CONSCIOUS COMMUNICATION
IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

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ê Interaction Associates

86% of remote workers surveyed find difficulty in communication a core problem when collaborating from a distance.

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PREFACE

When seated on an airplane and the person next to me asks, "So what does your company do?" I have developed the habit of pausing and saying, "Oh, Interaction Associates . . . we split the atom of human conversation and communication. My purpose as a collaboration consultant is to enable and empower people to have authentic and increasingly meaningful conversations at work, in the community, and at home." This usually leads to further questioning and exploration.

I've been a consultant with Interaction Associates for over 20 years, helping people and organizations all over the world work better together by teaching methods that develop inclusive teams and improve meeting culture. As a company we shifted to working remotely in 2018, and since the pandemic hit the world in 2020, we've been helping many organizations make the same adjustment. It has been exciting and challenging to bring to life the splitting of the atom of human conversation and communication in a new way.

After a decade of delivering our in-person **Managing with Impact**™ workshop, my colleagues and I were faced with the challenge of engaging, holding, and inviting the learning in a virtual setting. This was not the first time we had worked virtually, but it was the first time we had to convert this particular and established program into a virtual delivery. As I reflect on the differences between the in-person and the virtual, I'm left with the belief that the human skill of effective communication remains at the center of our work.

In this ebook I will focus on ways to consciously enhance communication skills, emphasizing **listening** as the key to navigating challenges that arise in the virtual environment.

REFRAMING LISTENING:

Be Altered by What is Said

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Do you remember the excitement around the release of the iMac, iPhone, and iPad? Each in its own time and its own way was a communications game changer. What struck me with each additional product update was the centrality of the "i." Although Apple was altering the communications game, the "i" seemed destined to have meant "I". . . as in me, myself, and I. I have since learned that the "i" initially stood for "internet" and yet it continues to strike me as strange that an instrument which invites us to enter into communication also invites me to put my earbuds in and listen to music by myself on my device.

The issue of course is that communication needs at least one sender of the message and at least one recipient. Sender, yes . . . but also, Receiver! As leaders, we tend to think if we push out enough ideas we will gain followership. However, if everyone is pushing out their ideas, no communication exchange is taking place.

PUSHING OUT AND PULLING IN

What is the distinction? "Pushing out" means asserting our own ideas, perceptions, or points of view. If we emphasize pushing out, then the I-focused dimension of communication takes precedence. It is easy to fall into the trap of believing that by simply sending out ideas, we are communicating when in fact we are doing just half the work. It is true that real communication needs someone to propose an idea to get the conversation moving. However there is another method for accessing that jumping off point, and that's "pulling in."

"Pulling in" means inviting the thinking of the other person. It recognizes that I do not have a singular grasp on all truth. Pulling in involves being curious about other perspectives, a recognition of one's own biases, and an openness to different ideas. Pulling in takes humility, respect, courage, compassion, and a win-win attitude. It also requires collaborative skills. In the next chapter, I'll provide a more in-depth look at techniques for pulling in.

"Yes, 'n how many ears must one man have Before he can hear people cry?"

- Bob Dylan, Blowin' in the Wind

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BE ALTERED BY WHAT IS SAID

Let me draw upon the beautiful frame described by an expert on the training of improvisational actors, Keith Johnstone. He once advised that instead of telling actors they should be "good listeners" (which is confusing) we should say to the actor, "Be altered by what is said." What a practical and powerful way to reinterpret listening! What a clear and simple means to pull instead of push! To be altered is to allow oneself to be affected by another. As communication usually includes emotion, cultural situations, the medium used to communicate, and the context of the interaction, I propose there are three additional dimensions along which we can allow ourselves to be altered:

1. Be altered by **HOW** something is said. Listen for the tone, the inflection and the words used. Notice insofar as you can, the body language of others in the group.

2. Be altered by **WHO** is saying the words. What can you glean of their values, their perspective, and their needs? From what place are they coming?

3. Be altered by the **CONTEXT** in which the person is speaking. What is happening in the present moment, in the world, and in their organization or department?

I recently presented this definition of listening as part of a virtual session I was running with a communications technology group based in Poland. The reply of one of the participants added even more to my own understanding. He said, "If I begin to listen with the intention of being altered by what I hear, then I may change my thinking, and I may change my perspective, and I will change myself!" These are powerful insights indeed.

SUMMARY

As people, we have a tendency to assert our opinions (to push) and believe this is important in conversation. It is! In addition, if we wish to engage in conversation or dialogue, we need to invite the thinking of the other (to pull) by listening in and allowing ourselves to be altered by what we hear, see, feel, and the context of the conversation. This rebalancing of our conscious listening capability is the key to reigniting the spark in all communication, whether it be in-person or virtual.

I invite you to embrace and operationalize this reframing of listening. In order to deepen your practice around allowing yourself to be altered, consider the following:

EXERCISE

1. With a focus on WHAT is being said:
During the course of a meeting, allow a phrase, a proposal, or a suggestion that might be different from your own perspective to enter your consciousness. After the meeting, reflect on the experience and note to yourself which comment or phrase stayed with you. Ask yourself why this thought continues to reverberate in your mind. What particular contribution are you changed by, and why?

2. With a focus on HOW something is said:
Notice the pitch or the tone of voice of someone who speaks with emotion. What is driving their perspective? Tone of voice can alert us to the passion that's in someone. We can be changed by somebody's passion, or by their pathos. To paraphrase Cicero, "eloquence is wisdom speaking." In addition to tone, be on the lookout for what you consider to be eloquent, and the wisdom the words might contain.

3. With a focus on WHO is saying the words:
Become curious about the speaker and what helps them make meaning or shapes their thinking at the deeper level of values. Notice what stories they live out of and what impact they aspire to have on the world. We can be inspired by the values of others, or by their ethos.

4. With a focus on the CONTEXT in which the person is speaking:
Be aware of the interrelated conditions in which the meeting is taking place, and each speaker's role in the system that is convening. Does a person's positional power affect how you hear and value their thinking? Be aware of the big picture in which this system is meeting and the impact of the wider world on that system.

I have found that writing down my reflections helps me change my way of being in a meeting over time. May I encourage you to begin to do the same.

CHAPTER 2

REFLECTIVE LISTENING:

How to Pull In Ideas

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I propose the central issue of virtual communication (whether through phone, email, text, or video) is how to balance pushing out ideas with pulling in ideas. Good virtual listening practices can lead to rich exchanges, help you build relationships, and are key to leadership growth. Because pulling in ideas tends to be the greater challenge, I'd like to offer six tools and techniques to assist you. I will then provide suggestions for applying each tool and conclude with practice tips.

PULLING IN MINDSET

Before delving into the techniques to help with pulling in ideas, it is important to consider the mindset required to do so successfully. Approaching people with a mentality of openness and transparency builds trust. Being open to sharing some of one's own uncertainties can make it feel safe for others to reveal themselves in return. I leave it to you in your context to determine what level of vulnerability is appropriate: too much sharing can overwhelm while too little can feel controlling.

SIX TECHNIQUES FOR PULLING IN IDEAS

In our culture, listening is usually accompanied by an impulse to respond. I wish to invoke the thinking of the author and psychotherapist Viktor Frankl who wisely said, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." Each of the following techniques serves to counteract our tendency to only push out our ideas in the face of someone else's input. Pausing before we respond and applying some of these techniques can help improve our interactions with colleagues and provide us with new, important perspectives.

Facilitative Leadership®
Delve further into these six techniques and learn more skills on being an effective leader in this essential program.

Learn More

> "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."
>
> *- Viktor Frankl, Author and Psychotherapist*

Technique # 1: "Yes, and . . . "

"Yes, and . . ." is a foundational principle of improvisational comedy that has been found to be similarly useful in business contexts. This is because "yes, and . . ." is about building agreement versus simply responding. If someone states an idea, acknowledging what they've said by responding with a "yes" followed by an "and . . ." challenges you to accept your colleague's idea before adding a new one. The simple two-word phrase, "yes, and . . ." pulls in others by opening up possibilities rather than shutting them down defensively.

Example

Speaker: "It is important to put more focus on search engine optimization so that we can drive traffic to our website."

Listener: "Yes it is important to strengthen our SEO, and we should also make some changes to our landing page."

Caution

Make sure that your "yes" is conscious and meaningful. Challenge yourself to see the value in your colleague's idea, and how you can build upon it.

Technique #2: Mirroring

Mirroring is a technique whereby you repeat the exact words that have been spoken back to the person who was speaking. Mirroring is a "reception technique," meaning that it pulls the speaker in by letting them know they have been heard–an important human need.

Example

Speaker: "I believe we should stop the project."

Listener: "So, you believe we should stop the project."

Caution

If overused, mirroring can come across as parroting. This may irritate the listener and seem to add little or no value.

Technique #3: Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is when you rephrase the speaker's words using your own, in order to confirm that you've grasped the speaker's meaning. Paraphrasing is a "comprehension technique." It pulls in the speaker by letting them know they have been understood–another significant human need.

Example

Speaker: "There are no better bananas than those grown in Hawaii."

Listener: "So, what you are saying is that Hawaiian bananas are the best in the world?"

Caution

If poorly used, paraphrasing may result in the speaker nodding in agreement in the virtual panel while saying internally, "I will never share or be vulnerable with this listener again because they do not really understand me." Counter this by encouraging people to correct you if they feel you're not conveying back to them what they meant.

Technique #4: Check Perception

Deepen your ability to support and empathize by checking on your belief about what the speaker thinks or feels. This technique goes beyond what is said to what is not being said, and seeks to uncover the emotion or thinking beneath the words.

Example

Speaker: "This marketing campaign didn't get the response we were expecting."

Listener: "It sounds like you are disappointed with the response. Is that so?"

Caution

Making inferences about emotion can be inappropriate depending on the context, or the listener can fall into the trap of accepting a perception as the truth without waiting for confirmation from the speaker.

Technique #5: Ask Open-ended Questions

Probe for further information by asking a question that requires more than a one or two word answer. Pull in the speaker to a dialogue or conversation where new possibilities, opportunities, and options open up as we ask non-binary questions like, "Tell me more? How might we?"

Example

"Where have you seen the problem arise?"
"What are your ideas for tracking errors?"

Caution

Questions that are too open-ended can lack direction and lead to unmanageable, off-topic, or meandering discussions that don't serve the purpose of the meeting.

Technique #6: Negative Polling

Negative polling is a technique that's used to arrive at a shared understanding or agreement. If you pose the question to a group, "Does everyone understand?" the normal reaction is silence. Silence is in fact the only logical answer, because no one can speak on behalf of everyone in the meeting. In the negative poll, paradoxically you invite disagreement when seeking agreement. Thus a question might be posed, "Is there anyone here who does not understand?" Or, "Is there anyone who cannot live with this proposal?"

Example

A popular example of negative polling is the moment in a traditional wedding service when the officiating person asks, "Does anyone here know of any reason that these two should not be conjoined in holy matrimony?" The question gives individuals the opportunity to chime in on their own behalf, making a lack of agreement evident.

Caution

If used in a hierarchical context, there may be some individuals who don't feel free to voice their lack of understanding or agreement. The leader should take care to create a culture of trust within the group so

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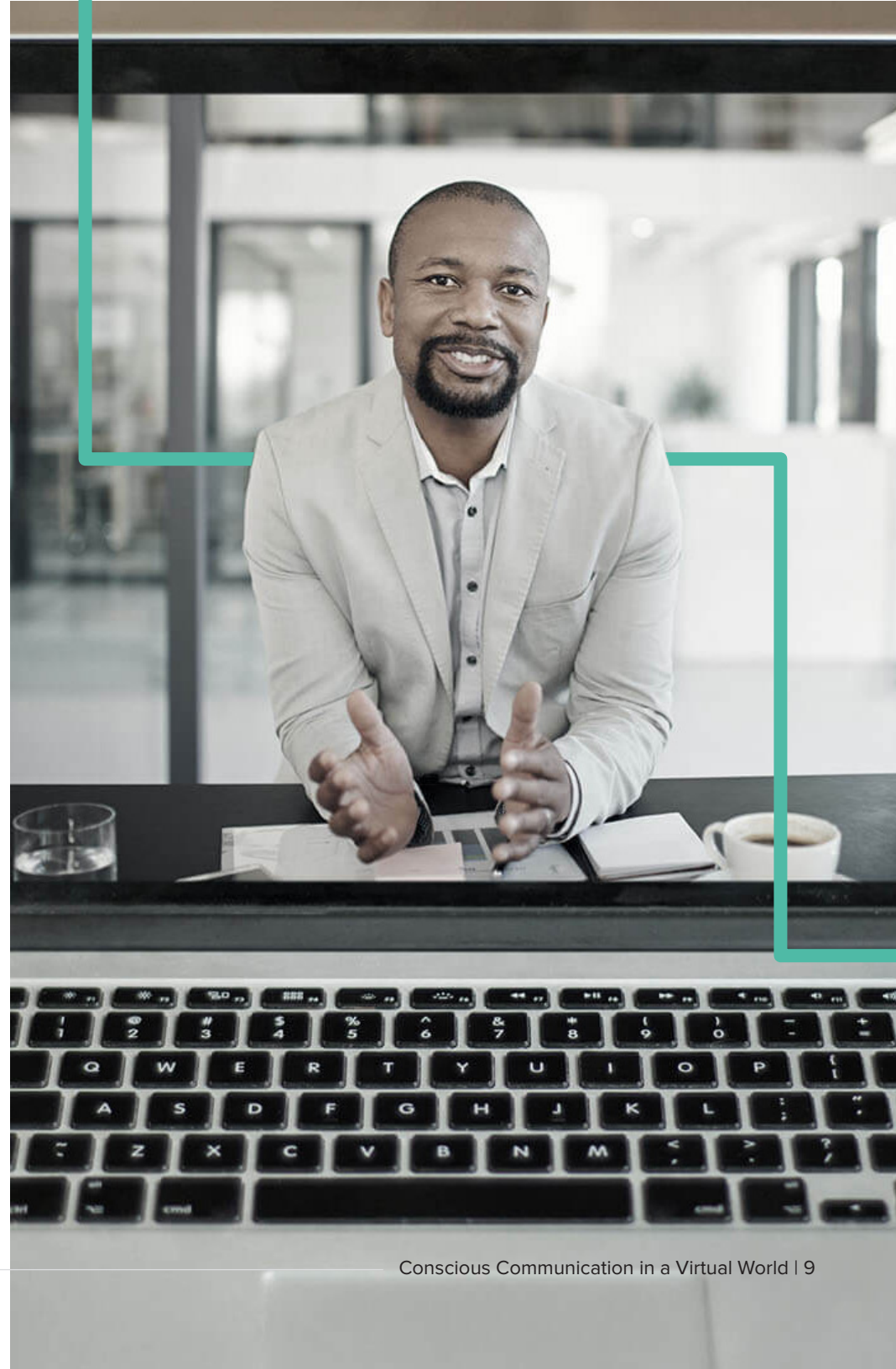
that everyone feels safe acknowledging, in a timely fashion, their lack of understanding of a proposal or their honest inability to support a proposed agreement.

If we don't unearth a lack of understanding upfront it can have a negative impact on morale, momentum, or execution of a project down the line. It benefits the leader and the group to not assume or push for premature alignment, and to welcome questions that ultimately build strong agreements. This is one case where it's better to "go slow to go fast."

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE: EXTROVERTS VERSUS INTROVERTS

My colleague Cynthia Silva Parker from the Interaction Institute for Social Change altered me in 2006 when reflecting on the Myers-Briggs' distinction between extroverts and introverts. She said, "Extroverts should be called 'extroverted thinkers' because they only learn what they think through talking." In other words, extroverts "speak to think." As an extrovert myself this was a mind-opening insight for me, and since then I have been asking my students to self-identify as being extroverted or introverted thinkers.

Noting the differences in how people process and communicate information is a very important consideration for a leader, manager, or facilitator who wishes to engage everyone in virtual conversation. I've found that each technique works differently depending on how people self-identify across these two dimensions. Certain skills are better for pulling in ideas from everybody but especially from the introverted. For example, I have found that asking open-ended questions is to be helpful to an introvert. For extroverts, some of these techniques can help put words to what they are thinking, which can be useful in terms of understanding and hearing their own thoughts. Mirroring is particularly helpful to the extrovert in this regard. You

"The introvert has the opportunity to collect their thoughts, process their reflection, and communicate clearly and succinctly using the chat function in the virtual meeting"

might have to reinterpret pushing out if the speaker is an extrovert who's only trying to find out what they think. I encourage you through practice to come to your own conclusions about which techniques work best with different people.

SUMMARY

If we want to change our way of communicating from only pushing out ideas to also pulling in, the following techniques may prove helpful:

1. Respond with "Yes, and. . . " to build upon someone's idea rather than shut it down.
2. Mirror back the speaker's exact words to demonstrate that the speaker has been heard.
3. Paraphrase what the speaker has said to ensure that the speaker has been understood.
4. Check your perception of the speaker by going beyond the words spoken to the underlying emotion.
5. Ask open-ended questions to open up new or different avenues of thinking.
6. Use negative polling to pull in understanding and agreement when more than two people are in the conversation.

The personality dimensions of extrovert versus introvert can help you understand whether someone is simply pushing out an idea in order to learn what they are thinking (extrovert) and how to invite their process of understanding, as well as what techniques you might consider using to pull out what someone might not be volunteering (introvert).

When we make conscious choices about how we communicate, we can grow and change our interactions with our colleagues for the better.

EXERCISE

Exercise #1:
Choose one technique listed in this chapter and practice using it for one week. For example, bring paraphrasing into every context in which you find yourself in virtual meetings, especially in one-on-one meetings. See what you learn about the challenge of paraphrasing skillfully. When tempted to say, "Yeah...But" or "NO!" or "BUT...", replace this knee jerk reaction with: "Yes, and . . ." and notice what happens to the individual, group, or participants. Try this technique at your next four meetings and keep track by writing down afterwards what transpired and what was the impact. Keep a daily journal for five working days and look back on how paying attention to one technique has achieved or altered your way of being in a meeting, in a group, in a conversation, or other virtual connection. Note how each technique alters you and the speaker.

Exercise #2:
Consider your teammates when on a video call and see if you can identify whether they are introverted or extroverted thinkers. Notice who seems to be sitting back and expressing ideas only after they are certain and who seem to be processing their ideas out loud with others. If you're comfortable, you can even pose the question to see how they self-identify. After the meeting, reflect on how people's behaviors can be reinterpreted through their self-identification.

MINDFUL LISTENING:

Techniques for Being a Self-Aware Listener

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As we navigate the communication challenges of a virtual world, it is vital to remember that there is only one person over whom we have any control—and that is one's self! Just as we can be altered by listening to others, we can be altered by listening to our own inner voice, noticing our patterns, and making conscious choices. In this chapter, I will offer two powerful tools for better listening to and managing oneself: "Bracketing" and "Ladder of Inference." I will then invite you to begin to practice these techniques on your own.

BRACKETING

To "bracket" is to internally acknowledge and set aside one's own advocacy, argument, perspective or judgment and become curious about the speaker's point of view. For many of us there is always an internal voice in our heads. We could never do away with that voice nor should we try! It is an indication that we are alive and human, like a radio station that is attuned to your thoughts. The technique of "bracketing" is noticing these thoughts that arise and consciously putting them to the side. It is a purposeful lowering of the volume on our internal chatter in order to pay attention with as much curiosity as we can muster to the other person. It requires great discipline to do so, but it is possible.

Think of the movies or television programs you've seen where an inner monologue reveals the character's genuine thoughts while they interact with others. It is often used to illustrate how, regardless of what the character says, they might be thinking something else entirely. The practice of bracketing is to notice this inner monologue and set it aside in order to respectfully pay attention.

When done well, I find that bracketing allows me to truly listen to the other and limit the interference coming from my own point of view. When done poorly, it results in what I call a "leaky bracket," where I reveal my thinking and the listener experiences my lack of attention to their reality. I have become distracted, unconsciously, very often by

my own fixations, and have temporarily abandoned the pull in of their ideas in favor of the push out of my own.

LADDER OF INFERENCE

The Ladder of Inference is a model that describes how humans process information. It demonstrates how our capacity to filter large amounts of information is limited by our own biased selection process. These unconscious choices can cause conflict in and damage to our work relationships, particularly when we act as if our perceptions are the truth. Remembering the Ladder of Inference helps us to make explicit the unconscious assumptions and self-generating belief systems we hold, allowing for more open and honest communication.
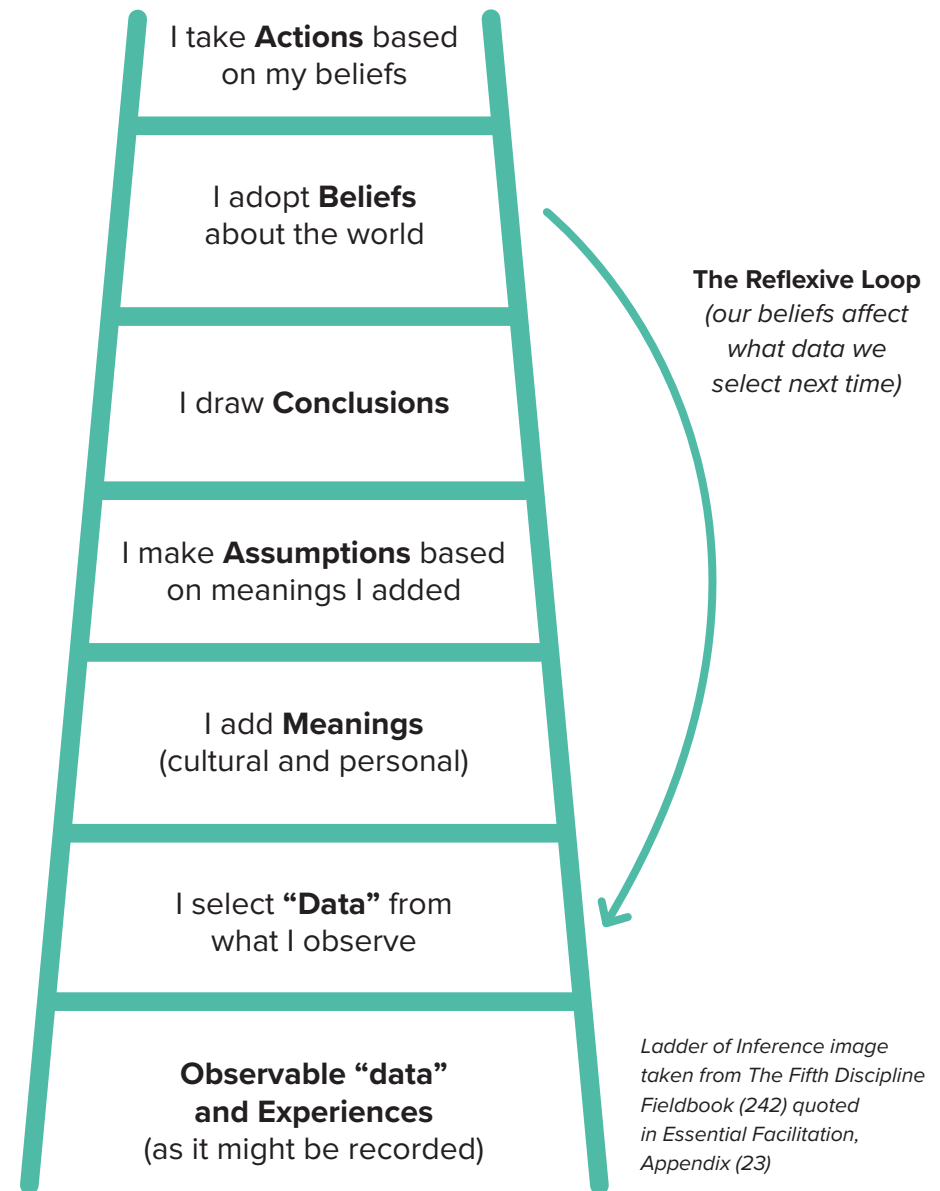
We live in a world of self-generating beliefs which remain largely untested. We adopt those beliefs because they are based on conclusions, which are inferred from what we observe, as well as our past experiences. Our ability to achieve the results we truly desire is eroded by our feelings that our beliefs are the truth, the truth is obvious, our beliefs are based on real data, and the data we select are the real data.

- The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, 1994

William James, a towering figure in American psychology, put it like this: "A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices."

I believe that we are each imprisoned in our own view of the world. We each need to overcome our own tendency to develop beliefs based on our perceptions. Understanding our own ladders of inference can enable us to take actions based on objective reality,

using observable data and experiences. The Ladder of Inference is our ticket to awareness and to responding to stimuli with increased freedom and growth.

I take **Actions** based on my beliefs

I adopt **Beliefs** about the world

I draw **Conclusions**

I make **Assumptions** based on meanings I added

I add **Meanings** (cultural and personal)

I select **"Data"** from what I observe

Observable **"data"** and Experiences (as it might be recorded)

The Reflexive Loop *(our beliefs affect what data we select next time)*

Ladder of Inference image taken from The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook (242) quoted in Essential Facilitation, Appendix (23)

To me the most interesting point of the ladder is the reflexive loop, where our beliefs affect what data we select the next time around. We will do well to remember that everyone we encounter has a ladder of inference, and when we meet them we usually meet them at the level of what beliefs they have already adopted or actions already taken. Our challenge is to come back down the ladder and meet together at the data level. The tools and techniques we outlined in previous chapters will be essential in this process. As you travel up each rung you can, for example, use the paraphrasing tool to ask yourself: am I hearing this correctly?

The ladder brings together all of the skills we've discussed up until this point. Referring to it encompasses the ideas of rebalancing the push and the pull in our communications, being altered by what is said, noticing and bracketing our own internal thoughts. Through it we can become more aware of our own thinking and reasoning, make our thinking and reasoning more visible to others, and inquire into the thinking and reasoning of others.

SUMMARY

I am a Dubliner by birth. When growing up, my father would often comment on what he considered immature behavior or lack of self-awareness in a public figure by saying, "They have no cop on!" Daddy would sometimes say to me, "Cop yourself on Michael!" If I'm truthful, initially I was not sure what he meant. It turns out it is a uniquely Irish way of saying, "wake up and smell the coffee" . . . with regard to yourself.

I think one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves as humans is to "cop ourselves on, on the Ladder of Inference." By which I mean: become more aware of where we are on the ladder in any interaction or instance. Some things ignite the irrational in us: some people inflame our assumptions based on our selection of the data; some situations trigger us to go up our ladders of inference. Cop Yourself On . . . use your notebook or your smartphone to log what irritates you, or gets you upset!

EXERCISE

Let me invite you, dear reader, to a few concluding activities designed to build your ability to mindfully listen to yourself.

Exercise #1:
Make a conscious commitment to practice bracketing in your next phone, video, or text message conversation. You might choose a conversation where you are aware of a pattern on your part of "knowing" what the other person is thinking. Exercise your curiosity muscle, lower the volume on your own certainty, and see what happens. Write down your reflections afterwards. Do this once a day for a week to feel the power of bracketing.

Exercise #2:
Think about 15 filters through which you view the world.

If you could see me, you would know I am male—one filter. I am also white and heterosexual—two more filters. If you could hear me speak, you would immediately recognize that my accent is foreign (from a North American point of view!) and I would be revealed as Irish—a fourth filter. You might therefore surmise that I am an immigrant (and from my perspective, an emigrant)—a fifth filter. In fact, I am honored to be a citizen of the U.S.—a sixth filter.

If at first you thought 15 filters was a hard task, you will soon realize as you do this work that 15 are only the beginning. We are blessed and burdened with our perspectives on the world. They come to us usually from the culture of our birth, from our family, through our education, as well as the journey of our short time on this planet.

CONCLUSION

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

We are hard-wired as humans to push out our ideas and then to defend those ideas. We spend a good deal of our energy at the top of our ladders of inference, happy with our subjective beliefs and picking up data to confirm our already formed perceptions.

If we are to develop our communication capabilities in a virtual setting, we must work firstly on ourselves by disrupting and acknowledging our tendency to merely push out or advocate for our ideas without properly listening to the other. This is "I, me, mine" territory. My invitation to you, beloved reader, is YES, push out your idea—and then go one step further and seek to pull in an idea or a response by checking what you hear and the perspective of the other or others in the virtual conversation or meeting. This is "we, us, ours" territory.

In chapter one, we introduced the concept of pushing out versus pulling in ideas and spoke about challenging pushing out as a dominant mode of communicating. We also considered reframing the definition of listening as "being altered by what is said." In chapter two, we focused on the skills and the mentality necessary to pull in ideas. We provided six practical tools to assist in developing the attitude of curiosity and interest-based inquiry into the thinking of others. In chapter three, we focused on listening to ourselves and provided two essential tools for broadening our awareness around the tendency to live in and out of our own beliefs or prejudices.

In conclusion, our final invitations are: #1, use this practical ebook as a developmental tool for yourself. #2, share your discovery of this ebook with one other person this week and bring it into your conversations as a leader and manager in your working from home, in your most intimate conversations, with your children, and with everyone you love.

About the Author
Michael has more than 25 years of experience in consulting and responding to the learning needs of adults in the financial services, biotech, power, and service industries. Michael's interest is in adult education, and his belief is that the workplace has become the 'third place' of learning and development for the 21st century. Michael holds a master's degree in Public Administration from the HKS, Harvard University, and is the thought leader of Interaction Associates' Cross Boundary Collaboration practice. Among his publications are "Principle and Profit-Corporate Responsibility in Ireland" and "You Can Have Better Online Meetings."

About Interaction Associates
Interaction Associates (IA) helps leaders and teams think more clearly, collaborate more effectively, and focus on what matters most to their customers, employees, and stakeholders. We provide our clients with practical methods for helping people work better together across functions, viewpoints, and geographies. Since IA introduced the concept and practice of group facilitation to the business world in 1969, hundreds of thousands of individuals have learned The Interaction Method™, a facilitated approach for building understanding and agreement so people can take informed, concerted action. Learn more at **www.interactionassociates.com**.