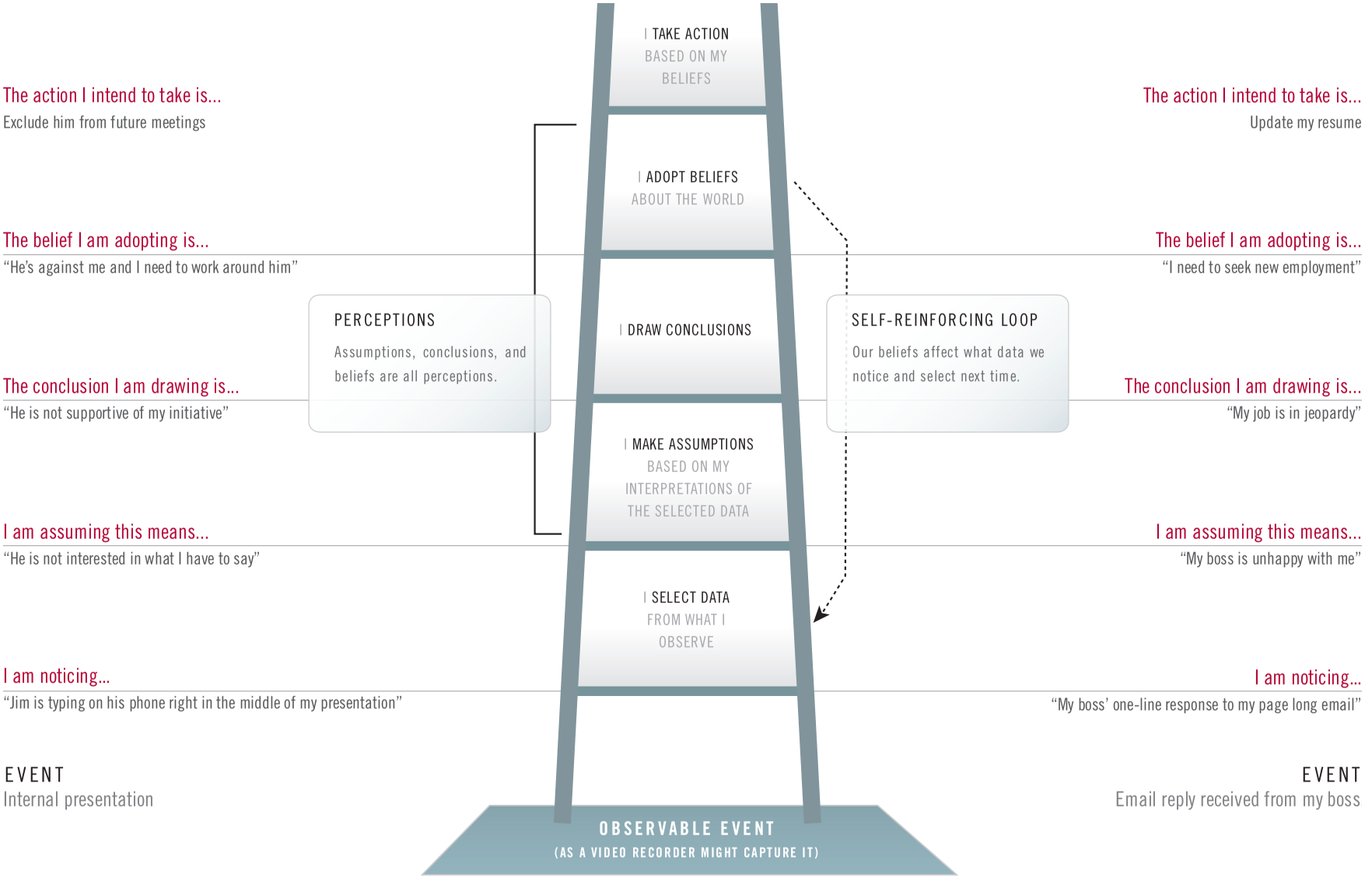


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The *Ladder of Inference* model, developed by Harvard's Chris Argyris and popularized by MIT's Peter Senge, highlights the cognitive (thinking) process people go through in order to draw conclusions, arrive at a particular belief about things, and make decisions. Even though we all go through this process many times each day we are rarely aware of the process itself. The "Telling Ourselves Stories" practice increases our awareness of this process and allows us to go about it in an intentional and more effective way.

## PERCEPTION VS. REALITY

When we tell ourselves stories we are often dealing with our *perceptions* of a situation rather than the *reality* of it. Once we recognize that our perceptions are based on limited information, we can consciously interrupt a pattern of drawing unwarranted conclusions. By checking in with others, we can test our assumptions and uncover missing information that can lead to better decisions, skillful action, and more desirable results.

## SCENARIO ONE

**Perception:** Roger stayed up half the night preparing for a meeting. Halfway through his presentation he notices his co-worker Jim is typing on his phone. Roger assumes that Jim is disengaged and concludes that he is not supportive of the initiative. Roger adopts the belief that he will have to work around Jim and decides to exclude him from invitations to follow up meetings.

**Reality:** Jim is so excited about Roger's presentation that he is enthusiastically emailing notes and ideas to his team with suggestions on how to line up support for the initiative.

**Cost:** By excluding a key supporter from future meetings, Roger has inadvertently jeopardized the success of his initiative.

## SCENARIO TWO

**Perception:** Ken sends his boss Julia a thoughtful email detailing his concerns about a high stakes project he is working on. In reply, Ken receives a one-line response. He assumes that Julia is unhappy with him and concludes that his job is in jeopardy. Ken adopts a belief that he should start seeking new employment and takes action by updating his resume for a job search.

**Reality**: Julia is actually highly confident in Ken's management of this project. Late for the airport, trusting that he is fully capable of handling next steps with minimal direction, she dashed off a one-line reply.

**Cost**: Julia may be facing the resignation of one her most valued employees. In turn, Ken could be leaving a boss who had great confidence in him.

## PRACTICE INSTRUCTIONS

1. Climb the Ladder Consciously. Notice when you are telling yourself stories (climbing the Ladder of Inference). Consciously catch yourself making assumptions. Refrain from drawing conclusions or taking any action until you have had a chance to "check in" with the other parties involved.

2. Do a "Check In" with the other person.

   a. State observation objectively: State your observation of the situation (event) as a video camera might capture it. "*Julia*, I want to check in with you regarding *our recent email exchange. I sent you a very detailed email about the new procedures and you replied with a one-line response*."

   b. Own your story: Take ownership of your own experience (assumption) thus reducing the likelihood of the other person becoming defensive. "The story I'm telling myself is *that your one-line response to my email was a way of telling me that you're upset with me* and I wanted to check in with you about that. "

   c. Be open to the other person's viewpoint: Seek to understand the other person's view of the event. In this way, you can draw conclusions on a more accurate assessment of the situation and then decide the best course of action.

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