Communication tools to support effective community planning conversations*:

The “ladder of inference”* is a well-known process of how people process and understand data and information.

Our previous beliefs and assumptions shape how we see the world and how we respond to new information.

The R on the ladder diagram depicts the responsive loop that happens when we draw conclusions about our surroundings. For example, imagine a housing provider in your community who refuses to believe that people can move directly from shelter or streets into housing and you are a housing first provider. What would you help you and the housing provider move forward in your community planning discourse?

Guides for walking down “the ladder”:

- Draw out people’s reasoning
- Use questions and inquiry
- Help make thought process visible
- Ask for contexts and examples
- Listen for new understanding

Building Effective Communication Skills: 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 IMPROVING YOUR INQUIRY SKILLS - How to ask others how to make their thinking process more transparent.*

**What to Do**

Gently guide others down the Ladder of Inference and find out what their assumptions might be.

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”.

Draw out people’s reasoning. Find out as much as you can about why they are saying what they are saying.

Explain your reasons for inquiring and make it clear how your inquiry relates to your own conclusions and concerns.

Test what others say by asking for broader contexts or for examples

Make sure you understand what others have said.

Listen for new understanding that may emerge. Don’t concentrate on preparing to destroy the other persons argument or promote your own agenda.

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.

**What to Say**

“What leads you to conclude that?” “What data are you thinking about that supports that? “What experience have you had with your conclusion?”

Instead of “What do you mean?”, or “where’s your proof?, you can say, “Can you help me to understand your thinking here?”

“What is the significance of that?” “How does this relate to your deepest thinking about homelessness in our community?”

“I am asking about your assumptions here because...

“Can you describe another community where these same effects occur?” “Is there data I am not aware of ?”

“Am I correct that you are saying....?” “What I hear you saying is......”

“Do you see it differently?” “Have you considered....?”

Even when advocating, listen, stay open, and encourage others to provide different views.