

Climbing down the Ladder of Inference

By Linda Heng

AS THE situation in Little India unfolds, I cannot help but feel a sense of dread, but also a sliver of hope for what is to come.

Dread arises from the fast and furious poisonous arrows that have been shot from members of the public. People have a habit of looking at a limited set of data, interpreting this limited data from their beliefs, assumptions and experiences; and drawing from them conclusions that they verbalise.

This is widely known as the "Ladder of Inference", a term used to describe how people can draw vastly different conclusions from different, limited or even the same set of data.

I have seen comments online to the tune of: "We should not condone such behaviour... If we do, they will get more brazen... and I'll say good luck to you and our future generation."

The author of this comment made observations hours after the event, interpreted that the actions were unacceptable and concluded that the future of the country was at stake. He has climbed his ladder of inference.

Contrast this with a different comment - "It is easy to hate. But these guys are human beings too. I wonder if they feel they're not given any respect at all because of their job scope." This person has seen data from the event, but included external data and made a tentative interpretation, where he then expressed reluctance to draw a conclusion.

After some time, as more news came in, a number who watched online footage of the mob overturning police cars left comments along the lines of "The video shows it all... the police are a disgrace to their uniform and their oath... Moral of the story - the police will not be there to protect anyone of us."

Contrast this with a comment from someone else who has watched the same video: "The riot police should be congratulated for showing restraint and not deploying tear gas and cannons."

Same video. Different observations. Different interpretations. Vastly different conclusions.

As conflict resolution professionals, we often see parties perch themselves at the top of the ladder, adamant that their conclusion is the only valid one.

And if they look hard enough, they will often find others who have climbed that exact same ladder to commiserate with (and vice versa, leading to different camps and power struggles). Our job is never to judge, but to alert warring parties that they have, inadvertently or not, climbed their individual ladders of inference.

For people who seek genuine solutions to their disputes, what we endeavour to do is to assist them to climb down their ladders of inference - leave the perch for a minute, examine the facts again, and in a safe place, question one's assumptions. Not because the facts can be so easily verified, nor that truth can ever be so easily ascertained, nor that basic beliefs and assumptions well-honed from past experiences can be so easily eradicated. But simply because the willingness and the process of climbing down the ladder of inference is that critical turning point at which parties can even begin to ask themselves what they really want out of the dispute.

Some of those unfamiliar with my profession may wonder: "Who cares about this Ladder of Inference? It is just an academic exercise that is irrelevant to the real world. In the real world, people have different thoughts, feelings and opinions. Why analyse this to death?"

Well, I started this post with what I described as a feeling of dread, because I have seen how words when verbalised and dosed with heightened emotions can take on a life of their own. Words linger long after they have been uttered. Their intent may be forgotten, but their effects continue to multiply.

What starts out as a single event, because of the shocking halt to the daily routine of a peaceful nation, has the potential to escalate if people do not take care to examine their own as well as others' responses.

What I pray and hope for is that Singaporeans will take care to examine the Little India riot carefully before they speak. What data have you have observed versus what other facts might you not know about? Which are facts and which are assumptions and feelings?

Reflect on your own interpretation - is it with one set of facts or a hypothetical set of facts? Consider if someone else would interpret this differently. Go through a thorough exercise before you draw your own conclusion and take care to consider the effect on others when you verbalise these conclusions.

Researchers in this field have observed that the exercise of repeatedly climbing down and up the ladder of inference is an act of self-mastery observed in mature and successful individuals.

As a relatively young nation, our collective response will show if we have a measured, well-considered and even gracious response to this incident. As in many disputes I've had the privilege to attempt to resolve, events like the Little India riot (and other national incidents) will strip us down to our very core and exhibit to the world our true maturity, a maturity that is not necessarily measured in years.

Which brings me to the sliver of hope. The heart of a mediator is a peace-making heart. What drives us is the ideal that we should always strive for a better way to resolve differences.

While I am not naive about the competition for scarce resources, the need for the rule of law and the dignity of the country, I also choose to believe in the best of human nature. In all things, I hope and pray that as a nation, we will have the good sense and gracious hearts to speak only if it is constructive, and to do unto others what we would have them do unto us. This incident will reveal what we are made of.

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