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# Ladder of Inference

leveraging the research by Chris Argyris

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## Ladder of Inference

# How do we shape our perception of ‘what is’?

The **Ladder of Inference** is a simple model that shows up the steps we all use to make sense of situations in order to take action.

It helps us think about our thinking. And it helps us get much clearer when thinking with others.

Our previous beliefs and assumptions shape what we notice (and what we ignore) and how we see the world and how we respond to new information.

Being able to ‘walk down the ladder’ is a key leadership capacity. In order to do so we must:

- Be aware of our own blind spots
- Draw out people’s reasoning
- Use questions and inquiry
- Help make thought processes visible
- Ask for contexts and examples
- Listen for new understanding

## Ladder of Inference – a group exercise

# What is happening in this picture exercise?

As an introduction to the **Ladder of Inference**, one can use the picture on the next slide.

Ask each person individually to notice what captures their attention first, second, third as they see the picture. Ask each individually to make up a story about what is occurring in the areas they noticed first.

Ask people to pair up and share with each other: 1. what did each of you notice first, second, third. And 2. What story did you make up about your first area of attention.

Then reflection on whether there were any differences, where those may have come from, what previous experiences may have informed the ‘stories’, etc.

Come back to the big group and debrief what people noticed about differences and similarities.

Then illustrate how the Ladder of Inference works for everyone all the time, causing us to select certain data elements (what we each noticed first, second, third, etc) , form and opinion based on our own belief, assumptions, backgrounds of experience (the story we made up), and, in real life, take action based on those opinions, so that over time we become more prone to only noticing certain data, applying our same ‘filters’, etc.

What is happening in this picture?



# Breakout groups



WHAT IS THERE...  
...OBSERVABLE  
DATA



HAIR

EARRINGS

Tattoo

T-SHIRT w Slogan

WHAT WE "SEE"

....POSITIVE  
OPINION AS 'FACT'

WELL-GROOMED

INTELLIGENT

EXPRESSIVE

COOL



WHAT WE "SEE"

....NEGATIVE  
OPINION AS 'FACT'

ONE OF "THEM"

UNPROFESSIONAL

"KID"

EDGY / URBAN

BUT DID ANY OF  
US “SEE”  
CEO?



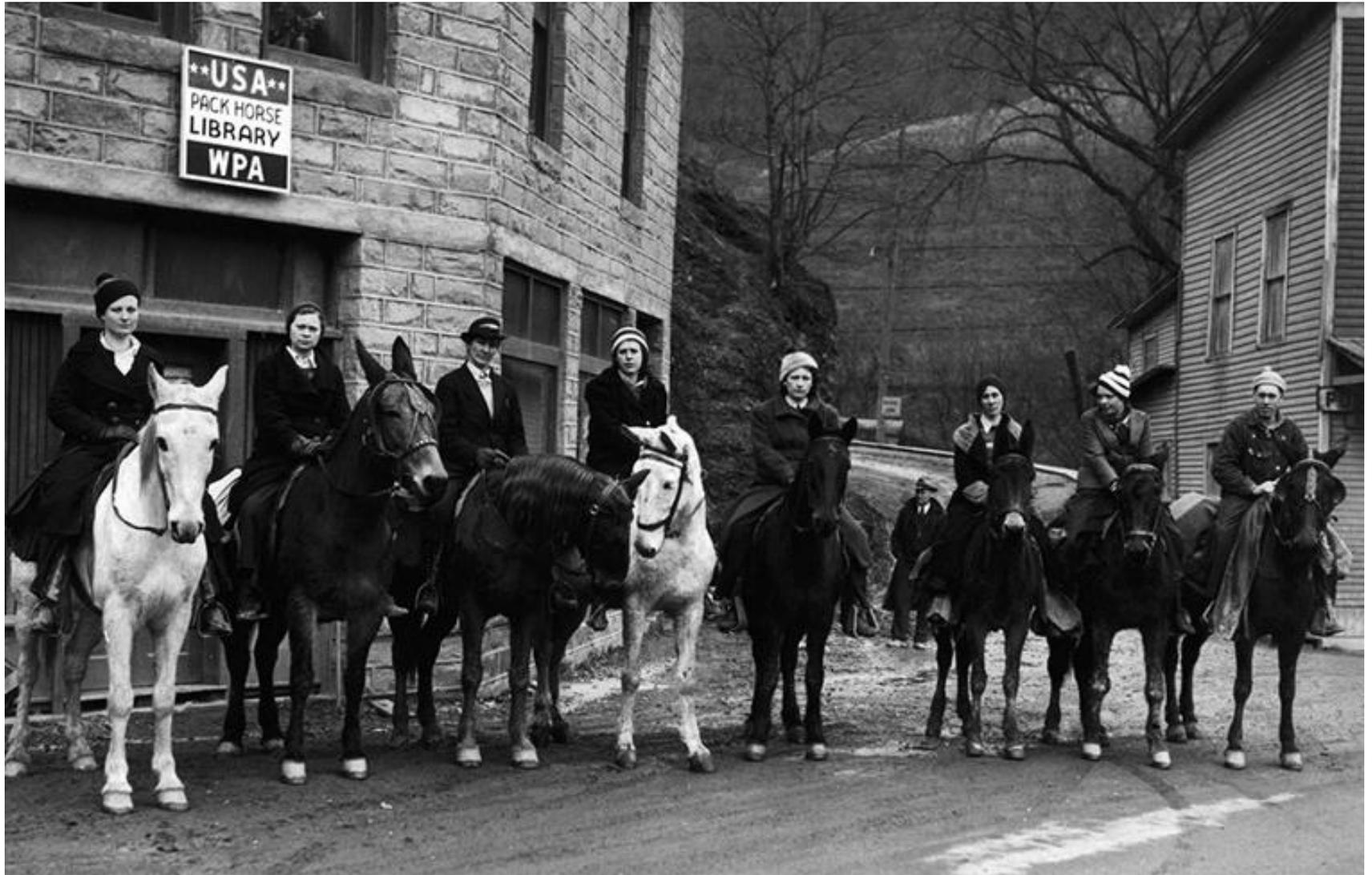
MEET MS ANGELA  
BENTON.

Founder and CEO  
of NewMe  
Accelerator in  
Silicon Valley.

Hedy Lamarr – inventor of technology that led to wifi .....and actress



# Librarians



# Scientists

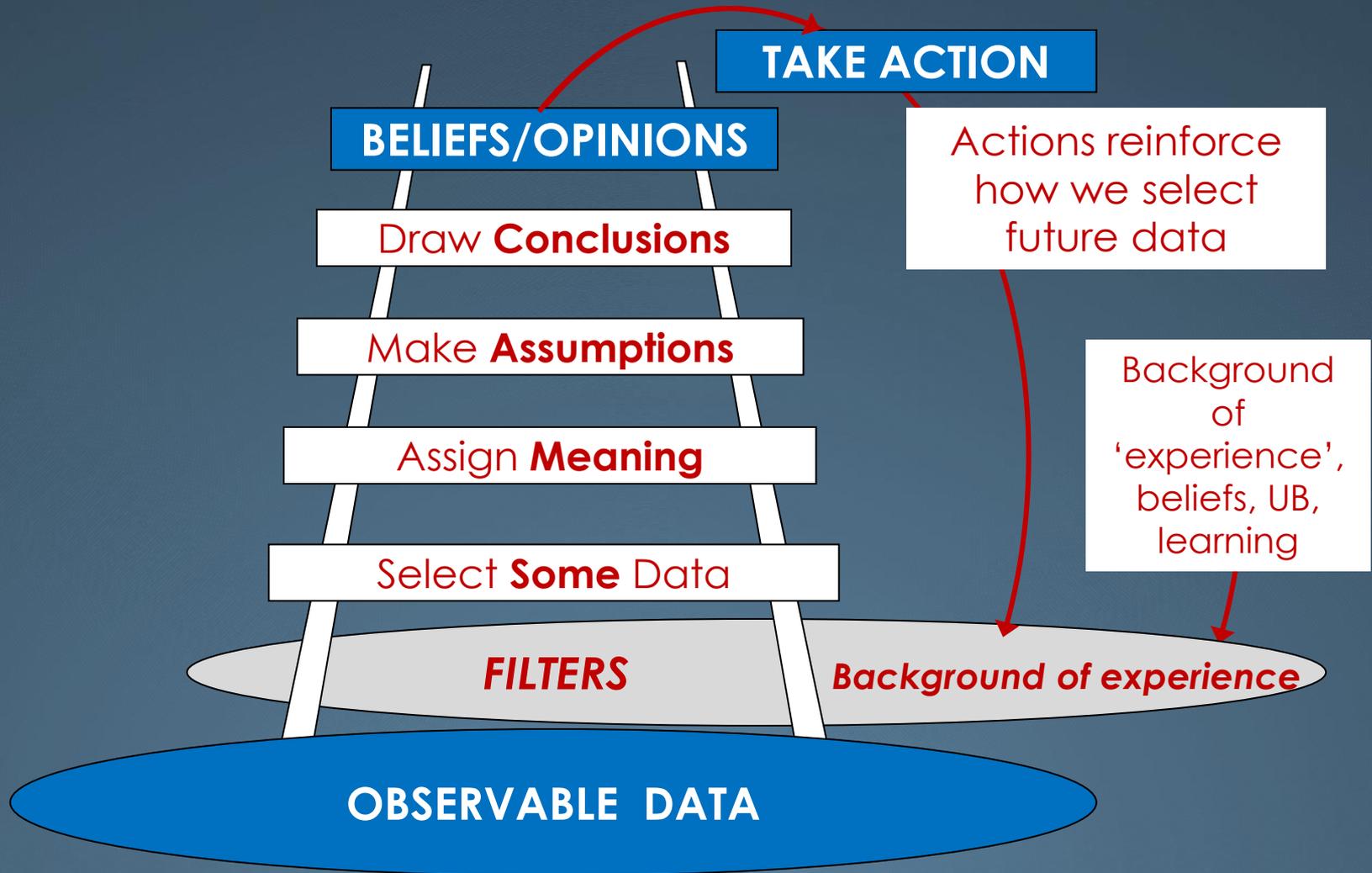


# HOW TO ADDRESS OUR AUTOMATIC THINKING?

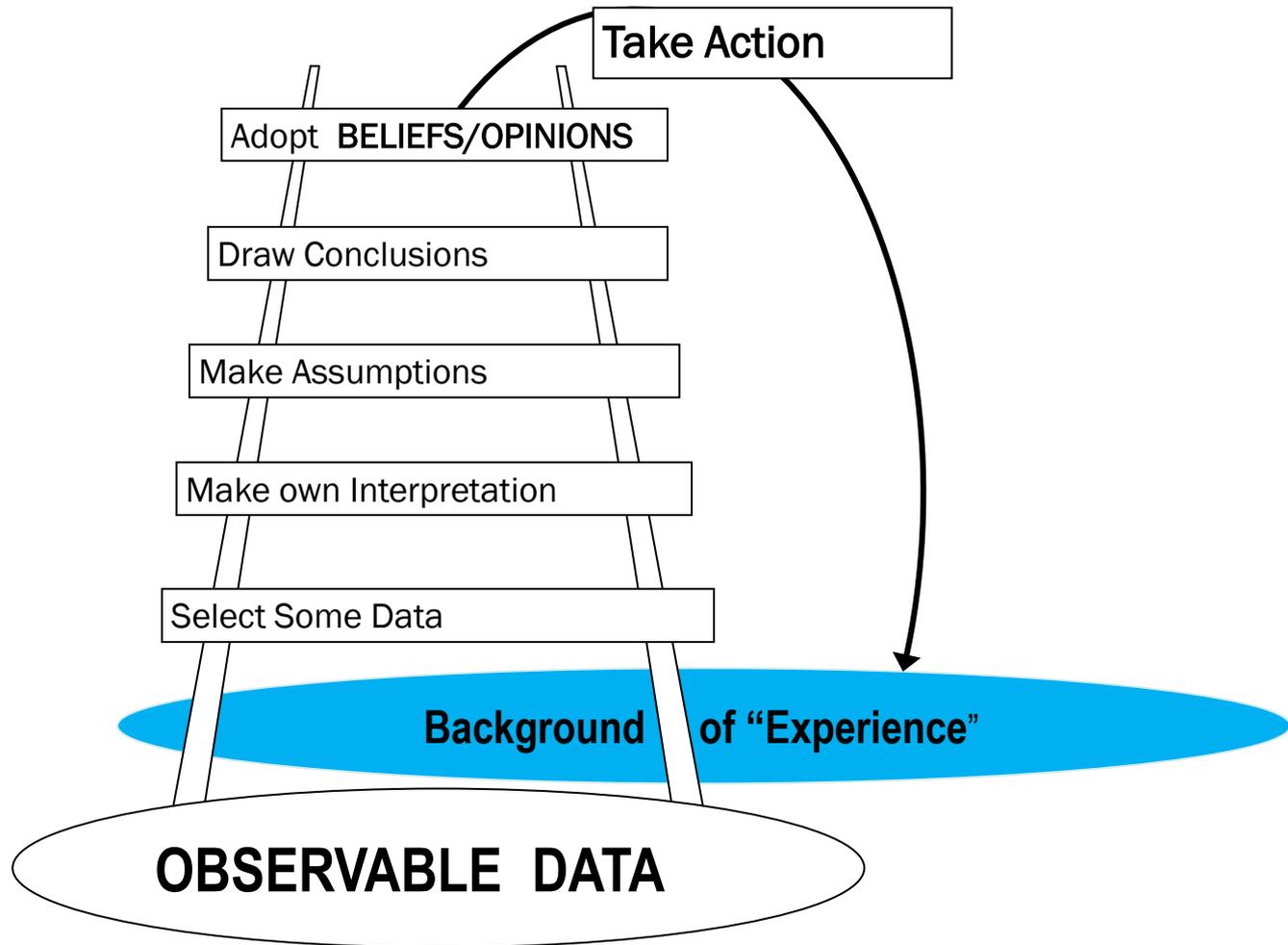
## Ladder of Inference



# Ladder of Inference



## Ladder of Inference



# Ladder of Inference — one assessors' perspective

Sam has low leadership potential

Sam cannot guide a team

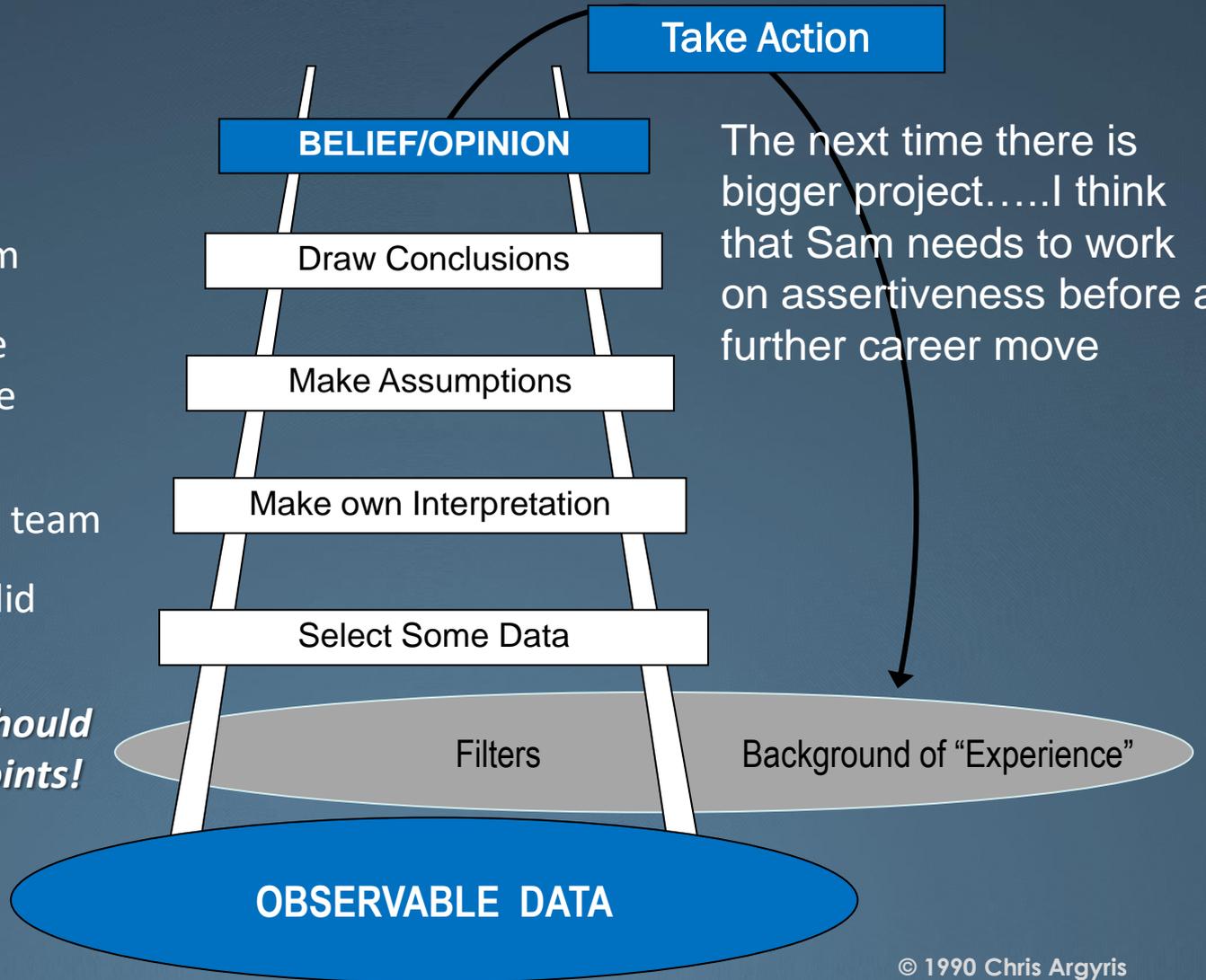
Sam may understand the issues but is not assertive

Sam should speak up to provide guidance to the team

Sam's team members did all the presenting

***Bias - Strong leaders should showcase their viewpoints!***

Sam speaks once during the meeting



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# Ladder of Inference — another assessors' perspective

Sam has high leadership potential

Sam is a strong project lead

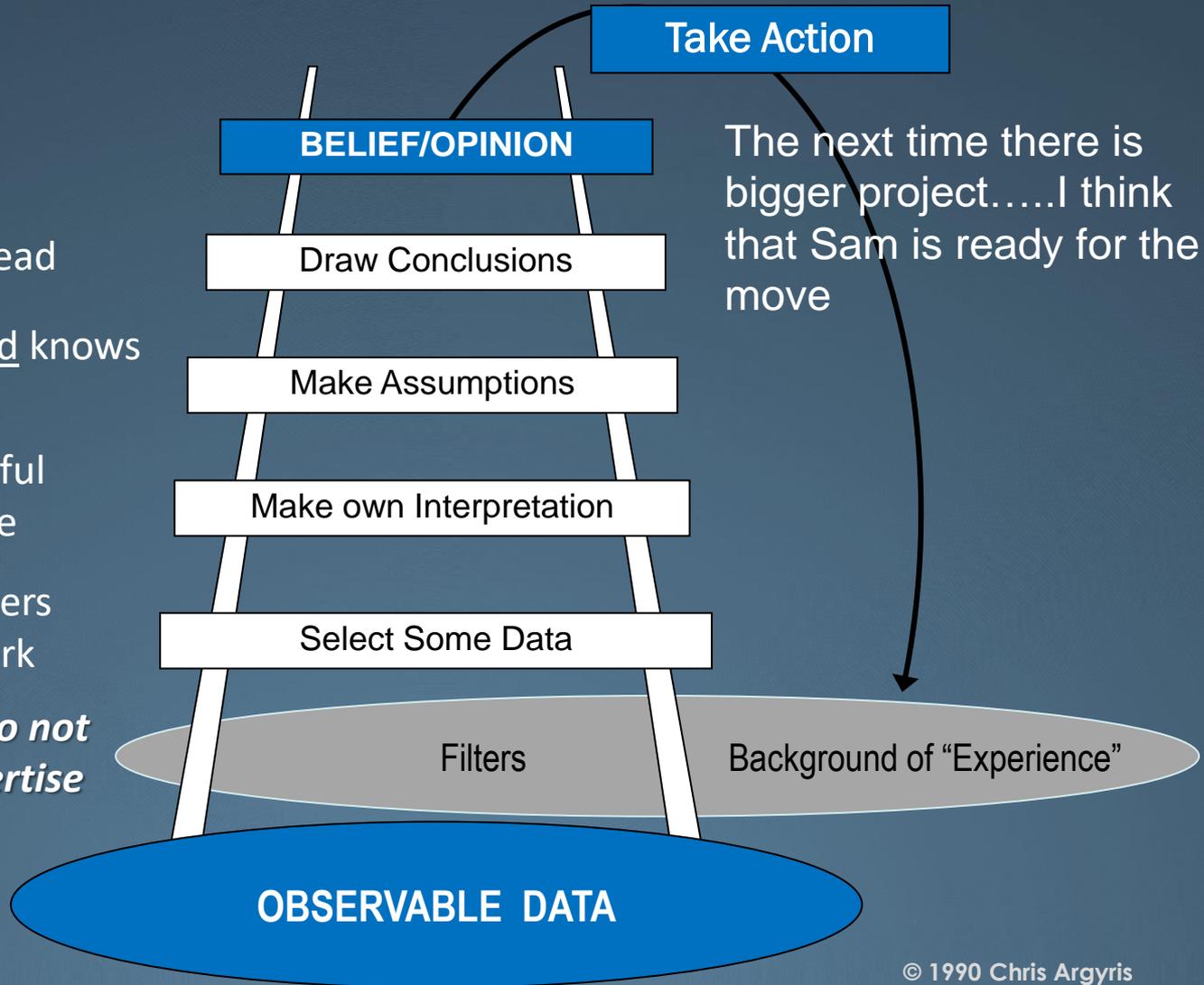
Sam gets things done and knows how to develop others

Sam made a very insightful comment and gave space

Sam let the team members showcase their great work

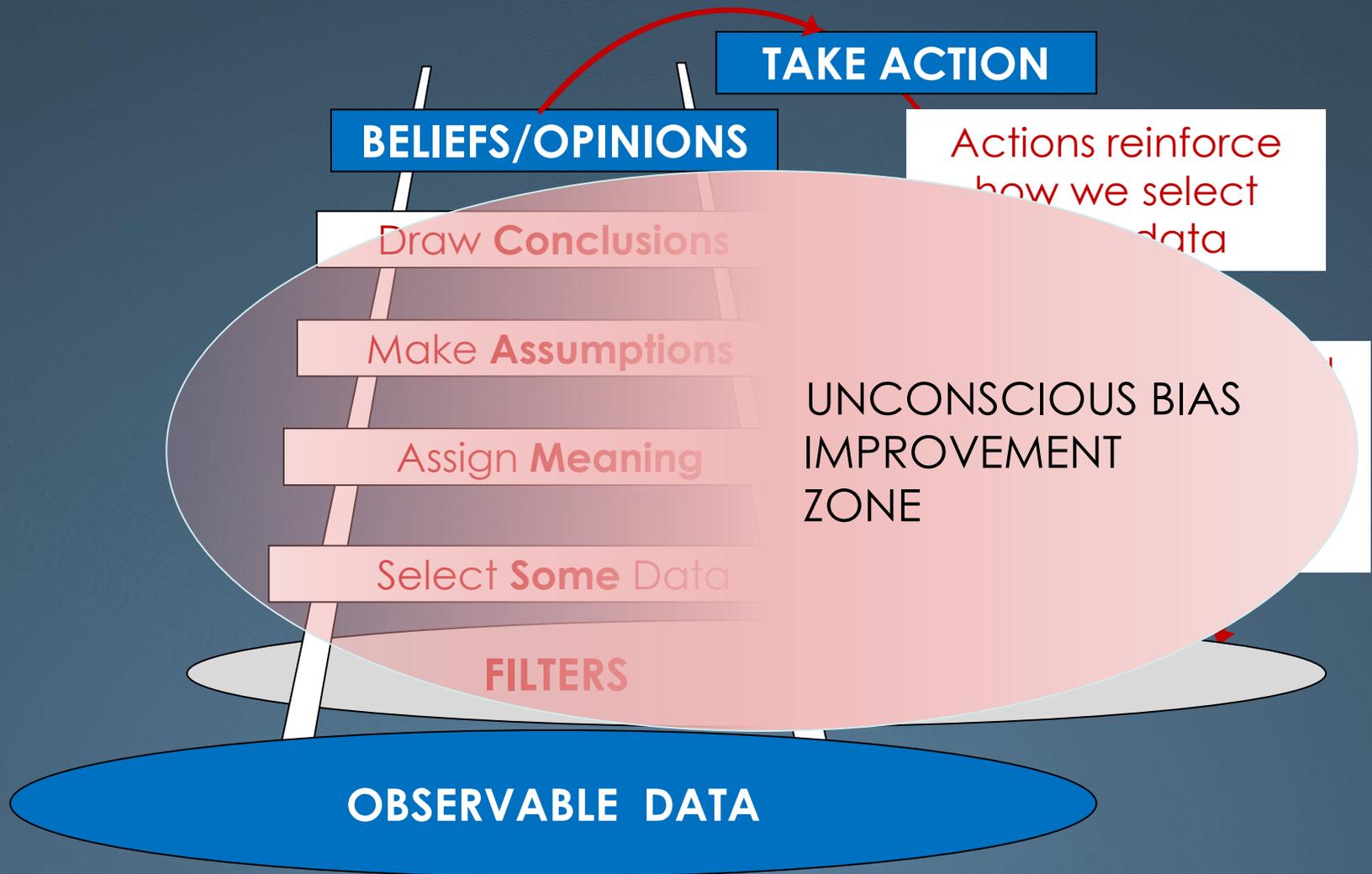
*Bias - Strong leaders do not need to overstate expertise*

Sam speaks once during the meeting



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# Ladder of Inference



# How being mindful of the Ladder of Inference can help you build more effective conversations

The move up the Ladder of Inference takes milliseconds. It happens all day long. It is happening all the time - when we interact in meetings, when we read the news. It affects how conversations evolve as others climb their own Ladders of Inference.

To move communication down the ladder and advance conversations that may have “scaled the heights”:

- Make your thinking process visible to others by explaining your assumptions, interpretations, and conclusions. Reveal where you own thinking may lack clarity, invite dialogue.
- Use respectful inquiry to help others make their thought processes visible.
- Use open and nonjudgmental questions, rather than questions that exhibit a bias.
- Ask for context and examples, defuse antagonism. “Can you help me understand your thinking here?”

## Protocols for slowly down the run up the ladder when in conversation with others

# What to Do, with Examples of What to Say

- Gently guide others down the Ladder of Inference by finding out what their assumptions might be. Ex. *“What leads you to conclude that?” “What data are you thinking about that supports that?” “What experience have you had with your conclusion?”*
- Use nonaggressive language particularly with people not familiar with these skills. Ask questions in a way that does not provoke defensiveness or “lead the witness” Ex. *Instead of “What do you mean?”, or “where’s your proof?, you can say, “Can you help me to understand your thinking here?”*
- Draw out people’s reasoning. Find out as much as you can about why they are saying what they are saying. Ex. *“What is the significance of that?” “How does this relate to your previous experiences? “*
- Explain your reasons for inquiring and make it clear how your inquiry relates to your own conclusions and concerns. Ex. *“I am asking about your assumptions here because...”*
- Test what others say by asking for broader contexts or for examples Ex. *“Can you describe another situation where these same things occurred?” Is there data I am not aware of ?”*
- Make sure you understand what others have said. Ex. *“Am I correct that you are saying....?” “What I hear you saying is.....”*
- Listen for new understanding that may emerge. Don’t concentrate on preparing to destroy the other person’s argument or promote your own agenda. Ex *“Do you see it differently?” “Have you considered....?”*
- Reveal where your own thinking lacks clarity. Rather than making you vulnerable, it defuses the force of advocates who are opposed to you and invites improvement. Ex. *Even when advocating, listen, stay open, and encourage others to provide different views.*

# thank you

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