



# Tackling Wicked Problems

**SUPPORTING  
COMMUNITY CHANGE:  
FUNDERS' PERSPECTIVE**

Michael Goodman

January 15, 2015

## 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
  - Sharing our experiences in dealing with wicked problems-learnings
  - “Improving Impact Through Systems Thinking” – Ripple Foundation experience (Laura Landy CEO)
- 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*

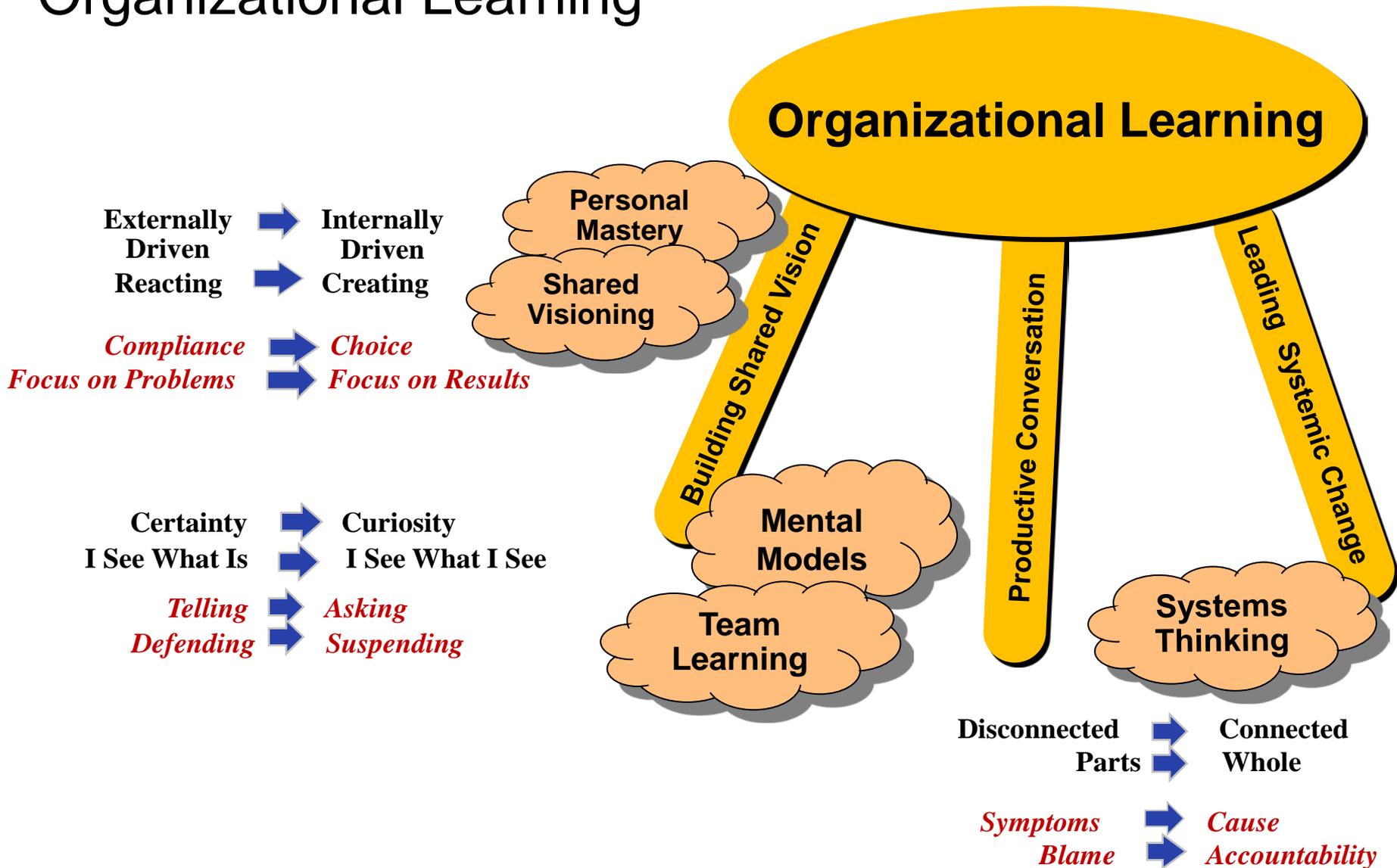
1999, *The Dance of Change*

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

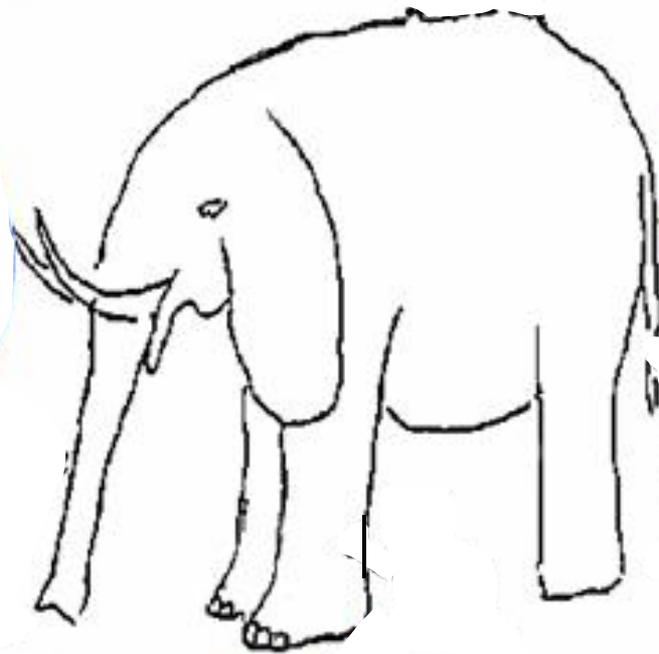


**Systems Thinking:** Developing capacity for putting pieces together and seeing wholes.

# 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

# Systems Thinking – Seeing the Whole



S.GROSS

# 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?*

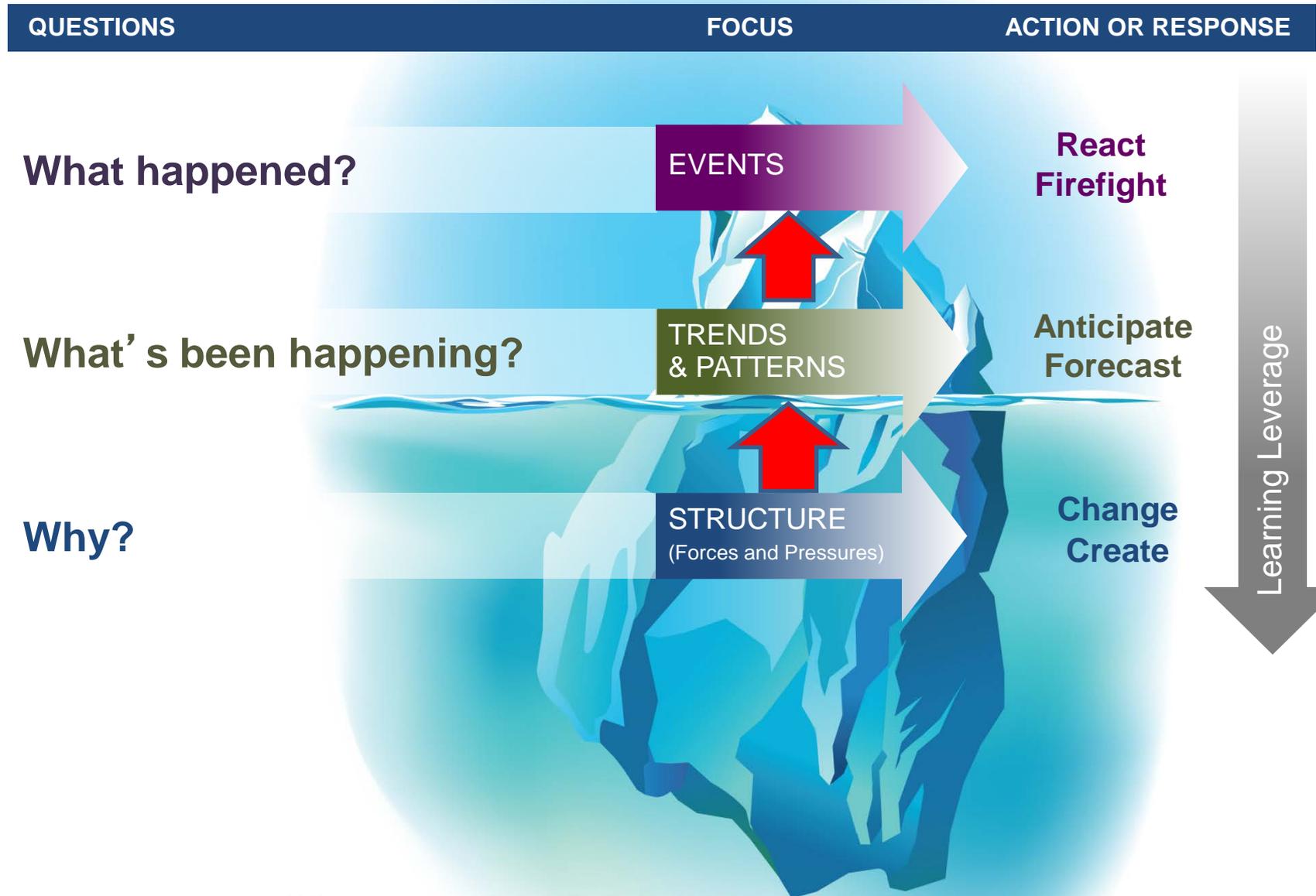
## 2. **What would be our strategic recommendations for making the most progress on closing the gap based on a systemic view of the current system. (*Treatment*)**

**The Tip of the Iceberg**

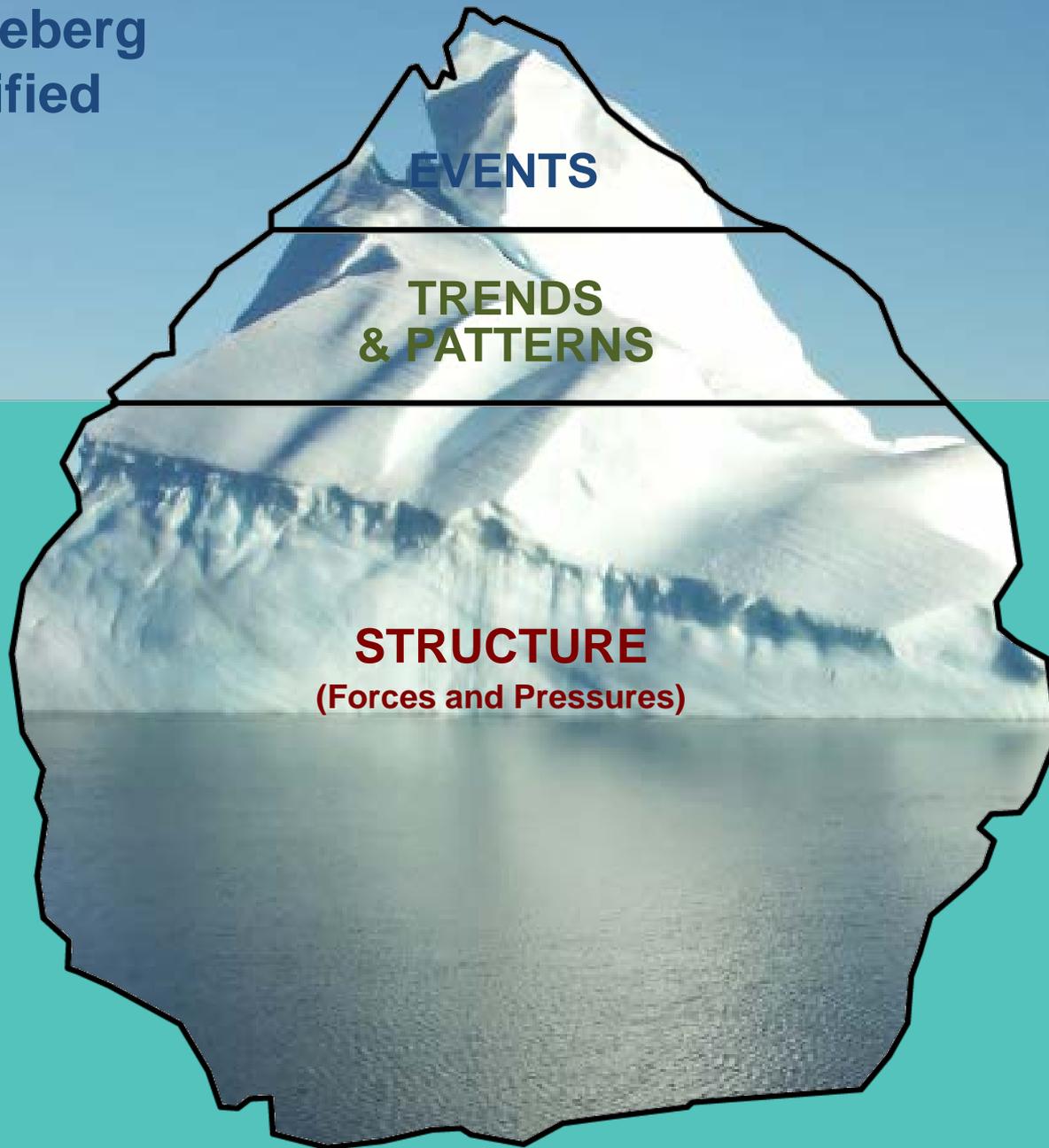


The Iceberg

# Deepening Our Understanding of Problems: The Iceberg



# The Iceberg Simplified

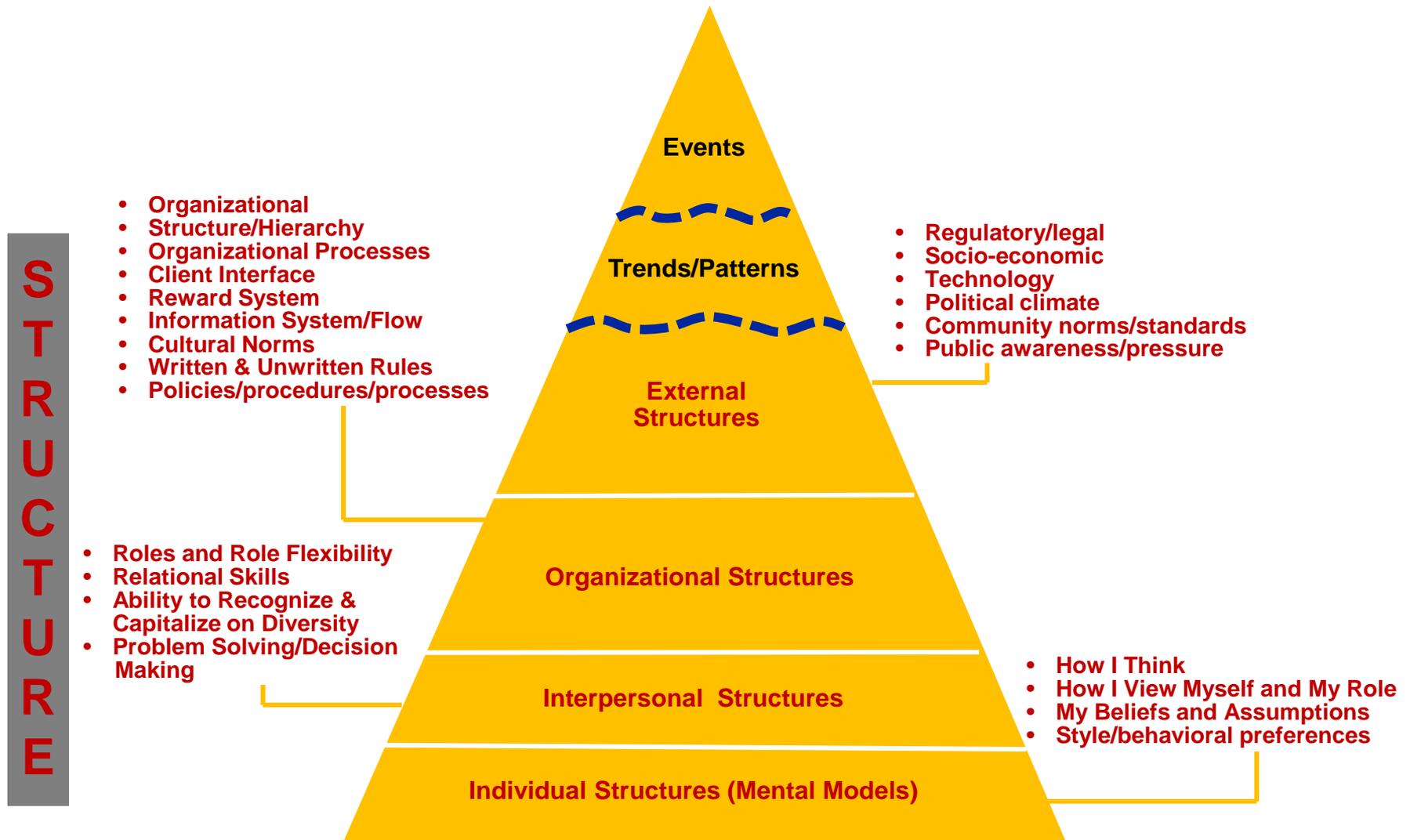


**EVENTS**

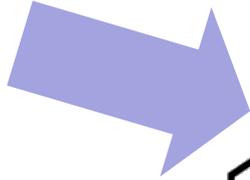
**TRENDS  
& PATTERNS**

**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

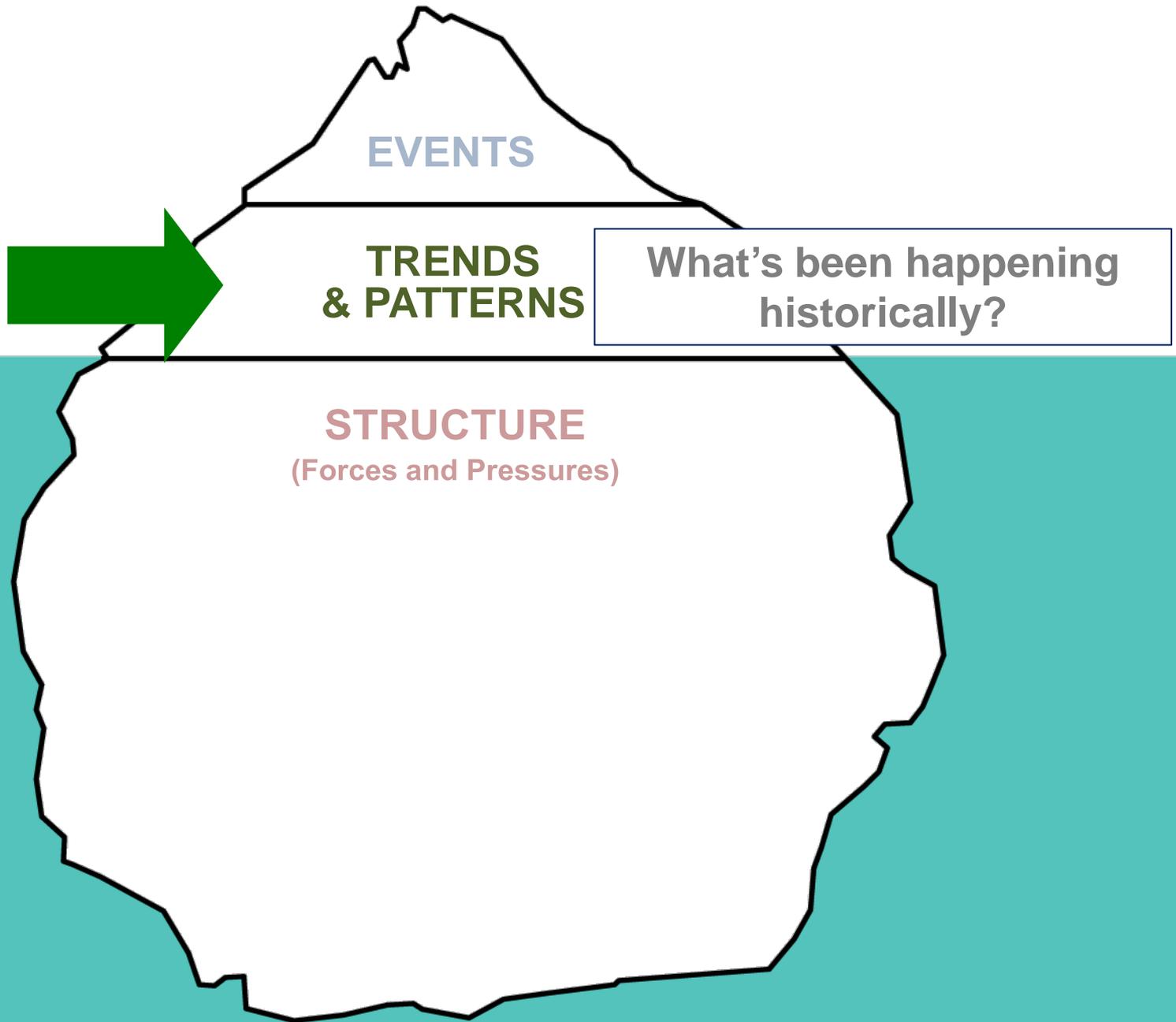
Systems thinking integrated with community building process –  
involving political and business leaders, service providers, and  
homeless people – to produce the ten-year plan

*\*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



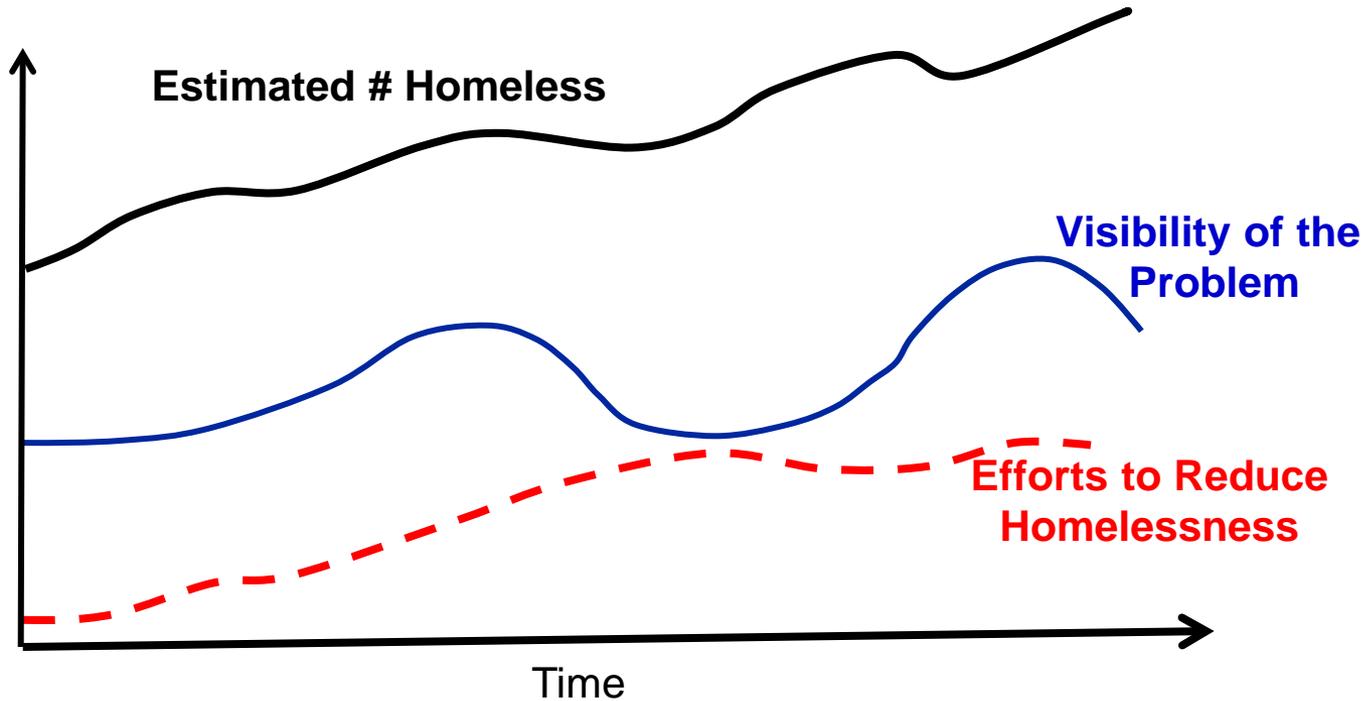
EVENTS

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

Some of the pieces:  
Structural elements  
& drivers

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

# Overview

## Homeless System

### *Stocks & Flows*

Flow



Stock

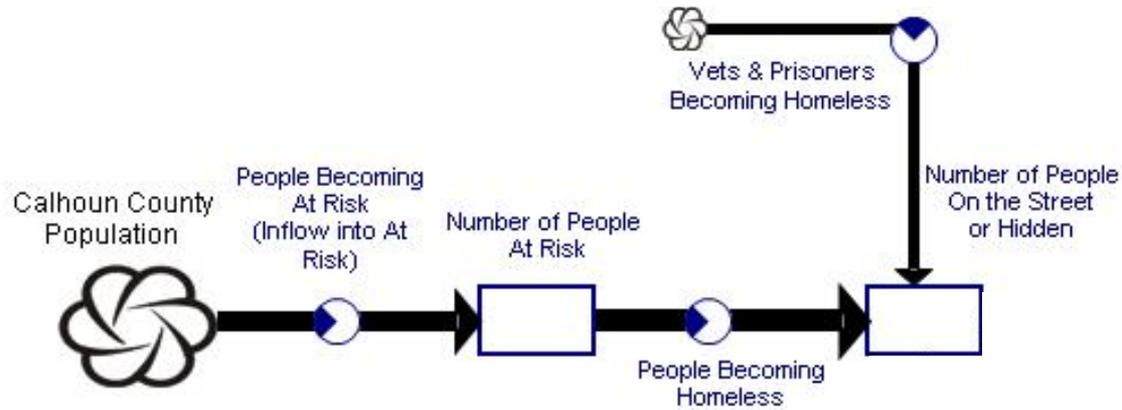


Calhoun County  
Population

People Becoming  
At Risk  
(Inflow into At  
Risk)

Number of People  
At Risk

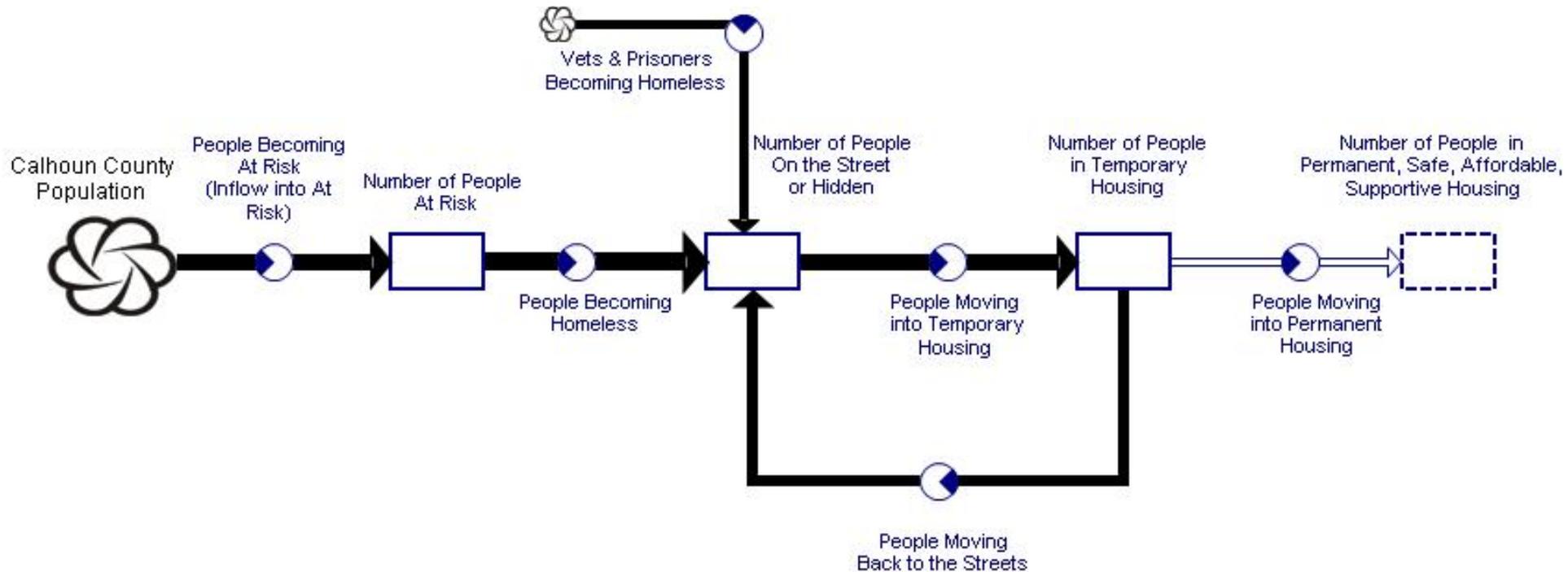
# Overview Homeless System



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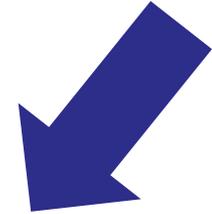


# Overview Homeless System



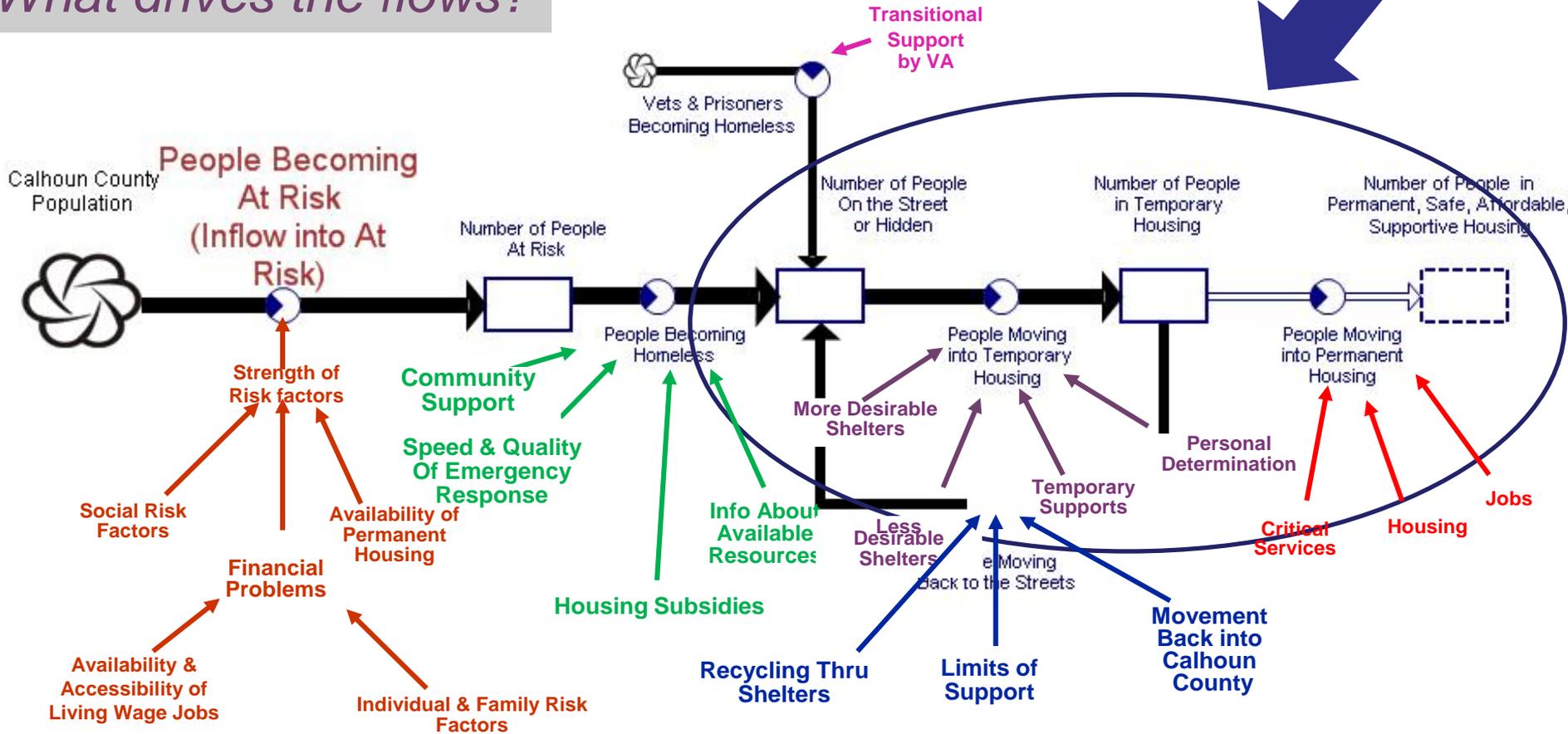
# Overview Of Calhoun County Homelessness

**Main Focus**



*What drives the flows?*

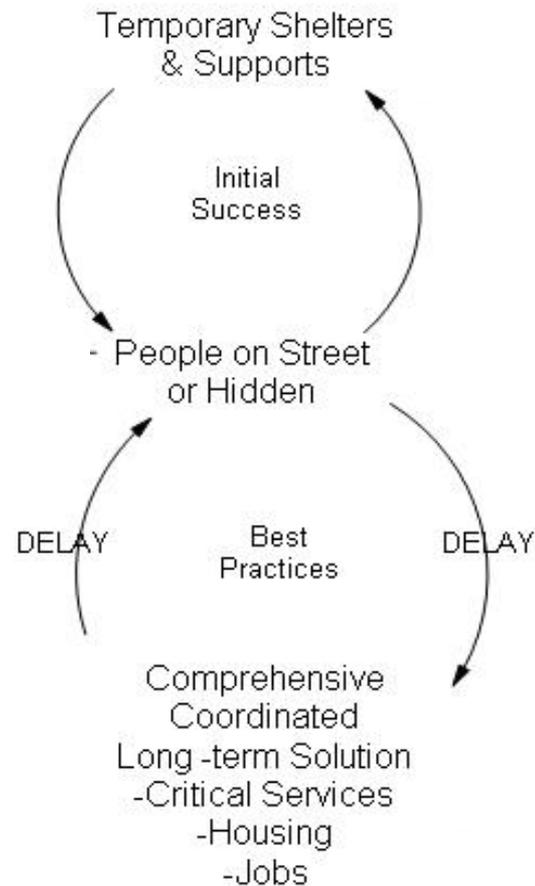
## Flows View



# 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?

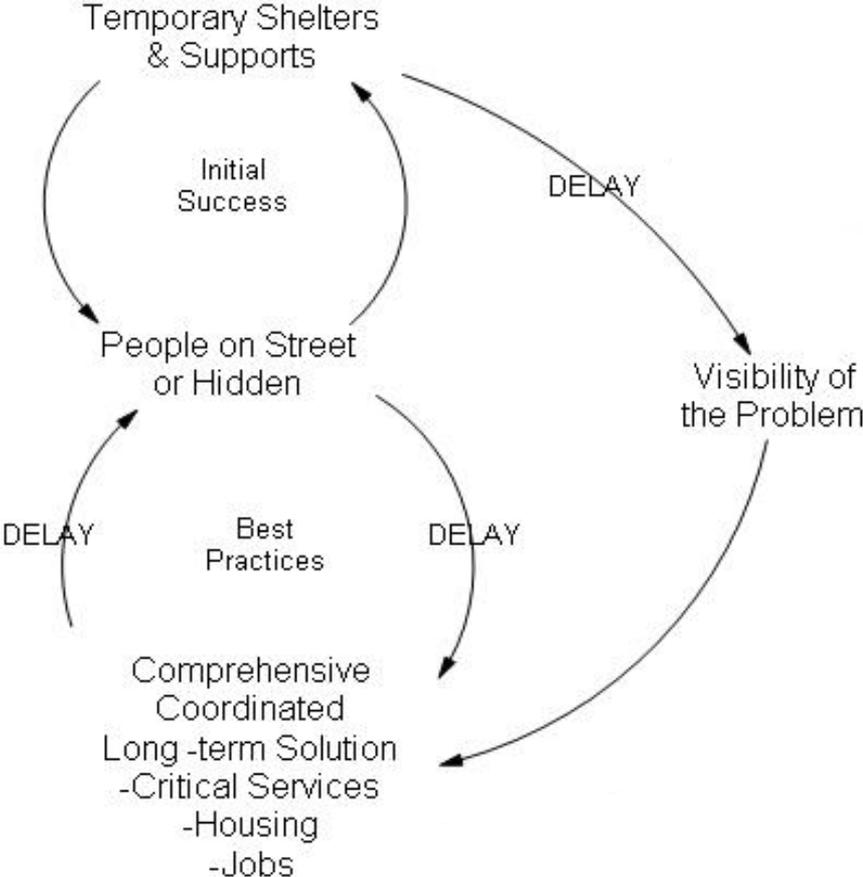
Ironically, temporary success in getting people off the streets has unintended consequences that make it *more* difficult to implement fundamental solutions

# 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?



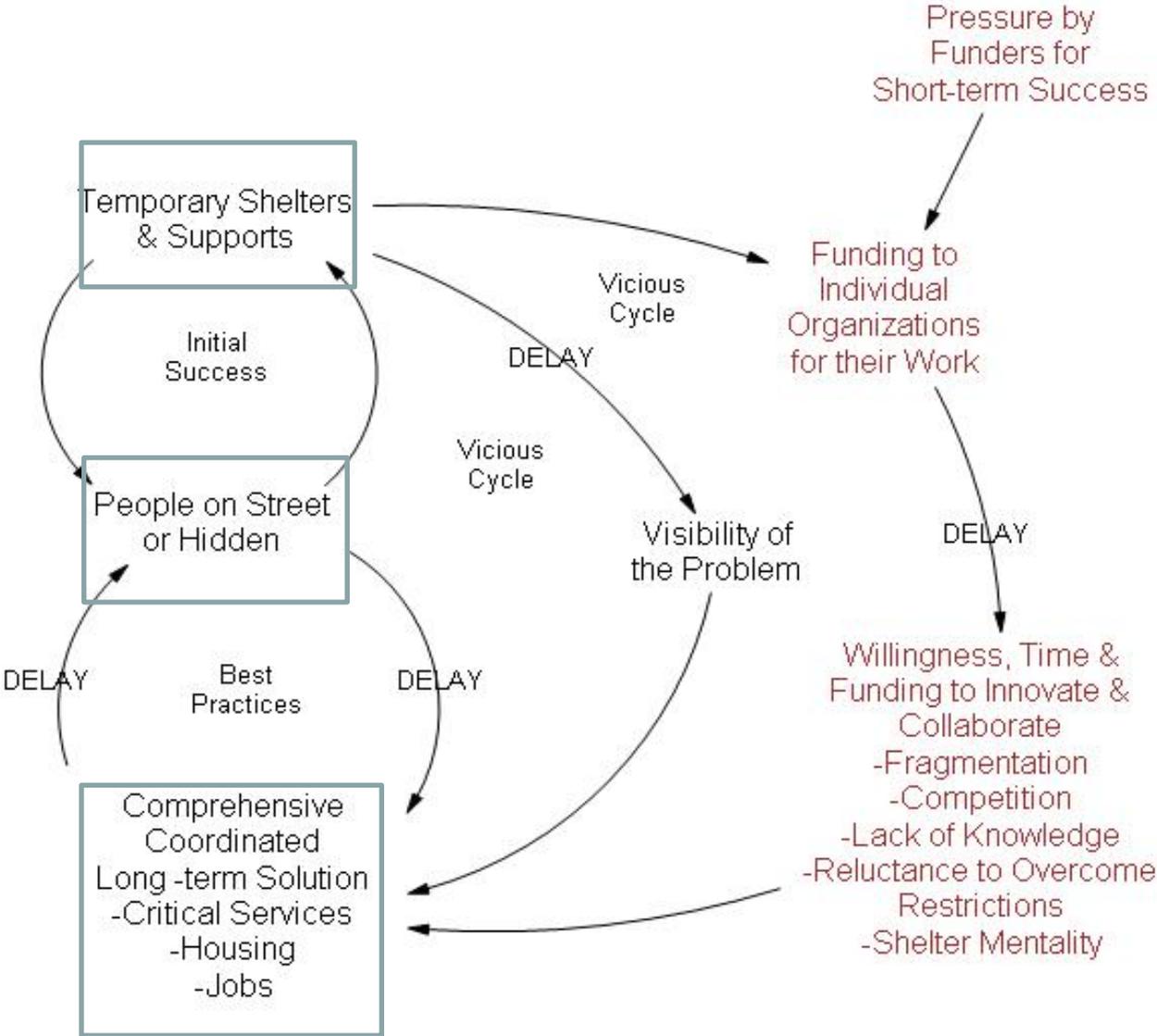
## But there is more...

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**

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- 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

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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

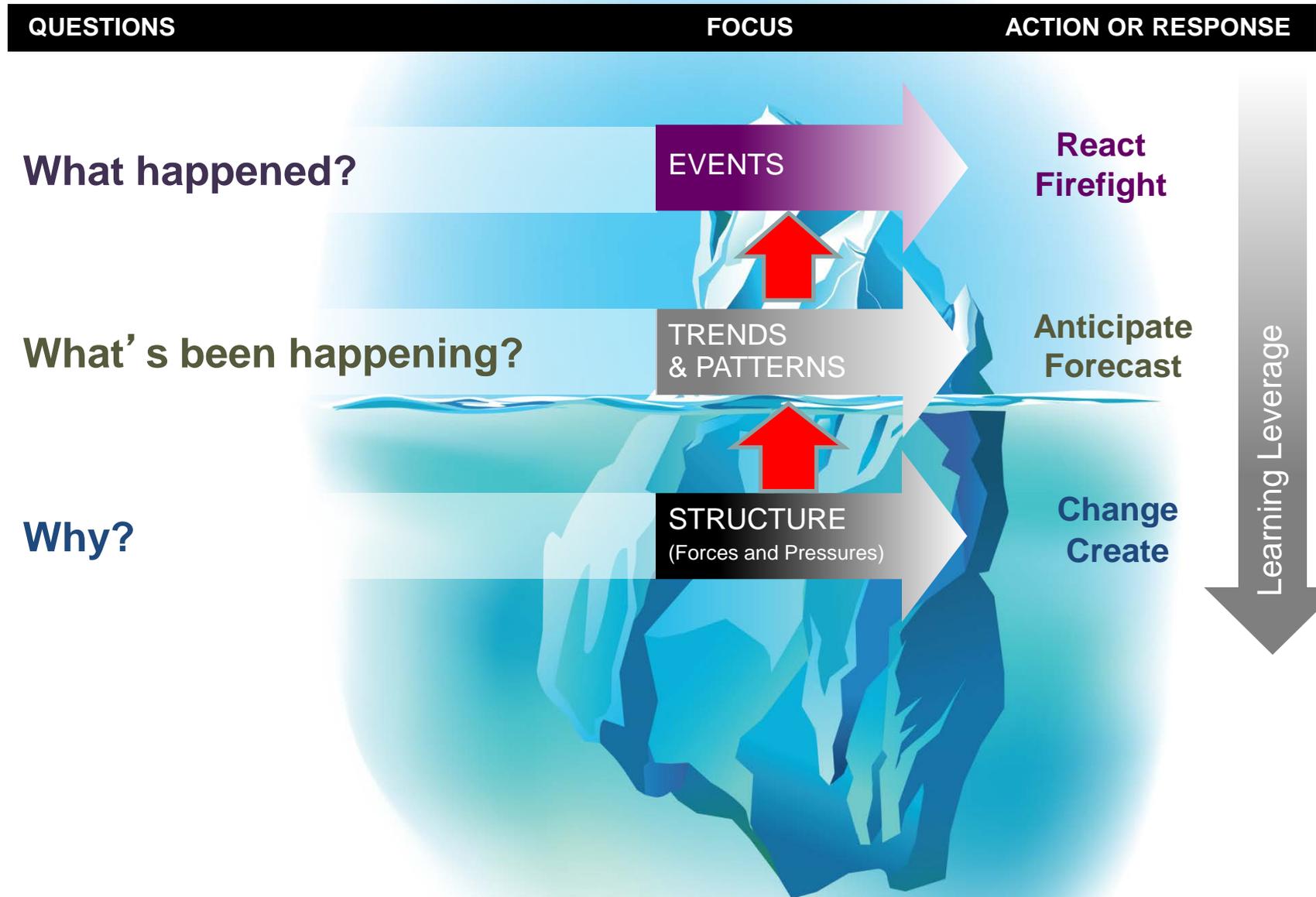
**Quantitative results:** In 2012, six years into the ten year plan, the county reported that homelessness decreased by 14% *despite* the 2008 economic collapse & a 34% increase in unemployment in the county

# What makes for good systems thinking issues?

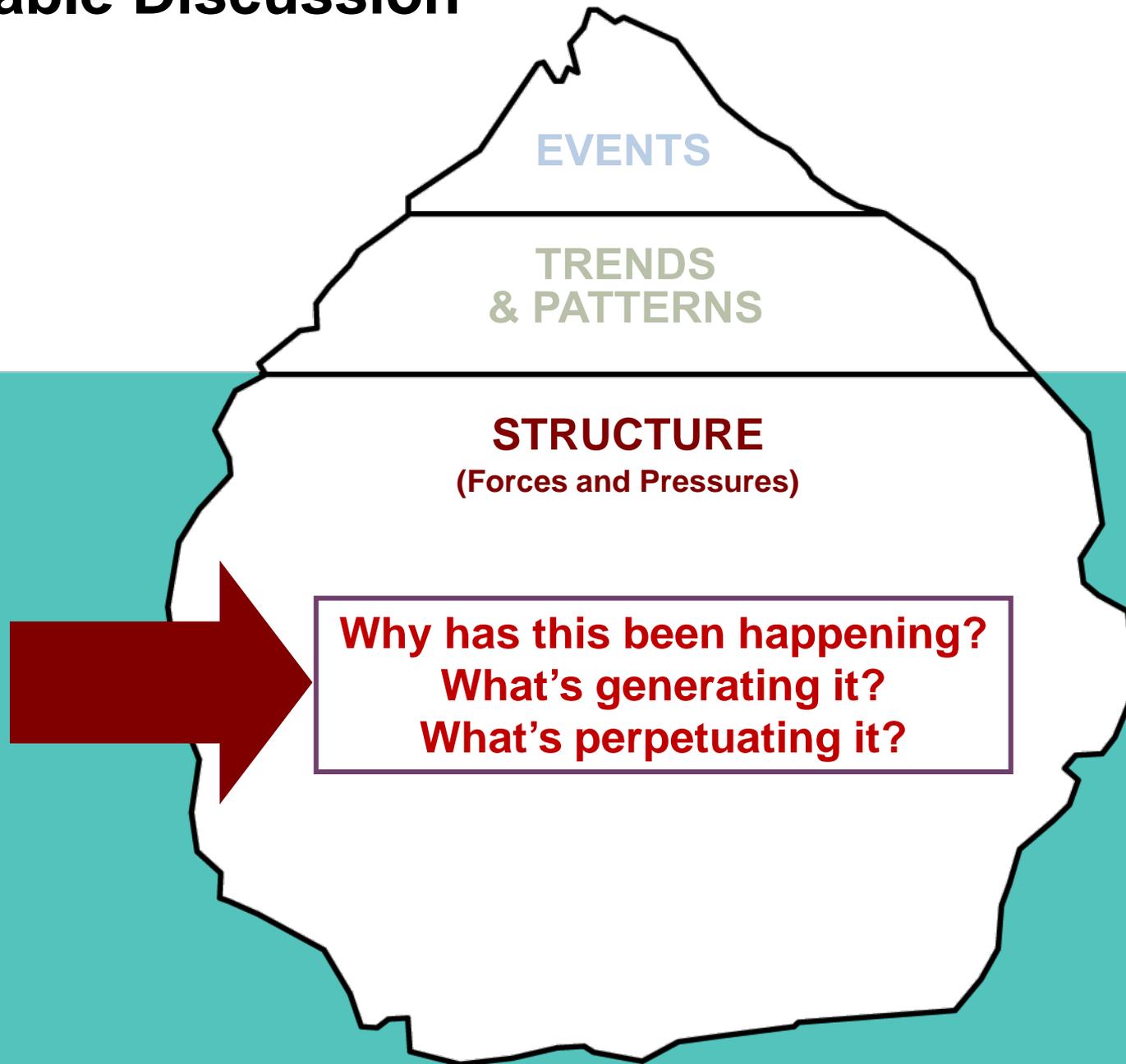
The problem/issue is chronic

- 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



# Table Discussion



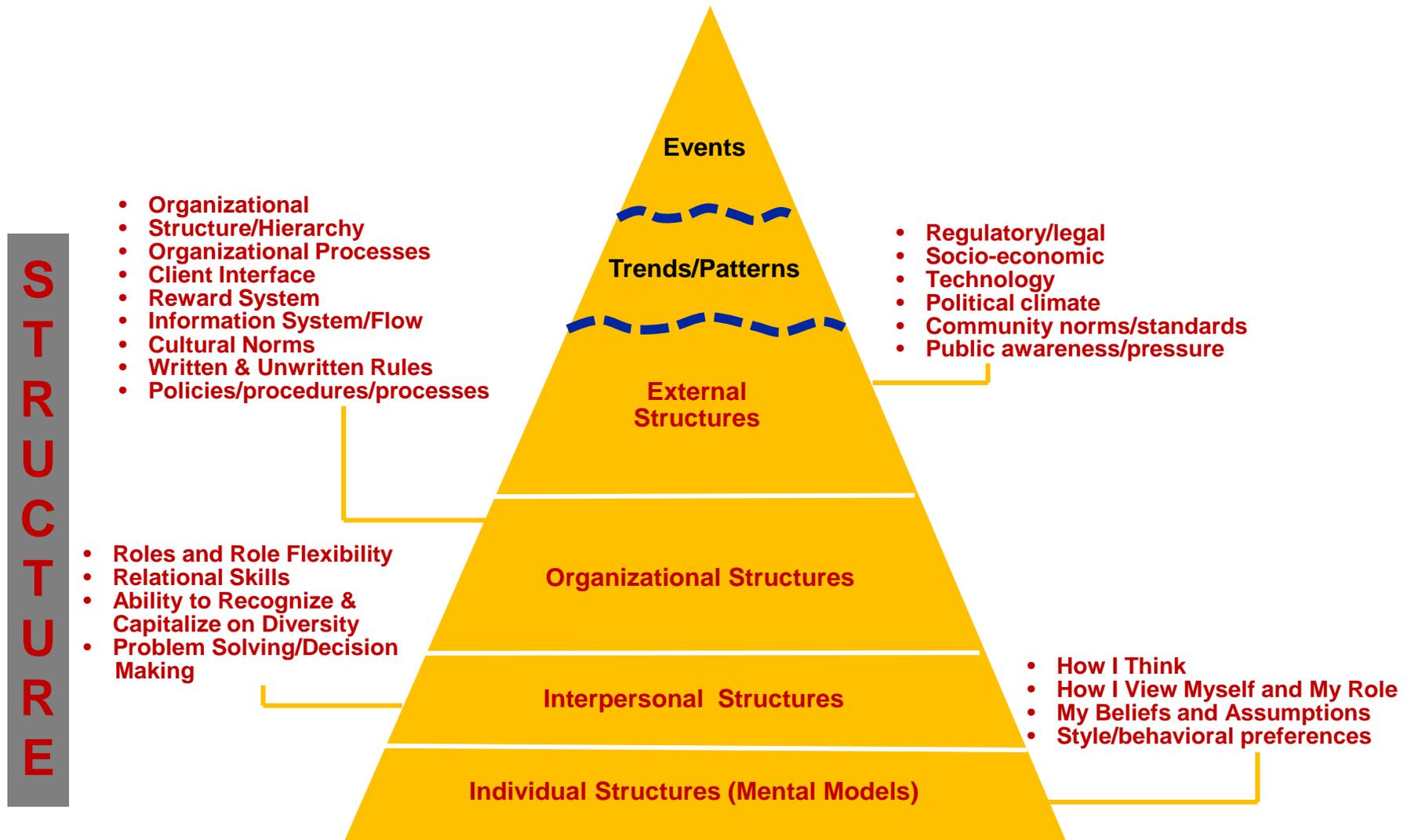
# Conversation

Share your actual experiences (case studies) dealing with wicked problems. What are we learning?

Pick a case: Identify what were the key underlying structures or drivers (bottom of iceberg) that were (or needed to be) addressed in the case? (Suggest using next pages as a checklist).

Be prepared to share your observations.

# Sources of Pressures or Forces



## *Sample* Elements of Structure that Generate Forces & Pressures

- State/local regulations & laws
- General economy
- Local economy
- Financial resources/capital (e.g. access to funding)
- Technology (e.g. access & availability)
- Political climate
- Human capital (e.g. skill level, education)
- Demographics (including migration patterns)
- Availability & access to services (health, education, etc)
- Level of collaboration among service providers & agencies
- State/local leadership (private/public)
- Housing availability & quality
- Built (infrastructure) capital
- Quality of life factors
- Natural capital
- Social capital (e.g. connections within community, among businesses and to resources outside the community)
- Cultural capital (mindsets, attitudes, level of public trust) (Mental models)

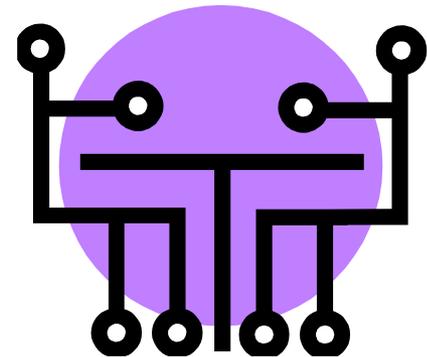
# Improving Impact Through Systems Thinking

Laura Landy – CEO Ripple Foundation

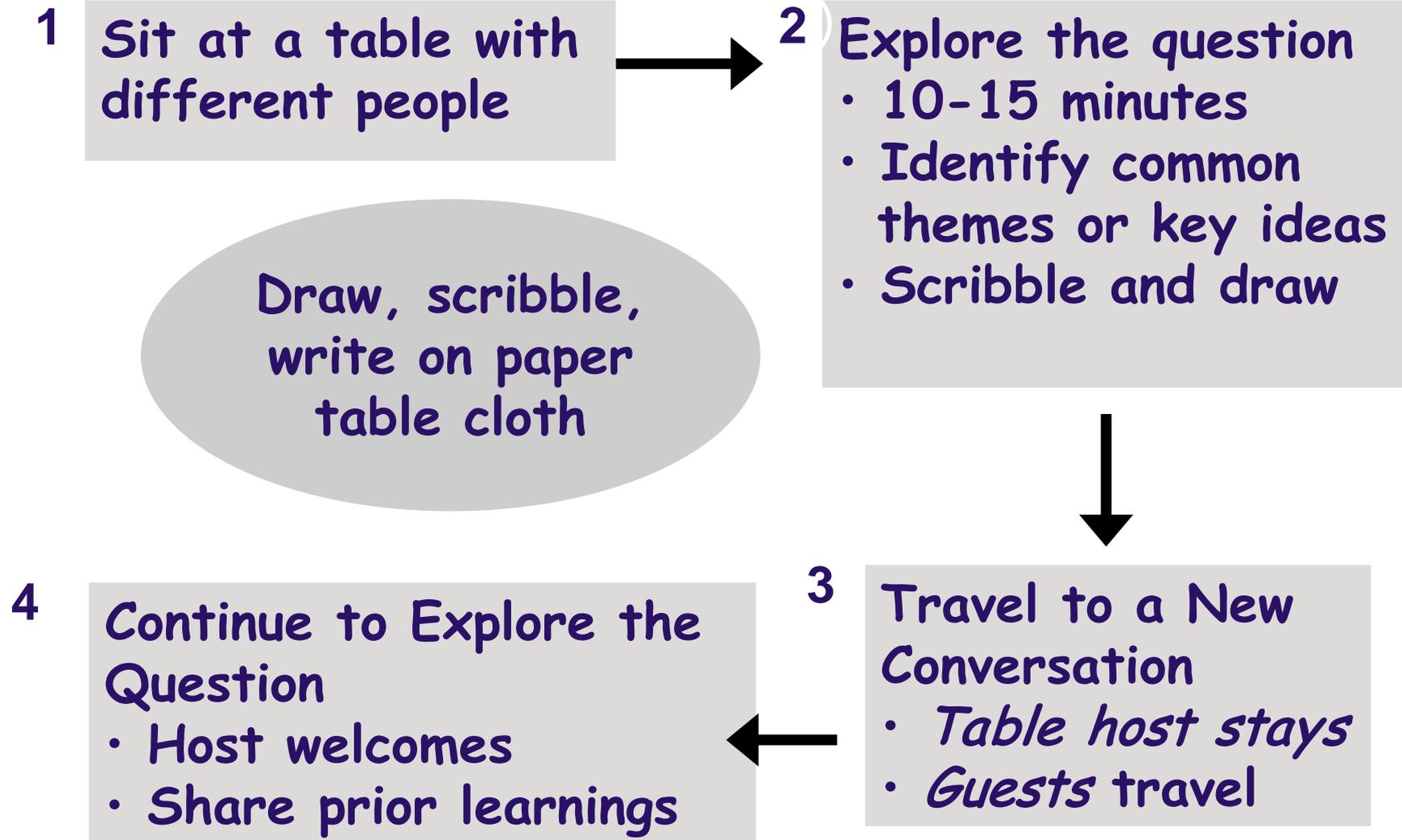
# Café Dialog

## 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

What are the **structural drivers/factors** that support and what are the factors that impede our ability to effectively **tackle our wicked community problems**? (Focus on both the internal and external drivers)

Where and how do we get “stuck” when trying to work on complex issues?

## 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](http://www.appliedsystemsthinking.com)
- Society for Organizational Learning: [www.solonline.org](http://www.solonline.org)

## Online Systems Thinking Course

- [www.iseesystems.com](http://www.iseesystems.com)