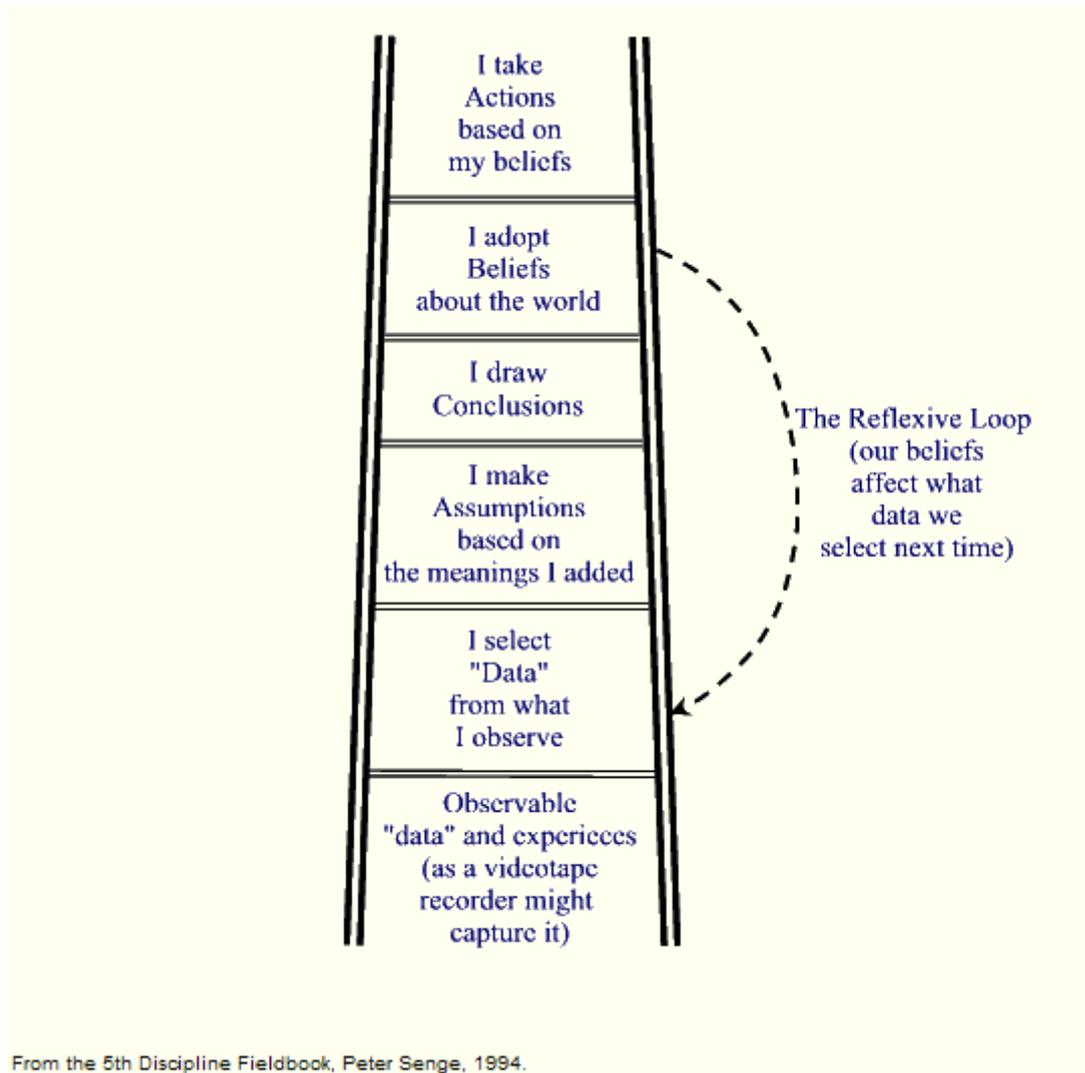


## Understanding our perception of the world and creating space for curiosity and dialogue

### *Using the Ladder of Inference*

The following "Ladder of Inference" was, I believe, initially developed by Chris Argyris, and subsequently described in Peter Senge's "The 5th Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization". In my view it's a wonderful tool which provides the foundation for stronger relationships and interactions between people – whether you're a leader, manager, team member focussing on internal or external relationships, this is a great starting point.



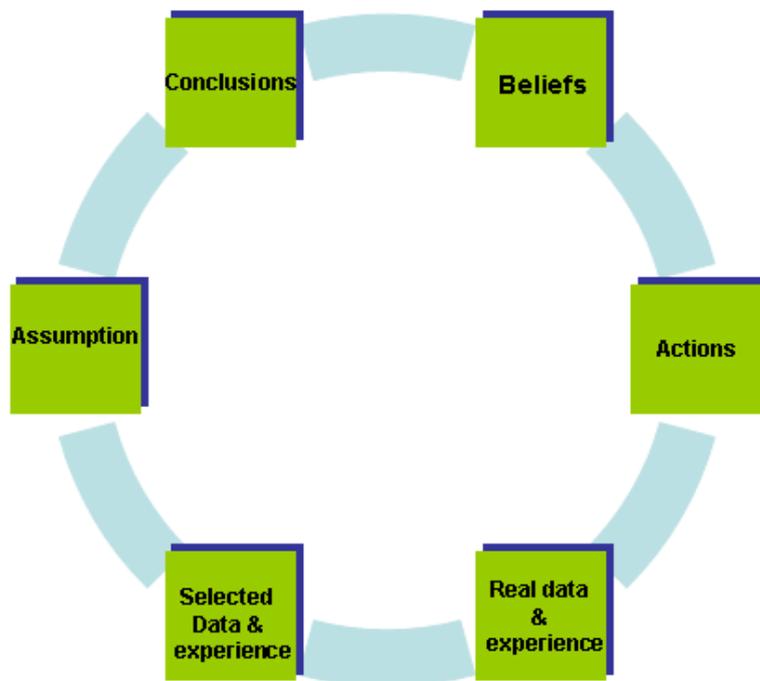
What the diagram implies is that we begin with **Real Data & Experience**, the kind that would be captured by a movie camera that didn't lie.

We then choose a set of **Selected Data & Experience** that we pay attention to. We will **ignore or delete** some of it as there's simply too much information bombarding our senses to cope with it all at once (you're unlikely to be focussing on the colour of the carpet at this moment!). Some of it we **generalise** – so when looking at a rectangular piece of wood in a wall, we know from experience it's a door and what to do with it. This allows us to quickly interpret things around us. Lastly, we **distort** some of it (those wonderful visual illusions are examples of how our eyesight distorts what is actually there in order to make sense of reality).

To this **Selected Data & Experience** we affix meaning (our own version of reality or our truth – which is very unlikely to be as complete and accurate as the real data and experience), which leads us to develop **Assumptions**, come to **Conclusions**, and finally develop **Beliefs**.

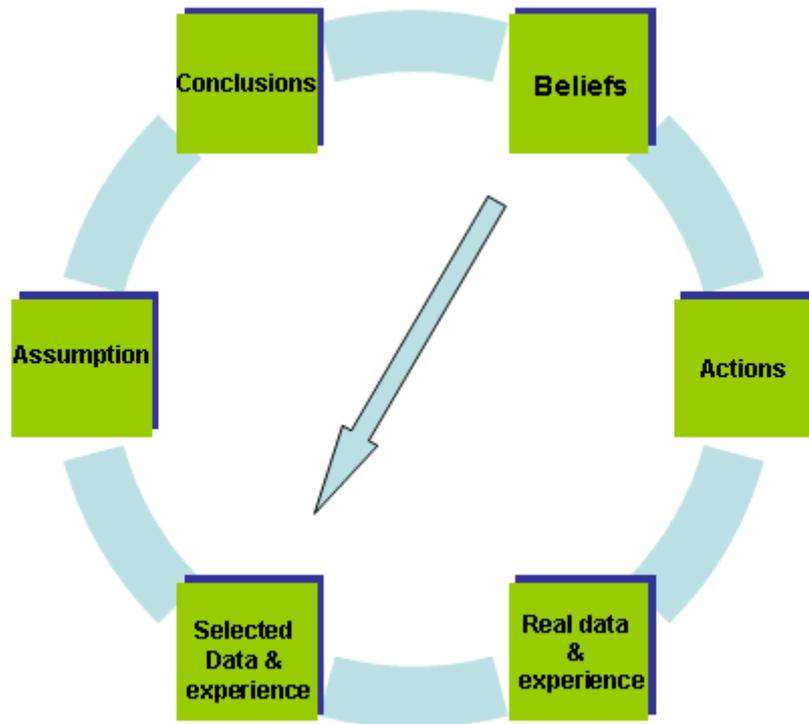
These beliefs form the basis of our **Actions** which then result in additional **Real Data & Experience**

The circular nature of this description becomes evident when the diagram is redrawn with an added influence.



This diagram indicates the reinforcing nature of this structure, as each action builds on the one

before it. However, our **Beliefs** (which are also influenced by our experiences, values, upbringing, and culture) influence the **Selected Data & Experience** to which we choose to pay attention.



So, this can create and an internal reinforcing loop which short circuits reality. The tendency is to select data to pay attention to which supports our beliefs. So, you can imagine that if our **Beliefs** become more and more firm, the **Selected Data & Experience** we are willing to pay attention to will become a smaller and smaller portion of reality.

So, how do we stop short circuiting reality and begin to see reality for what it really is?

- **Develop awareness** – knowing that you do it is a start as it gives you the prompt to question whether your interpretation of reality is accurate.
- **Be curious** – about where the truth lies. Between the different versions of reality that people hold and the meaning they have made, there is space for dialogue and exploration.

- **Using questions to seek to understand others' ladders of inference** such as:
  - What information have you noticed?
  - What is your interpretation of what's happening? What other interpretations/perspectives might there be?
  - What assumptions might you be making?
  - What conclusions are you drawing?
  - What do you believe about what happened?
- **Recognising & sharing your own reactions/interpretations and testing your understanding** - if you notice you are feeling frustrated about something, it can be powerful to share that and explain why – no one can argue with how you feel, but it could form the basis of powerful dialogue. If you're interpreting something (and not just if it's a negative interpretation!), explaining your interpretation, assumptions and conclusions creates space for dialogue, clarity and shared understanding.

In my experience, we may have a similar view of the **Real Data & Experience** but there are subtle differences in our ladders of inference which affect our interpretation of events and actions.

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