Performer, Challenge, & Beyond

A colleague and member of your team, Jennifer Performer, has asked for your support and help in dealing with a challenging situation.

Robert Challenge was put on Jennifer's team three years ago. According to Jennifer, since that time, Robert's performance has been disappointing. Jennifer has spoken to him several times, but there has been no improvement.

Jennifer, along with others in the department, genuinely want to give Robert the benefit of the doubt and help him be a successful member of the division. Jennifer has met with Robert to communicate that she wants to keep Robert but that, if his performance does not improve, some other alternative will have to be considered.

A transcript of a conversation between Robert and Jennifer follows. Assume that you and Jennifer have agreed that this transcript represents the full range of Jennifer's patterns of action during his meeting with Robert.

You are sitting in your office reading the transcript. Jot down the following:

- Your immediate reactions to/analysis of Jennifer's effectiveness, the first things that come to mind:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

- What you would actually say to Jennifer when you meet with her to be of help:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Notes

Conversation Between Robert & Jennifer

Jennifer Robert, as I've discussed with you before, your recent performance in this department has simply not been up to our standards.

Robert I thought things were getting better.

Jennifer That's not my understanding. You still seem to be carrying a chip on your shoulder, and it seems to have affected your work in a number of ways. People have constantly used words like "lethargy," "uncommitted," and "disinterested" in describing your work.

Robert But I've devoted so much to this organization.

Jennifer I really do believe you've contributed a lot in the past, but I'm talking about your behavior over the past three years in this department. I'd like to discuss your feelings about your performance.

Robert You know what's gone on in the past!

Jennifer Robert, I know you want to talk about past injustices, but I don't believe it will be valuable to spend a lot of time discussing things that happened several years ago. That's behind us. We need to talk about you today and your future in our organization.

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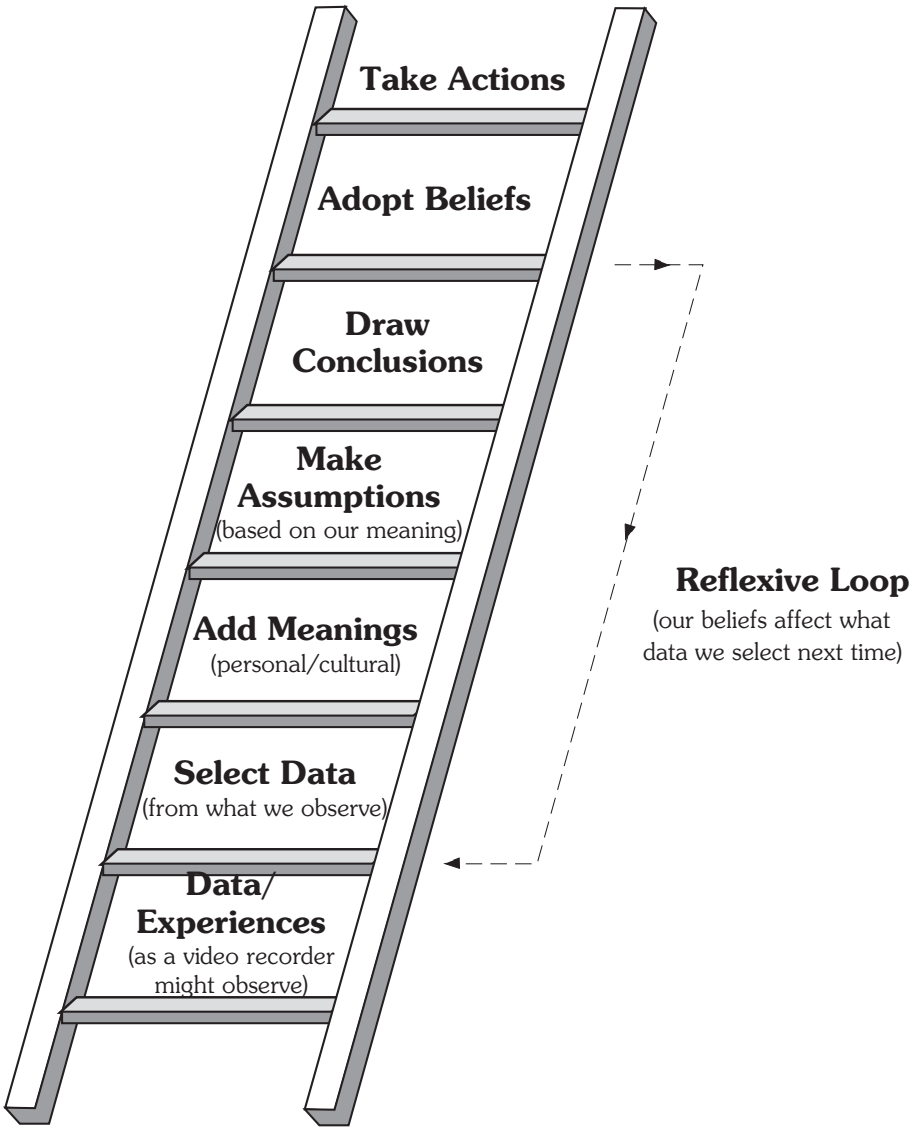
Notes

Ladder of Inference*

Underlying our behavior is the Ladder of Inference, a model describing the flow of human information processing. Our capacity to work with others to make decisions and take effective action is significantly affected by the ways in which we select and make meaning of data. These choices, of which we are all too often unaware, can cause conflict in and damage to our work relationships, leading to unintended, undesirable results. We create these unintended consequences particularly when we act as if our perceptions are the truth without testing them with others.

Applying the Ladder of Inference enables us to make explicit the tacit assumptions and self-generating belief systems we hold, allowing for more open, honest, direct communication. This, in turn, leads to decisions and actions that are based on valid information and to which people are internally committed.



* Adapted from *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook (page 243)* by Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ron, Peter Senge and Bryan Smith.

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What Is It?

The Ladder of Inference is a common mental pathway of increasing abstraction, which often leads to misguided beliefs and actions.

Why It's Important

Understanding both our own and others' Ladders can:

- Examine/test/change assumptions;
- Foster appreciation of different points of view;
- Allow awareness, visibility and reflection of each other's thinking and reasoning, leading to:
  - improved communication, especially in conflict, by facilitating understanding, shared meaning and true consensus.

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Definitions

INQUIRY Listening actively in ways that encourage others to communicate their points of view, voice their differences, ask questions and raise concerns.

ADVOCACY Stating one's point of view in ways that take responsibility for having a viewpoint, while making that viewpoint open to examination by others.

Strategies for Seeking Understanding

- Inquire before you advocate.
- Make conscious choices about the mix of inquiry and advocacy, based on the context, your relationship with the person, and your goals for the conversation.

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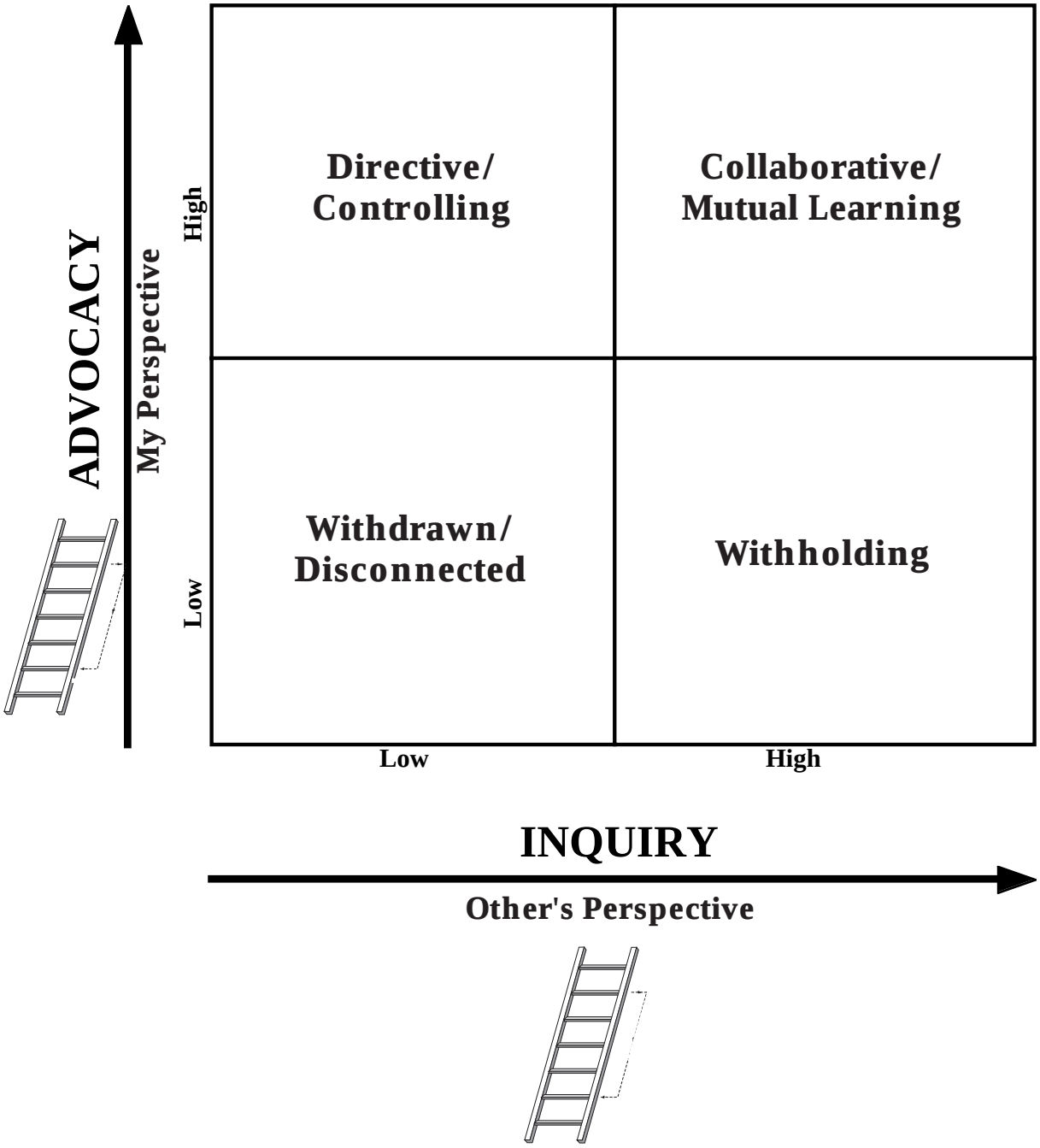
ADVOCACY
My Perspective
High
Low
Directive/
Controlling
Collaborative/
Mutual Learning
Withdrawn/
Disconnected
Withholding
Low
High
INQUIRY
Other's Perspective

Notes

Guidelines for Productive Inquiry

Guideline/ Technique	Intention	How To Do It	Example
Listen	• To hear, free from your own filters and assumptions, the other person's intended meaning	• Momentarily set aside your own reactions, thoughts and feelings, and fill your mind with genuine curiosity about the other's thoughts and feelings.	*If you're thinking, "He's crazy! That will never work," set that aside and replace it with, "Hold on! I may be missing something. Slow down and first just work hard to understand where he's coming from."*
Ask for data and reasoning	• To help the others make explicit their data and reasoning so they can test the validity or invalidity of their thinking • To deepen both their and your understanding of their thoughts, feelings, and actions	• Ask basic questions using, "who," "what," "why," or "how." • Ask what was said or done that led the other to his/her conclusions. • Ask for the reasoning they used to get to the conclusions.	*"What other concerns did you have about the review committee's comments?"* or *"What did Mary actually say or do that makes you think she's been manipulating the situation?"*
Paraphrase	• To legitimize the other person • To confirm or disconfirm what you think he or she is saying or feeling • To make your perceptions visible and openly discussible	• Listen and look for key phrases, body language, and feelings. • Restate your understanding or perceptions using your own words.	*"What you seem to be suggesting, Helen, is that the proposal will not be approved unless you take the time to find out Paul's concerns."* or *"Ralph, you seem to be feeling really pressured to commit to the deliverables before you can check out some major problems you see."*
Check for Understanding	• To build mutual understanding	• Check to see if your perceptions are accurate	*"Is that accurate?"* or *"Is that what's really getting to you?"* or *"What am I missing?"*

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Guidelines for Productive Advocacy

Guideline/ Technique	Intention	How To Do It	Example
State your view, data, & reasoning	• To make your own inferential process visible so that it can become openly discussible.	• State the specific, observable data and reasoning that led you to your conclusions.	*"I know we're under a time pressure right now, but because this is the second project that has come up with a big time crunch at the end, I'd like to take an hour tomorrow to see if we can identify the key issues in order to prevent this from happening in the future."*
State Impact	• To help build understanding about the consequences of actions. • To provide more data from which to build an informed decision.	• State the potential or actual consequences of the reasoning or action.	*"My concern is that if we don't take the time while it is fresh in our minds, we'll lose the learning and keep repeating the same problems next month when we're really going to be under the gun."*
Check for Understanding	• To build common understanding so that you can ultimately take concerted action.	• Ask them to restate, in their own words, what you've said. • Ask what questions they have for understanding.	*"Am I making myself clear?"* or *"What questions do you have about my concern or what I'm suggesting?"*
Invite Reactions	• To seek disconfirming information. • To test the validity of your thinking. • To build mutual understanding and internal commitment.	• Check to see where the other person agrees or disagrees with your perspective. • Encourage the other person to point out any fallacies in your thinking. • Inquire into the data and reasoning that leads them to disagree.	*"What's your reaction? Does that seem reasonable, or what am I missing?"* or *"What is it about my thinking that you're having problems with?"* or *"Help me understand what leads you to disagree?"*

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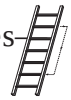
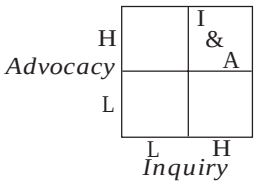
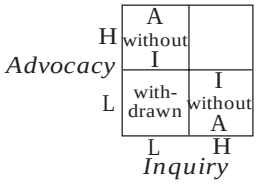
Notes

Features of Productive and Counter-productive Conversations

Productive Conversations	Conversations Leading to Unintended Consequences
• Clear messages	• Mixed messages
• Direct	• Indirect
• Open, explicit about , reasoning	• Withheld , reasoning
• Test assumptions	• Untested assumptions
• Provide data	• Do not provide data
• Productive inquiry guidelines—inquire into other(s)' ladder 	• Do not inquire into other(s)' ladder
• Productive advocacy guidelines—share your ladder and encourage other(s) to confront your reasoning	• Inquiry without advocacy
• 	• 
• Consistency between espoused values and values governing actions	• Inconsistency between espoused values and values-in-action
• Be willing and proactive about stating your intentions all along the way	

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You can't "choose" whether to have thoughts and feelings. They just occur.

You will probably experience negative consequences if you express your thoughts and feelings.

You are likely to experience negative consequences if you do ***not*** *express your thoughts and feelings*

The Dilemma is,
How can you raise the issues and thoughts that you believe to be important in such a way that they can be heard and dealt with openly?

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Notes

Processing the Mind's “Toxic Waste”

For the moment, think of your private thoughts and feelings as potentially “toxic waste.” What are the options for dealing with such “waste Products?” What are the consequences of exercising these options?

Dump It—
Could pollute the environment

Bury It—
Could leak, seep out, & pollute the environment

Process or Refine It—
Hold yourself accountable for making your ladder clear and explicit by—

- identifying the data and reasoning that lead you to your conclusions
- deciding if the data, reasoning, and consequences are significant enough to address
- testing them publicly if you choose

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Notes