factually correct, relevant, memorably expressed, consistent, and timely. Check the information has been received and correctly interpreted. In other words, help your superior unpack his ladder of inference, so that they become aware of their reasoning and judgements. For example, before a presentation to a committee, ask your boss to give you feedback afterwards on the style and substance of your delivery. When you receive the feedback, you are seeking to understand on what observations he has based his judgement and the reasoning behind it. Ask questions like: *What did you observe in my presentation?* – your behaviour on which he has relied. *On what did you base your feedback?* – the reasoning he has used. *What would have made this a superior presentation?* – revealing the gap between your performance and his assumptions about what you are capable of.

Summary [1] Remember, once formed, perceptions of you are difficult to change, [2] Be clear about the most important perception/s you want your boss to have of you, and [3] Manage the content and timing of the information that flows up the ladder so that it shapes favourable assumptions and beliefs about you. Managing up by using the ladder of inference to influence what someone crucial to your career believes about you is a skill you can and must learn.

Managing the ladder of inference can't change the facts of you how perform in your role; your performance is a function of your attitude and competence. But by actively managing the ladder of inference you can positively influence the way your performance is interpreted and judged. And that's just as important to your career progress.

Further sources

If you want to delve into other aspects of this topic I suggest you read:

- + [You are who you think are](#), one of my posts, and
- + [The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome](#) by Jean-Francois Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux in Harvard Business Review.