Andy Crissinger:	Hi everyone. My name's Andy Crissinger. I'm the Director of Coaching at Reboot, and I wanted to record a short session today to share, um, to share a tool that I found myself using quite a bit in my one-on-one coaching sessions, uh, lately. It's a tool that I've always used in my coaching and that we've often used in leadership development trainings that we've done at Reboot. But I found that it's been particularly relevant and timely in this, um, these last few weeks of dealing with COVID-19 and its impact on businesses and in particular, leadership teams. The tool is called the Ladder of Inference. Just for a bit of background... I won't belabor this. It was developed by a gentleman named Chris Argyris who was an organization development professor at MIT. Uh, I think he first put this forward as a tool, maybe in the 70s. Um, I came to become familiar with it through the work of Peter Senge who was one of Argyris' colleagues, MIT, and also Fred Kofman. And as I said, it's a tool that I've often used in coaching and training, um, engagements over the years.
	Uh, first of all let me share a little bit more about why this tool and why now. One of the things I'm noticing in my coaching at the moment is as leadership teams are seeking to quickly adapt and respond to the unique challenges that the coronavirus situation is presenting for businesses, one of the things I'm noticing is a lot of, uh, miscommunication happening at the leadership team level, uh, sometimes in th-, the, the level of, uh, co-founders. And what's happening is, uh, even now more than ever, you take what's already a, uh, you know a challenging, uh, thing to be doing, which is, uh, running a startup or a scaling organization, uh, and doing that well... collaborate, c- collaborating effectively, uh, among the leaders. Then you just amp up the stakes and the anxiety and the sense of, of threat, uh, existential threat to the business and the pace of that communication is picking up, the, the, the weight of it, uh, as I said, that, the, the stakes are higher, and what I'm noticing is a, a, a lot of miscommunication misfiring, um, communicating past one another. I'm seeing this show up with my clients and it seems to be a, a theme that's, that's bubbling up. So, that's why I want to share this tool more widely right now.
	Uh, what is the tool for? Um, there is a visual that we're gonna share a- a- accompanying this s- short audio recording so if you wanna pull that up now and take a look at it, you can see the visual representation of the tool, the Ladder of Inference. And the tool itself is a model that's designed to represent how as human beings we go from taking in available data, so da- data available to our senses at any given time, and then making sense of that data, and then acting on the sense that we've made of the data.
	And so the way the ladder works, if you look at it, is you start at the bottom. And you can see down at the bottom of the ladder, uh, what's represented at the bottom is all the observable data that's available to our senses at any given time, so, if you think about this within the context of business this could be feedback from our customers. This could be, um, uh, reports coming in from other functions in the business. Uh, this could be an internal conversations. This

could be, um, sales numbers uh, or some other form of a financial metric. Um, als-, it could be also just, um, overheard conversations or impromptu conversations. It could be the kinds of dialogue that, that takes place in meetings. So, all of this is available to our senses and there's data coming at us all the time.

Obviously, our senses, our brain is not able to process all of that data at once and so the first step of the ladder is, is the selection [00:04:30] process. Um, so we select data from all that's available, um, that we're going to pay attention to. Sometimes that happens purely unconsciously and, uh, and yet we can make that a conscious process. We can choose to place our attention in, in certain places and obviously when we select certain data we're also deselecting other data that we're not paying attention to. So, that's the first step in sense-making, is to ch-, is to pay attention to something. Then as we go further up the rungs of the ladder, and I won't talk about each of them in turn... Hopefully you're able to look at the visual here. We're going, uh, from levels of specificity to greater levels of abstraction. So we're starting to make sense of and see patterns in and make meaning of the data that's available to us.

So, we begin to interpret data based on a number of things, both nature and nurture aspects. How we're wired, um, how our brains are wired, um, genetically, how we're predisposed, and then also, uh, our conditioning. So things like our family of origin or our culture of origin or the culture of our organizations. All of these things, both cultural and personal, uh, begin to shape how we make meaning of the data that's coming at us. And a really quick example of this is sometimes in trainings or, uh, off-site, we'll show a team a, a visual image, like a f-, a, a famous painting and we'll say, "Just take five minutes and write down five statements about this image." And at the end of that five minutes, people have focused on different aspects of the painting. They've already begun drawing conclusions about what certain things mean in the painting and it's often, uh, widely different. And also people don't always notice how quickly they go from, uh, a data level observation to a conclusion. And our brains are wired to be making meaning and so we're, we're, we're doing that all the time.

As we go further up the ladder and think about this as we live in and operate in the world, we begin to see patterns, observe patterns and then those patterns impact how we interpret data around us. So we make assumptions, uh, we attribute reasoning and motives to other human beings based on what we've experienced of them or how they map to, um, patterns or personas that we've seen in our life before. Um, we draw conclusions based on stereotypes. Um, now, now that can be on, on a... That could be on a, on a negative side, so think about things like racism. Um, it could also just be, um, more benign in terms of, uh, those patterns allow us to have shortcuts in our thinking, uh, which are act-, actually quite useful for us. Uh, and then we'd form belief structures about how the world works. Um, that's the top of the ladder if you look at the image. And

we take action based on those belief structures. So, this, that's like the level of mental models. And I'm talking here about mental models and the way that someone like Peter Senge talks about them, um, as opposed to say the, uh, maybe have someone like Charlie Munger talks about them. Here we're just talking about the, the internally held models that we carry around in our heads about how the world works. It's... Think about worldview.

So we take actions based on our worldview and our mental models about how things work and you'll notice there's an arrow going from the top of the ladder, uh, where it says, uh, "We take actions based on beliefs," back down to the level of data that we select. And so this is something that we might call a recursive loop or that, it, it's just indicating that we tend to select data that, uh, confirms or, um, maps to the way we already think about the world. And so, let me pause there and just say that all that we've just looked at is just the, a visual representation of how human beings go from available data to making sense of that data and then acting on that data in the world. It's neither good nor bad, it just is. It's, it's how things work. Now, here's where it becomes really, really important, particularly when we're trying to communicate in a high-stakes environment with other colleagues. We are all going up and down our old ladders internally, all the time. But those ladders are different and if we're not exposing our thinking, if that thinking remains, um, an enigma to our colleagues, uh, or they're thinking remains an enigma to us, we could often miss each other in communication.

And as I mentioned it earlier, in times of high stress where we're all worried potentially about the survival of our business, um, you know, the really basic Maslow's Hierarchy stuff of like, is there gonna be enough? Are we gonna survive this? Uh, we can be moving up and down those letters really, really quickly, um, not communicating as effectively, and therefore not collaborating as effectively, therefore not getting the outcomes that we want, uh, to get together as a team, collaboratively. So, a very simple way to use this with your team is actually just to introduce that language of the ladder. "I'm going up the ladder here," which is just another way of saying I'm drawing a conclusion. It's owning your conclusions as conclusions. Often we get into miscommunications and challenging communications in when we're trying to collaborate when we just fail to acknowledge that we've actually drawn a conclusion.

So, we're talking to each other as if this is just a simple as data, like what a video recorder would, would, you know, sort of share back to us, and so we can get really righteous in our thinking of like, "Why don't you see it the way I see it?" This is, this is just self-explanatory, but of course it's not self-explanatory because we're all operating with this different, these diverse, sort of, uh, internal structures of how we perceive reality. So just introducing this as a concept can be to be super helpful to start with. And then, notice there's two arrows, one going up the ladder and the other going down the ladder on the other side. The one... The, the arrow going up is labeled advocacy and the arrow

going down is labeled inquiry. These are the two basic moves that you have in conversation, uh, when you're trying to advance the action, so to speak.

You can be advocating which is putting forth um, uh, a particular set of actions... like, "Hey, I think we need to be, uh, prioritizing this feature in the next, um, sprint or, or in the product roadmaps." Something like that. Or we can be inquiring which is asking questions, trying to get back down to the level of data and understand how another person got to perhaps a particular, um, conclusion or, or adv-, um, adv-, you know, point of advo- advocacy. So these are your two moves. It's helpful to know what you're doing, when you're doing it. When you advocate and go up the ladder, which is important to do... we all need to be doing this, um, from time to time, uh, in teams... it's helpful to be making your, your, uh, reasoning as transparent as possible. What's the data you're using? Um, what's the framework that you're using to, uh, make this decision, to draw to conclusions? The degree to which you can make that transparent for your colleagues doesn't mean you'll agree and come to consensus, and that's not necessarily the goal here. But it will result in better, more generative conversation and less thrash.

On the other hand, if you find yourself struggling to understand where another person's coming from, that's the time to turn to inquiry. What we often talk about at Reboot... As open and honest questions, we borrow that language from our friends at the Center for Courage & Renewal... An open and honest question is, is a question that you don't have a, um, preferred or um, uh, or, a preferred answer or one that you're trying to steer the, the question receiver toward. And so inquiry is a way that you can help another person get down, travel back down their own ladder, 'cause they might not be sh-, exactly sure how they got to this particular, uh, point of advocacy that they're driving so hard for. And if you don't understand it, um, that inquiry process can help you understand where the other person's coming from.

Again back to why I think this is important right now. I see a lot of leaders having to move quickly, having to make quick decisions, not able always to have all the data that we might like to have, and that's okay and that's part of what it means to be leading in a crisis. That said, often we can be heading out, leading but turning around and realizing that there's no one there following us because we haven't brought the rest of the team along. And so, a tool like this can help you slow down just enough to ensure that you're communicating with effectiveness um, and collaborating with effectiveness with your team. It can also help in- inject a bit of humility into our communications in recognizing that... Look, we're all drawing conclusions. None of us sees the pristine picture. We're all using frameworks, um, in order to make these decisions.

I had a grad school professor who used to like to say, um, "Biases aren't bad, but bad biases are bad," and I always loved that because what he was saying was there is no, um, sort of, neutral ground from which any of us can see everything.

We're all coming from a perspective. We're all operating, uh, with shortcuts in our thinking. Um, now some of those shortcuts can be helpful and often they are. Some of them, when they're left unexamined can limit us to familiar ways of acting. Familiar patterns of behavior that actually don't give us the most choice and ability to be adaptive to the situations that are coming up, especially when we're dealing with situations like, how does a business leader respond to a pandemic? So, recognizing that we have a Ladder of Inference, that we're moving up and down it all the time, and bringing what's unexamined into the light of what's examined can help us communicate and collaborate more effectively during times like these.

Um, I hope this finds you well. I hope this is helpful. Um, know that, uh, these are challenging times for all of us and we can, uh, we can be there for one another. So be good to yourself, be good to each other and, um, we'll talk again soon.