



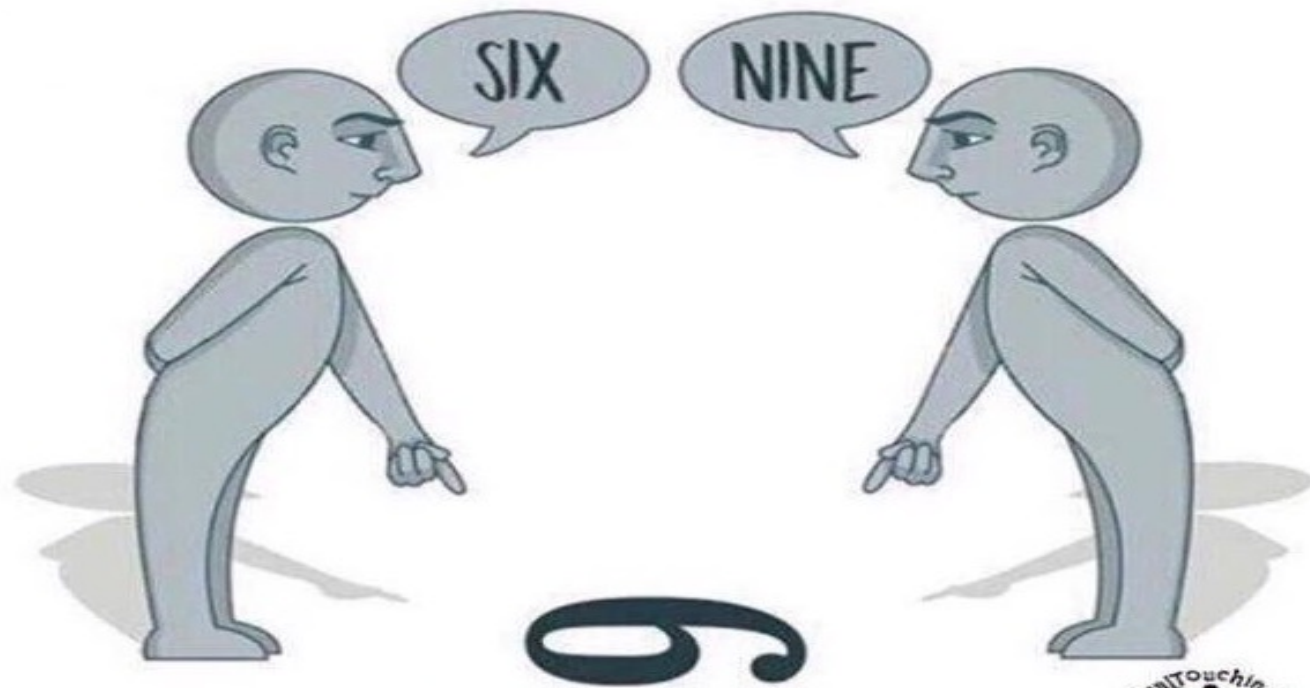
# Depolarizing: The Power and Practice of Reflective Structured Dialogue

Bob Stains  
Senior Associate

essential **PARTNERS**







**Just because you are right, does not mean, I am wrong. You just haven't seen life from my side.**










FERMONS  
LES  
ABATTOIRS !



www.fermons-les-abattoirs.org

FERMONS LES ABATTOIRS

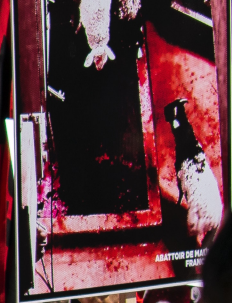


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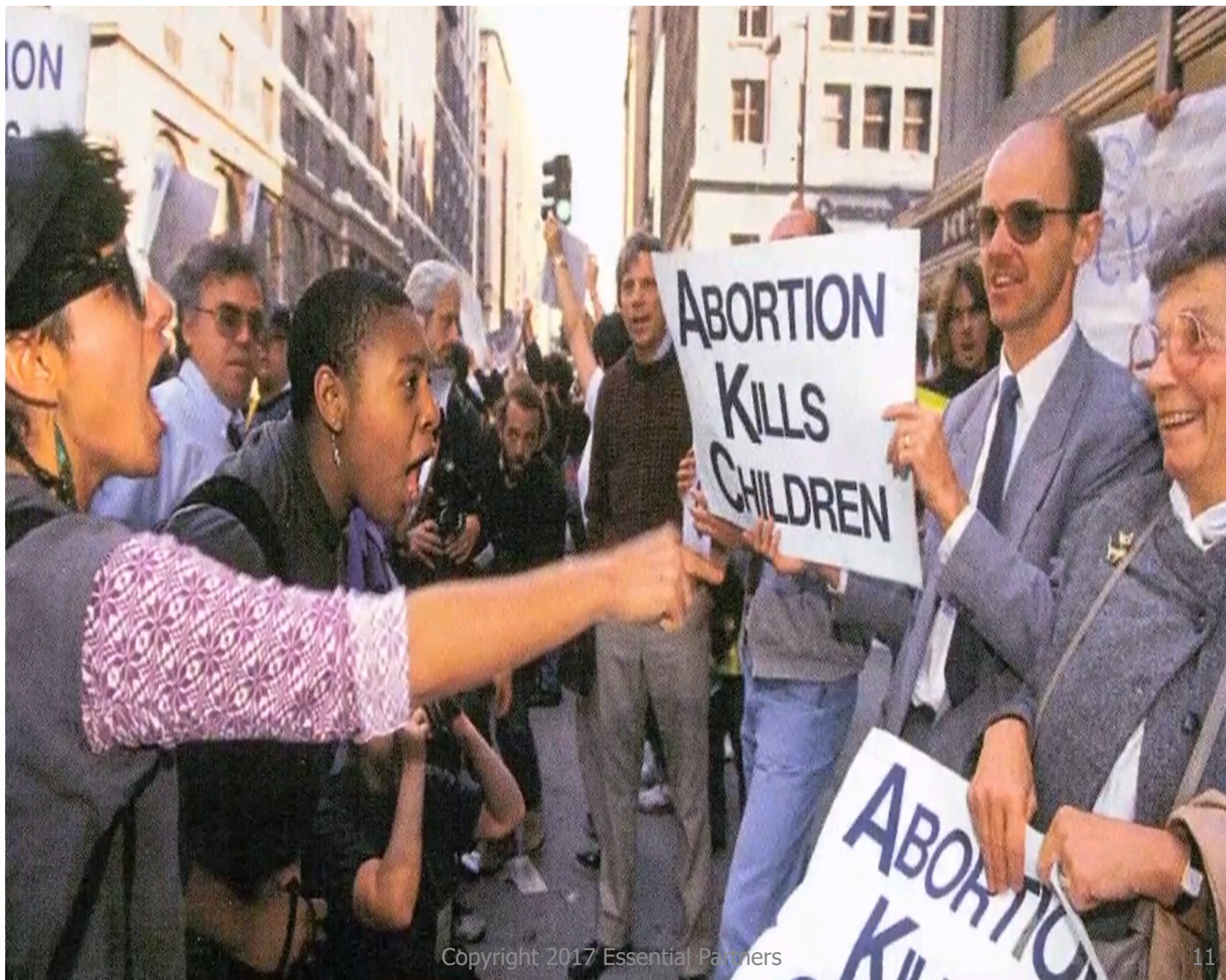


















# Essential Partners

- <http://news.wgbh.org/2016/12/12/local-news/healing-divide-one-conversation-time>

# Why Conversation?

COMMUNITY



RELATIONSHIPS



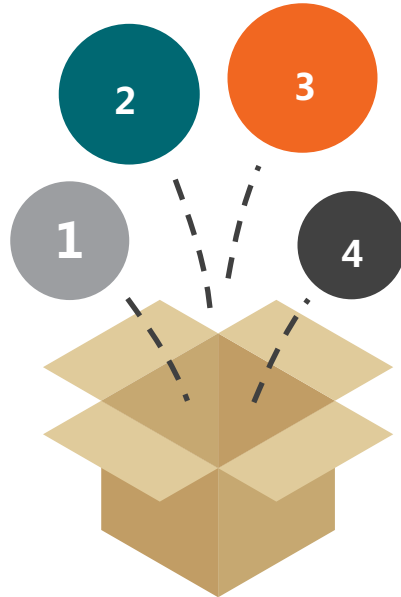
CONVERSATION



# What we call Dialogue

**Primary goal of dialogue:** Pursue mutual understanding rather than agreements or immediate solutions.

A good dialogue offers participants a chance to:



1

Listen and be listened to with care.

2

Speak and be spoken to in a respectful manner.

3

Learn about the perspectives of others.

4

Reflect on one's own views.

# Applications

- Refugee re-settlement
- **Treatment of Mental Illness**
- Post-war reconciliation: Burundi; Liberia
- Religion: Nigeria; Sexual ID; Science
- Guns and community safety
- Higher Education
- **Abortion**, race, gender, social class





# Shifts Happen

Through such conversations,  
people typically:

- Develop empathy and trust
- Enhance skills for connecting across divides
- Build or repair community
- Open new possibilities for problem solving

# Activists' conversations on abortion: Six years

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fie1-KUmj3s>



# “Good Relations” Indicators

- Attitudes
- Personal Security
- Interaction With Others
- Participation and Influence

Good Relations: Establishing Indicators to Measure Good Relations. Good Relations Project, 2014

# Dialogue Results: Two samples

	Respectful Conversations	Montana Gun Dialogues
	1550 participants, 14 Lead Facilitators, 300 table facilitators	84 participants, 11 facilitators
Felt my views were heard	92%	100%
Will be useful in other settings	96%	96%
Greater empathy for different others	62%	66%
Better understanding of others' points of view	65%	82%



# Introductions, I: By yourself

- What wise person in your life influenced your formation of the values that led you to do the work that you're doing? What are those values, and how did your Wise Person influence you?
- Think and take notes for yourself for 2 min.
- Find two other people to create a group of three

# Introductions, II: In your group

- Your wise person
- In what ways did that person affect you? What wisdom and values have you brought/might you bring from your encounter with them into your work?
  - \_\_ min. each; pass the timepiece; pause between speakers; no comments, questions, cross-talk



# Guiding Questions

"Every communication arrangement invites some things and discourages others"

**What do you want to discourage (Prevent)?**

**What do you want to invite (Promote)?**

# Debrief

- **Functions and effects of:**
  - ▶ Time limits
  - ▶ Turn-taking/go-round
  - ▶ Pausing
  - ▶ Think-write-speak
  - ▶ No comments
  - ▶ Pass phone
  - ▶ Wise person



# David Rock's SCARF



## **S**TATUS

Where do I stand with  
this group?



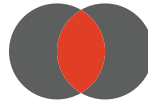
## **C**ERTAINTY

What's gonna  
happen next?



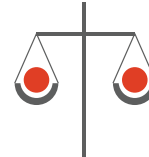
## **A**UTONOMY/AGENCY

How much choice do I  
have?



## **R**ELATEDNESS

Am I/will I be 'in'  
or 'out'?"



## **F**AIRNESS

Why is the  
facilitator giving  
HIM so much time?

# Reducing “Avoid” and Enhancing “Approach” Response in Groups



## STATUS

Connect in **advance** (e.g., **interviews, invitations**), greet everyone personally, timed go-rounds



## CERTAINTY

Agenda **in advance**; review in room



## AUTONOMY/ AGENCY

Get **input in advance** (e.g., **ground rules**), shape design to evolving needs



## RELATEDNESS

Questions and activities that evoke recognition and connection



## FAIRNESS

Start with timed go-rounds, Assess your biases, avoid “thank you for speaking”

Rock, D. SCARF: A Brain-based Model for Collaborating with and Influencing Others. Sydney: The Neuro Leadership Journal, 2008.



# Theory bases of Reflective, Structured Dialogue

- Social constructionism
- Interpersonal neurobiology
- Communication theory
- Narrative family therapy and mediation
- Appreciative inquiry
- Family systems

# Another way: Interrupting old patterns and inviting “the new”

- Shared purpose
- Preparation and reflection
- Agreements
- **Artful inquiry**
- Structured exchanges
- Exploring curiosity



# Questions for Persuasion or Understanding

- Pair up

Round one:

- Speaker 1: something you believe is true: one sentence
- Asker: ask questions to persuade the speaker otherwise (2 min.)
- Switch roles and repeat with Speaker 2

# Round Two

- Speaker One: say something you believe is true again
- Asker: ask questions to understand speaker's perspective, thinking, feeling, choosing, etc. 2 Min.
- Switch roles and repeat with Speaker 2
- Return to whole group

# Debrief

- What was going on for you – as asker or listener- in each condition: persuasion and understanding?
- What did each kind of asking evoke?
- How did the questions affect what you thought of the asker; what choices you made?
- Was there a question that stood out as particularly useful?



**Try it out!**

# Agreements

- We can “pass” if we are not ready or do not wish to respond.
- We will listen to understand and speak to be understood.
- We’ll speak one at a time and will not engage in side conversations.
- We will speak for ourselves
- We’ll respect confidentiality by not allowing others to be identified.

# Mini-Dialogue: Part one

- Find a partner
- Respond to **Question One**:
- Could you tell your partner something about your life experience that would help them understand your perspective on freedom of speech?
- Both partners pause for 2 min.; take a couple of notes for yourself
- Take turns speaking for 2 min. each. Listening partner just listens; notes curiosity



# Mini-dialogue: Part Two

- Please respond to the **Second question**: What's at the heart of the matter/what do you most want your partner to understand about your perspective? Are there places where you're less clear, or feel pulled in different directions, either by competing values or by relationships?
- Pause for a minute again
- Each speak in turn as before; listener just listens; notes curiosity

## Part Three: Questions of genuine interest

Now is the time to follow your curiosity about what your partner has said. Each of you can ask your partner one question that invites them to say more. 5 min. total for both.

**NOTE: Remember “Questions for Understanding;” Avoid questions that are:**

- Rhetorical
- Statements in disguise/advice
- Judgmental

# “Opening” questions

- Personal experience
- Heart of the matter
- Complexity



# What We Mean: Our Model

Component	Purposes	Applications
<b>Preparation</b>	Dialogue begins long before a group gathers. Prepare people for what they will do together, and plan a design that will allow people to fully participate. Ensure participants are in alignment around shared purpose.	Interviews Surveys Invitations Planning Team Meetings
<b>Structure</b>	Interrupt and/or prevent old problematic patterns of communication. Foster a sense of safety and encourage people to approach, rather than avoid, each other. Encourage intentional speaking and listening.	Timed speaking Go-rounds Pausing between speakers Time to reflect Begin more structured and move towards more natural
<b>Inquiry</b>	Invite people to reflect on and share something about themselves. Invite complexity and curiosity.	Opening Questions Closing Questions Questions of Genuine Curiosity
<b>Facilitation</b>	Every choice we make will help people focus on each other or on us; we want them to focus on each other. Be “omni-partial” – model caring about everyone.	Set the tone: frame the dialogue in the opening. Transparently manage dilemmas. Intervene when needed. Facilitate as servant leader.
<b>Reflection</b>	Be comfortable with silence. In the silence comes reflection, creativity and space for less vocal people to speak.	Reflection before Reflection in Reflection after

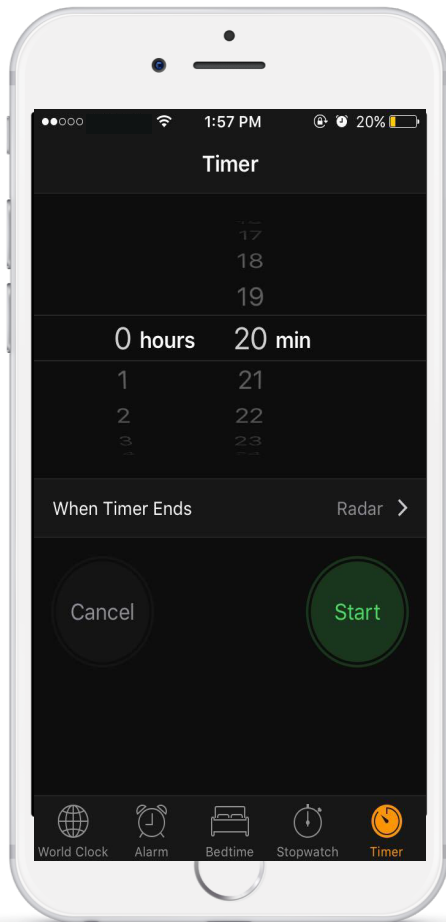
# Threat, identity and communication

Think of a time when someone spoke of something that was important to you (e.g. your identity, core social or political values or beliefs, family, friends, race, religion, ethnicity) in a way that upset you or left you feeling angry, vulnerable, threatened. (2 min.)

**What did you notice:**

- **In your body?**
- **In your thoughts about yourself?**
- **In your thoughts about the other person?**
- **About what you felt tempted to do?**

**Tell your partner what you noticed.**



# It takes 20 minutes

**1/5**  
SECONDS

## REACT

It takes  $\frac{1}{5}$  of a second for the protection parts of our brain to take over when they sense emergencies.

**20**  
MINUTES

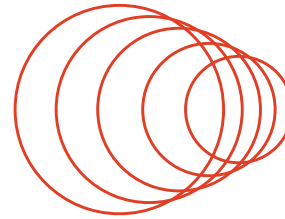
## RECOVER

It takes about 20 minutes to get out of those parts.

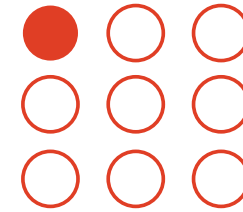


# The threat affects our...

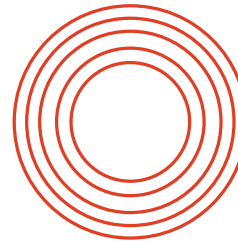
- Pre-frontal cortex functions diminish.
- Perceptions narrowed.
- Increased generalizations and over-simplifications.
- Defensiveness.
- Small problems become BIG ones.
- Ability to collaborate plummets.



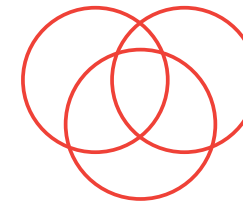
**PERCEPTION**



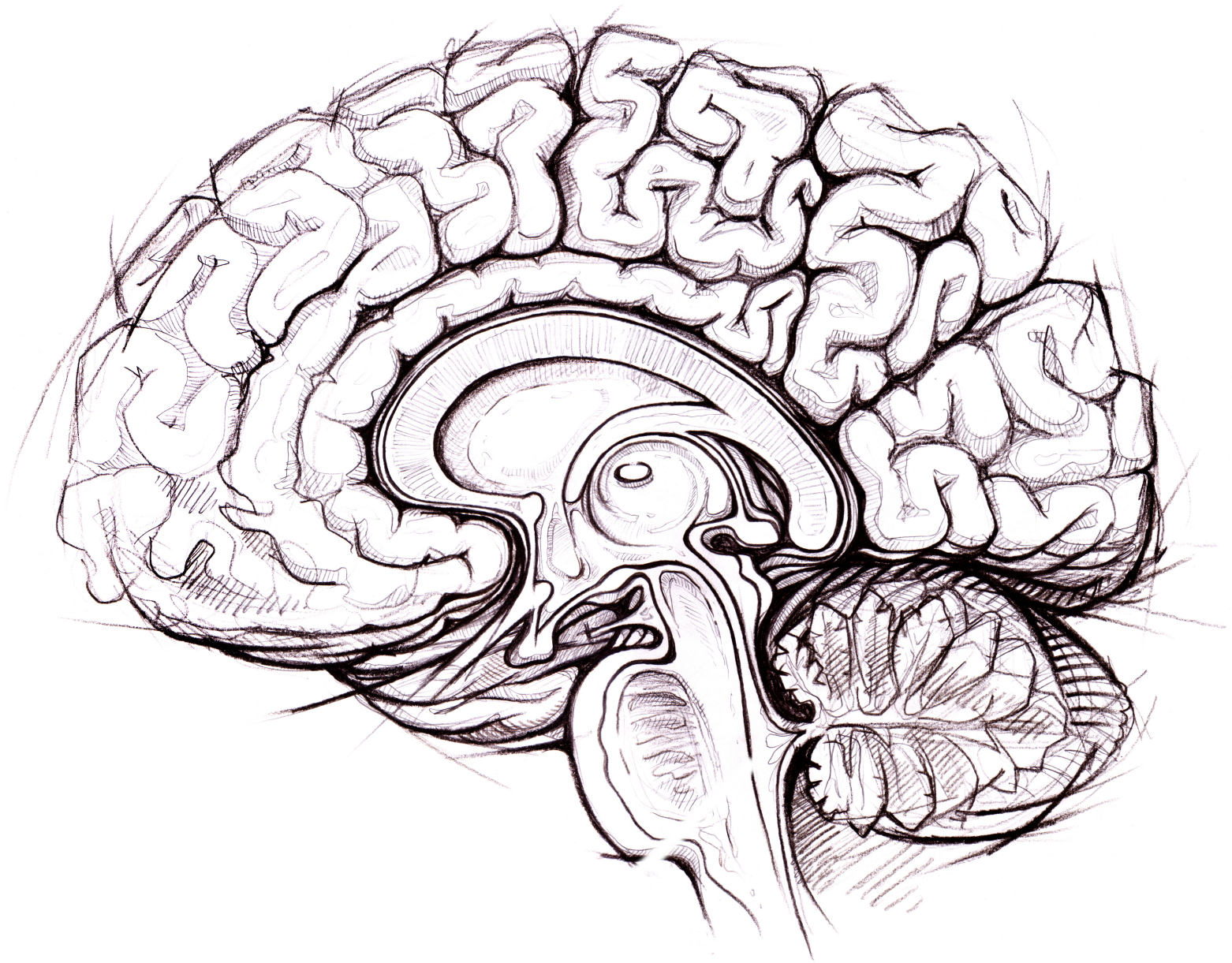
**THINKING**



**AWARENESS**



**FEELINGS**



Rick Hanson, PhD

“Hardwiring  
Happiness”

- Velcro and Teflon

David  
Cooperrider's  
"Appreciative  
Inquiry"

- Attention gives life:  
what we attend to,  
grows



# Hanson

- Negativity bias
- Reactivity
- Responsivity

# Effects of threat

- Narrowed perceptions; access to inner resources; sense of choice
- Increased Simplification and generalization
- Virtuous “US;” Evil “THEM”
- Vigilance, attack, avoidance

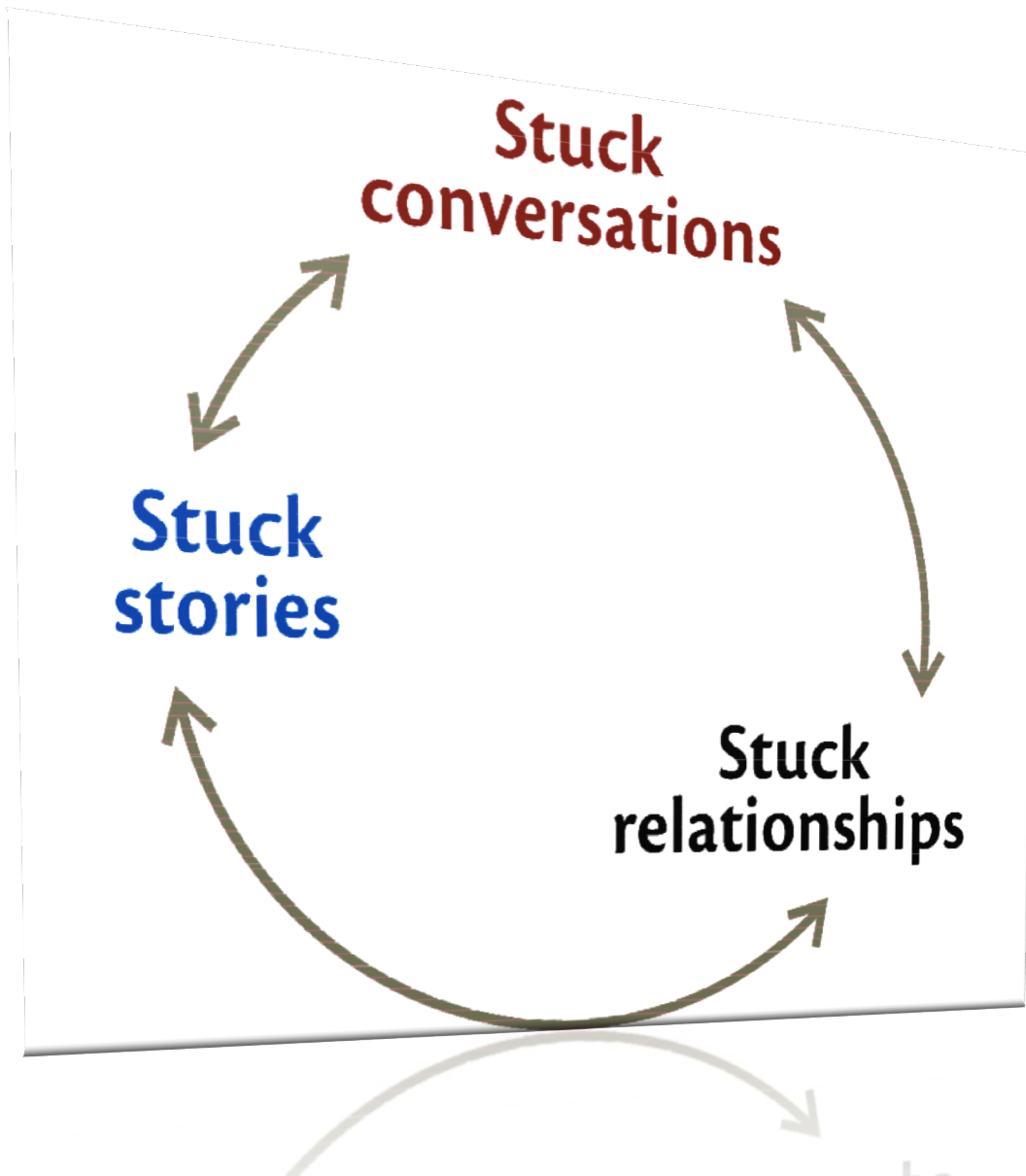
# Conversations to reduce seclusion and restraint

- Two-year task force: former patients and current staff
- One year in, a triggering exchange; work comes to a halt
- Planning team; seven months' prep work
- Two “apart” workshops; two mixed dialogues
- Created policies that reduced R/S by 86%
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB5Au9RNJnA>

# Threat and Stories



# Conversations Get Stuck







Vigilance is the enemy of genuine  
curiosity

When certainty comes in the door



Curiosity goes out the window

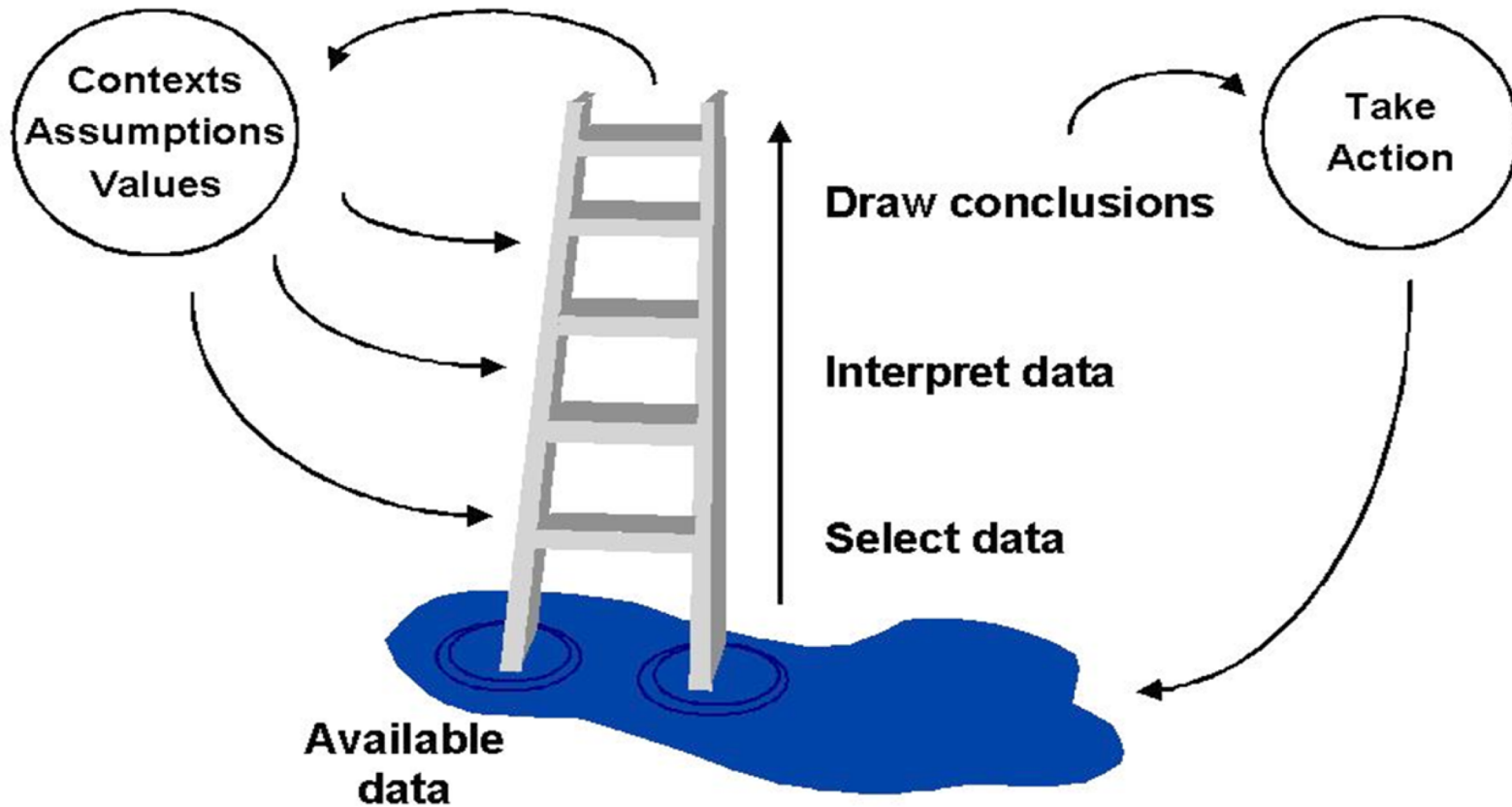


# **Predator or Prey**

# Blind to the cost

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqqKEgrPhHo>

# The Ladder of Inference





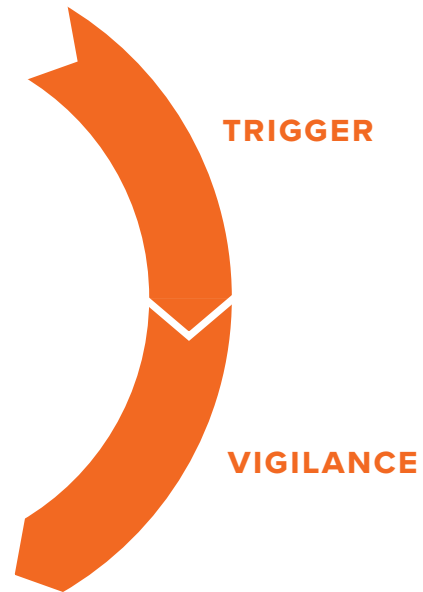
What keeps things going? What's missing?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fie1-KUmj3s>

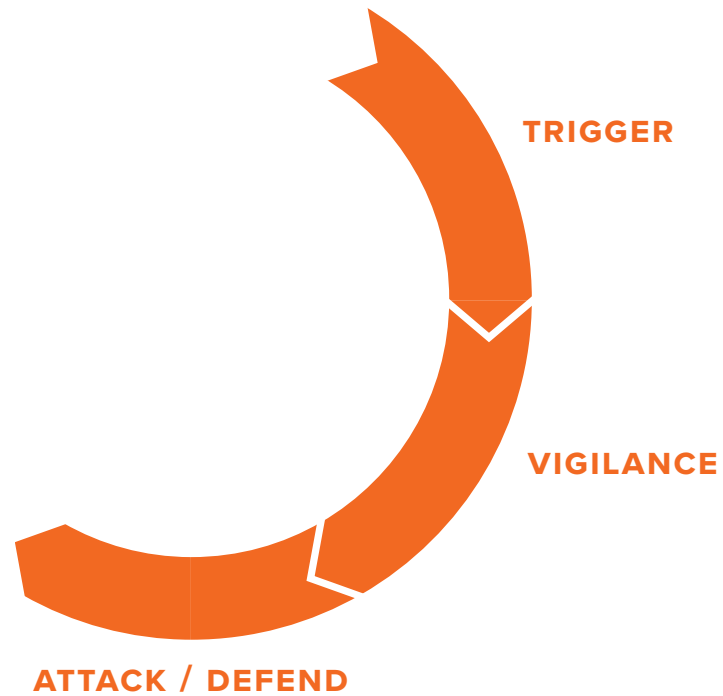
# The Vicious Cycle



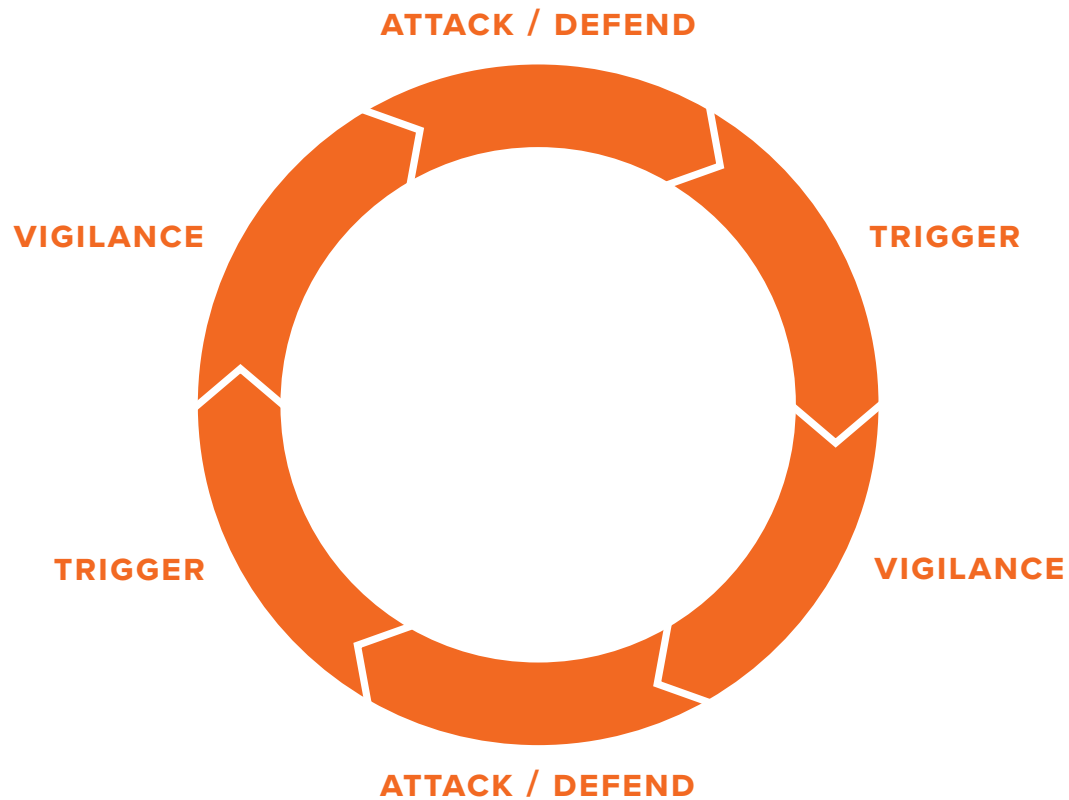
# The Vicious Cycle



# The Vicious Cycle

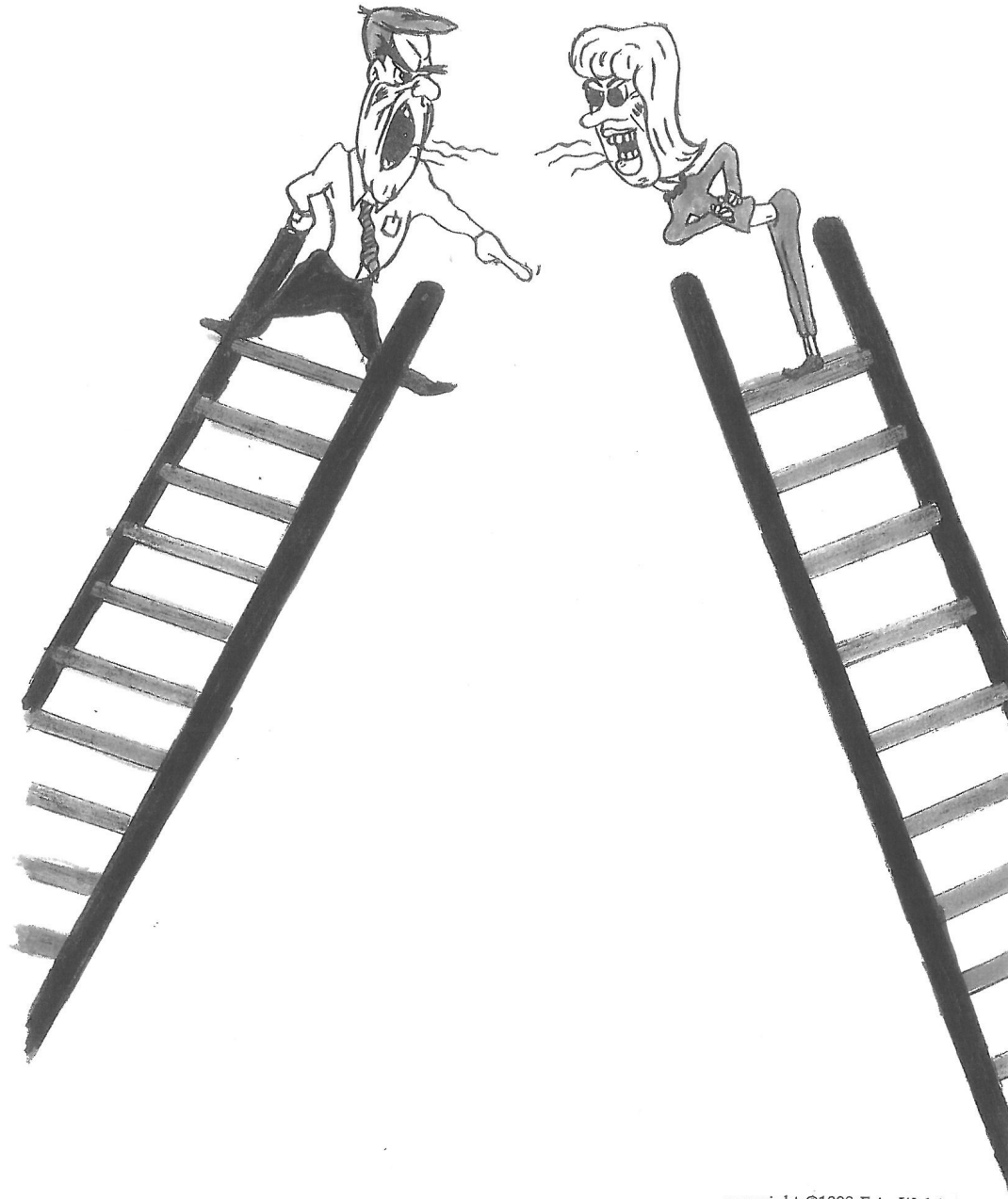


# The Vicious Cycle







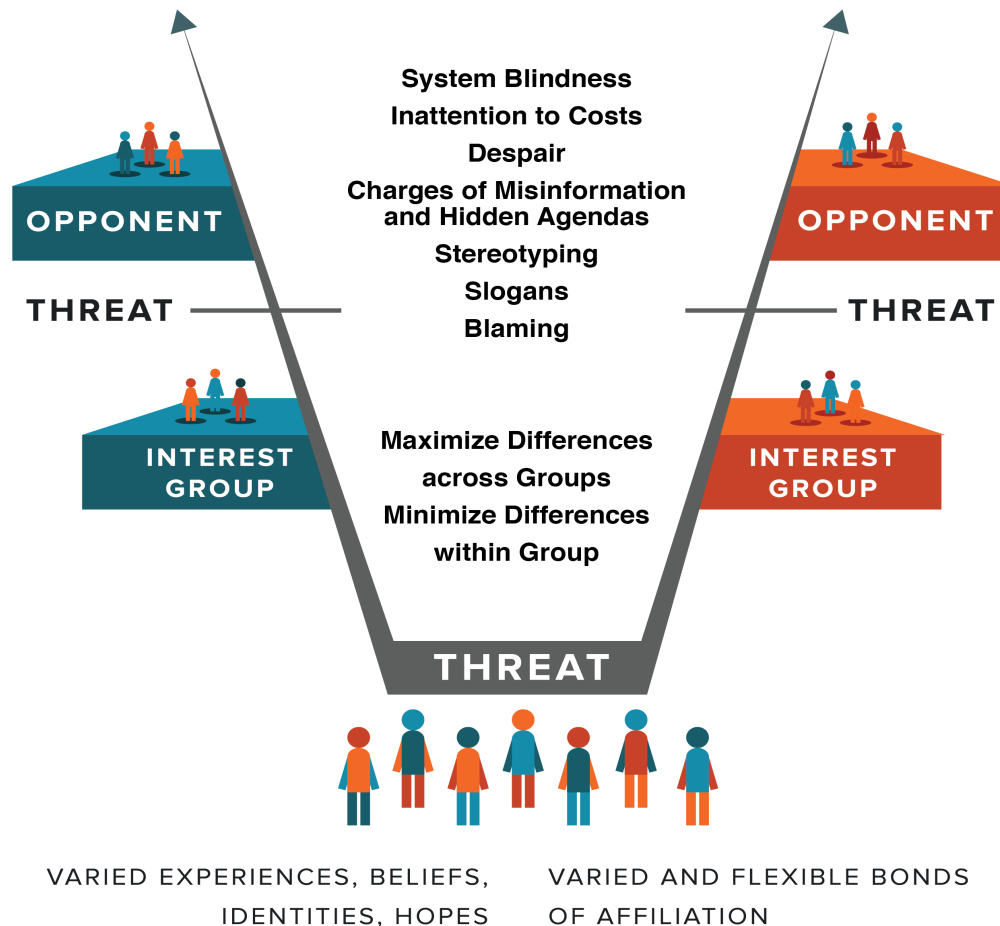


Down the ladder ex here



# POLARIZATION:

## A SELF-PERPETUATING SYSTEM



Created by Maggie Herzig for Essential Partners

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB5Au9RNJnA>



# Family systems basics

- Everyone's involved
- Hallmarks of corrosive interactions can be named and mapped
- Patterns repeat, deepen and are resistant to deviation
- Changing the context can change the patterns
- Changing the patterns can change the relationships (Gottman: "Masterful Couples")

# Communication patterns

- Groups develop patterns of communication
- Patterns preserve existing system dynamics
- Patterns can cycle over and over
- Stories are created and told to justify and preserve patterns
- Patterns can be very resistant to change
- Deviance –even positive deviance- is punished

# Interrupting old patterns: Narrative therapy principles

- Stories shape experience and perception
- Stories are always partial
- Stories evolve to justify actions and “things-as-they-are”
- Stories can imprison or liberate
- Re-storying affects the teller as much as the listener
- Skillful inquiry can elicit fresh stories
- Fresh stories re-shape relationships

# The Power of Stories

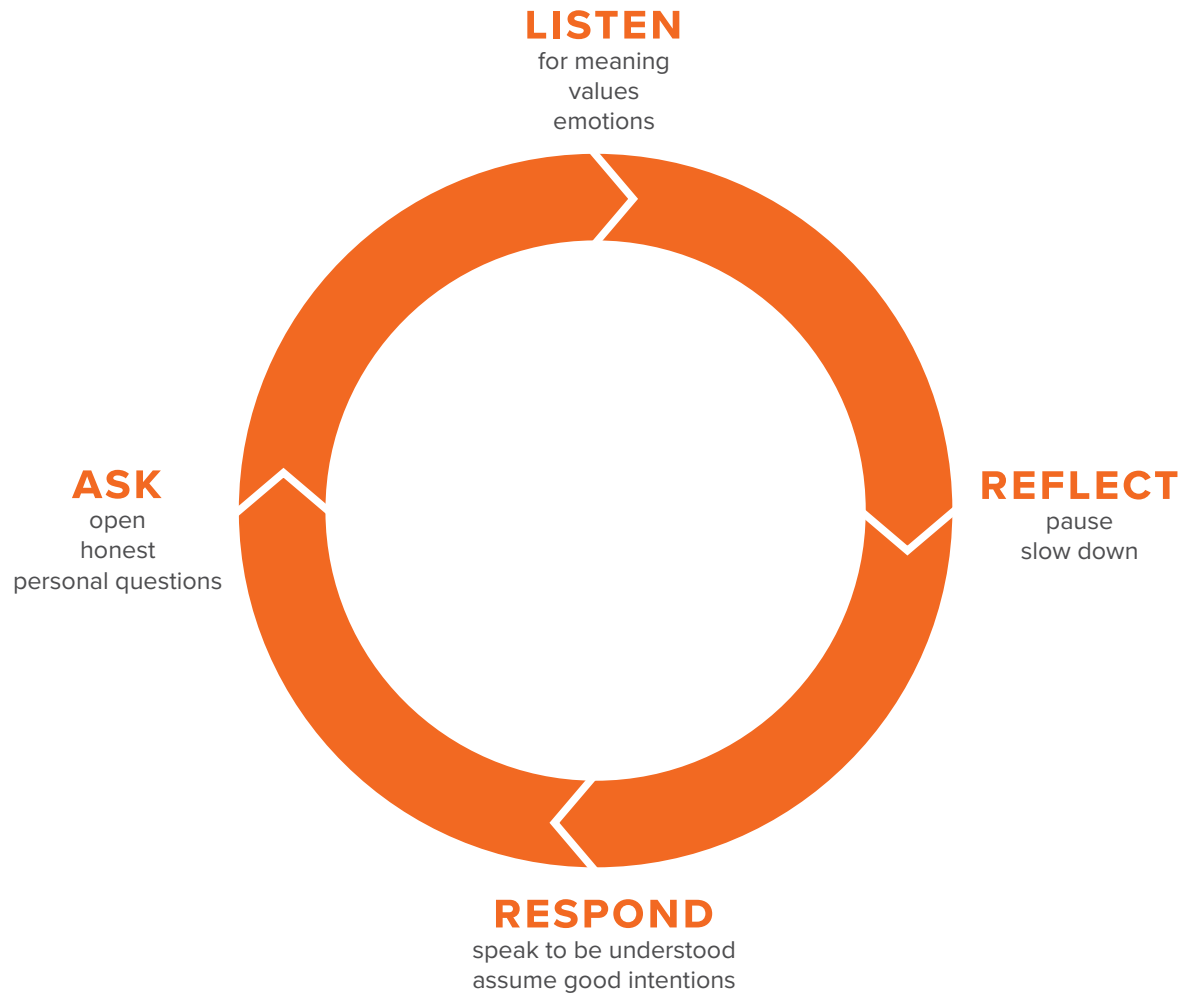
- We organize our worlds through story
- We construct our identity through stories
- We invite others into our world
- Understanding others' stories goes deeper than “positions” or perspectives
- Told about others can produce “THEM”
- Hearing, telling and re-authoring stories can be transformative

# But... We do not own our stories

- What happens when other people tell stories about us?
- What happens when we tell stories about others?



# Cycle of Constructive Conversation





# Effects of Strong Emotion

- **CONFLICT NARROWS**
- **I N Q U I R Y  
E X P A N D S**













# Wisdom from Parker Palmer

When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.


# Places for questions in RSD

- Before a meeting: interviews
- Before a meeting: reflection
- During a meeting: questions of all
- During a meeting: questions of each other
- After a meeting/between meetings: reflection, integration, connection, planning, action

# Inquiry for Reflection, Preparation and Perspective-Shifting

- Shift from the “landscape of action” to the “landscape of meaning”
- Invite reflection
- Cultivate curiosity
- Create the experience of “being recognized”
- Reduce anxiety
- Expand perception and awareness
  - Hopes and concerns
  - Ideas for change
  - Exceptions to the problem story
  - Triggers, patterns and ideas





**What if we  
change the  
questions we  
ask?**



# Useful Questions for a dialogue

- Inquire about who people are as individuals, not as stereotypes or “representatives”
- Ask what people truly care about, related to deep hopes or fears
- Explore what in their life experience has shaped who they are and what they care most about
- Look for aspects of their views that are more complex than one would guess from the typical “pro/con”

# Changing the Question from:

Is there a war on Christmas?

**To**

What do you hope to communicate when you express good wishes to others and what do you hear when someone expresses good wishes to you during this winter holiday season?

# Changing the Question from:

Should we or shouldn't we legalize marijuana?

**To**

What values or commitments do you hold that inform your decisions about legalizing marijuana?  
Where did you learn those values?

# Changing the Question from:

What should be the limits on who owns a fire arm?

**To**

Share an experience you have had that informs the way you approach how we regulate guns in our community?

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB5Au9RNJnA>



A large, stylized geometric logo in a lighter teal color is positioned on the left side of the slide. It consists of a square with rounded corners, a circle, and a thick line that forms a continuous, abstract shape.

**What question  
could you ask to  
open a new  
conversation on  
the topic you wish  
you could talk  
about?**







# Listening

## Listen: For The Values and Hopes Within the Concern

**ASK**  
open  
honest  
personal questions

**LISTEN**  
for meaning  
values  
emotions



Every expression of concern or complaint implies something that is hoped for:

- Isolation implies a desire for connection
- What do tears say about what is precious?

When people name something that upsets them this is an invitation to listen to their values, hopes and commitments.

Our job as listener is to listen for the value they hold and the hope they have for a preferred future.

# Listening

## Listen: For The Values and Hopes Within the Concern

**ASK**  
open  
honest  
personal questions

**LISTEN**  
for meaning  
values  
emotions



### Practice:

If someone has a concern that the downtown has too much traffic and no place for kids to walk and people drive too fast. Just the other day:

They are saying they value: \_\_\_\_\_

They are hoping for: \_\_\_\_\_

Our job as listener is to listen for the value they hold and the hope they have for a preferred future.

# Listening

## What You'll Need:

- Three people
- Listening Roles Handout
- Pencil or Pen
- A timing device (phone or watch)

## What You'll Do:

Get into groups of three.


- Each person should think of something that they they are concerned about or that upsets them in their home town, job, school system, etc. Each person should be able to speak to the issue for up to one minute – give an example with some specificity about the issue.
- One person will listen for the value and one for the hope implied in the complaint.
- Reflect back the values you hear and the hope or preferred future implied
- **Switch roles by rotating roles one person to the left.**

**ASK**  
open  
honest  
personal questions

**LISTEN**  
for meaning  
values  
emotions







**What might shift in  
your relationships  
if you listen for  
what people really  
care about and  
hope for?**

What might shift if we changed the structure of conversation?

# One-session Format

- Before the session:
  - Invitation
  - Preparation: Interview and/or reflective task
- In the session:
  - Sharing a meal
  - Purposes and plan
  - Agreements
  - “Opening” questions to all; timed responses
  - Questions of each other: “Questions of Genuine Interest,” with guidance
  - Closing question



# What helps

- “Mindsight” (Siegel)- Reflection, Attention, Intention, distinction
- Prevent destructive loops via preparation and structure
- Invite and amplify positive deviations
- Develop “Islands of Reflection”
- Shape conversational environments
- Notice, name discern, choose
- Inquiry



# Reflection, Self-understanding and Engaging Emotion

- Reduce anxiety and help people manage emotion (Stone, Patton and Heen)
- Enhance brain functions of curiosity, rational thinking, choice-making and self-observation (Daniel Siegel)
- The more sophisticated the understanding of self, the better Theory of Mind (John Medina and others)

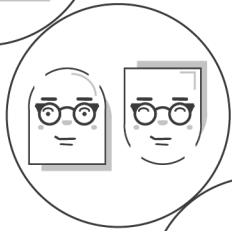
# One-session Format

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  - Closing question

# The Six P's



PURPOSE



PEOPLE



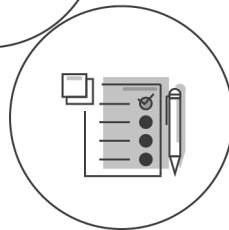
PROMOTE



PREVENT



PLAN



PREPARE

# Purpose

- Clear purpose
  - Learning
  - Understanding
  - Building relationships
  - Creating / deepening trust
- Shared purpose



got purpose?

# Promote

- Re-humanization
- Speaking to be understood
- Listening to understand
- Intention/ Impact
- Mutual recognition and respect
- 6 C's - curiosity, concern, care, clarity, connection, collaboration



# Prevent

- “Us” vs. “Them”
- Stereotyping
- Attacking
- Blaming
- Dominating
- Speaking for others



# Preparation

- Connect before Content
- Align participants' expectations and purpose
- Understand their hopes, concerns, experience, strengths and resilience
- Listen deeply and reflect both feelings & content
- Invite collaboration, communication, and care

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB5Au9RNJnA>

# Structured Exchanges

- Lower anxiety, increase spontaneity
- Go-rounds
- Timed responses
- More structure to less structure
- Pauses for reflection: before and between

# Communication Agreements

- We can “pass” if we are not ready or do not wish to respond.
- We will listen to understand and speak to be understood.
- We’ll speak one at a time and will not engage in side conversations.
- We’ll “step up” and “step back.”
- We’ll respect timeframes.
- We will speak for ourselves
- We’ll respect confidentiality by not allowing others to be identified.



- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB5Au9RNJnA>

**Where could you use dialogue in your life?**







## Example: Treatment of Mental Illness

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB5Au9RNJnA>



# References/resources

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\*Pearce, K. Compassionate communicating: Poetry, prose & practices. Oracle, AZ: CMM Institute for Personal and Social Evolution, 2012, p. 23.

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Siegel, D. Pocket guide to interpersonal neurobiology: An integrative handbook of the mind. New York: Norton, 2012.

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# Related video clips

## **Respectful Conversations Project**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMtDVOawysg>**

## **Mental Health Project**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB5Au9RNJnA>**

## **PCP Intro**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJzSpmIZxsM>**

## **Dick Simon: “Them”**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Evi357e1spA>**

## **WGBH on EP:**

**<http://news.wgbh.org/2016/12/12/local-news/healing-divide-one-conversation-time>**

But some people still love a good argument

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lvcnx6-0GhA>

# Connect With Us

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