

# Workplace Enhancement Notes

A Tip Sheet for Organizational Leaders & Managers

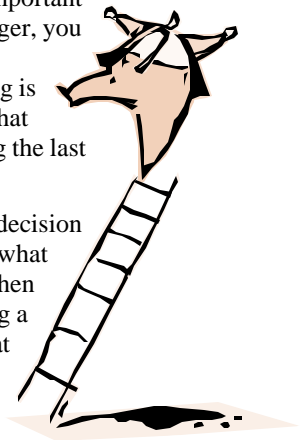
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## In this Issue

<i>Ladder of Inference</i>	Page 1
<i>Dealing with the Upset Customer</i>	Page 1
<i>How People Think &amp; Learn</i>	Page 4
<i>About Russell Consulting</i>	Page 4

## Don't Leap Up that Ladder of Inference!

Steve has done it again. The meeting started fifteen minutes ago and, as he did last time, Steve waltzed in, offered no explanations or apologies, and sat down. His late arrival upset the flow of the communication enough to create some confusion, but the meeting quickly got back on track. Once he was seated, Steve seemed disengaged, distracted, and uninterested. He offered no comments or suggestions during an important discussion of the company's performance indicators. As project manager, you decide that if Steve doesn't care about these inter-departmental team meetings, you might as well stop inviting him. By the time the meeting is over and people head off to their respective departments, you decide that the team can function quite well without him — it certainly has during the last two meetings.



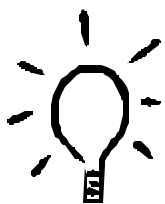
While you are right to wonder what is driving Steve's behavior, your decision to stop inviting him to future project team meetings is an example of what you should *not* do in response to his counter-productive behaviors. When you take the giant "leap" from observing a specific behavior to making a decision based upon this limited information, you are jumping up what is called the "Ladder of Inference."

### The Ladder of Inference

The actions that any of us take are based upon a series of logical mental steps that enable us to feel, justifiably, that our actions are based on observations and our good judgment. What happens, however, is that the distance our mind travels in taking these mental steps is often based upon misperception and misunderstanding.

*(Continued on page 2)*

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### Read this Issue to . . .

- Avoid taking actions that are based on incorrect assumptions
- Know what an upset customer wants
- Identify how people think

## What Does an Upset Customer Want?

She is angry. You've tried to reason with her, but she won't listen. "I don't have time for all of this chit-chat," she declares with irritation. "Just give me what I want and I'll leave." You've try responding to her, but before you have a chance to offer a solution, she cuts you off with "I don't want any bureaucratic excuses. I'm tired of the runaround I get every time I come in here."

Dealing with an upset customer, no matter what type of business you're in, is one of the greatest challenges that you and your staff face. Sorting out what the upset customer really wants is the key to responding to the customer's need and being able to provide the quality service that is important to your success.

### Sorting Out the Levels of Customer Needs

Larry Larmer, a University of Wisconsin-Madison communications professor, suggests that dealing effectively with the upset customer requires understanding the two levels of customer needs. The customer's *Level One* needs, says Larmer, is what the customer directly asks for. This is the specific thing that the customer *says* he or she wants. It is the customer's conscious need. A *Level Two* need, however is often not directly expressed by the customer. A *Level Two* need must usually be discovered through conversations with the customer.

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Ladder of Inference, contd.

Renowned author and professor at the Harvard Business School, Chris Argyris, uses the Ladder of Inference as a tool for helping individuals and teams avoid taking actions based on assumptions and inferences rather than on observable and tested data. In his book *Knowledge for Action*, Argyris explains that “making inferences is a key activity in designing and implementing (productive) action.” He argues that by making our inferences explicit and testing them out with others, we are more likely to take the appropriate actions based upon *real* (rather than assumed or inferred) data.

### The Rungs on the Ladder of Inference

The *lowest* rung of the ladder is that of direct **experience and observation**. This rung is where we gather information from what we see, hear, and feel. For our example with Steve, this level is his late arrival at the project team meeting.

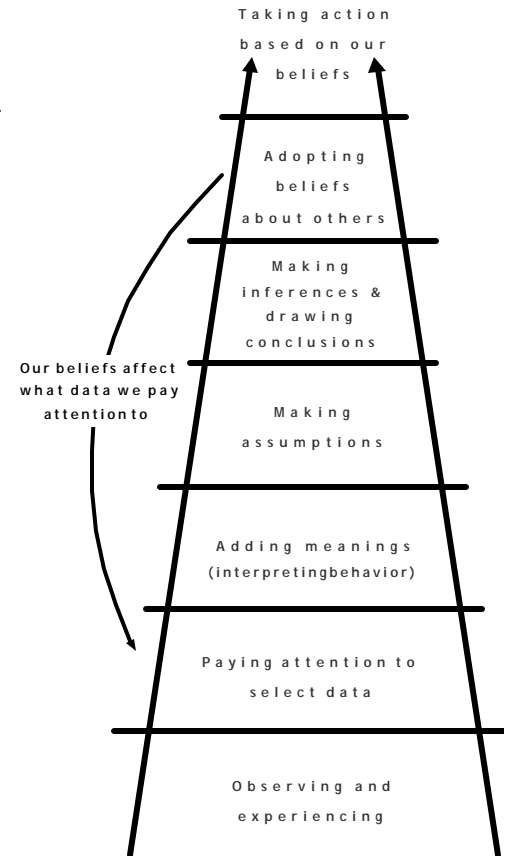
**Paying attention to select data** is the rung where we pay attention to only certain data. Since we are presented with a myriad of information and stimuli, we are unable to absorb all of it in—much less balance what we directly experience with our broader memory of experience. To create order, then, we focus on only a few things at a time. In this case, we focus on Steve’s late arrival at our meeting. Since this has happened once before, we say to ourselves: “There he goes again!”

**Adding meanings** occurs when we attempt to interpret the selective data by explaining to ourselves what it means. The *meaning* that we add to our observation of Steve’s arriving late for the meeting is: “Steve knew when the meeting was supposed to start, he just didn’t think it was important enough for his time.”

The next rung is **making assumptions**. Our interpretations of or the meanings we attribute to an observed event (e.g., Steve arriving late for a meeting) directly lead us to making an assumption about the other person. For Steve, we make the assumption that “Steve can’t bother himself with matters that don’t directly affect him. He is only concerned about his narrow self-interest.”

Based upon these assumptions (most likely erroneous), we move up the ladder to the next rung: **making inferences and drawing conclusions**. We infer from our observations, meanings, and assumptions that “Steve is focused on his narrow self-interest” and we conclude that “we can’t expect any purposeful participation or contribution from Steve in the future.”

Finally, at the *last* rung on the Ladder of Inference, we **adopt beliefs** about Steve. For Steve, our belief is that he is unconcerned about the future success and profitability of the company. Based upon selected data, our added meanings, the assumptions we make, and the inferences and conclusions we draw, we come to believe that Steve isn’t committed to the company, but instead is looking out for his own interests.



We're more likely to take the *right* actions when we test out our assumptions, inferences, and beliefs

Call **Russell Consulting** today to find out more about how we can help you learn ways to test out your assumptions and inferences—and, in turn, take the appropriate actions

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(Continued on page 3)

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Based upon our climb up the Ladder of Inference, we decide to *take actions* that reflect our beliefs, inferences, and assumptions. For Steve, this means not inviting him to future project meetings, passing over him when it comes time for career advancement opportunities, and withholding rewards and recognition for his performance. And, since our beliefs influence what we pay attention to, we tend to look for—and find—behaviors that reinforce our beliefs! Although Steve may actually make significant contributions to the company’s success, we tend to overlook this and, instead, focus on his behaviors that demonstrate our preconceived beliefs and assumptions. The self-reinforcing process continues, of course, when Steve starts to withdraw from team members because they are withdrawing from him!

### Avoid Leaping Up that Ladder!

The simplest way for you to stop leaping up the Ladder of Inference is to slow down and challenge your assumptions, inferences, and conclusions. Instead of stepping up the next rung on the ladder, ask yourself: *Is there more data that I need to collect to make sure that I’m seeing and understanding things correctly?* You can gather more information by suspending your assumptions and observing more and by asking questions that explore the *meaning* of a behavior rather than assuming that you know the meaning.

Avoiding the leap also involves being *critically reflective* and setting aside preconceived notions of another person and giving him or her another chance to *demonstrate* commitment, motivation, and dedication.

After gathering more data you may find that, in fact, Steve *has* decided to disengage from the team and the company and that he’s ready to move on. Just make sure that, before you jump to this conclusion on your own, you sit down and talk. Gather more data. Find out what’s behind his actions. It just might prevent you from writing off an employee who has a lot to contribute—once he is given the chance to explain himself.

**Russell Consulting, Inc.** can help you and your team learn the skills of critical reflection and testing assumptions. Give us a call to find out more about our tools and strategies.




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**THINK** and  
reflect before  
you leap!

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## What Does an Upset Customer Want?, contd.

Responding effectively to an upset customer involves identifying and responding to *both* customer need levels. **Level One** needs typically include such things as wanting a service or information provided, a question answered, a specific concern addressed, a problem solved, or a frustration or inconvenience removed. A Level One need is usually clear because the customer directly asks for it to be addressed.

A **Level Two** need, however, is often a basic, more fundamental customer need—one that is often *unexpressed* and may even be an unconscious need. Level Two customer needs include being heard or listened to, being appreciated or valued, having someone pay attention, being taken seriously by someone, being treated with respect, and having someone empathize with the customer.

Level I Need – Overt	Level II Need – Underlying
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Question answered</li> <li>• Concern addressed</li> <li>• A problem solved</li> <li>• A frustration relieved</li> <li>• A pain removed</li> <li>• A service provided</li> <li>• Information received</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fairness &amp; equity</li> <li>• Justice</li> <li>• To be heard or listened to</li> <li>• Being appreciated</li> <li>• To be taken seriously</li> <li>• To be treated with respect</li> <li>• Someone to be punished</li> <li>• Compensation or restitution</li> <li>• To be made whole</li> </ul>

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“The Customer is **not** always right, but the customer is **always** the customer.”

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### Guidance in Discovering Level 2 Customer Needs

**Russell Consulting, Inc.** can help you and your employees to calm the upset customer by teaching you strategies for uncovering—and then addressing—both levels of customer needs. Talk to us too about our customer service training and our approaches for assessing customer satisfaction.

*For more information on ways to improve your customer service . . .*

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## Understanding How People Think & Learn

**W**hy is it that some people seem to hear and understand every word you say while others seem to miss the meaning entirely? Why is it that, when you are teaching someone a new task, one person will “get it” immediately while another is lost in a cloud of confusion? Why do some people look off into empty space when they are thinking, while others “think out loud” (and feel compelled to include you in their journey!)?

While these questions have many possible answers, a major part of the answer lies in how people process information. The way you think and process information affects how you experience the world, how you put bits and pieces of knowledge together, and, fundamentally, how you learn.

### What is Your Learning Type?

People process information through their *senses*—through what they *hear*, what they *see*, and what they *feel*. These three information gathering modes are essentially the *only* way we have to experience and learn from the world. Short of some type of futuristic Spock “mind-meld” (see *Star Trek* for more information!), we have no way other than these three senses to take in information.

While you use all three senses to process information to varying degrees, you very likely have one preferred method for thinking, knowing, and learning. The three types of learning are:

**Auditory** — Auditory thinkers/learners tend to gather their thoughts and learn by listening to others. They tend to enjoy music, radio, plays, debates . . . anything that involves the ebb and flow of sound. Auditory thinkers also tend to “think out loud” by talking through problems and discussing the pros and cons of a situation or solution. They are good speakers and have a good memory for *names*.

**Visual** — People who like to be *shown* how to do something are *visual* thinkers/learners. These people are keen observers of events and interactions. They like to read, watch movies and television, and “people-watch.” Visual thinkers tend to stare off into space when they are thinking. They also have a good memory for *faces*.

**Kinesthetic** — Learning by doing is the buzz phrase of kinesthetic people. They are always moving, seeking action and experience. They much prefer “hands-on” experience rather than watching someone else, reading about it, or listening to someone talk them through a new task. These action-oriented people tend to be impatient with manuals and guidebooks. Although they are action-oriented, they approach the task in a careful, step-by-step way. Kinesthetic thinkers tend to remember what they and others *did* rather than what was planned or written down.

### Working with Learning Types

Effectively communicating and connecting with others requires that you understand both your own thinking/learning preferences and those of others. You then need to do your best to communicate with and teach using the other person’s learning preferences. While you should try to use all three modes when communicating with others, understanding other people’s thinking/learning preferences will help strengthen your ability to connect with and understand someone else—and this person, in turn, will be more likely to understand you!

The voyage of discovery lies not in finding new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

- Marcel Proust

Call **Russell Consulting** for more information on how you can use these approaches to improve your communication effectiveness.



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Linda & Jeff Russell, Co-Directors of RCI

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