BLOOMBERG HARVARD | City Leadership Initiative

Difficult Conversations

Practical Tools for Navigating Charged Conversations

Robert Wilkinson

Difficult Conversations

What are your most difficult conversations?

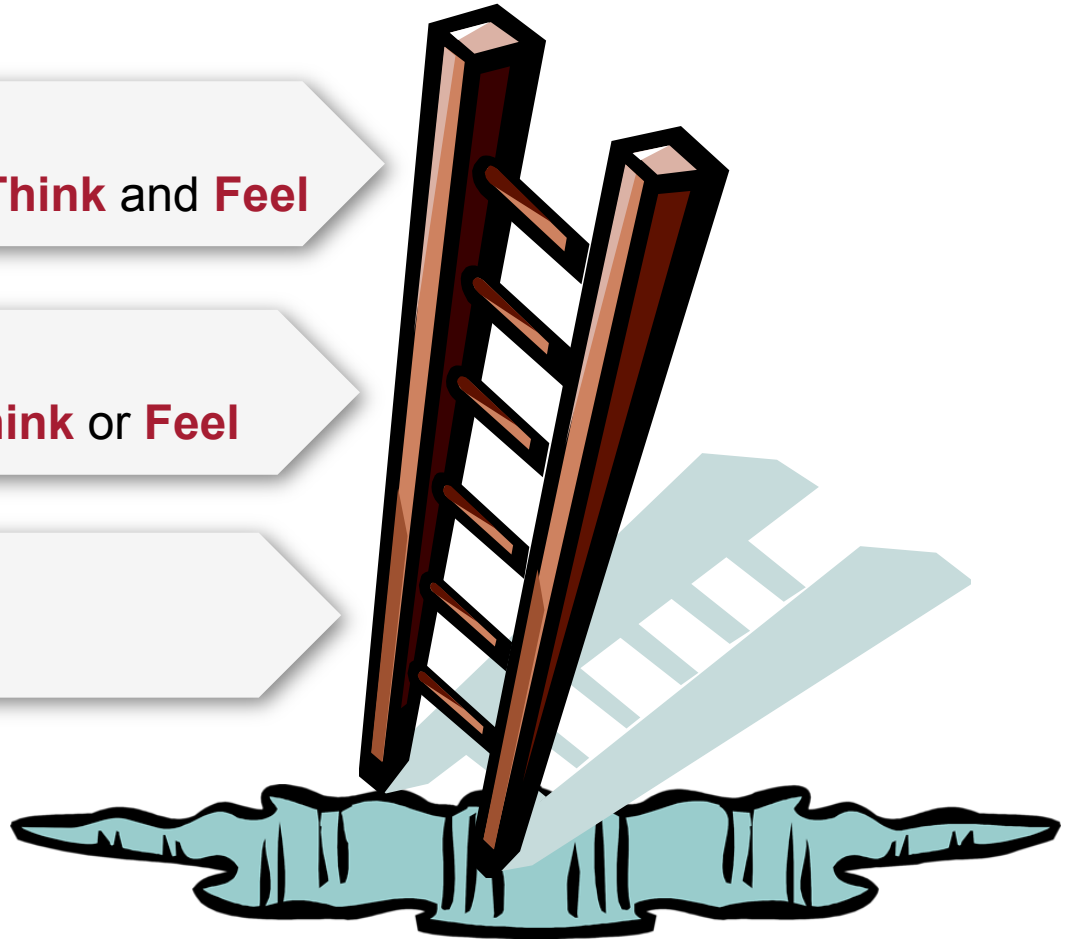
The Ladder of Inference

Conclusions:
What we **Believe** based on how we **Think** and **Feel**

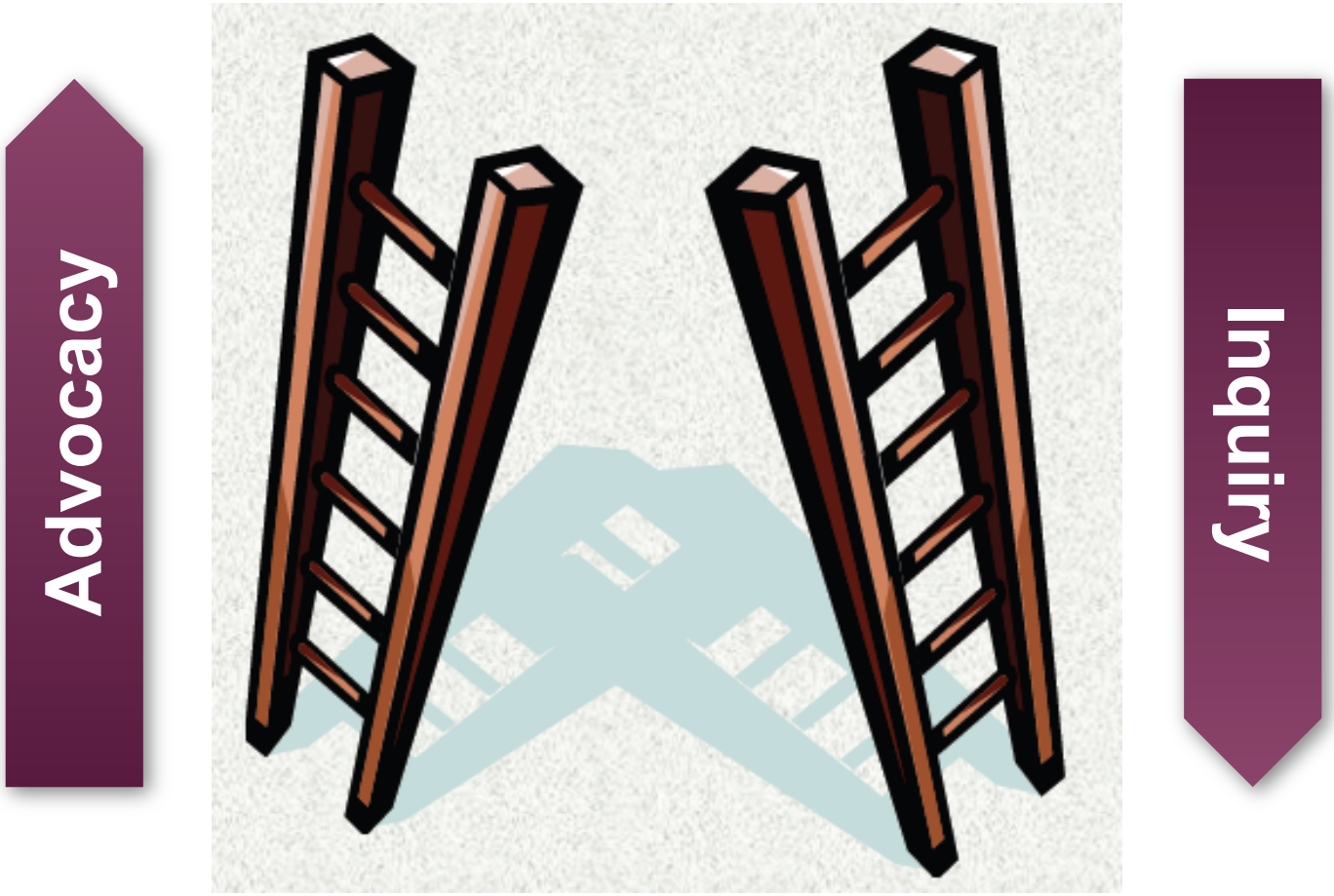
Interpretations and Reasoning:
How what see and hear makes us **Think** or **Feel**

Selected Data:
What we actually **Focus on**

All Available Data:
All available input and “data”



The Ladder of Inference



Your personal example of a conversation where you deeply disagreed with someone: Score with an A or I

I said:

She/he/they said:

I said:

She/he/they said:

I said:

She/he/they said:

I said:

She/he/they said:

I said:

She/he/they said:

Watch for “False Inquiry”!

“Don’t you think that...?”

“Wouldn’t it be better if...?”

“Surely you’d agree that...?”

This is a statement, masked as a question...

Guidelines for Inquiry

Ask **open-ended** questions to understand their perceptions
*(e.g. what their **Ladder of Understanding** looks like)*

1 If they give their **Conclusion:**

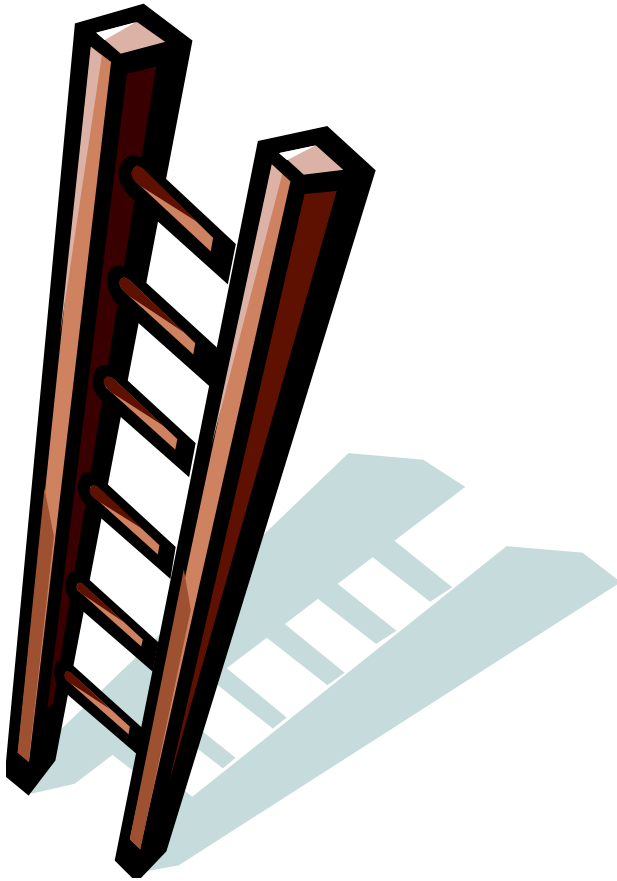
I think you're wrong…"

2 Ask about their **Reasoning:**

"What leads you to think that way?" ***or*** *"Can you help me understand why you feel that way?"*

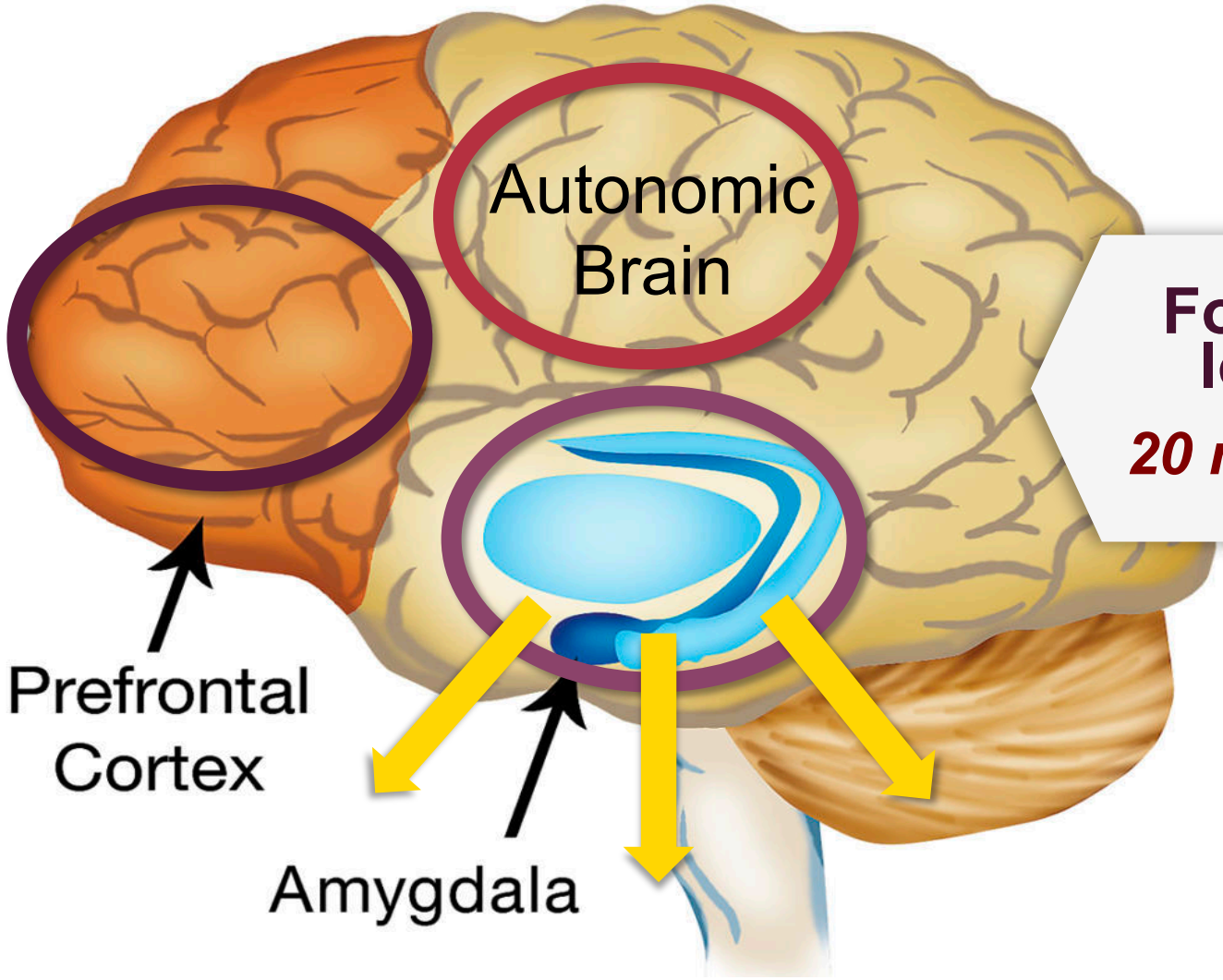
3 Ask about what they saw **[Data]:**

"*What did you see/experience that led you to feel that way?*



Emotions

Brain Science of Managing Emotions!



For how long?

20 minutes

Tactical Ways to Managing Emotions

1. Breathe
2. Reframe/Change the focus of discussion
3. Reframe/Change the process
4. Consider naming the Emotions
5. Genuine Inquiry
6. Empathy

Further Learning:

- Strategic Leadership: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3689291
- Podcast on Difficult Conversations: https://harvardbsc.simplecast.com/episodes/episode-6-managing-difficult-conversations-effectively-yGoQFQVj
- Podcast Series on Leadership Insights: https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/podcasts/4p-model-for-strategic-leadership
- Leadership Case studies from Harvard:
  - Hearts and Minds: Admiral Jim Stavridis on the Art of Wrangling NATO
  - Leading with Empathy: Tarana Burke and the Making of the MeToo Movement

    **both cases were shared with you in the materials sent before the session*