

# Career Communications: *Navigating Difficult Conversations*



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Let's talk about all the types of conversations  
you have throughout your day...



CONFERENCE & EXPO



The background features a light gray gradient with several faint, semi-transparent icons. There are two large question marks, one on the left and one on the right, and two speech bubbles, one on the left and one on the right, all rendered in a light gray color. The text is centered and reads: 

What would your organization look like if every conversation ended in success?



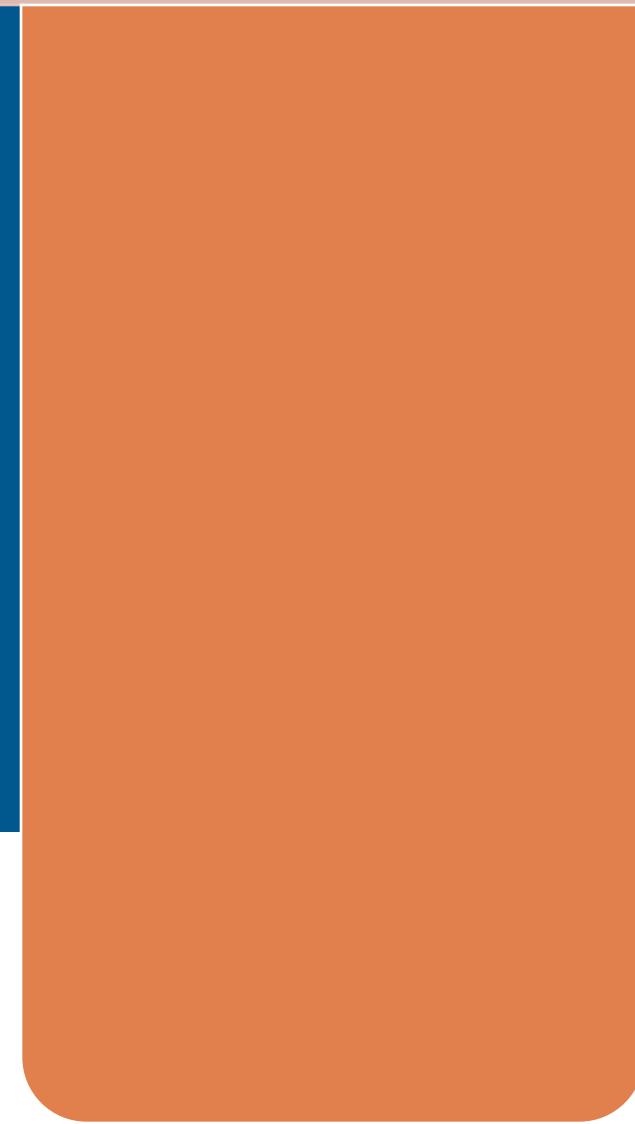
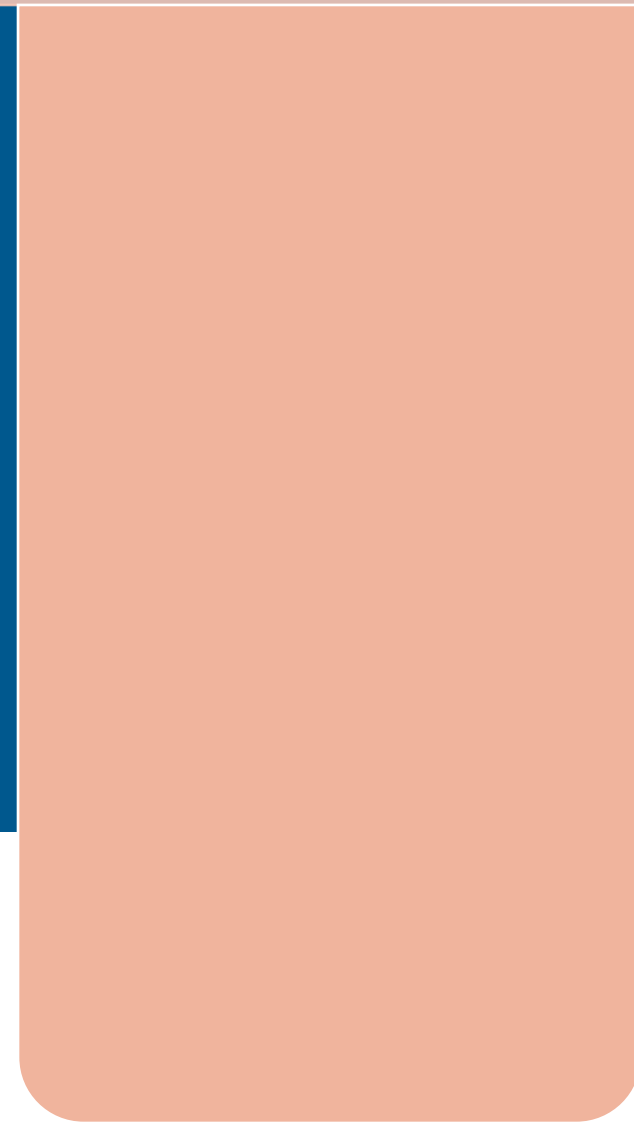
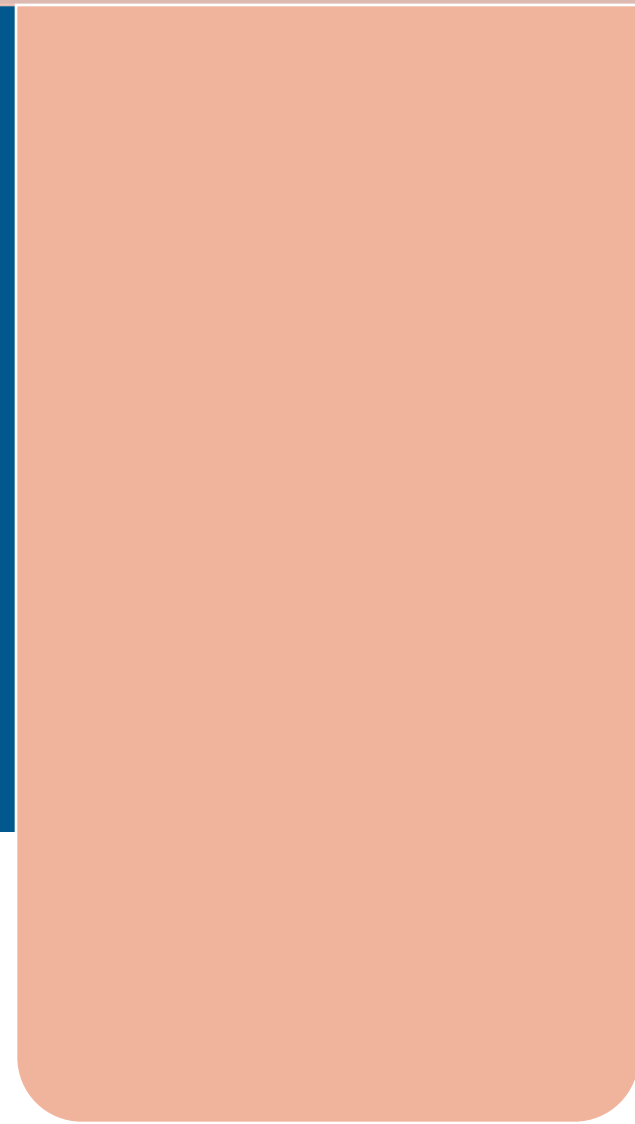
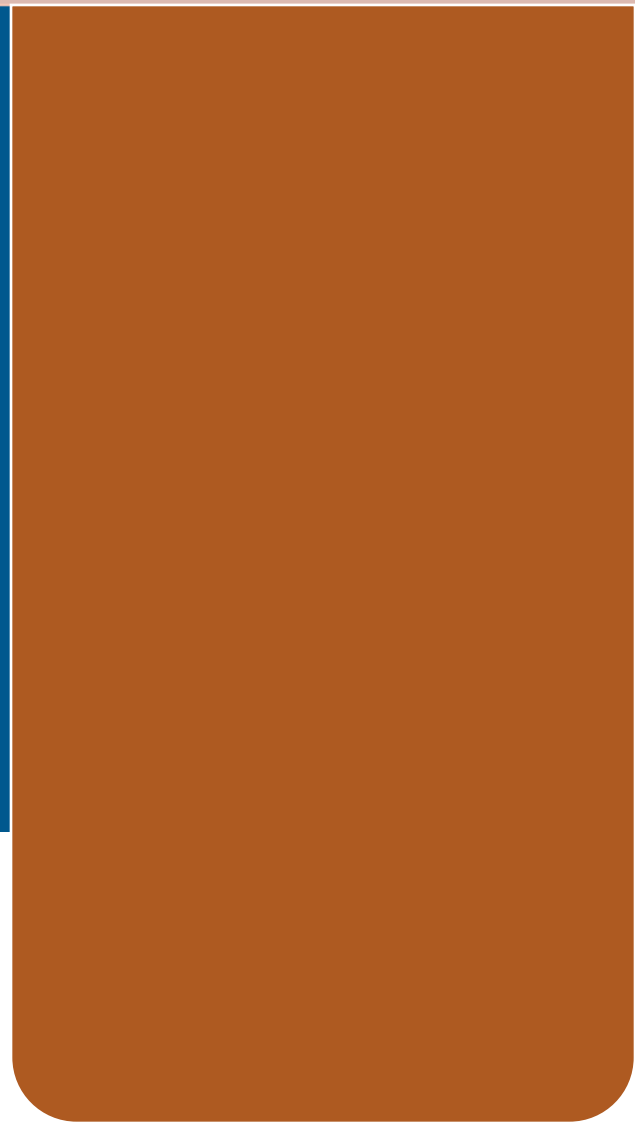
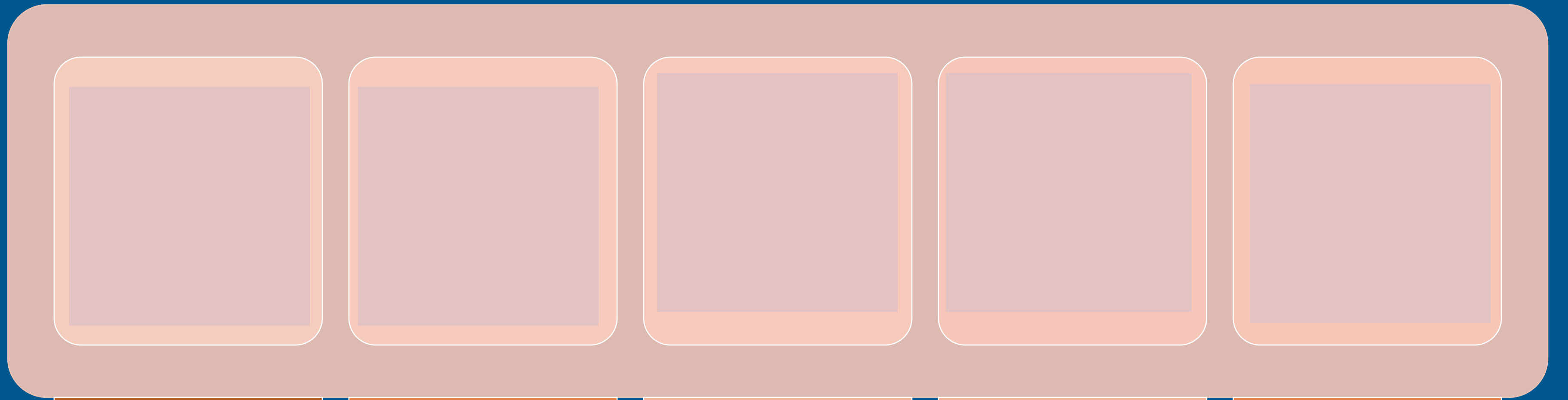
Before you begin any conversation...

*The End*

# What happens when it is over?



- What do I want this person to know?
- What do I want this person to feel?
- What do I want this person to do?



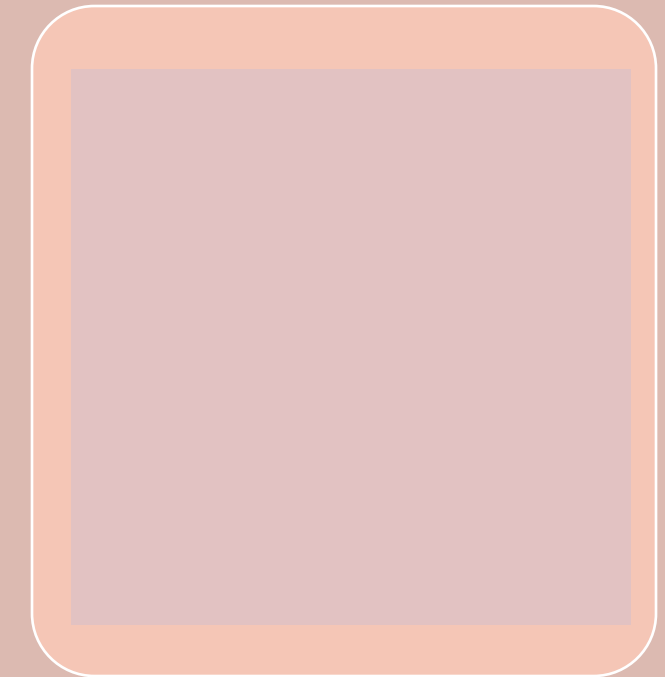
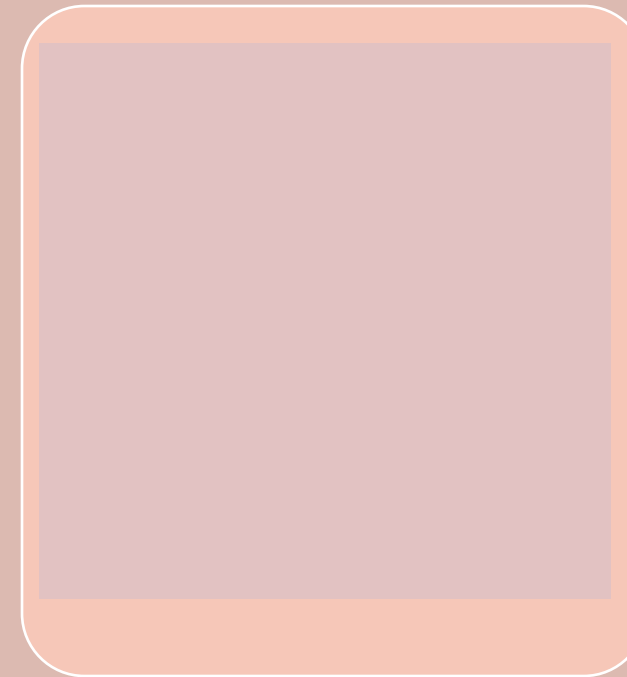
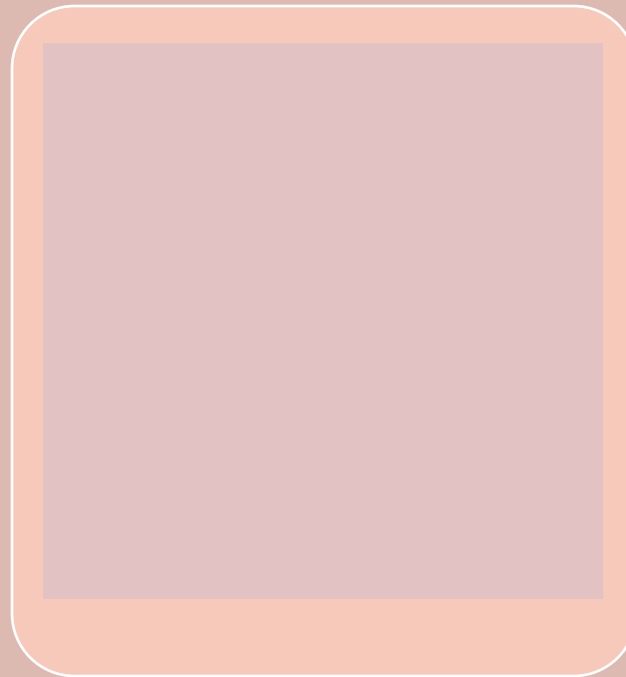
S

SPECIFIC

What specific item do you want to address?

S

M

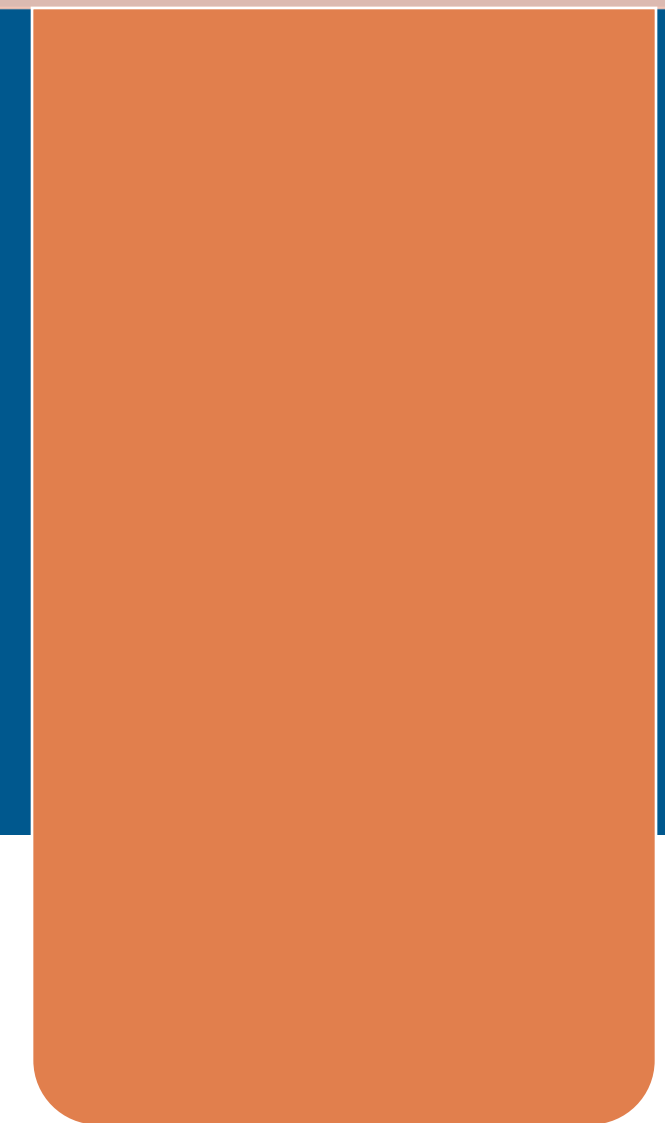
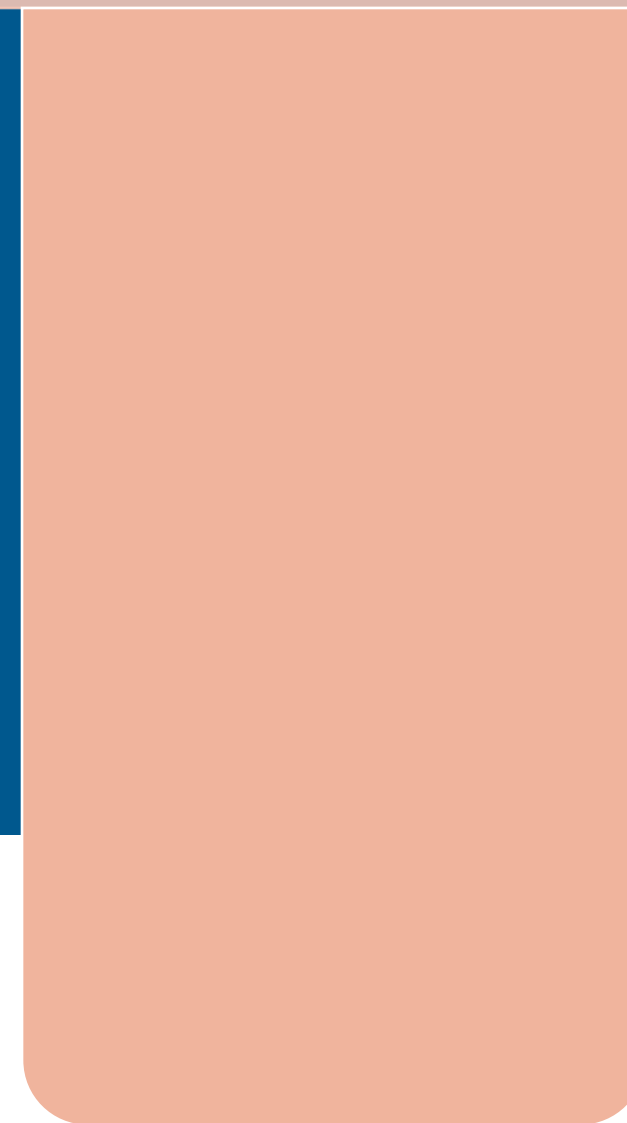


SPECIFIC

What specific item do you want to address?

MEASURABLE

What tangible action items do you want to have in place?



**S**

**M**

**A**

**SPECIFIC**

What specific item do you want to address?

**MEASURABLE**

What tangible action items do you want to have in place?

**ACHIEVABLE**

What solutions do you propose?

**S**

**M**

**A**

**R**

**SPECIFIC**

What specific item do you want to address?

**MEASURABLE**

What tangible action items do you want to have in place?

**ACHIEVABLE**

What solutions do you propose?

**RELEVANT**

Why is this important to the team, department, or organization?

**S**

**M**

**A**

**R**

**T**

**SPECIFIC**

What specific item do you want to address?

**MEASURABLE**

What tangible action items do you want to have in place?

**ACHIEVABLE**

What solutions do you propose?

**RELEVANT**

Why is this important to the team, department, or organization?

**TIME-BOUND**

When will this plan be put into action?

**S**

**M**

**A**

**R**

**T**

**SPECIFIC**

“I want to address the missed deadlines with Janice, identify the root cause, and agree on a solution to ensure future deadlines are met.”?

**MEASURABLE**

“By the end of the conversation, we will have identified at least two specific steps they can take to improve time management and agreed on a system for tracking progress.”

**ACHIEVABLE**

“I will propose realistic solutions such as weekly check-ins or adjusted timelines that align with their workload.”

**RELEVANT**

“Improving their time management will directly support the team’s ability to meet project deadlines and achieve department goals.”

**TIME-BOUND**

“This plan should be implemented within the next month, with the first check-in scheduled for next week.”

# Best Practices



- Always keep it professional!
- Prepare and research
- Listen to understand, not to reply
- Ask clarifying questions

Let's talk about...



...difficult conversations



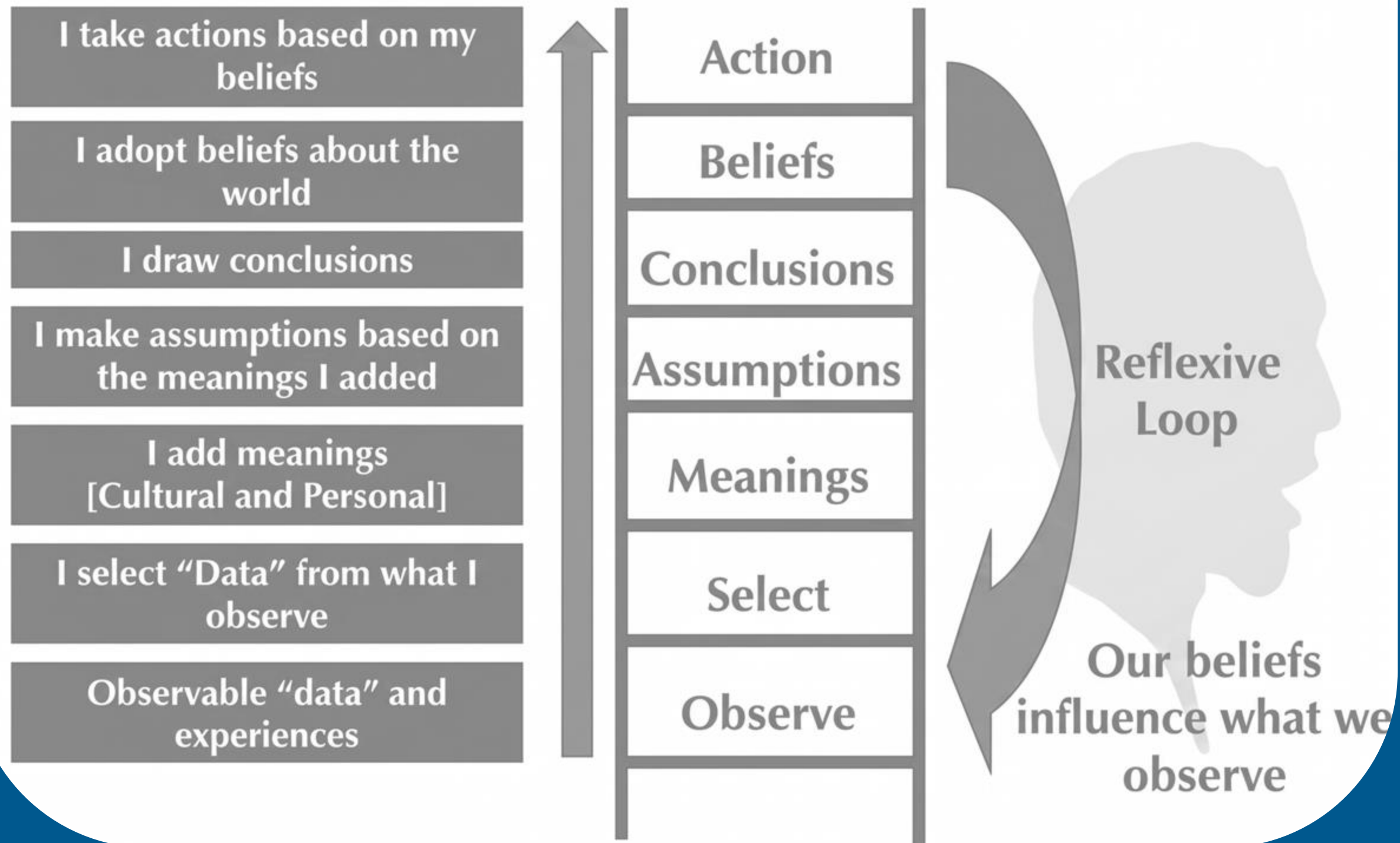
What are some difficult conversations you might need to have in the future?



# Ladder of Inference



# The Ladder of Inference



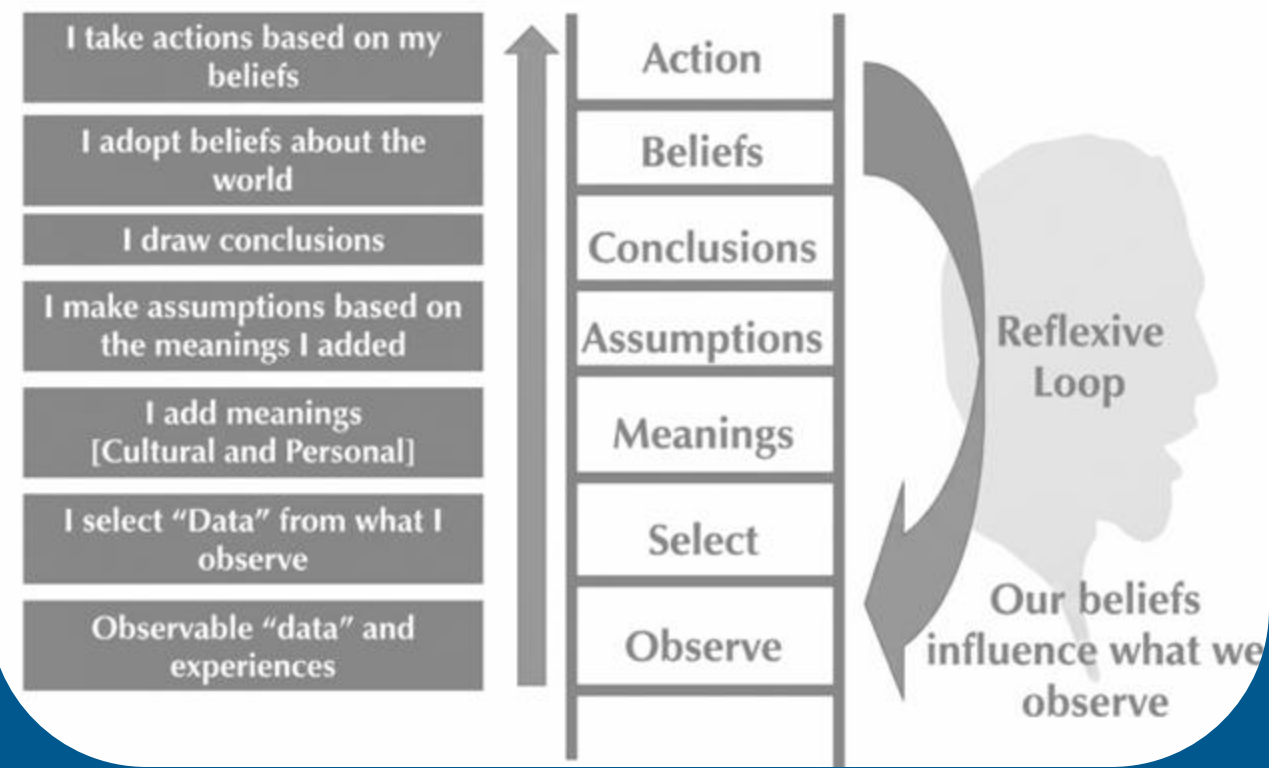


## Observe (What you see/hear):

Alex says: “We can’t present to leadership without detailed analysis. It’s reckless to go in unprepared.”



### The Ladder of Inference

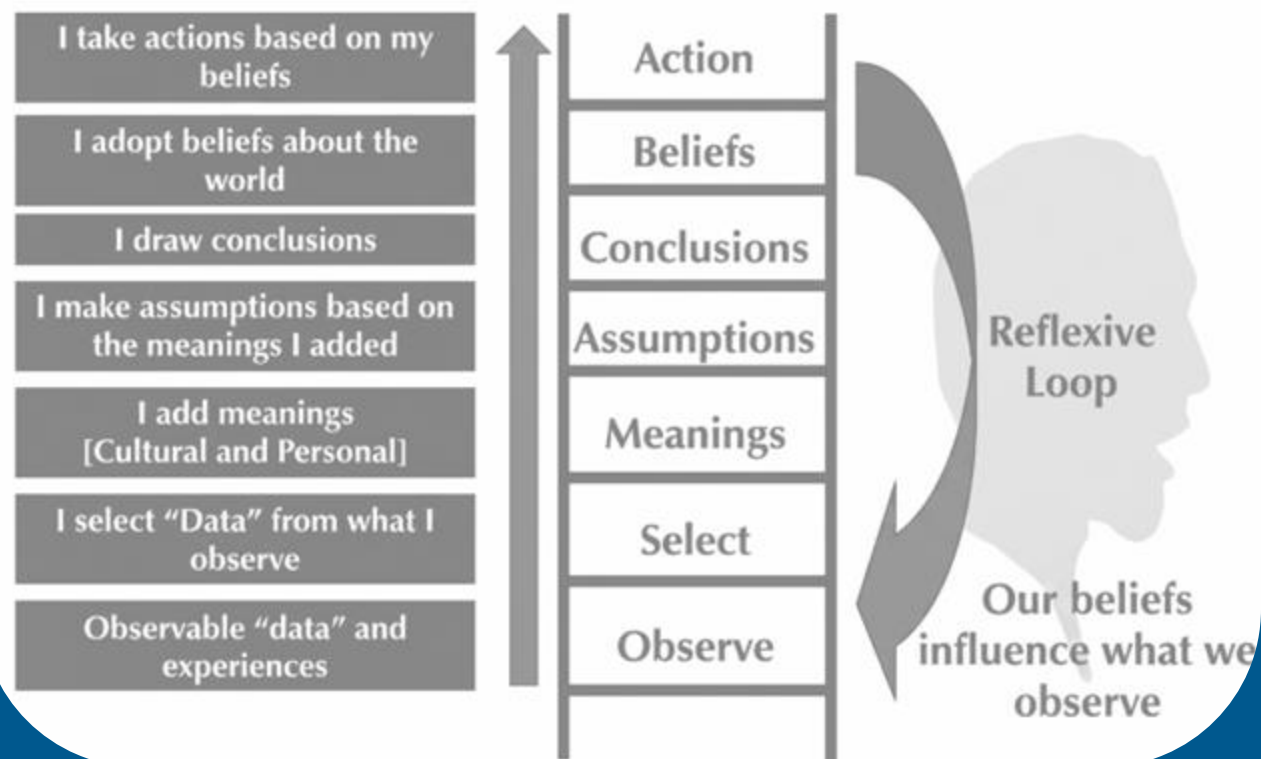


## Select (from what I observe):

**Your reaction:** You feel frustrated because the tight deadline doesn't allow for the depth Alex is suggesting.

**ACTION STEP | Pause:** Take a breath. Avoid responding emotionally.

### The Ladder of Inference



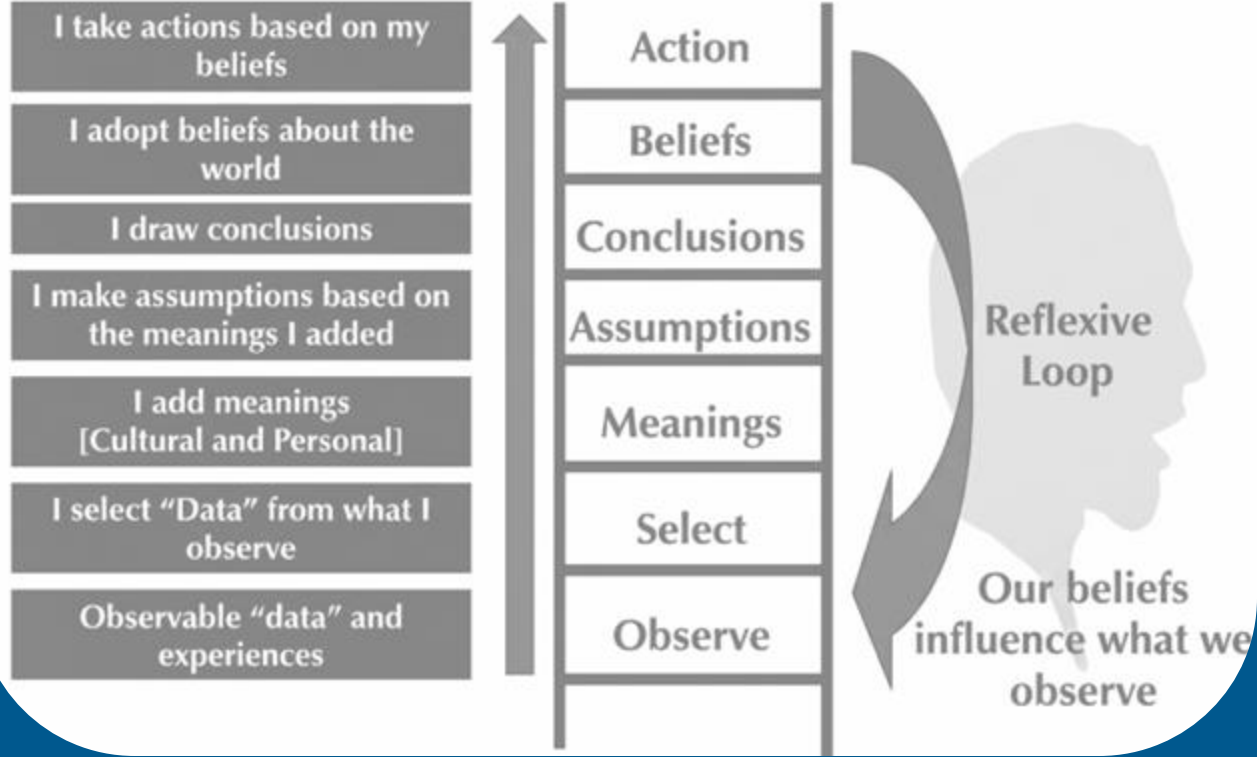
Meaning (What it means to you):

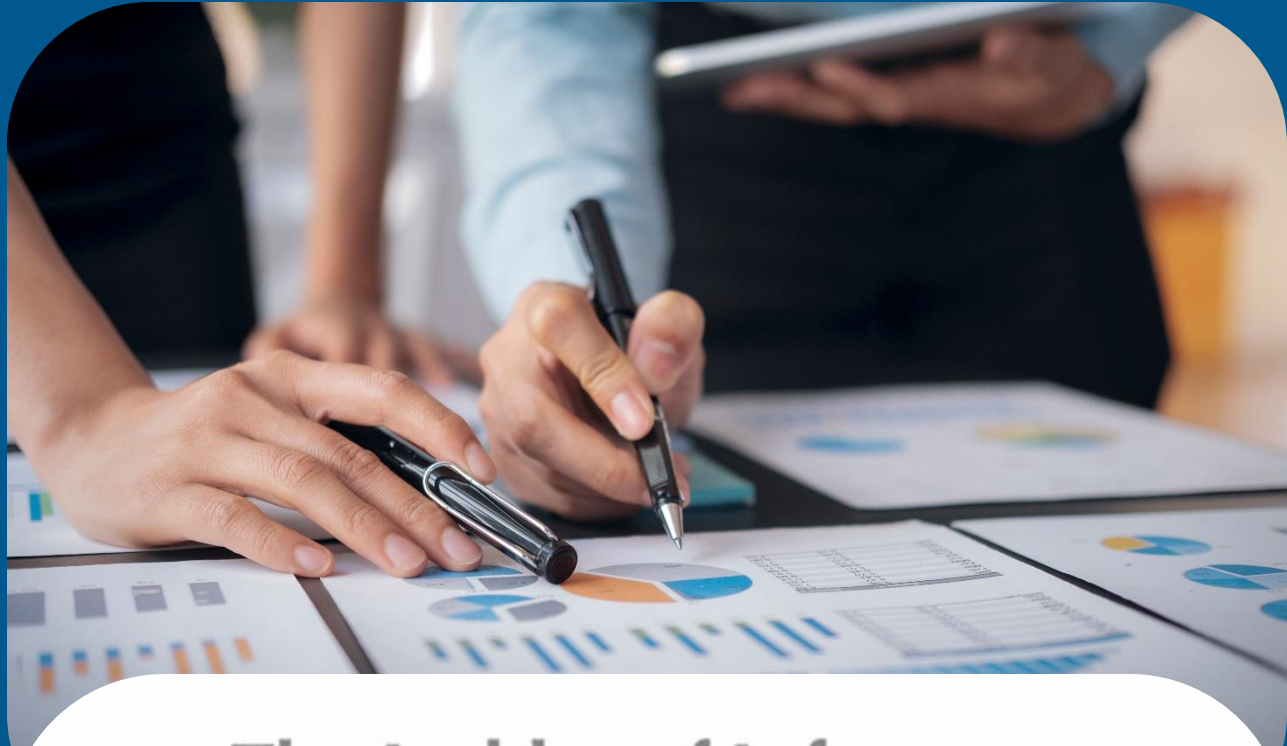
You interpret Alex’s statement as implying that your approach is careless or less thorough.

**ACTION STEP |** Reflect: Ask yourself, “Is this what Alex really means, or am I making an assumption?”



**The Ladder of Inference**

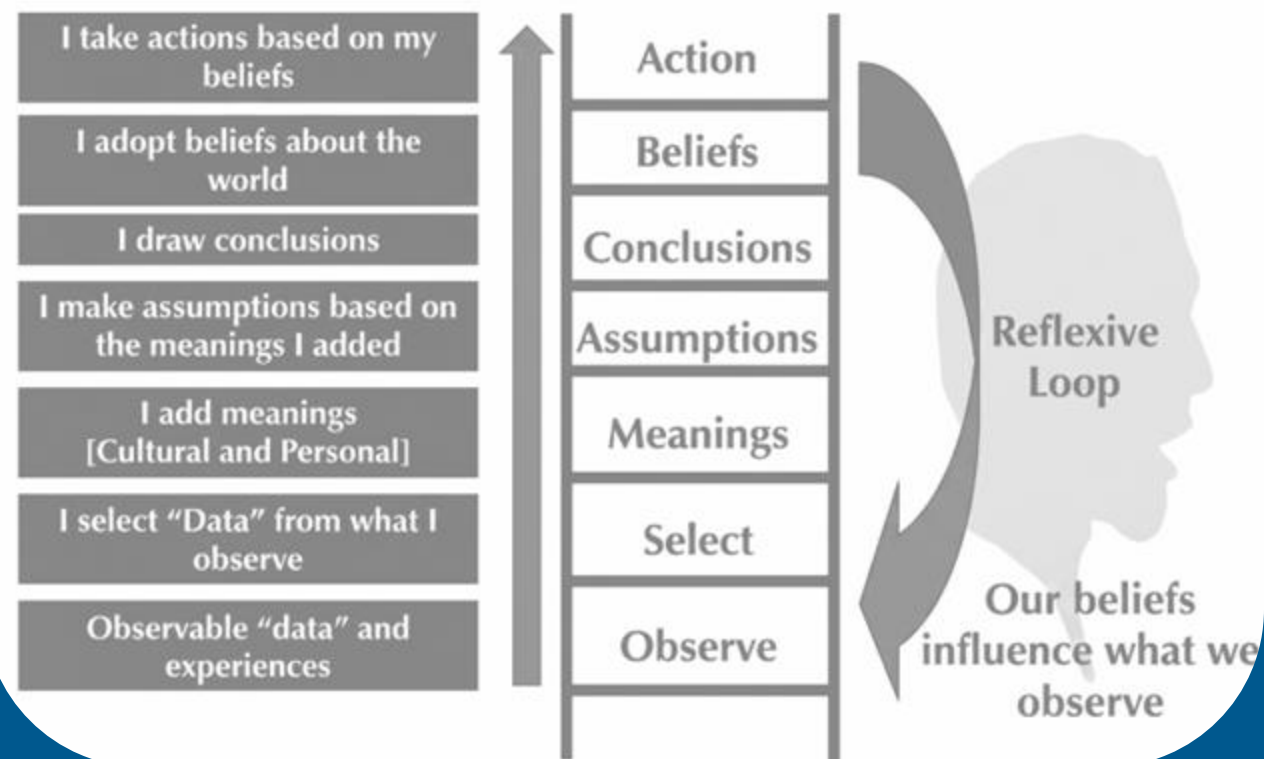




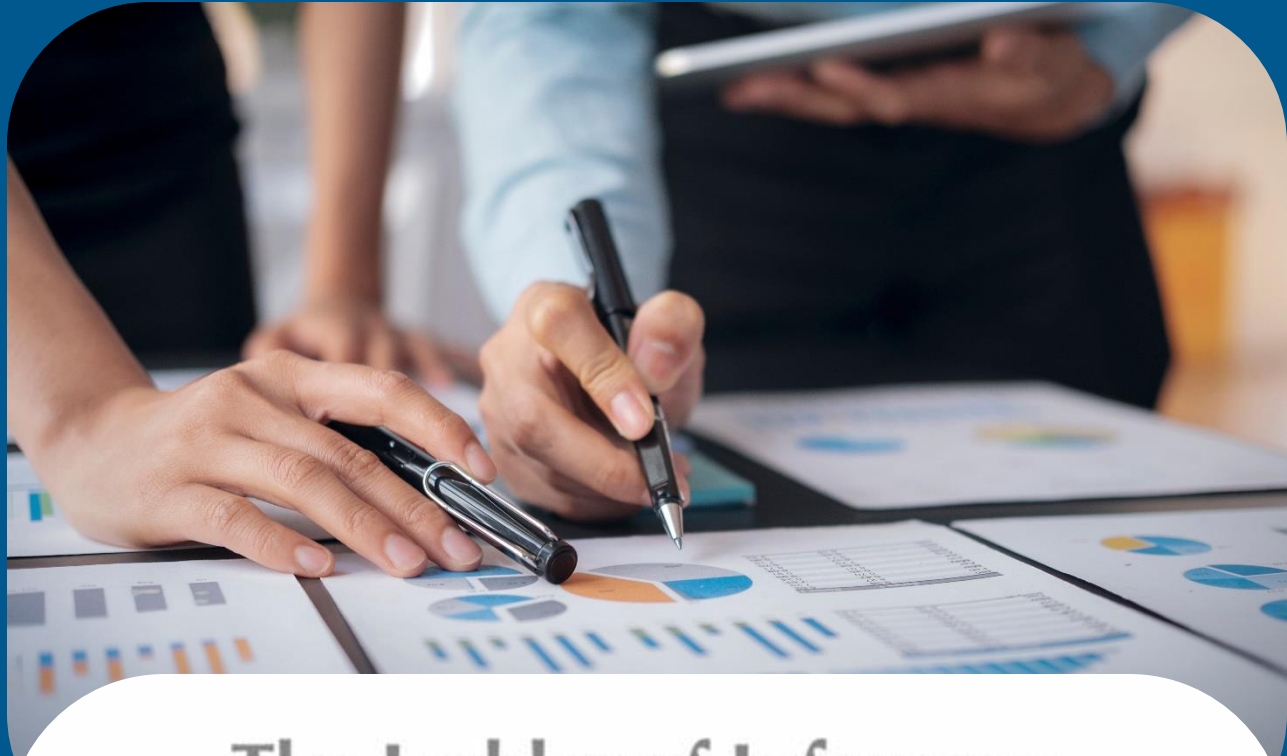
## Make Assumptions (What you believe):

Assumption: Alex doesn't trust your judgment or isn't considering the time constraints.

### The Ladder of Inference



**ACTION STEP** | Reframe: Think, "Alex might simply have a different perspective or priorities for the presentation."

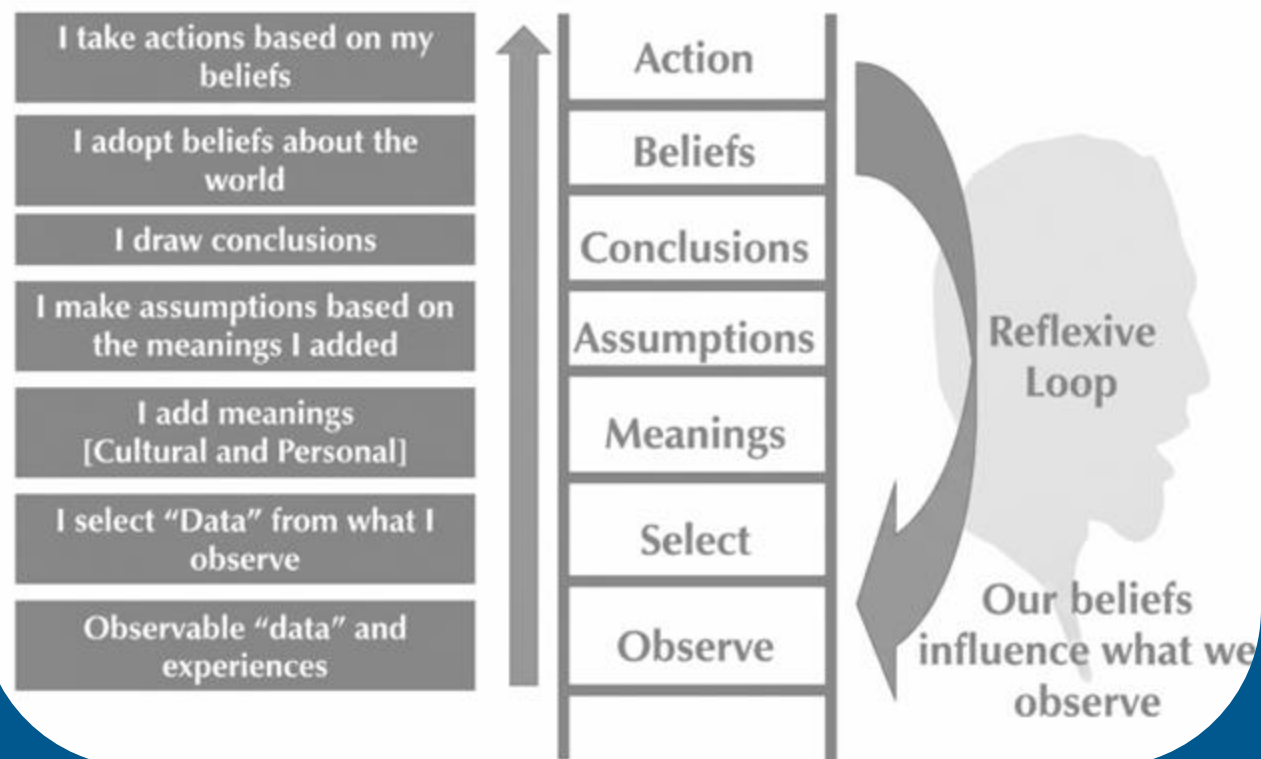


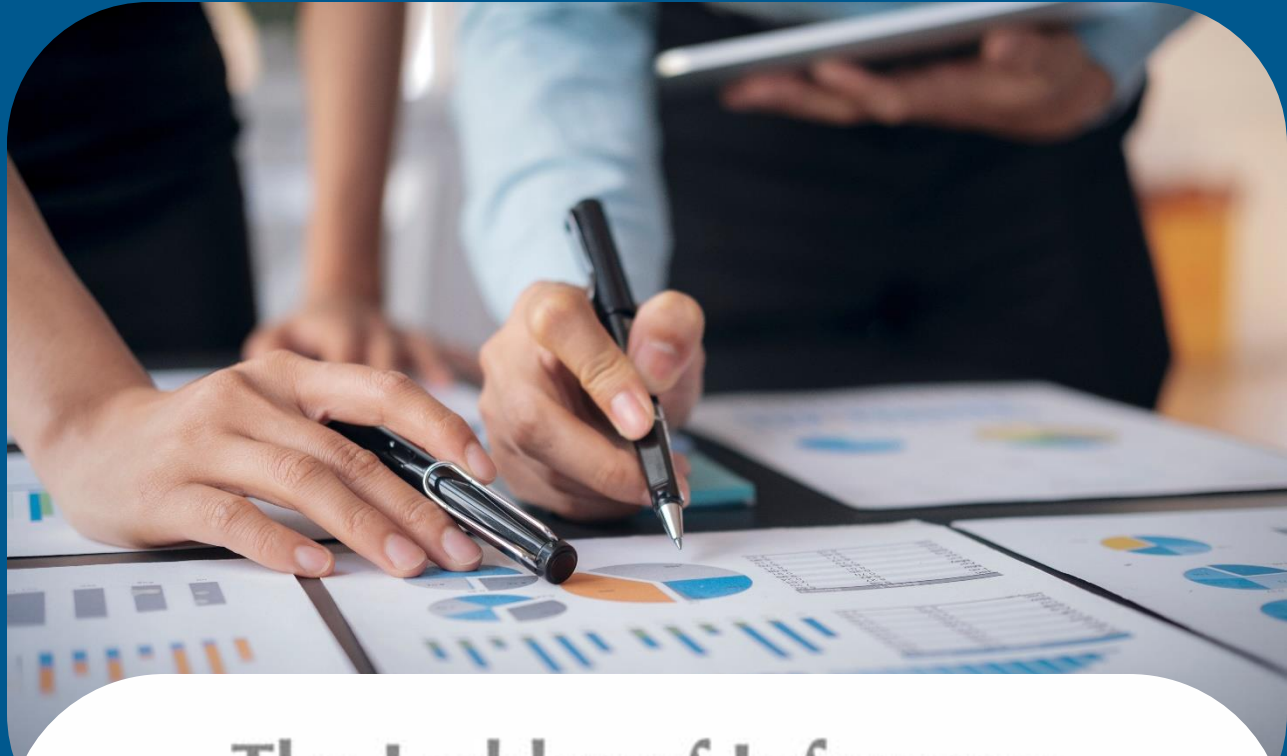
## Draw Conclusions (Decide what's true):

Initial conclusion: Alex's plan is impractical and might derail the project timeline.

**ACTION STEP** | Adjust: Before concluding, decide to gather more data by engaging Alex in a constructive discussion.

### The Ladder of Inference



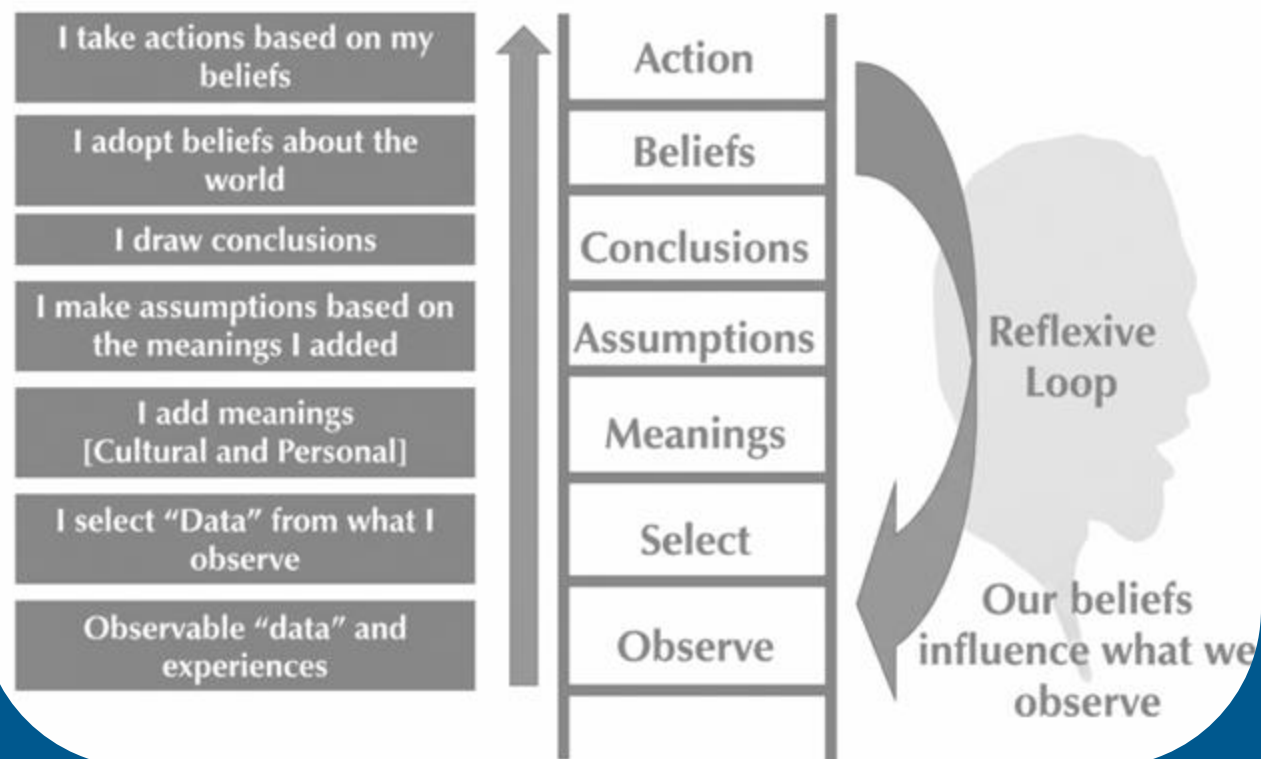


## Form Beliefs (Your mindset about Alex):

Belief: Alex might value thoroughness over efficiency.

**ACTION STEP** | Shift Perspective: Think, “We both want the presentation to succeed, but we’re prioritizing different aspects of the work.”

### The Ladder of Inference





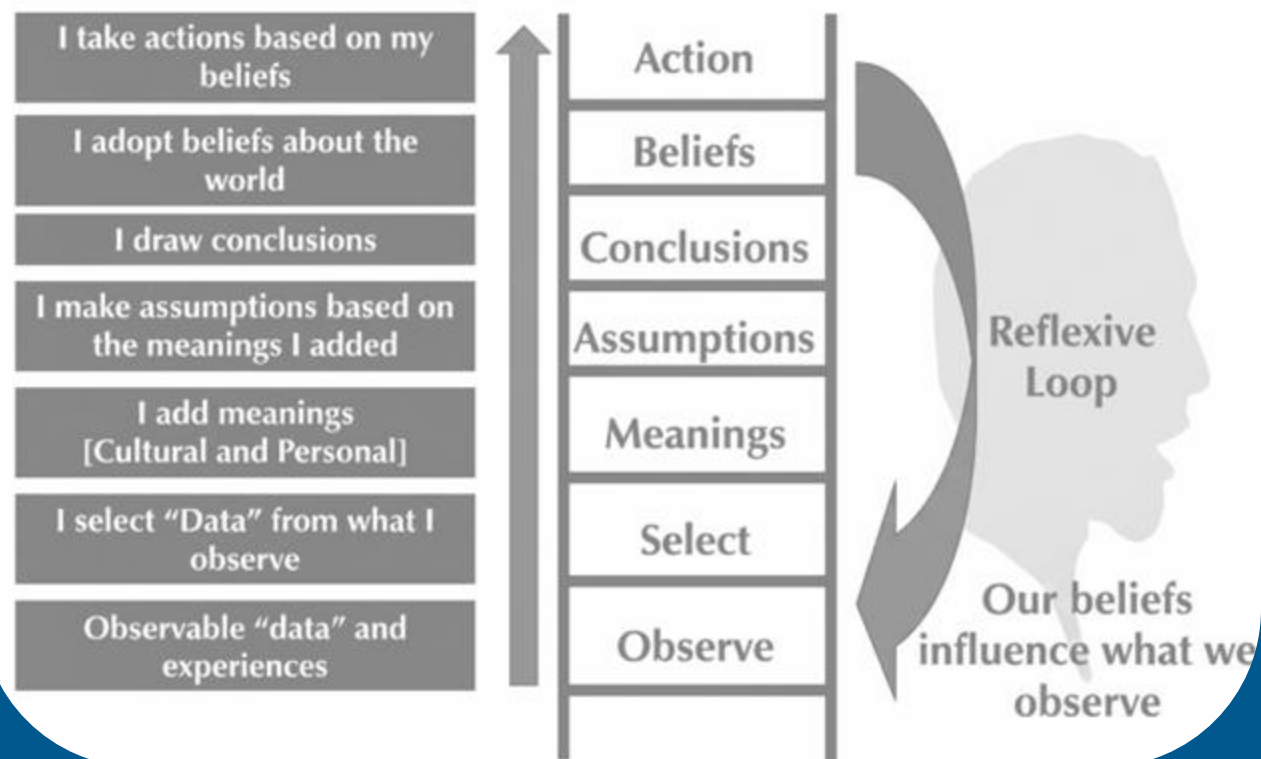
## Take Action (Your response):

Instead of reacting defensively, you decide to approach the conversation with curiosity.

Example Response:

“Alex, I understand your concern about being well-prepared. Can we discuss what level of detail would be sufficient for this presentation, given the deadline? Perhaps we can strike a balance.”

### The Ladder of Inference



# Ask Better Questions



REACTIVE  
COMMUNICATION:  
what do I do about this?

CRITICAL  
COMMUNICATION:  
pauses and asks questions.



**What do we know vs. what are we assuming?** Name both explicitly before you proceed.

**What's missing?** What information would change your answer if you had it?

**Who else should be involved?** Who has context, authority, or perspective you don't have?

**What are the second-order consequences?** If we do X, what happens next — and then what?



**When we pause and ask  
questions, we open up  
communication channels.**



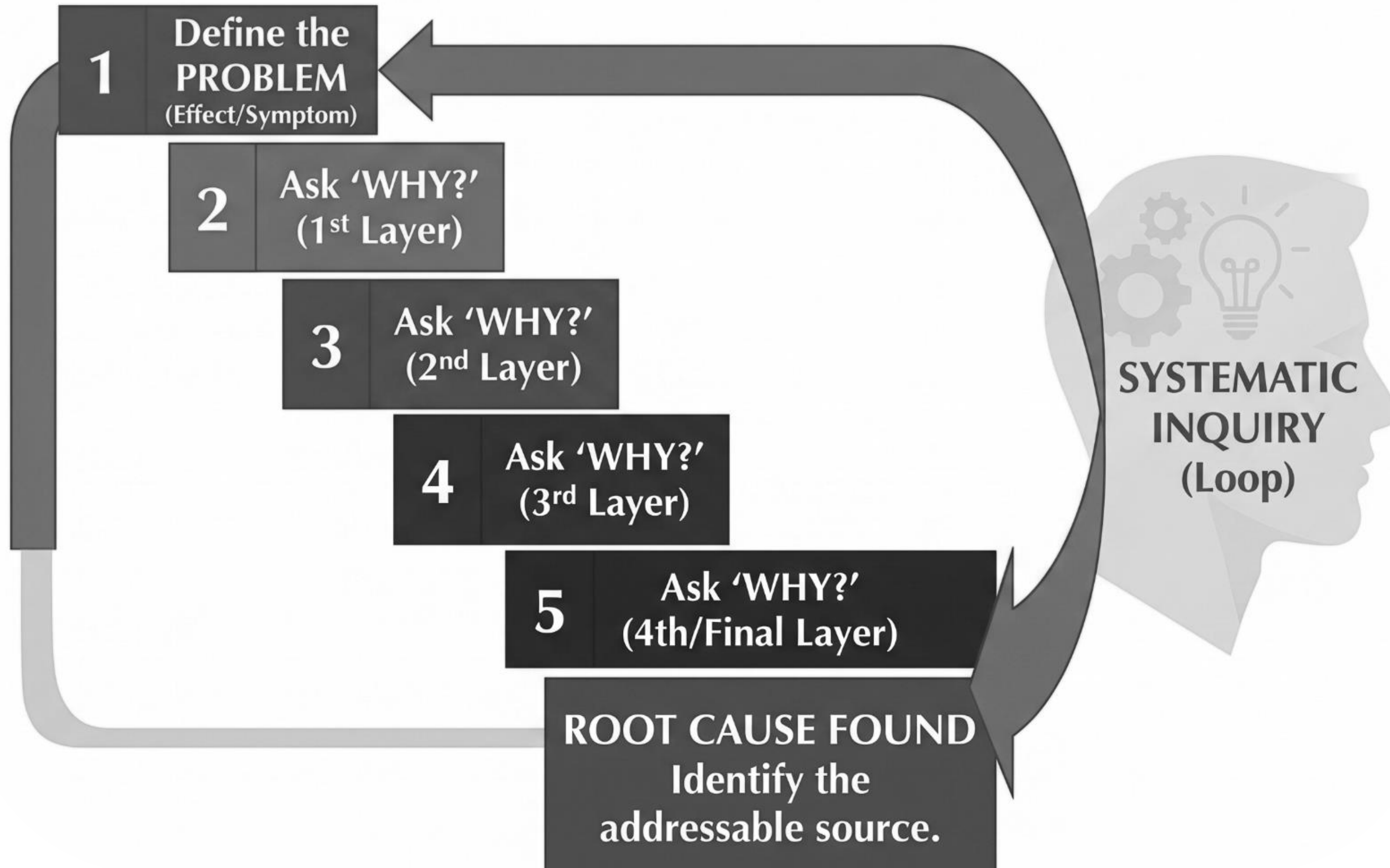
# The 5 Whys



**Best use case:** when the same issue keeps coming back because the real cause was never addressed.



# The 5 Why's Framework



**Problem:** Departments keep submitting incomplete purchase orders

**Why 1:** Staff aren't filling out all required fields

**Why 2:** They don't know which fields are required

**Why 3:** The PO form was updated 6 months ago — training wasn't updated

**Why 4:** No process for notifying training when forms change

**Root cause:** No formal communication channel between IT and HR/training when forms change

The screenshot shows a 'Purchase Order' form. At the top left, it says 'Your Company Name' followed by fields for 'Address:', 'City/State:', 'Postal Code:', and 'Email Address:'. At the top right, it says 'Purchase Order' followed by fields for 'Purchase Order #:' and 'Date:'. Below these are fields for 'Delivery Date:'. The main body of the form contains a table with columns for 'Description', 'Quantity', 'Rate', and 'Amount'. There are four rows of placeholder text: 'Product or service description goes here'. Below the table, there are fields for 'Subtotal', 'Tax Rate', and 'Tax'. At the bottom right, there is a 'Total' field. The form also includes a 'Notes:' section with the text 'Comments can go here.' and a small logo in the bottom right corner.



Simulate the conversation and what arguments my supervisor/colleagues would state and my counter-points using the {insert framework}.



**You:**

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I've been making significant contributions I've made to the department. I'd like to discuss my current position to align with the level of responsibilities I've taken on."

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**Boss:**

"I understand your concerns, but as you know, the budget is tight and we don't have the flexibility to increase salaries."

---

**You:**

"I completely understand the budget constraints, and I've consistently performed duties beyond my current classification, such as leading projects, handling cross-department initiatives, and managing client relationships. These are tasks that align more closely with the responsibilities of a higher-level role. Reclassifying my role would ensure that my compensation is commensurate with the value I'm bringing to the team."

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**Boss:**

"But even if you're doing more, we still don't have the funds to justify reallocating the budget just for one person."

**You:**

"I appreciate that, and I'm not looking for an immediate large salary increase. A phased approach or even starting with the reclassification itself would be ideal. I'd like to discuss this point when the budget allows. This way, the role accurately reflects my responsibilities, and the financial aspect can be addressed when feasible."

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**Boss:**

"That's a reasonable idea, but I'm still not sure we can justify the budget impact, changing classifications could set a precedent for other employees' requests."

---

**You:**

"I understand the concern about precedent, but what I'm requesting is not a salary increase, but rather a recognition of the expanded scope of my role, which aligns with higher-level classifications. My current compensation does not reflect the value I'm bringing to the team, and I believe it's important to ensure that my role is properly classified to maintain fairness and motivation for all team members."

---

**Boss:**

"I see your point, but the fact remains that we still have constant budget constraints in all situations. Wouldn't it be unfair to them if we only adjusted yours?"

**You:**

"I value fairness across the team and the organization. However, this isn't just about a salary increase—it's about ensuring that the classification and the role are aligned. If other team members are also experiencing similar misalignment, I think it's an opportunity for a broader conversation about role re-evaluations. I'm happy to discuss that as a group, but right now, I'm advocating for my role based on my current contributions and how they exceed the scope of my current classification."

---

**Boss:**

"I get that you've been doing more, but even with those added responsibilities, I'm still not sure it's enough for a reclassification. Many executive assistants take on more work over time—it's part of the job."

---

**You:**

"That's true, and I'm proud to step up when needed. However, my role has evolved significantly to include tasks that are well outside the traditional executive assistant duties. For example, [mention specific advanced duties], which align more with the higher pay band roles. These tasks are directly contributing to the efficiency and success of the department, and I believe it's important to reflect that in the classification."

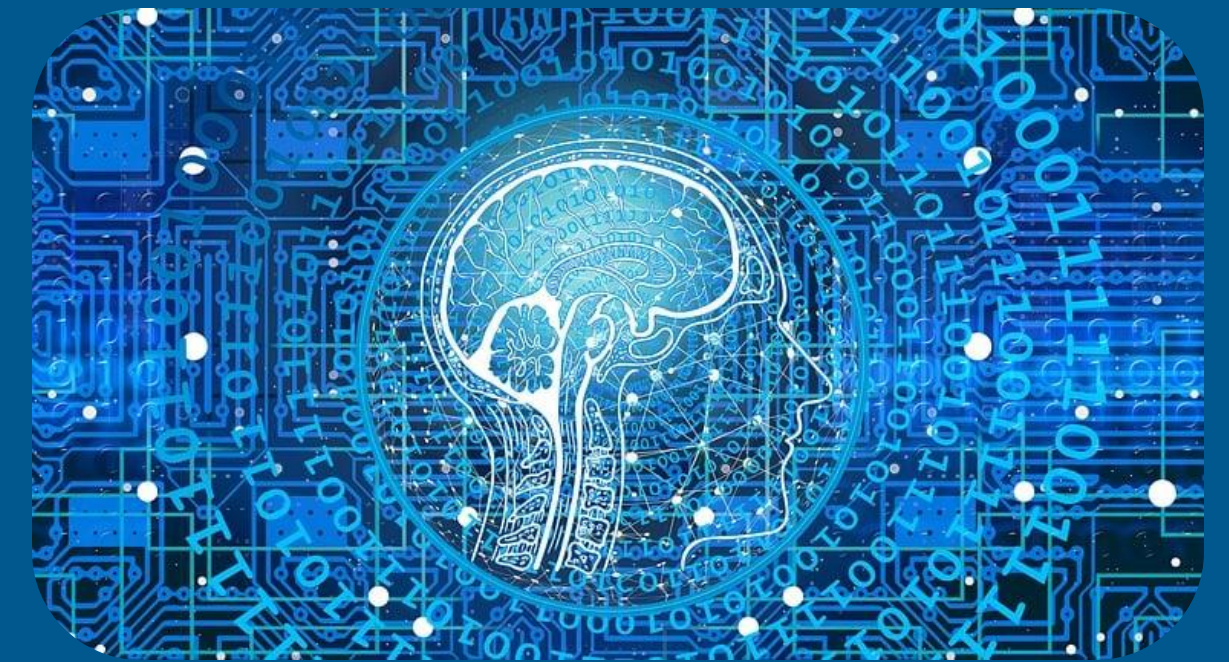
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**Boss:**

"I see your point, but my concern is that even if we made the change, there's no guarantee of the salary adjustment being approved down the road."



**ACTION ITEMS:** Next time you are faced with a difficult conversation...



# QUESTIONS?



**REMINDER!**

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