



Tackling Wicked Problems

**INCREASING
ORGANIZATIONAL
IMPACT: BOARD ROLE**

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In the News

Homeless
shelters
perpetuate
homelessness

Food aid
leads to increased
starvation

Drug busts
increase drug-
related crime

“Get tough”
prison sentences
fail to reduce
fear of violent
crime

Job training
programs increase
unemployment

**What do you notice about
all these?**

They're All About Failed Solutions

Some Common Characteristics of Failed Solutions

- ❑ Address symptoms vs. underlying problems
- ❑ Obvious and often succeed in the short run
- ❑ Short-term gains undermined by long-term impacts
- ❑ Negative consequences are unintentional
- ❑ If the problem recurs, we do not see how we contributed

The Philanthropic Challenge: Fixing Now vs. Helping Over Time

When you are confronted by any complex social system ... with things about it that you 're dissatisfied with and anxious to fix, you cannot just step in and set about fixing with much hope of helping. This is one of the sore discouragements of our time.

If you want to fix something you are first obliged to understand ... the whole system.

Lewis Thomas

Award winning author, scientist, poet, physician, educator, researcher & policy advisor

Objectives

Overview of organizational learning & systems thinking

Introduce basic systems thinking framework

Conversations about us as critical stakeholders in addressing wicked problems

Agenda

- Introduction to Organizational Learning and Change
- Systems Thinking
 - Distinguishing Traditional from Systems Thinking
 - The Iceberg
 - Iceberg exercise & conversation
- Mental models
 - Introduction
 - Exercise
- Café Dialogue – A tool for collective thinking and action

Two Types of Thinking

Conventional

appropriate for
simple problems

Systems

appropriate for chronic,
complex/messy
problems

Conventional vs Systems Thinking

Conventional

The connection between problems and their causes is obvious and easy to trace

Systems Thinking

The relationship between problems and their causes is indirect and not obvious

Conventional vs Systems Thinking

Conventional

Others, either within or outside our organization, are to blame for our problems and must be the ones to change

Systems Thinking

We contribute to our own problems

Everyone is acting reasonably and responsibly and no one is to blame

Conventional vs Systems Thinking

Conventional

What we do short-term
will also assure long-
term success

Systems Thinking

Most quick fixes either make
no long-term difference or
actually make matters worse
in the long run

Conventional vs Systems Thinking

Conventional

In order to optimize the whole, we must optimize the parts

Systems Thinking

In order to optimize the whole, we must improve relationships among the parts

Conventional vs Systems Thinking

Conventional

The best way to implement change is to aggressively tackle many independent initiatives simultaneously.

Systems Thinking

Only a few high leverage interventions are required for large systems change

“A Learning Organization or Community is ...

... a group of people who are continually enhancing their capacity to create the results they want.

If you think about this statement, it has two parts to it:

*One, you have to know **what you want to create**, so you're continually reflecting on your sense of purpose, vision.*

*And secondly, you have to be continually **developing the capability** to move in that direction.”*

- Peter Senge, Author

1990, *The Fifth Discipline - The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*

1994, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*

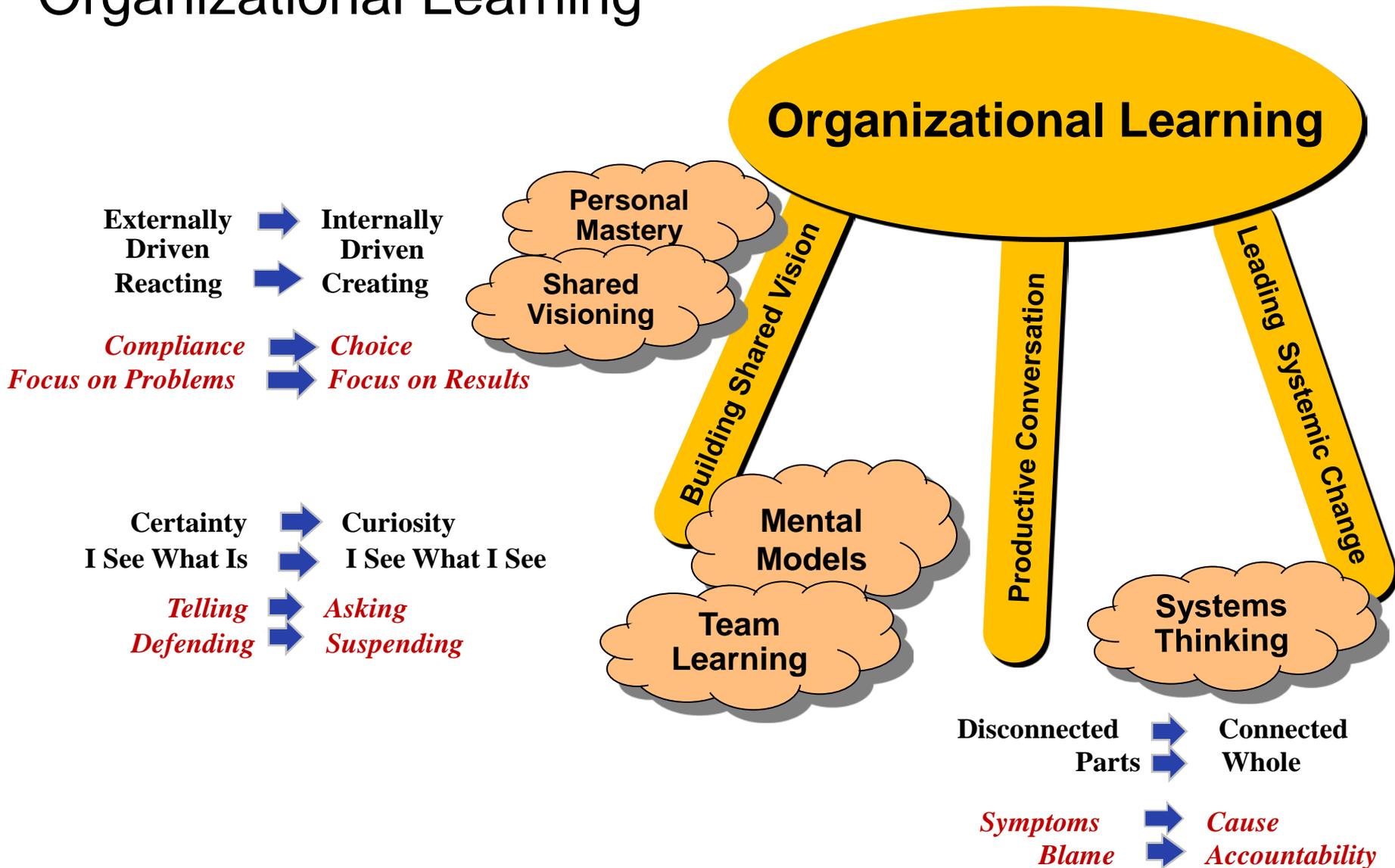
1999, *The Dance of Change*

2000, *Schools that Learn*

2005, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*

2008, *The Necessary Revolution: How Individuals and Organizations Are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World*

The Disciplines of Organizational Learning



The Five Disciplines of Organizational Learning

Building Shared Vision



Personal Mastery: Developing capacity to clarify what is most important to us, and to achieve it.

Shared Visioning: Building a sense of commitment in a group based on what people want to create.

Productive Conversation



Mental Modeling: Developing capacity to reflect on our internal pictures of the world to see how they shape our actions.

Team Learning: Developing capacity for collective intelligence.

Leading Systemic Change



Systems Thinking: Developing capacity for putting pieces together and seeing wholes.

Systems Thinking... why?

- Helps us to recognize **hidden & unintended consequences**
- Enables us to **think deeper and wider** about effective strategies in complex systems
- Can be helpful when thinking about strategy & change - **the short term as well as the long term**
- **Expands the choices** available to us & enables us to focus on higher leverage strategic interventions

Observations about Systems

- Many of today's problems were yesterday's solutions.
- The Law of Unintended Consequences - Systems are seductive... what looks obvious to do often generates non obvious consequences... but NOT right away.
- The Law of Worse Before Better - What works in the short term typically makes things worse in the long term and what works in the long term often makes things worse in the short term.
- The Law of Compensating Feedback – The harder you push on the system the harder the system pushes back.
- We are prisoners of systemic forces to the extent we are unaware of their existence and don't appreciate their power.

Observations about Systems Cont.

- **Systems naturally resist change despite how well-intended the efforts to improve performance are.**
- **We spend enormous time, effort and money fixing problems we don't really understand.**
- **Real leverage points in the system are displaced both in time and in space from the symptoms.**
- **Collective awareness of the system can produce the shifts needed to produce real, sustainable change... when we see it, we no longer have to be controlled by it.**

Basics of Strategy & Change: Establishing Creative Tension

Results/Outcomes
(What you want)



Current Reality
(What you have)



Systems Thinking:

- Establish a **shared** picture of current reality that both honors different perspectives and explains their limitations
- Develop clarity about not only what is happening, but also **why**
- Identify **root causes** of complex, chronic problems
- Anticipate **unintended consequences** of proposed solutions
- Clarify **leverage points** for sustainable improvement in system-wide performance
- **Anticipate and prevent** difficulties from becoming major problems

Using Systems Thinking to Understand Current Reality

1. Why do we have the current reality we have? (*Diagnosis*)

Why do we have this gap (between desired results & current reality)?

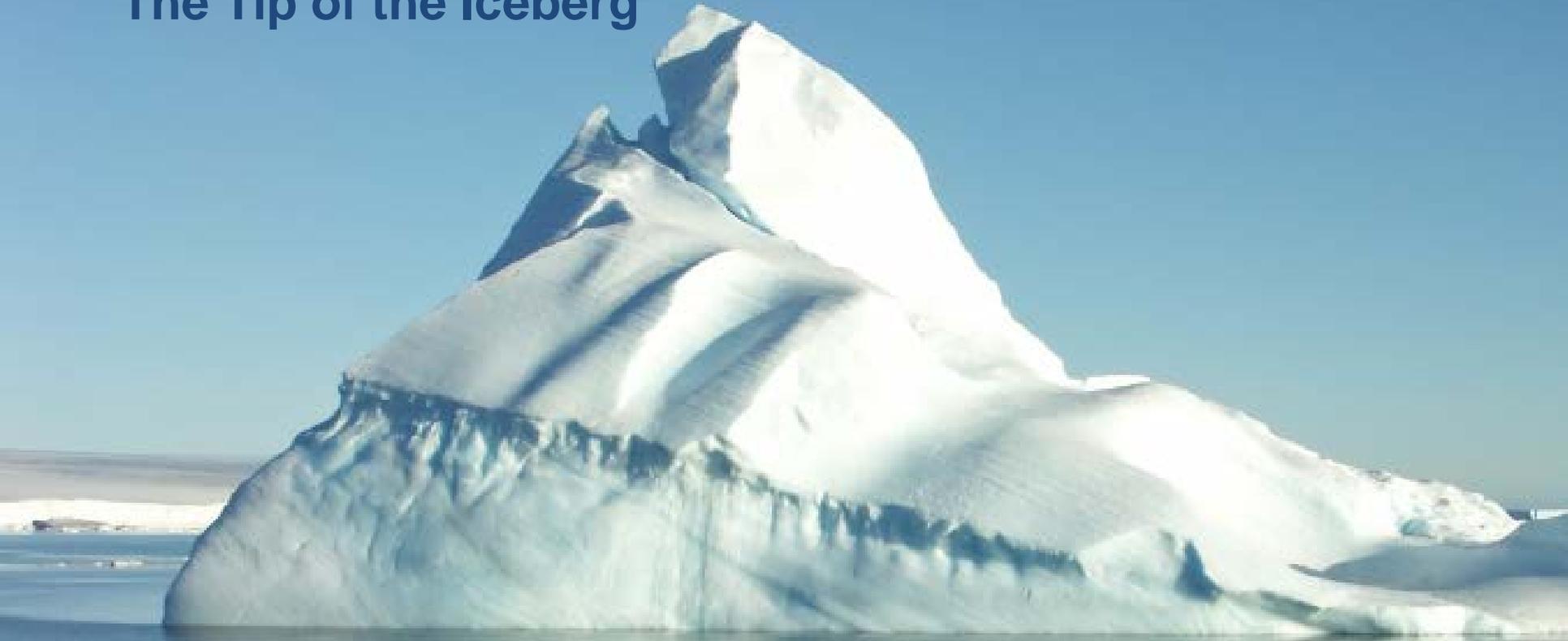
Why has it persisted?

What will prevent or impede change?

What are the barriers to improvement?

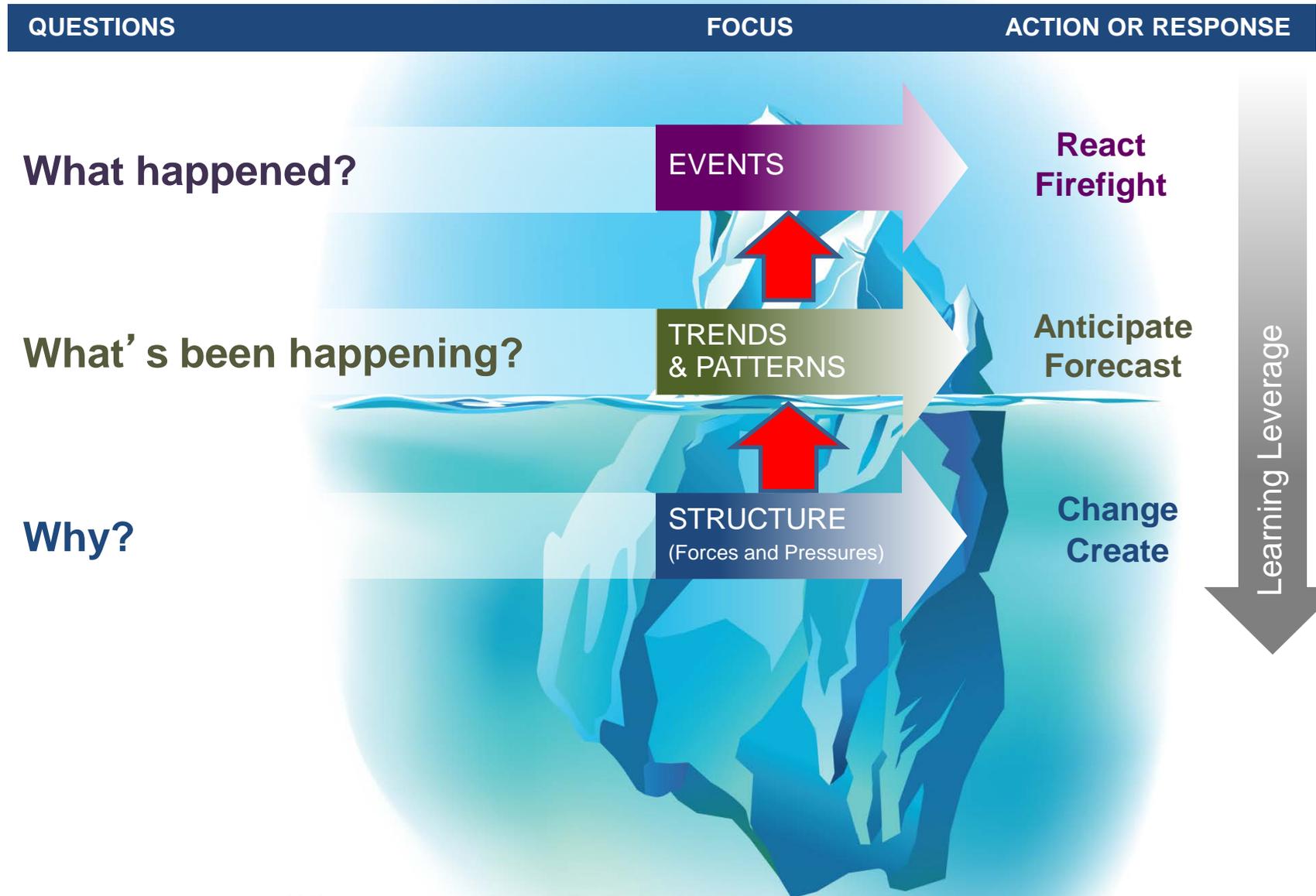
2. **What would be our strategic recommendations for making the most progress on closing the gap based on a systemic view of the current system.** (*Treatment*)

The Tip of the Iceberg



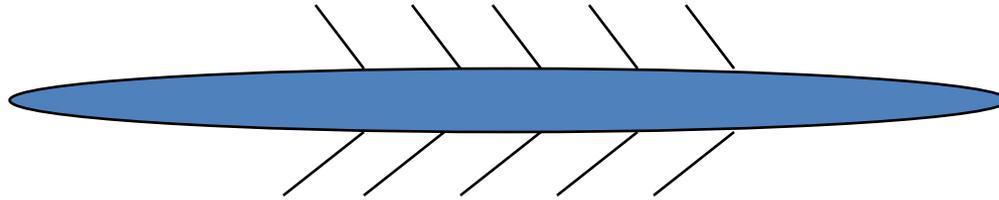
The Iceberg

Deepening Our Understanding of Problems: The Iceberg

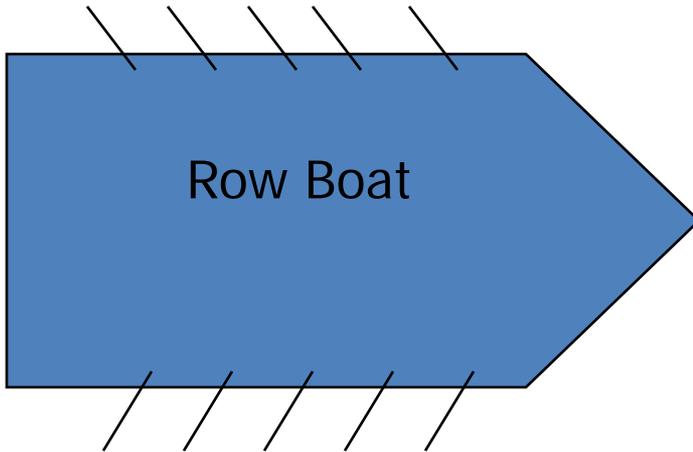


Structure Matters

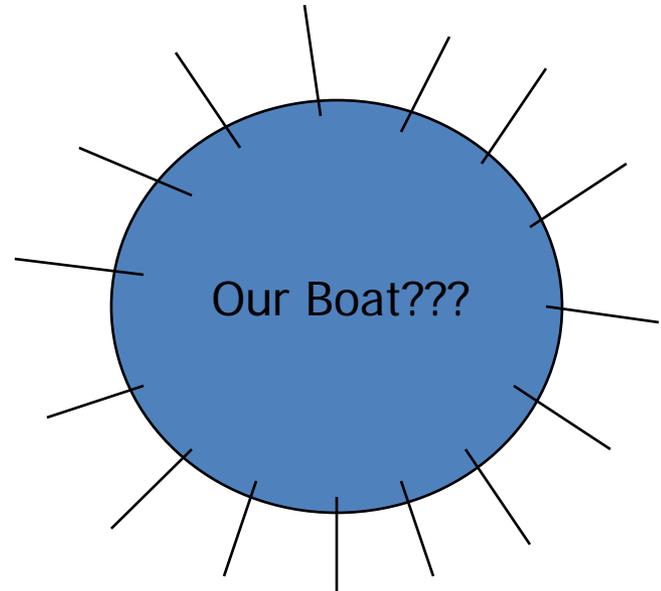
Crew Boat



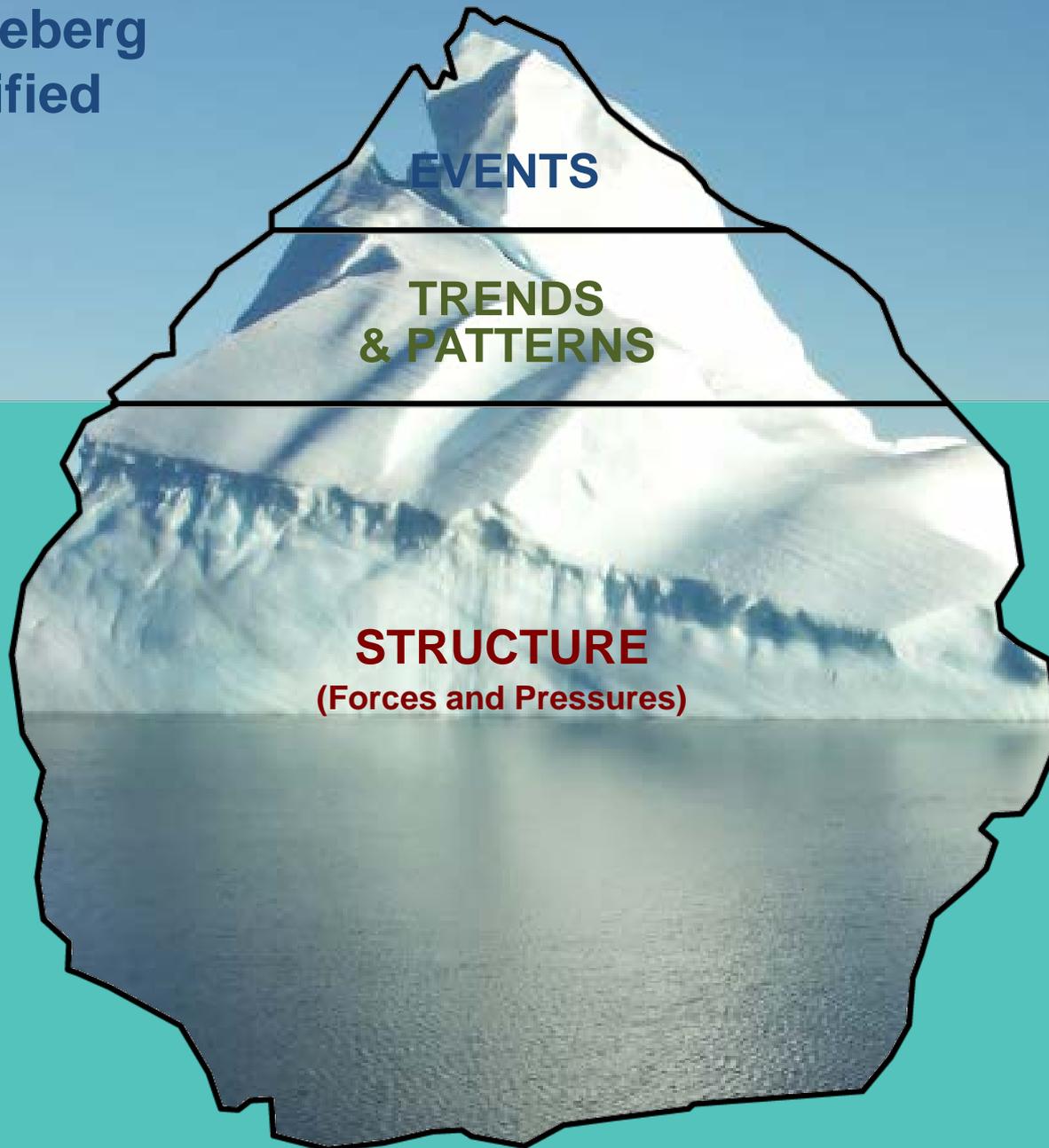
Row Boat



Our Boat???



The Iceberg Simplified

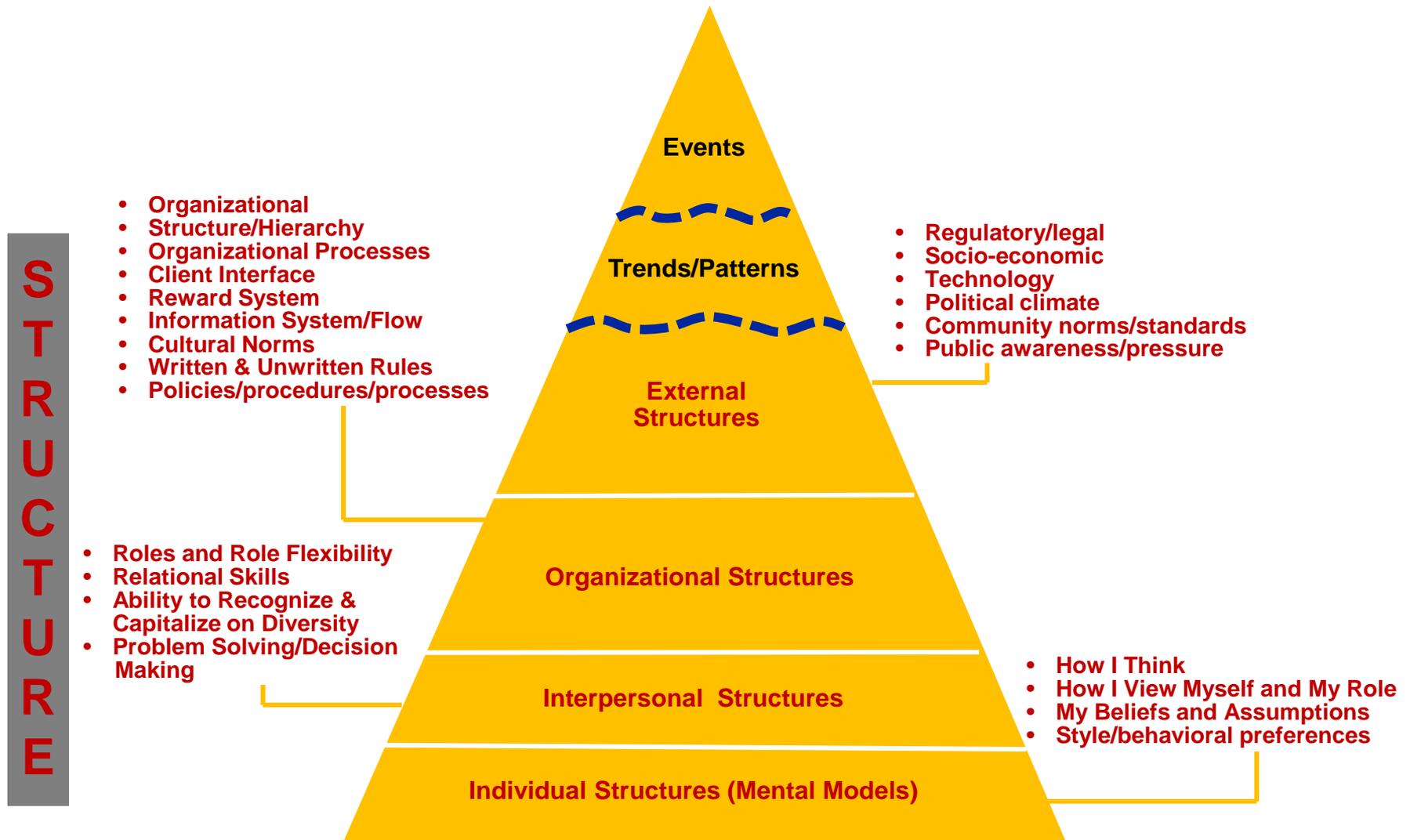


EVENTS

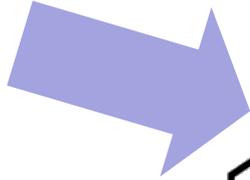
**TRENDS
& PATTERNS**

STRUCTURE
(Forces and Pressures)

Sources of Pressures or Forces



Case Example



EVENTS

**What's getting our
attention or concern?**

**TRENDS
& PATTERNS**

STRUCTURE
(Forces and Pressures)

Case Example of a Wicked Problem:

Ending Homelessness in Calhoun County (Battle Creek, MI)

Events

Calhoun County, MI: estimated
250-500 people homelessness among
population of 100,000

Homeless Coalition* meetings again fail
to deal with the problem: disagreements,
competition, and lack of knowledge cited

Opportunity to receive funding to develop
ten-year plan to end homelessness

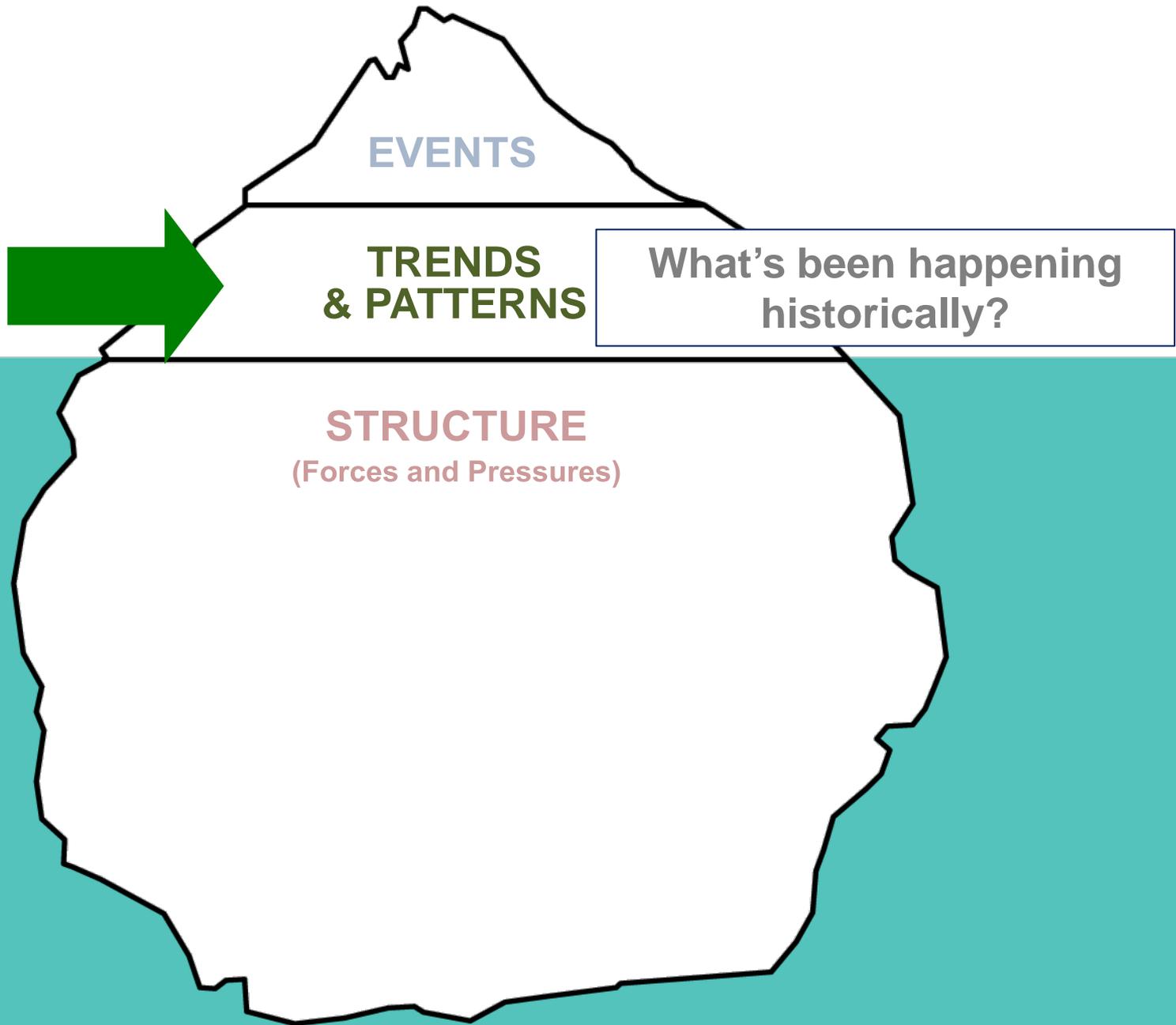
Systems thinking integrated with community building process –
involving political and business leaders, service providers, and
homeless people – to produce the ten-year plan

**A collaborative workgroup of the Coordinating Council of Calhoun County involving 40
providers of services, consumers of those services, funders & city/county reps.*

Focusing Question

*Why, despite our best
efforts, have we been
unable to end
homelessness in Calhoun
County?*

75% “episodically” homeless
25% “chronically” homeless
32% women
68% men
33% mental illness
48% drug and/or alcohol addictions



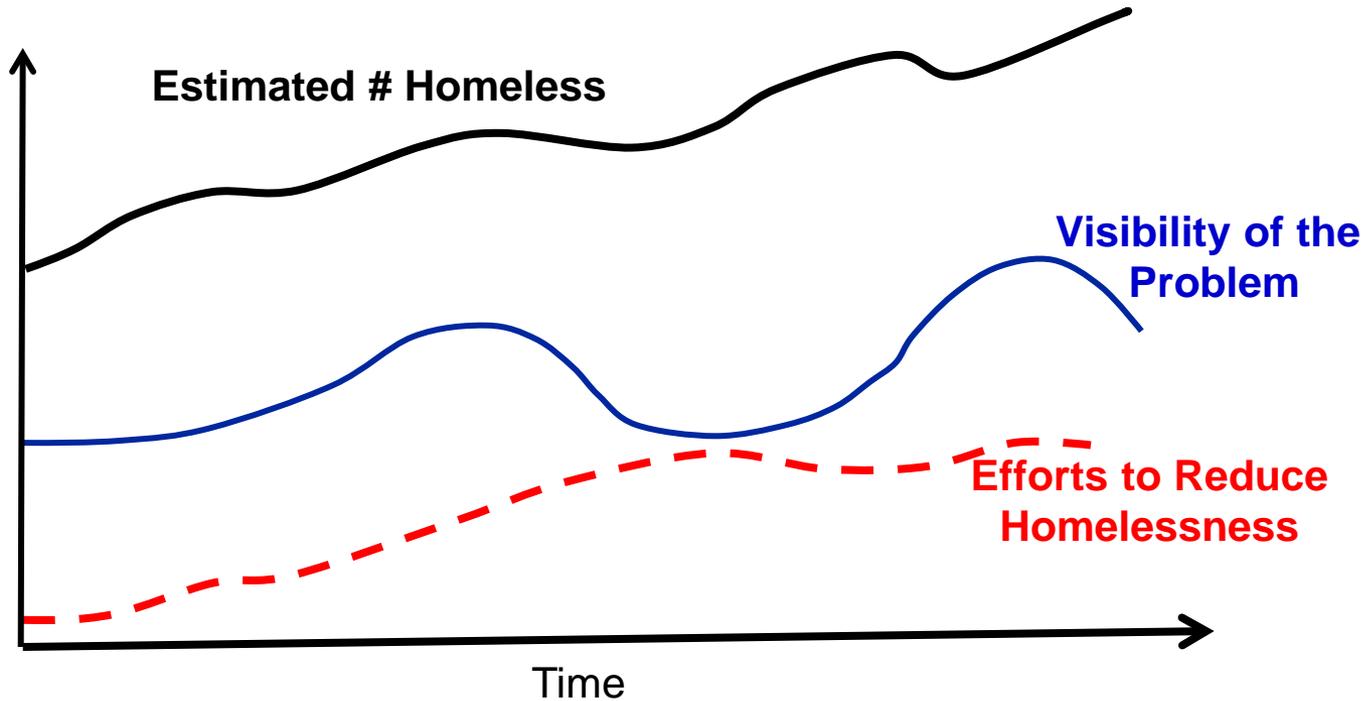
EVENTS

**TRENDS
& PATTERNS**

What's been happening
historically?

STRUCTURE
(Forces and Pressures)

Trend or Pattern Perspective: Calhoun County



EVENTS

TRENDS
& PATTERNS

STRUCTURE
(Forces and Pressures)

**Why has this been happening?
What's generating it?
What's perpetuating it?**

Case Example of a Wicked Problem:

Ending Homelessness in Calhoun County



Focusing Question

Why, despite our best efforts, have we been unable to end homelessness in Calhoun County?

Overview

Homeless System

Stocks & Flows

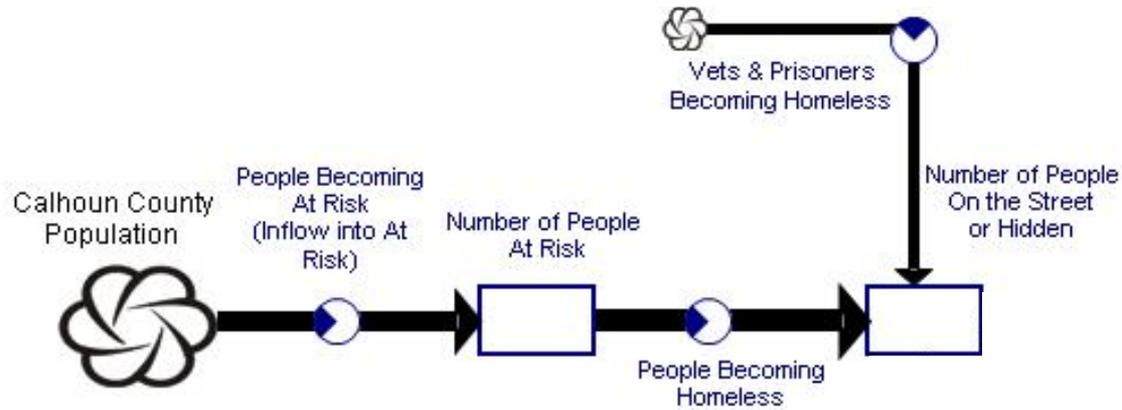
Flow



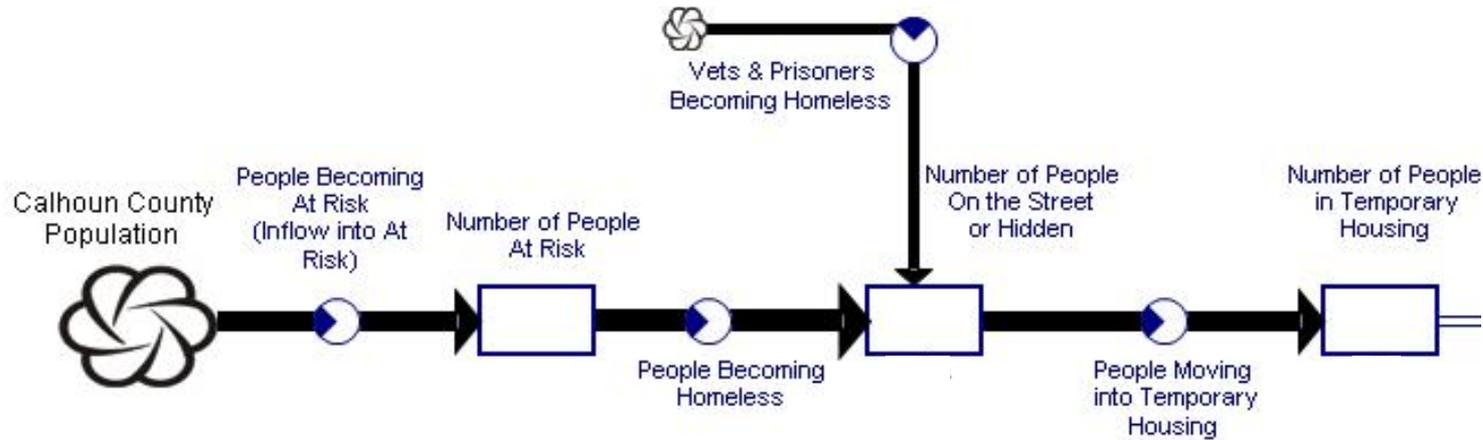
Stock



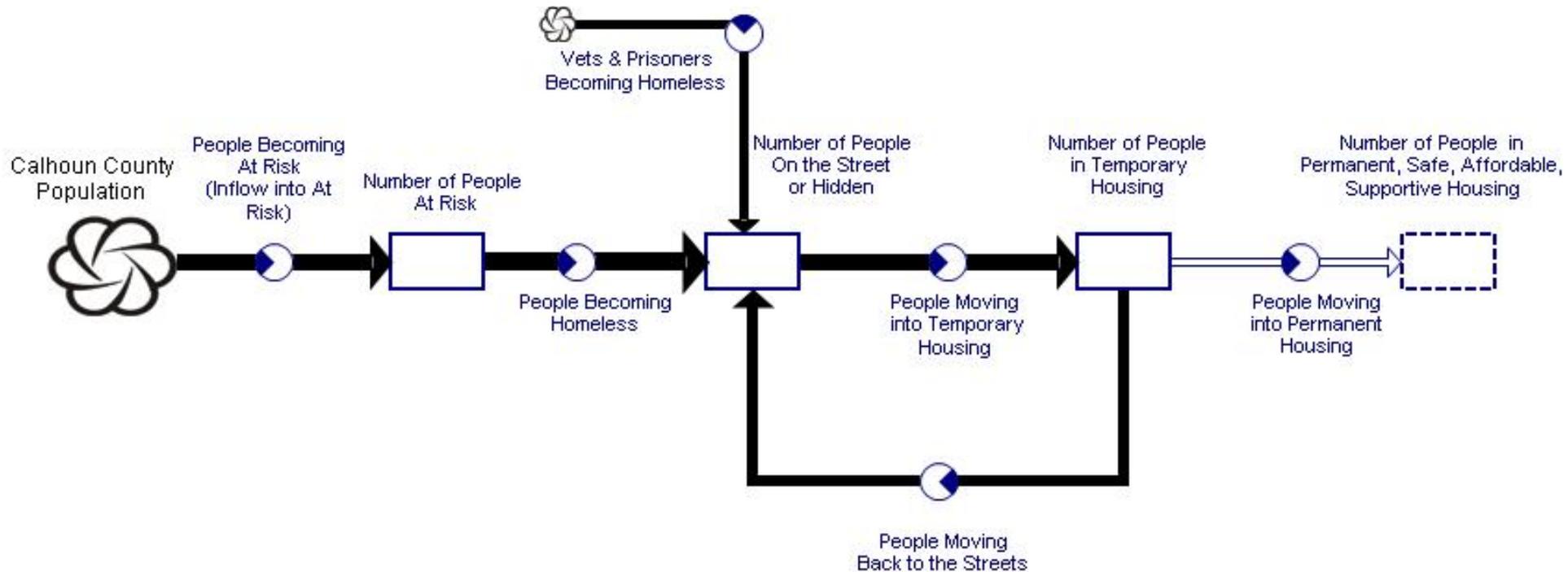
Overview Homeless System



Overview Homeless System

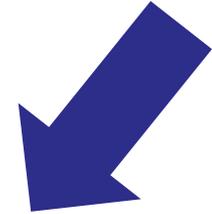


Overview Homeless System



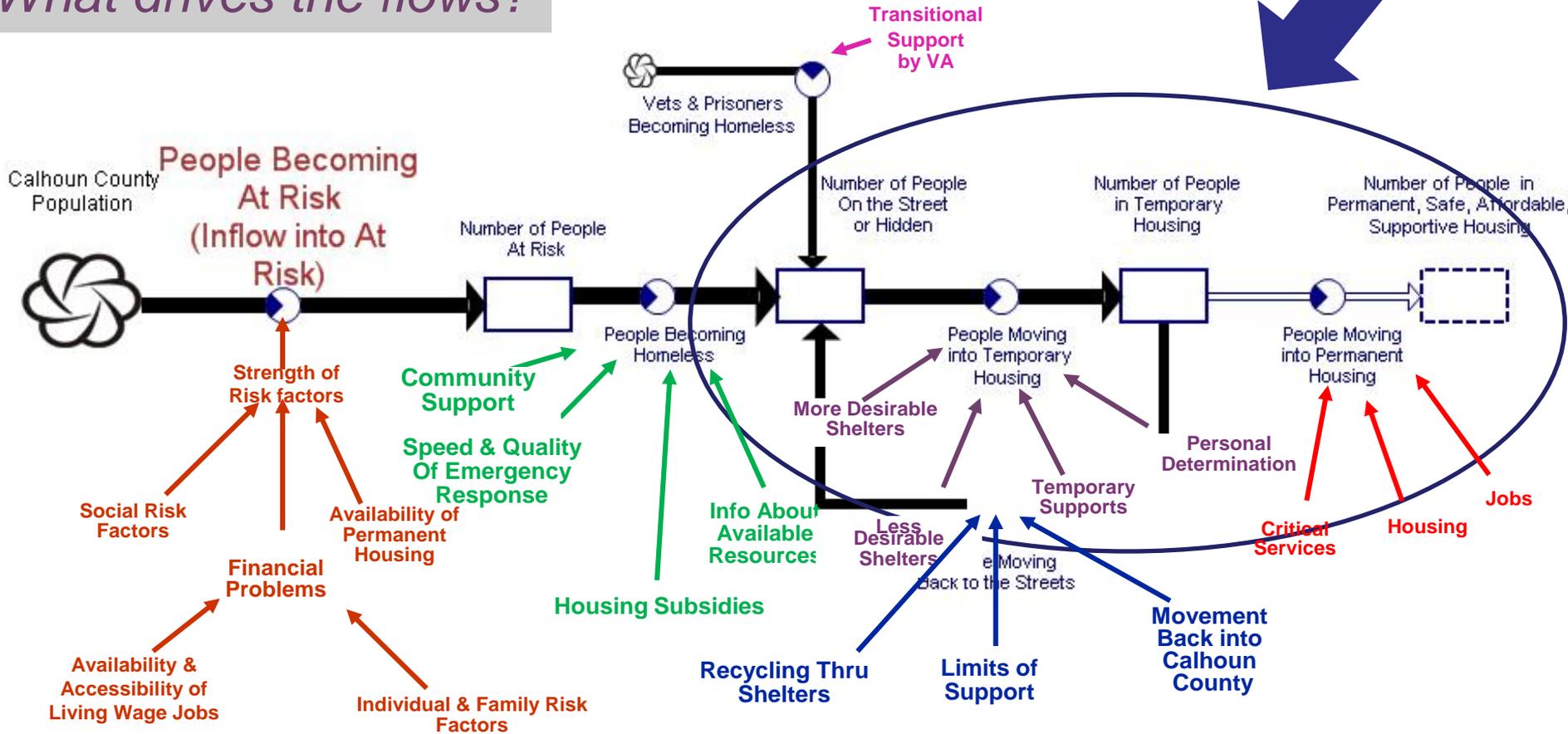
Overview Of Calhoun County Homelessness

Main Focus



What drives the flows?

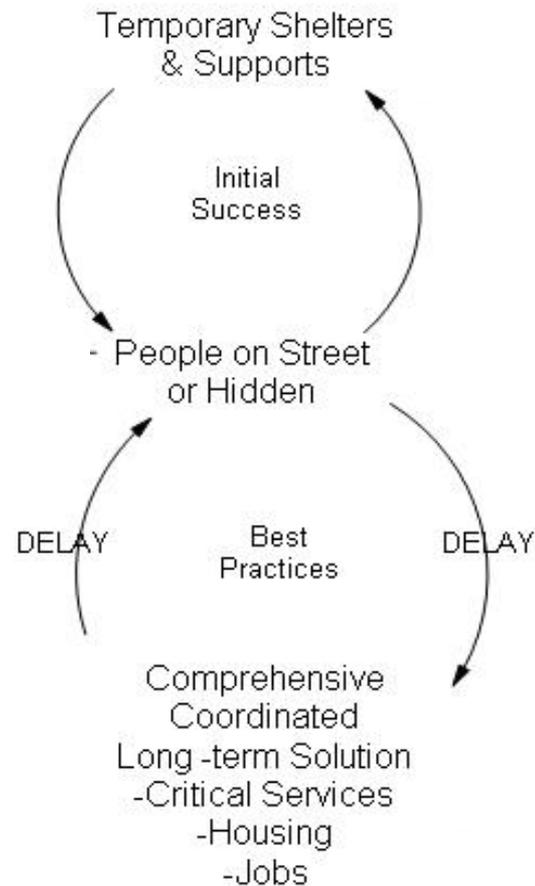
Flows View



Another Way to See the Issue: Use of Temporary Shelters & Supports



Another Way to See the Issue: Short-term Vs. Focus on Long-term Solution



What Keeps People From Moving Into Permanent Housing?

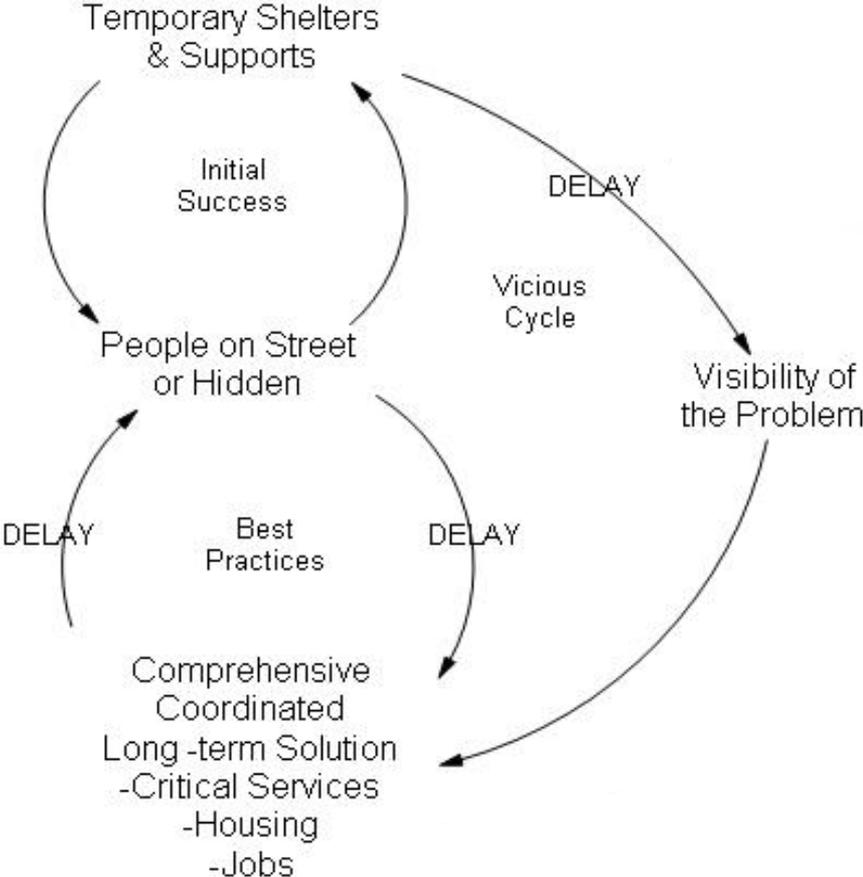
Ironically, temporary success in getting people off the streets has unintended consequences that make it *more* difficult to implement fundamental solutions

Unintended consequences of shelters & temporary placements?

Visibility of the problem of homelessness **decreases**

- Natural reluctance to see the problem in the first place
- Reluctance on the part of homeless people to be seen
- Lack of visibility further reduces pressure on the community to solve the problem
- Lack of data also reinforces the invisibility of problem

What Keeps People From Moving Into Permanent Housing?



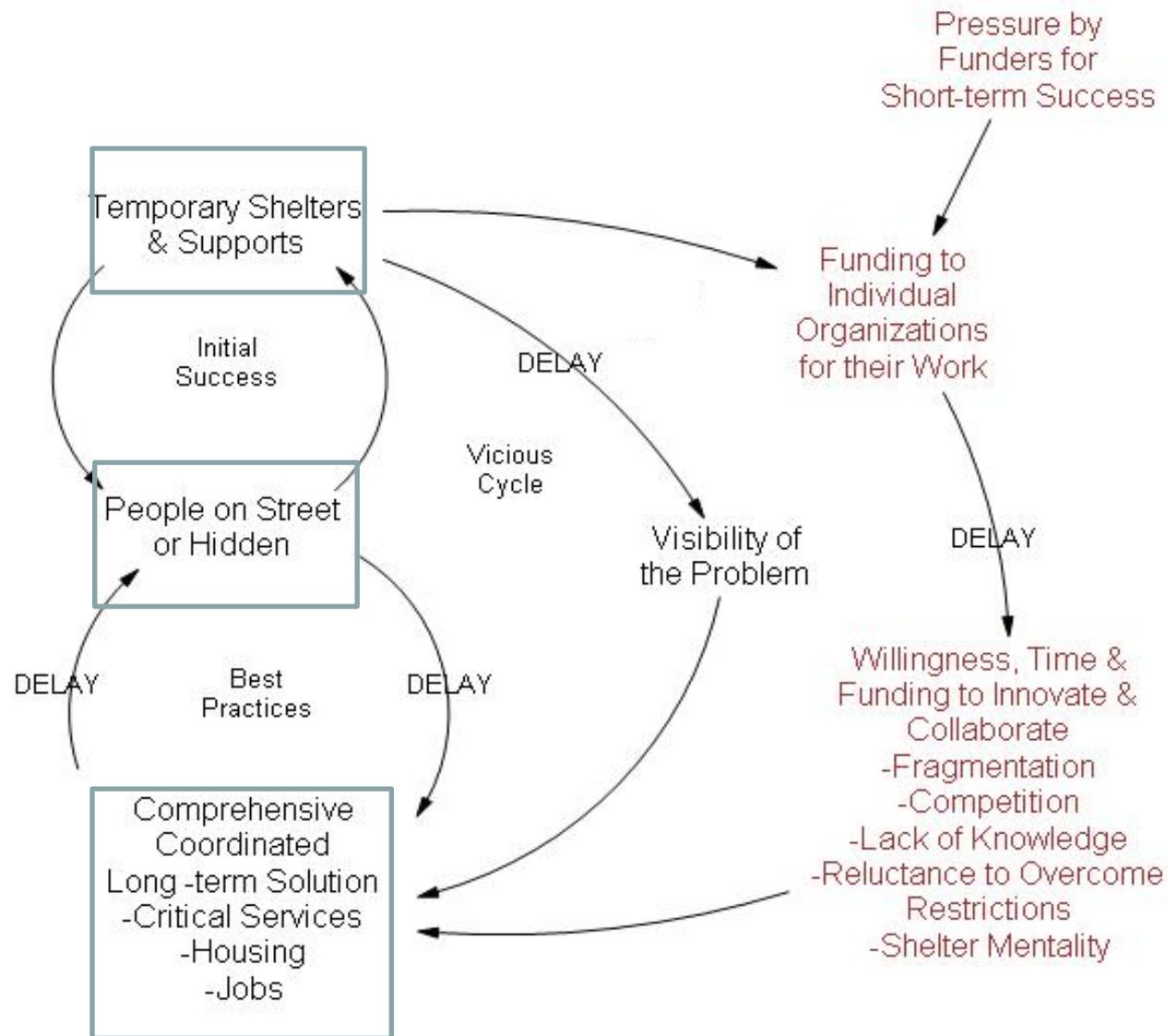
But there is more...

Temporary success and pressure by funders for short-term success **reinforce** funding to individual organizations for their current work.

This decreases their willingness, time, and funding to innovate and collaborate, which in turn leads to:

- Fragmentation of services
- Competition for existing funds
- Lack of broader knowledge of best practices
- Reluctance to overcome government restrictions that make it difficult to innovate
- Shelter mentality

What Keeps People From Moving Into Permanent Housing?



Leverage for Ending Homelessness

- Increase visibility of the problem (without endangering homeless people)
- Establish permanent solutions mindset
- Increase collaboration/alignment among funders
- Increase collaboration/alignment among providers and community
- Improve access to housing, employment, and critical services

Ending Homelessness: **Making a Choice**

- Focusing on temporary shelters has appeared to be the *right* thing to do
- Although shelters help people *cope* with homelessness, they actually make it more difficult to *end* it
- The community, especially service providers, has to make a *choice* between coping with homelessness and ending it

Ending Homelessness: **Learnings**

Jennifer Schrand, Chair of the Calhoun County Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness, observed:

*I learned so much, especially the **difference between changing a particular system and leading systemic change**. You (systems thinking) helped **involve our consumer** – homeless people – in developing the community's ten-year plan to end homelessness. You **expanded the view of service providers** so that they are now committed to helping the consumer overall instead of just “doing their own thing” as individual organizations. Agencies took a hard look together at their individual and collective responsibilities for failing to end homelessness, and **recognized that their emergency work hides the problem** and reduces community pressure to solve it. The **goals of our new plan** to end homelessness derive directly from your analysis of the whole system and identification of leverage points to achieve a sustainable solution.*

Ending Homelessness: Results

Plan funded: Leverage points identified by a shared understanding of why homelessness persisted became the basis for state approved plan

Collaborative breakthrough: Homeless Coalition voted unanimously to reallocate HUD funding from one service provider's transitional housing program to permanent supportive housing program run by another provider

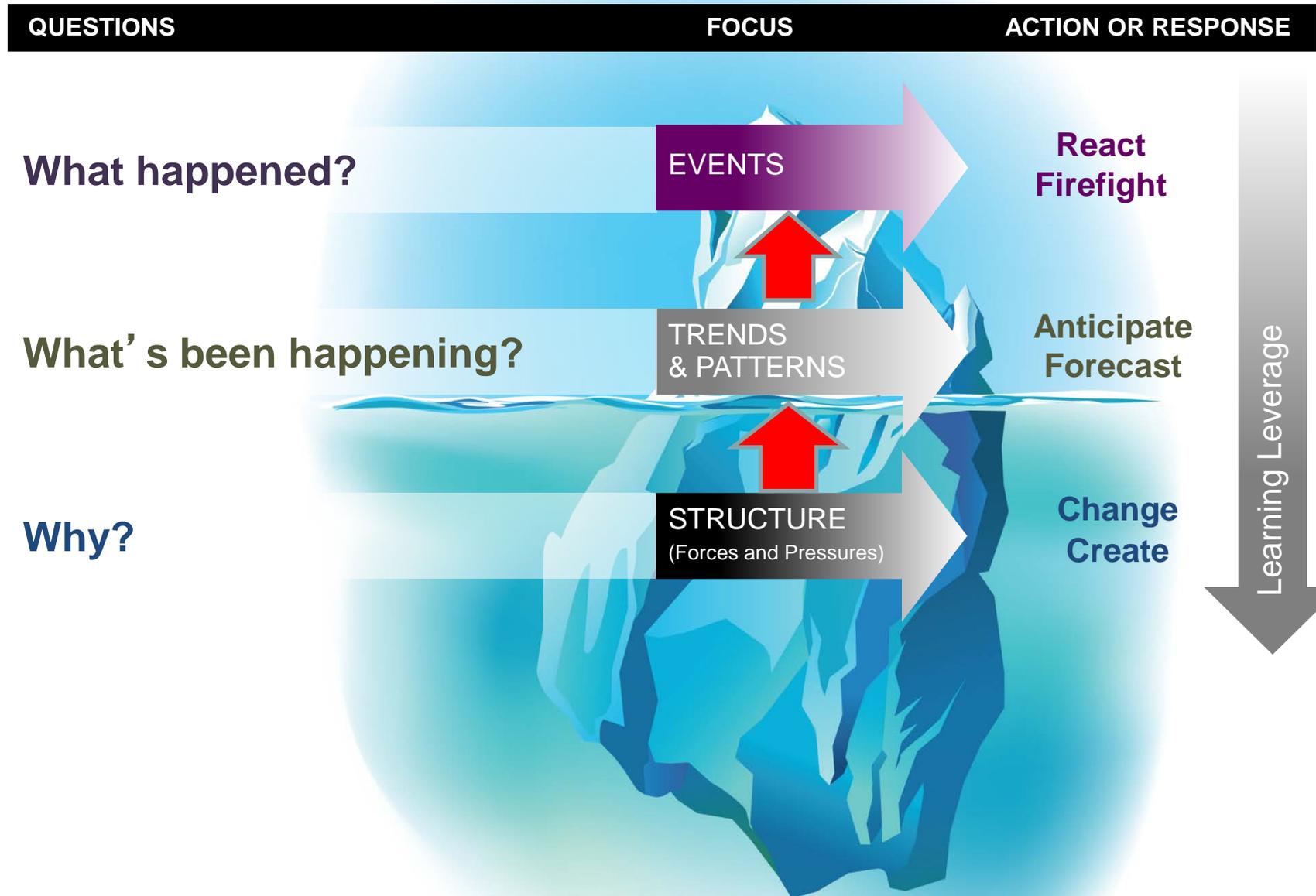
Quantitative results: In 2012, six years into the ten year plan, the county reported that homelessness decreased by 14% *despite* the 2008 economic collapse & a 34% increase in unemployment in the county

What makes for good systems thinking issues?

The problem/issue is chronic

- There is a known history – we have data and are knowledgeable about the issue
- Prior attempts to solve the problem have failed
- Multiple perspectives exist on why we have the problem & what should be done
- We believe there is more to be learned about the issue
- We have some control or influence over the situation including access to the key stakeholders

Deepening Our Understanding of Problems: The Iceberg



An Iceberg Exercise

Identify the Structure

What are the forces & pressures at work?

What is perpetuating or exacerbating the problem?

- **Develop a list of important drivers or factors contributing to or perpetuating the problem**

(Suggestion: Use sources of pressures or forces list on earlier slide)

- **Use Brainstorming**
- **Avoid solutions or fixes**

Example

- Factors That Create Risk
 - Individual and family risk factors, e.g. poverty, discrimination, and lack of education; substance abuse, mental illness, DV; lack of support for minors; absence of life management skills, underlying self-esteem
 - Limited permanent, accessible, living wage jobs
 - Financial problems stemming from above, e.g. difficulty paying for medical emergencies and child support – not just rent and food
 - Limited permanent, safe, affordable, supportive housing
 - Social risk factors, e.g. aging, meth lab immigration
- Dynamics That Increase Risk
 - Renting to people who are at risk reduces housing affordability *for landlords*, which increases vacant housing or gentrification and decreases quality of the remaining stock
 - Vulnerability to scams, e.g. slum lords, quick cash

Conversation

What are the **structural drivers/factors** that support and what are the factors that impede our organization's ability to deal effectively **with the wicked problems we face?**

What are the barriers that hinder our effectiveness as an organization?

Mental Models

What are our Mental Models?

The beliefs, assumptions, and models we have are about every aspect of ourselves, others, our organizations, and how the world works.

- They are critical to our effectiveness.
- They affect how we think and how we act.
- They may be conscious, or unconscious; they can get us into trouble.
- It's easier to see others' mental models and harder to see our own.
- They are always incomplete and often flawed.
- They are high leverage.

Mental Models Examples

“Who would ever want a computer in their home.”

“The only way anything changes around here is when our senior leaders change it.”

“Learning is what we do outside of work.”

“The world is a big machine we own & operate.”
(Vs. “The world is a garden we live in & tend.”)

Mental Models Question

What are the prevailing mental models that will enable our organization to deal effectively with the wicked problem we face?

What are the mental models that will be (or already are) barriers to change and improvement?

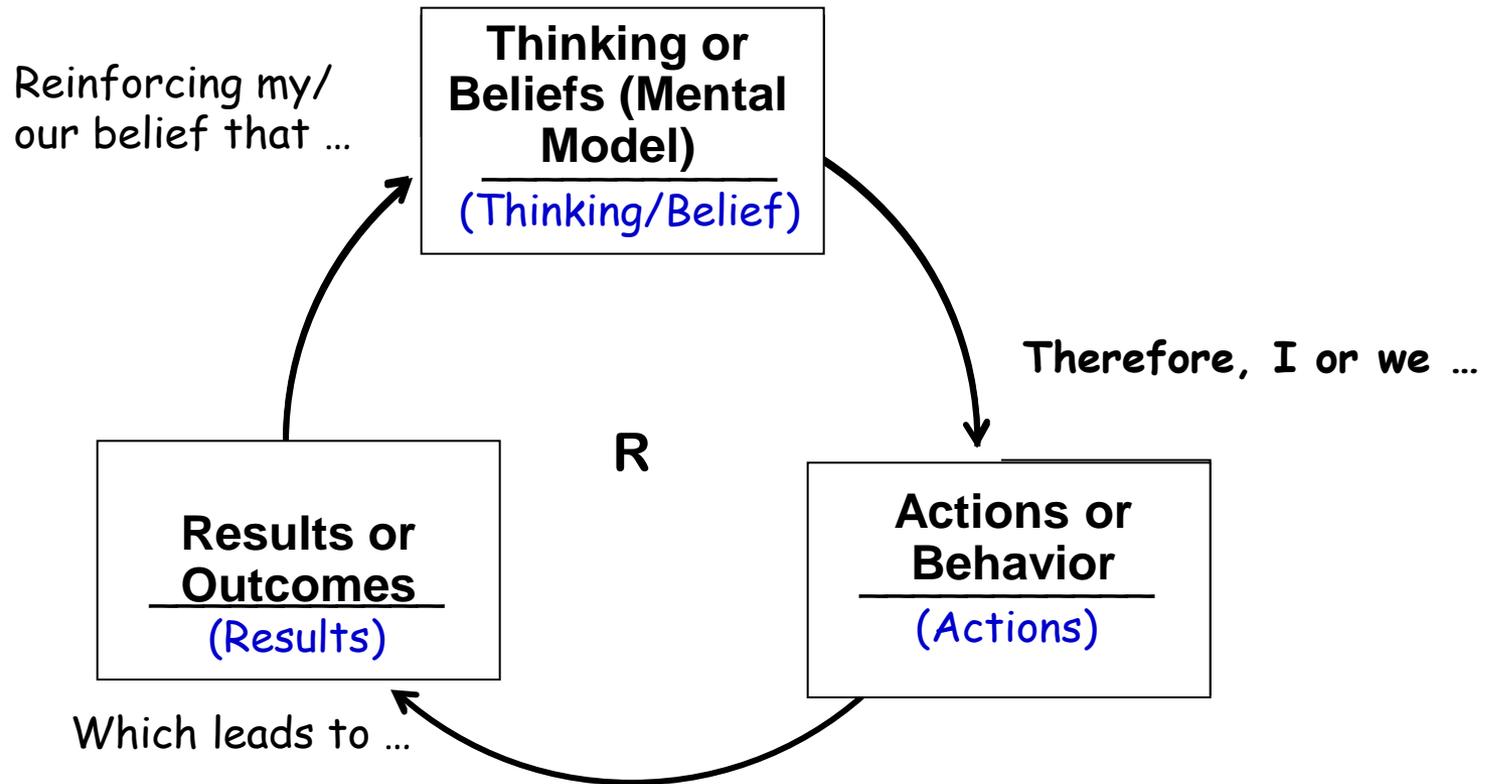
Write them as if they were statements of fact:

“The only way anything changes around here is when our senior leaders change it.”

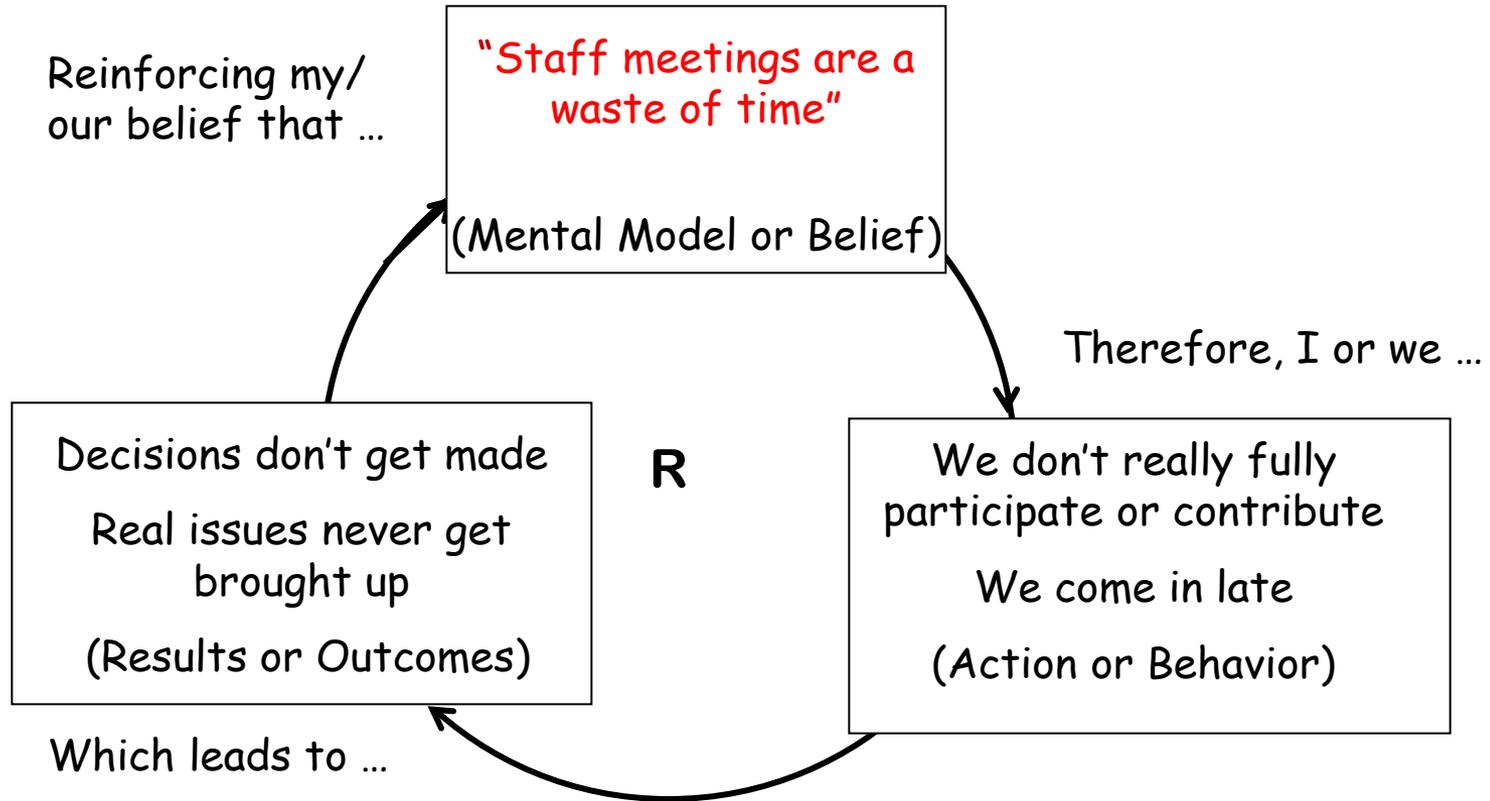
“Things only get done when we have a major crisis.”

“Meetings are a waste of time.”

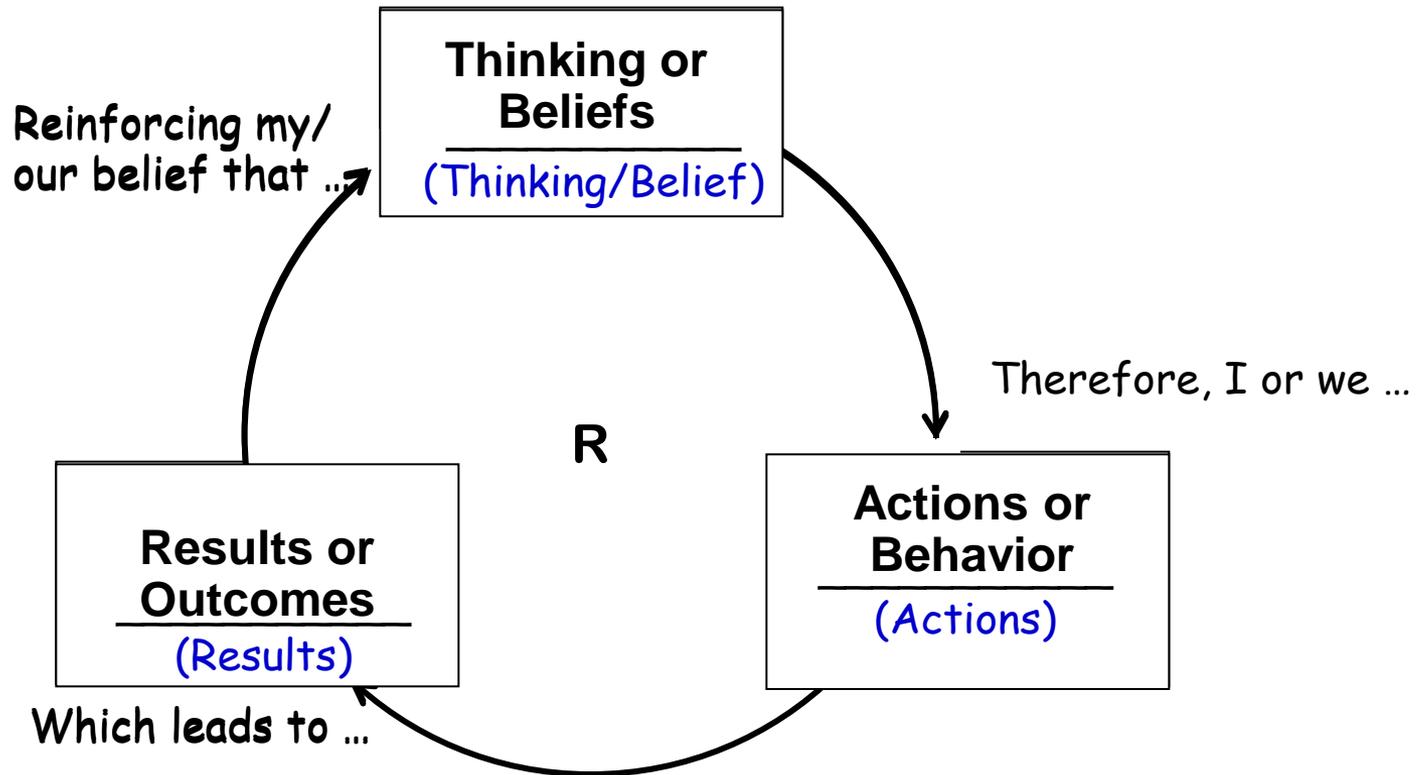
Belief-Action-Results Maps



Beliefs – Actions – Results Loop: Example



Develop a BAR map using one of the mental models you just identified



Advocacy-Inquiry-Summarizing

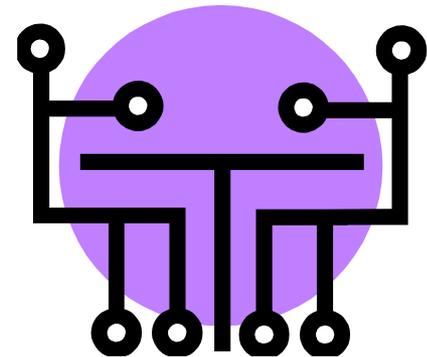


- **Inquiry:** Asking questions that are designed to solicit the other person's point of view and opinion.
- **Advocacy:** Sharing your expertise, viewpoint, and assessments.
- **Summarizing (Acknowledging):** Sorting out the central aspects of their message and paraphrasing it back.

Café Dialog

Purpose

- Build the collective intelligence of this community of people by sharing ideas and experiences horizontally
- Learn how this community of colleagues is thinking about important issues
- Learn a process we can apply back at work
- Practice skills e.g. like inquiry



"Café" is a Process

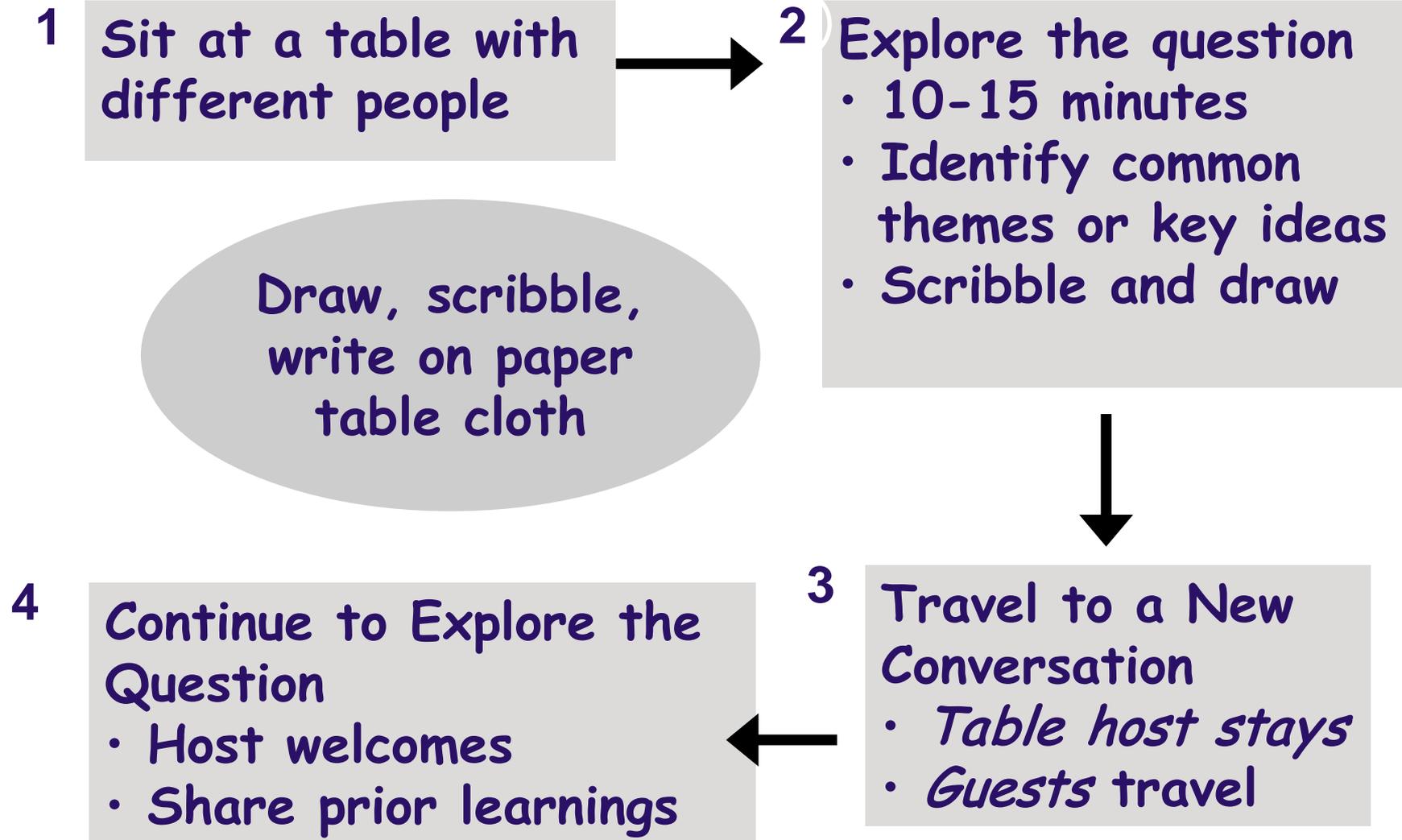


Table Host Job

- Remind people at your table to jot down key connections, ideas, discoveries and deeper questions
- Remain at table when others leave and welcome travelers from other tables
- Briefly share key insights from the prior conversation so others can link & build using ideas from other tables

Café Etiquette

- Focus on what matters
- Contribute your thinking
- Speak your mind & heart
- Listen to understand
- Link and connect ideas
- Listen together **for insights and deeper questions**
- Play, doodle, draw... **writing on the tablecloths is encouraged**
- Have fun

Café Question

How do we leverage our role as board members to enable our organizations to become highly capable of learning and adapting?

Café Debrief

What are common themes that emerged from your conversations?

On what themes/issues was there a lot of energy?

Resource List

Books

- Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline
- Peter Senge et al, The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook

Websites

- Applied Systems Thinking: www.appliedsystemsthinking.com
- Society for Organizational Learning: www.solonline.org

Online Systems Thinking Course

- www.iseesystems.com