



## TEACHER LEADERSHIP

# Effective Strategies for School Transformation: Our Beliefs

MARCH 11, 2013

---

Image credit: iStockphoto

My book, *The Art of Coaching: Effective Strategies for School Transformation*, was released this week. It offers a coaching framework and dozens of tools which can be used by a range of educators. The excerpted section below is relevant to all who work in schools as we can all refine our understanding about where beliefs come from and how we can shift them. The following excerpt comes from chapter three, titled, "Which Beliefs Help a Coach be Effective?"

## Where Do Beliefs Come From?

Chris Argyris' "Ladder of Inference" provides an invaluable tool for helping us see how our beliefs are formed and why we do what we do. This model describes how we unconsciously climb up a mental pathway of increasing abstraction that often produces misguided beliefs. (Senge 1994, p.243)

Let me explain this framework by providing an example. A high school principal asked me to observe a teacher who had been struggling with management. We entered the classroom and stood at the back. Ms. Smith was at the front directing a whole-class discussion of a text. She asked a question and twelve students raised their hands. She called on a girl sitting in the front row. She asked another question. A boy shouted out the answer. The teacher ignored him. He shouted it out again. She called on a girl in the back. The teacher asked another question and called on another girl. One of the boys got frustrated and said, "How come you don't call on me? I keep raising my hand? Why do you always ignore me?" Ms. Smith quietly redirected his behavior. He groaned and put his head down on the table. The teacher asked another question and called on another girl. Several boys in the back mumbled to each other, "See, she always calls on girls." Under his breath, one of them called the teacher a bad name.

The principal and I left the room. "Wow," the principal said. "Those boys were so disrespectful. I can't believe she let them get away with behaving like that -- she's so weak. She needs to get tough and institute detention. That kind of talking back can't be tolerated. She's going to lose control. They can't be allowed to run the room. I'm going to insist that she implement a tough behavior management program immediately." The principal intended to take actions to move the teacher into this management program that afternoon. But before he could send her an email requesting an emergency meeting after school, I asked if we could

debrief and explore how he'd arrived at that decision.

You might have arrived at a different conclusion based on what I described or you might have some questions about what I shared. Let's use Argyris' Ladder of Inference to trace how the principal ended up at his decision.

Visualize a ladder. On the first rung of the ladder is **observable data and experiences**. What is captured on this level is what a camera would record; a massive amount of data. If you could see a video of the classroom we were in, you'd also see the student work posted on the walls, the piles of boxes in the back of the room, the sunlight streaming through the windows, the torn jeans of the kid in the front, the teacher's red earrings; you'd hear the questions the teacher asked, the articulate responses by the students, the chuckles from some boys, the train passing outside, and so on. Because our brains cannot make sense of so much data, we need to sort. This is where things get interesting; this is where the principal started climbing up the ladder to his conclusion.

On the second rung of the ladder, the principal selected "**data**" from what he observed. Because of what he already believes, because he's seen some of these actions before in this class or elsewhere, he filters out most of what's going on and selects certain data points. In this class, the principal noticed that the boys were shouting out, criticizing the teacher, and calling her names. He's just ascended one rung.

On the third rung of the ladder, he **added meaning** to what he observed. Meaning is often based on our own cultural backgrounds and experiences, and/or the culture of the structure or organization in which we are working. According to his cultural background, students must respect their teachers. They must *never* talk back to them, they must always raise their hands, etc. When they demonstrate this behavior it means they don't respect their teacher. By adding meaning, he's ascended another rung.

On the fourth rung of the ladder, he **made assumptions** based on the meanings he added. He assumed that the boys had no boundaries in class and that their behavior was not kept in check.

On the fifth rung of the ladder, he **drew conclusions**. He concluded that the boys are out of control. Without realizing it, the principal moved farther up the ladder.

On the sixth rung of the ladder, he **adopted a belief** about the boys (that they are unruly, disrespectful, and don't take learning seriously) and about the teacher (that she is weak and losing control of her class).

And on the seventh rung, at the top of the ladder, he **took an action**, or was just about to mandate that Ms. Smith institute a tough behavior management plan immediately.

What could happen next is actually what propels someone up the ladder again. The principal's belief that boys are not serious and are out of control will influence him the next time he's observing a class-his attention will be drawn to how boys behave. Unconsciously, he's going to focus on data points which affirm his belief system -- this is just what our brains do. Most likely, he'll constantly see the same thing: unruly

boys who need discipline. This translates into a generalized belief about boys, and his actions will emerge from this belief.

We can't live our lives without adding meaning and making assumptions. We simply have to do this in order to make sense of our world. But as you can probably see, there's a great danger in constantly charging up the ladder and taking actions based on unexamined assumptions—we operate from a distorted picture of reality.

As I described the principal's thoughts as he climbed up the ladder, did you have any questions about what he was thinking? Did you want to interject something like, "But maybe..." Or, "Perhaps the teacher was..."? Did you want to challenge his thinking because you saw other meanings to add, other assumptions that could be drawn, or different conclusions to arrive at?

To make this scenario more complex (and also realistic) what if I'd told you that all of the boys who shouted out were African American? And that the assumption the principal came to was that African American boys don't respect their teacher or take learning seriously? And that this assumption affirmed his belief that African Americans don't value education? And that the action he suggested was a tougher policy towards boys who don't value education; perhaps he ruminated that "they should not attend our school, because we are focused on academic success"?

Back in the principal's office, I pulled out the image of the ladder of inference that I always carry and asked if we could explore how he'd arrived at his conclusion. He agreed, somewhat reluctantly. He just wanted to take action regarding what he'd seen in Ms. Smith's class. Two hours later, after we'd painfully worked our way down the ladder of inference, he dropped his head into his palms and said, "I feel like you just took a sledgehammer to my brain. I don't know what I think or believe any more, but as hard as this was, I think I'm glad my brain has been shattered." The actions that he took in the coming weeks were very different than what he'd planned on doing that day.

*You can purchase Elena Aguilar's book [here \(1\)](#). Please share your thoughts on this post in the comment section below.*

**Source:** [www.edutopia.org/blog/effective-school-transformation-strategies-belief-systems](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/effective-school-transformation-strategies-belief-systems)

## Links

**1** [www.amazon.com/The-Art-Coaching-Strategies-Transformation/dp/1118206533/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1362538653&sr=8-1&keywords=the+art+of+coaching](http://www.amazon.com/The-Art-Coaching-Strategies-Transformation/dp/1118206533/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1362538653&sr=8-1&keywords=the+art+of+coaching)

**Reprint Policy:** [www.edutopia.org/terms-of-use](http://www.edutopia.org/terms-of-use)

**Privacy Policy:** [www.edutopia.org/privacy-policy](http://www.edutopia.org/privacy-policy)

---

EDUTOPIA | WHAT WORKS IN EDUCATION | © 2013 The George Lucas Educational Foundation | All rights reserved.