

# ABSTRACTION LADDER

## WORKSHEET

**Purpose:** Think at different levels of detail.

1. Start with a specific problem.
2. Move up levels of abstraction (Why does this matter?).
3. Move down (What specific actions can be taken?).

**The problem/decision/choice/action:**

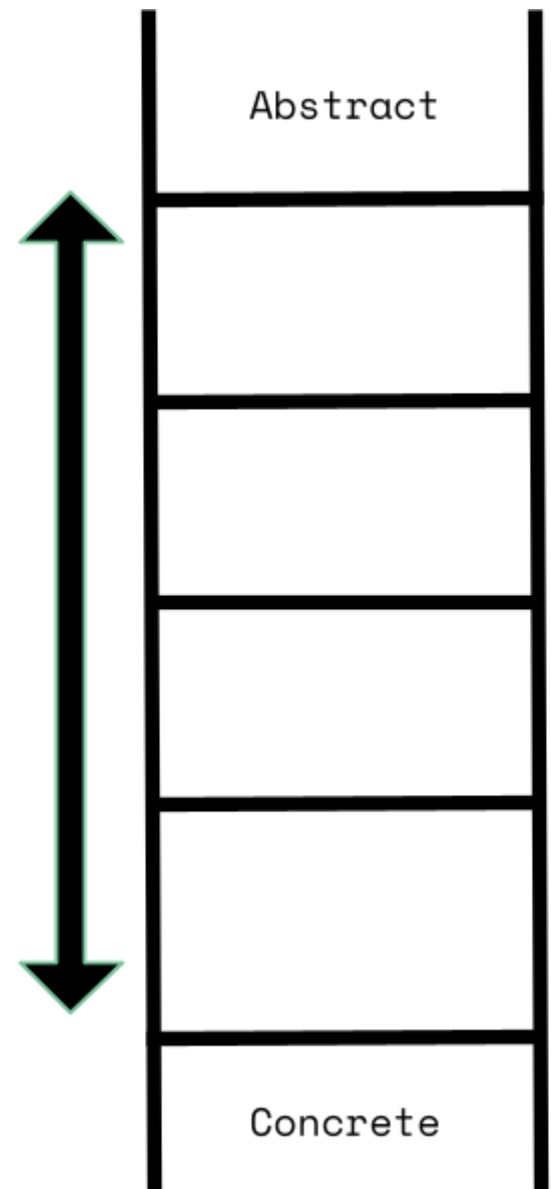
Why does this matter? The big picture.

Are there any broad principles?

What specific actions can be taken?

Is there any specific data?

How can you put this into action?



# HOW TO USE (PRO TIPS)

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## **Create a Visual Ladder:**

- Draw a ladder or staircase with each step representing a level of abstraction. Label the bottom with concrete details and the top with abstract concepts. This visualization can help pinpoint where clarity is needed.

## **Oscillate Between Levels:**

- Deliberately shift between high-level strategic thinking and low-level tactical details.
  - ◆ For example, start by stating the big picture, then drill down to the immediate next step, and alternate to maintain a balanced perspective.

## **Identify Underlying Assumptions:**

- Use laddering to expose assumptions hidden in everyday language.
- Ask “why” repeatedly until you reach the most abstract rationale behind an idea or problem.

## **Apply to Communication:**

- Use abstraction laddering to tailor messages for different audiences.
- For technical teams, descend to detailed steps; for executives, ascend to the core vision or outcome.

## **Define the Problem at Multiple Levels:**

- Begin by writing a broad problem statement, then create sub-statements that break it down into specific components.
- This practice ensures that no essential detail is overlooked while keeping sight of the overall objective.

## **Regularly Reassess:**



→ In dynamic projects, revisit your ladder to see if your assumptions still hold or if new details have emerged.

◆ Adjust your steps up or down accordingly.

**Combine with Other Models:**

→ Integrate abstraction laddering with other tools.

◆ For instance, after mapping out a decision tree, use laddering to see if the underlying logic behind the branches remains consistent when viewed from a higher level.

**Practice Makes Perfect:**

→ Regularly practicing abstraction laddering, such as during brainstorming sessions or after-action reviews, can sharpen the ability to switch perspectives quickly. Over time, this skill becomes second nature.

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# QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

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## **Moving Between Details and Big Ideas:**

- What are the concrete details or specific examples that illustrate the problem or opportunity you're facing?
- Looking at the issue broadly, what are the underlying principles, values, or long-term goals that connect to this challenge?

## **Questioning Underlying Assumptions:**

- What assumptions are you making at the detailed level that might differ when viewed from a higher perspective?
- How might your perspective change if you shifted from the minutiae (e.g., daily expenses, minute-by-minute scheduling) to the overarching strategy (e.g., financial independence, life balance)?

## **Connecting Levels of Understanding:**

- How does this specific challenge reflect broader trends or patterns in your life or work?
  - What insights do you gain by contrasting the detailed (micro) and the conceptual (macro) views of this issue?
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