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"Thinking about Thinking as a Department Chair"

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Spelman and Davi, "Thinking about Thinking as a Department Chair"

Relevance of session to chairpersons

Department chairs are faced with a multitude of leadership decisions, both large and small. Our effectiveness in making these decisions can be improved by increasing our awareness of how our mind moves, often invisibly, from evidence and information to assumptions, conclusions, beliefs and, ultimately, behaviors.

Presentation focus

The session focuses on how our minds work as we take on the leadership challenges of being department chair.

Recommendations that will be made to chairpersons

The presenters will recommend that chairs develop a regular "practice" for thinking about their thinking. Specific approaches and resources will be discussed.

How the audience will be involved

The session will begin with the following request of participants:

Make notes to yourself about a situation in which you were less than totally effective as a leader. Choose a situation that contains enough richness to make it worth analyzing in depth. Among the data you might capture:

- Setting
- Key actors
- Key issues
- Your goals
- Symptoms of ineffectiveness

The presenters will then introduce Argyris's Ladder of Inference (1982; Ross, 1994).

The Ladder of Inference is a "simple model of how the mind works in everyday life" (Putnam, 2013). The mental climb up the ladder begins with our selecting data from the deluge of stimuli in our environments. We then assign meaning to what we have observed, from which we reach conclusions that harden into beliefs. Very importantly, we often take action based on those beliefs. Our thinking becomes increasingly abstract as we climb the ladder, increasingly disconnected from the original information that we selected. This mental process transpires "at the speed of thought," (Putnam, 2013) and mostly out of one's awareness.

Having presented the basic model, the presenters will add four key questions that increase the usefulness of the Ladder of Inference for addressing everyday leadership challenges:

1. What might be going on outside of my conscious awareness and control that affects how I'm making sense of and acting in this situation?
2. How are my emotional responses in this situation related to my thoughts and actions?
3. How are my social identities (my gender, race, age, nationality, etc.) and those of other participants affecting the way I am responding to this situation?

4. How might my desire for certainty be causing me to oversimplify the situation?

Specific examples will be provided to demonstrate how the four elements on which these questions focus affect our thought processes and, ultimately, our behavior.

The participants will then be asked to reflect on how the Ladder of Inference and the four questions help them understand the situation they identified at the beginning of the session.

Robert Putnam. "Interview: Robert Putnam, Applying Argyris," *Action Design*. November 2013.
<http://actiondesign.com/resources/readings/applying-argyris>.