

Climbing Down the Ladder of Inference

Making interpretation visible in conflict

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In conflict communication, a position is rarely just a position. It is not merely a statement about what someone wants. It is often a way of holding ground, protecting dignity, managing fear, or trying to regain a sense of control. A position may sound simple—“I am not going,” “We need to decide today,” “That is not acceptable,” “You have to apologize”—but beneath it, there is usually a more complicated structure of meaning.

Positions matter because they are communicative acts. They do not simply describe preference; they do work in the relationship. A position can create distance, mark refusal, draw a boundary, signal urgency, or make a demand for recognition. It may also conceal the very thing that most needs to be understood. In that sense, the problem is not that people have positions. The problem is that conflict often traps them there.

The ladder of inference helps explain how this happens. It describes the often unseen movement from what a person observes, to what they interpret, to what they assume, to what they conclude, and finally to what they say or do. In plain terms, it is the path from what happened to what I now believe is true. The danger is not that people make inferences; the danger is that they forget they have made them.

A person may notice that a colleague has not responded to an email. At the level of observation, this is simple: no response has arrived. But the mind rarely leaves the observation alone. Meaning begins to gather around the silence. The person may interpret the silence as avoidance, assume that the colleague does not think the issue matters, and conclude that the colleague is being

disrespectful. From there, a position may form: “I am done trying to carry this conversation by myself.”

Nothing in this movement has to be intentionally dishonest. Each step may feel reasonable from inside the person’s experience. But the climb has changed the conflict. What began as a missing email has become a story about respect, importance, and whether the relationship can be trusted. By the time the person says, “You are disrespecting me,” the ladder has disappeared beneath the conclusion. The other person is no longer being asked about an email. They are being asked to answer for a character judgment.

That is why arguing at the top of the ladder so often fails. If one person says, “You do not respect me,” and the other says, “Yes, I do,” the conversation has very little room to move. Both people are now arguing about the conclusion. The original observation is hidden. The interpretation is hidden. The assumption is hidden. The conversation becomes a contest over whose conclusion will be treated as the truth.

Climbing down the ladder of inference is the practice of making that hidden movement visible again. It asks the speaker to return from conclusion to assumption, from assumption to interpretation, and from interpretation to observation. The purpose is not to weaken the concern or talk a person out of their own experience. The purpose is to bring the concern closer to the ground, where it can be seen, questioned, and answered.

Instead of saying, “You are disrespecting me,” a person might say, “When I did not hear back from you, I started to interpret the silence as a sign that this did not matter to you. I want to understand what happened.” That turn does different work in the relationship. It still names the concern. It still allows the speaker to be honest. But it does not force the other person to begin from defense. It leaves room for clarification, apology, explanation, or repair.

The ladder moves from observation, to interpretation, to assumption, to conclusion, to position or response. The important movement in conflict is not only the climb upward, but the return downward. A person can ask, “What did I actually notice? What did I make it mean? What did I assume? What conclusion did I reach? What else could be true? What do I need to ask before treating this as certain?” Sometimes this climb down happens silently before it happens in speech. A person pauses long enough to notice that their conclusion may be sincere without being complete.

This matters because people are often standing on different ladders without realizing it. Even when they share the same event, they may not share the same meaning. A manager who asks detailed questions may believe she is showing care and seriousness, while an employee may experience the same questions as distrust. A partner who becomes quiet during conflict may believe she is preventing escalation, while the other person may experience the silence as withdrawal. The conflict grows not only from what happened, but from what the happening came to mean.

The ladder of inference also helps explain why conflict can become self-reinforcing. Once I have concluded that you are careless, I may begin to notice every missed detail. Once I have concluded that you are controlling, I may notice every directive. Once I have concluded that you are hostile, I may hear sharpness even in neutral words. My conclusion begins shaping what I notice next, and what I notice next strengthens the conclusion. The ladder becomes circular.

Climbing down interrupts that circle. It does not ask me to distrust myself, but it does ask me to remember that my perspective is partial. I may have seen something real without seeing everything. I may have a legitimate concern without having the only possible interpretation. I may need to set a boundary, make a request, or name harm clearly, but I can still do so closer to the ground.

A boundary spoken from examined inference is often clearer than a boundary spoken from unexamined reaction. “I am not willing to continue this conversation while I am being interrupted” does different work than “You never listen.” “I need decisions that affect my work to include me earlier in the process” does different work than “You are trying to shut me out.” “I cannot agree to this timeline without knowing what support will be available” does different work than “This plan is impossible.” The first statements are still firm, but they reveal more of the path by which the speaker arrived there.

In conflict communication, this is essential because every inference becomes a possible next turn. If I infer contempt, I may respond defensively. If I infer exclusion, I may withdraw. If I infer disrespect, I may attack. If I infer carelessness, I may tighten control. My inference does not remain private. It enters the relationship through tone, timing, word choice, posture, silence, and response.

For that reason, climbing down is not only a reflective practice. It is a relational one. When I climb down, I change what the conversation can become. I make room for correction, clarification, accountability, and repair. I allow the other person to say whether my interpretation fits their intention, whether my observation is complete, and whether there is information I do not yet have. I also give myself a better chance of speaking in a way that can be heard.

Climbing down the ladder of inference does not erase disagreement. It makes disagreement more speakable. It slows the movement from observation to accusation, from interpretation to certainty, and from certainty to position. It reminds me that the conclusions I bring into conflict do work in the relationship. They can harden the exchange, or they can become invitations to look more carefully together. Climbing down is the choice to make my meaning visible enough that it can be understood, questioned, corrected, or confirmed. It does not guarantee agreement, but it keeps the conversation close enough to the ground for people to remain human to one another.