Climbing Down the Ladder of Inference: A Template

Situation: Think of a situation where you felt conflict or discomfort with someone's behavior (a client, a colleague, etc.).

1. Actions

- **What did I do?**: What were your specific actions in the conflict situation? (e.g., In Jim's case, he avoided Stan and was cold to him.)
- **Why did I do it?**: What was your intention behind that action? (e.g., He believed Stan was harmful.)

2. Beliefs

- **What belief drove my action?**: What firm conviction inside you led to that action? (e.g., 'Stan is an incompetent and harmful person.')

3. Conclusions

- **What conclusion did I reach?**: What was the final conclusion that led to this belief? (e.g., 'Stan is a terrible worker.')
- **What did I think was the evidence for this conclusion?**: Why were you so sure this conclusion was right?

4. Assumptions

- **What assumptions did I make?**: What assumptions did you make to reach your conclusion? What did you "fill in the blanks" with that might not be true? (e.g., Jim assumed Stan was deliberately choosing to be lazy or careless.)
- **What other possible assumptions could there be?**: What other assumptions could explain the situation? (e.g., 'Stan is going through a personal crisis,' 'He's overloaded with work,' 'There's a problem with the new follow-up system.')

5. Added Meaning

- **What meaning did I add to the selected data?**: What meaning did you attach to the specific facts or behaviors you chose to focus on? (e.g., Jim gave the meaning of 'negligence' to the behavior of 'incomplete work.')
- **Are there other meanings?**: What other positive or neutral meanings could be attached to that same behavior? (e.g., 'He's distracted,' 'He has other urgent priorities.')

6. Selected Data

- **What specific data did I focus on?**: Out of all the available data and experiences, what did you specifically notice and remember? (e.g., Jim only focused on 'Stan not completing follow-up work.')
- **What data might I have ignored or overlooked?**: Is there other information or behavior that you might have missed that could provide a broader perspective?

7. Data and Experience

- **What is the actual, observable data?**: Set aside your interpretations and emotions. What were the objective facts or words said in that situation? (e.g., 'Stan did not complete the client follow-up work.' This is the only objective fact.)

The Scenario: The Unresponsive Colleague

A new team member, Alex, has been assigned to a joint project. I sent Alex an important email with a few questions about their part of the project, expecting a prompt reply. I haven't heard back from them in two days. Based on this, I've already started to assume Alex is lazy and doesn't care about the project's timeline.

Here's how I'll climb down the ladder, starting from my actions.

1. Actions

- **What did I do?** I started to talk to other team members about how I felt Alex was a poor communicator and might be holding up the project. I also deliberately held back from offering Alex help on another task, assuming they wouldn't appreciate it anyway.

- **Why did I do it?** I was acting on my belief that Alex was negligent and unreliable. My actions were a way of expressing my frustration and protecting the project's timeline.

2. Beliefs

- **What belief drove my action?** I had formed a firm belief that "Alex is an unreliable team member who doesn't care about the project or their colleagues."

3. Conclusions

- **What conclusion did I reach?** My conclusion was that "Alex is an irresponsible person." I felt this was justified because a professional would have replied to my email quickly.

- **What did I think was the evidence for this conclusion?** My only evidence was the lack of a reply to my email after two days.

4. Assumptions

- **What assumptions did I make?** I assumed that Alex had seen my email and deliberately ignored it. I assumed the two-day delay was a sign of disrespect or laziness. I invented a story that Alex was not a dedicated worker.

- **What other possible assumptions could there be?** This is the key step. What if Alex didn't see the email? What if their email system has a glitch? What if they are dealing with a personal emergency? What if they are simply overwhelmed with onboarding tasks and missed my email in the flood of new information?

5. Added Meaning

- **What meaning did I add to the selected data?**: I took the fact of "no reply after two days" and added the meaning of "unprofessionalism" and "lack of care."

- **Are there other meanings?**: The same data could also mean "busy," "missed the message," or "facing an urgent personal issue."

6. Selected Data

- **What specific data did I focus on?** I focused exclusively on the absence of a reply. I didn't consider any other interactions or data points, such as Alex's enthusiasm during a recent team meeting or their other project contributions.

- **What data might I have ignored or overlooked?** I overlooked the fact that Alex is new and might be struggling to manage a large number of communications. I also didn't consider the possibility that they may have been waiting to gather more information before replying.

7. Data and Experience

- **What is the actual, observable data?** The only objective fact is: "I sent an email to Alex two days ago, and I have not received a reply."

By climbing down the ladder, I can see that my negative feelings and actions were based on a very small piece of data and a series of unchecked assumptions. My conclusion about Alex's character was an invention. This process helps me realize that a more productive and compassionate approach would be to simply follow up with a polite message or a quick chat to check in.