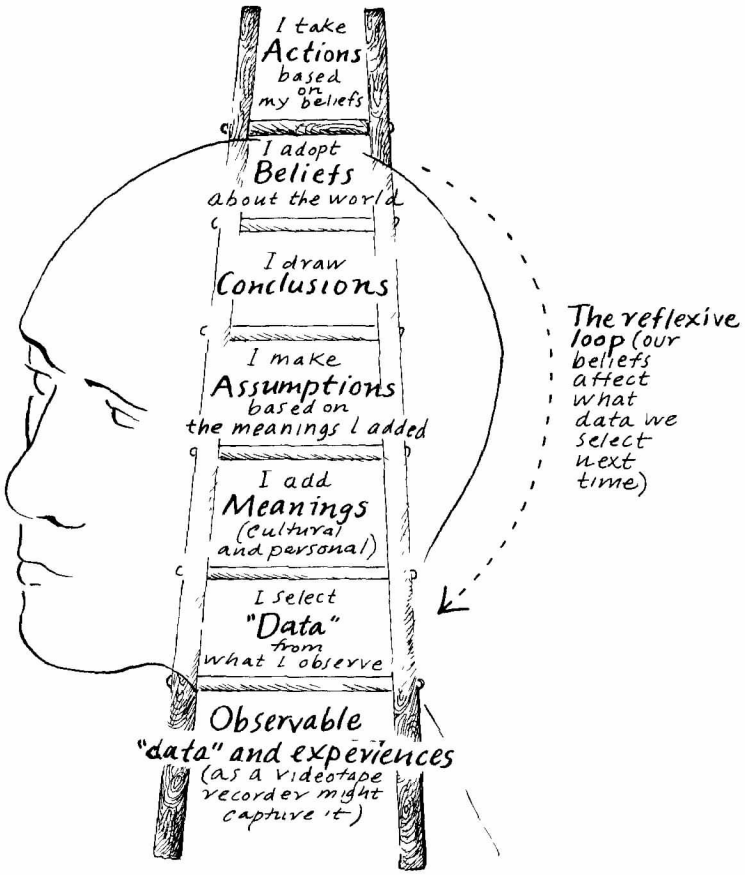
What Do You Believe?

We live in a world of self-generating beliefs, which remain largely untested. We adopt those beliefs based on our conclusions, which we create based on our observations plus our past experiences. Our ability to see things differently is often blocked by our feelings that:

- **Our** beliefs are the truth.
- The truth as **we** see it is obvious.
- **Our** beliefs are based on real data.
- The data **we** select are the real data



The Ladder of Inference

The Ladder of Inference describes the thinking process that we go through, usually without realizing it, to get from a fact to a decision or action.

This move up the Ladder of Inference takes *milliseconds*. It happens all day long. It happens when we interact with people, and when we read the news. It also affects how others see us as they climb their own Ladders of Inference. Here is how the ladder works:

- **Observable Data** Observation by itself is not a biased activity. When I observe I see what happens, hear what was said, or experience a situation - no more and no less.
- **We select data from what we observe** - Here is where the filtering begins. We create assumptions about which parts of the event observed are important.
- **We add meaning to what we gave selected** - At this point, we imply meaning using the norms of our culture, or experience.

- **We make assumptions based on the meaning we have added** - This process begins to fill in gaps in knowledge. We naturally make assumptions about the motivations, behaviors, wants, desires, likes and dislikes of others.
- **We draw conclusions which prompt feelings:** We draw conclusions about why the person is behaving that way. And, of course, we immediately begin to have feelings about these conclusions.
- **We adopt beliefs about the world**: Based on our conclusions, we can now see that there are things within the world that are out of alignment (or in the case of a positive conclusion, in alignment). We have either negative or positive feelings about the situation.
- **We take action based on our beliefs and feelings**

Strategies to Stay Down the Ladder

The truth is that you can't live your life without using "the ladder." It would be an inefficient, tedious way to live. But you can improve your communications and relationships if you:

- Become more aware of your own thinking and reasoning (reflection);
- Make your thinking and reasoning more visible to others (advocacy);
- Inquire into others' thinking and reasoning (inquiry).

There are a few things you can do to help cut down the number of times you run up the ladder:

- Seek new data! Be aware that *your* "truth" may be based on incomplete data. In other words, be aware that you may be "up your ladder."
- Invite others to test your assumptions and conclusions. When you have the opportunity to work with others, have them help you think things through.
- Use inquiry to help others make their thought processes visible. Use open and nonjudgmental questions, rather than questions that exhibit a bias.
- Be open to hearing other's perspectives
- Share facts not opinions! When trying to "get down your ladder" reflect on whether you are sharing raw data or filtered data.
- Make your thinking process visible to others by explaining your assumptions, interpretations, and conclusions.

JTF CapMed