

# COMPASSIONATE SYSTEMS

A FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE

MAY 18, 2026

HUMAN  
EARLY LEARNING  
PARTNERSHIP





*I am grateful to  
Indigenous Elders  
and colleagues  
whose ways and  
knowledges have  
guided me.*

*It is my hope that  
this work will in  
some small way  
contribute to a path  
towards  
reconciliation and a  
brighter future for  
all children and  
grandchildren.*

# Grounding and Check In – Why is it Important?

- Practice of self-reflection
- Facilitates emotional settling
- Creates a generative and compassionate social field
- Increases readiness to be together; builds community

If you want different outcomes, you have to look at and do things differently



We live in deeply interdependent and complex systems. Yet little in our education prepares us to understand and work with this complexity. The result is institutions of education, government, business, and the social sector sometimes locked in a perpetual reactive mode, often implementing 'fixes' that may make problems worse.

Compassionate Systems helps people reorient toward a different way of showing up and being in relationship with themselves, each other, and the world, thereby enabling greater collective action, kindness, and resilience.

Compassionate  
Systems is.....

a systems  
transformation  
initiative

A method for creating change in the way a system is working to address complex challenges

An integrated framework for development of skills and knowledge to effectively progress systems change initiatives


# Compassionate Systems – Core Elements

**Self Leadership** – cultivating compassion, self-awareness and mindfulness practices

**Relational Leadership** – building authentic connections within generative spaces

**Systems Leadership** – understanding and fostering connections between self, others and the broader system



A glowing lantern in a dark, wooded setting. The lantern is the central focus, emitting a warm, yellow light. To the left, a blue tent is partially visible, and to the right, there are dark, silhouetted branches and leaves. The overall atmosphere is quiet and focused.

Compassionate Systems is a way to  
light the path you are on – not a  
new path.

# Aims For Our Time Together

Introduce ideas to bring a compassionate systems lens to your leadership.

Cultivate your own vision for wellness and relational collaboration.

Introduce some CS tools and practices that could be applied in your context.

Explore opportunities to continue building capacity with CS in your district.



# Foundations: Cultivating Mindfulness and Compassion

Paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally..... as if your life depended on it

-- *Jon Kabat-Zin*



# Cultivating Mindfulness

What practices do you have to nurture mindfulness and present awareness?





Compassion as a  
way of being...

Our human compassion binds us  
the one to the other - not in pity or  
patronizingly, but as human beings who  
have learned how to turn our common  
suffering into hope for the future."

-- Nelson Mandela





## Compassion unfolds when.....

an **AWARENESS** of suffering in self or others  
(cognitive - perspective taking)

a **FEELING** of being emotionally moved by suffering -  
empathy (affective)

a **DESIRE** to see the relief of that suffering  
(intention)

an **ACTION** to alleviate the suffering (action)

a **WARM GLOW** (“intrinsic reward”)

Compassion

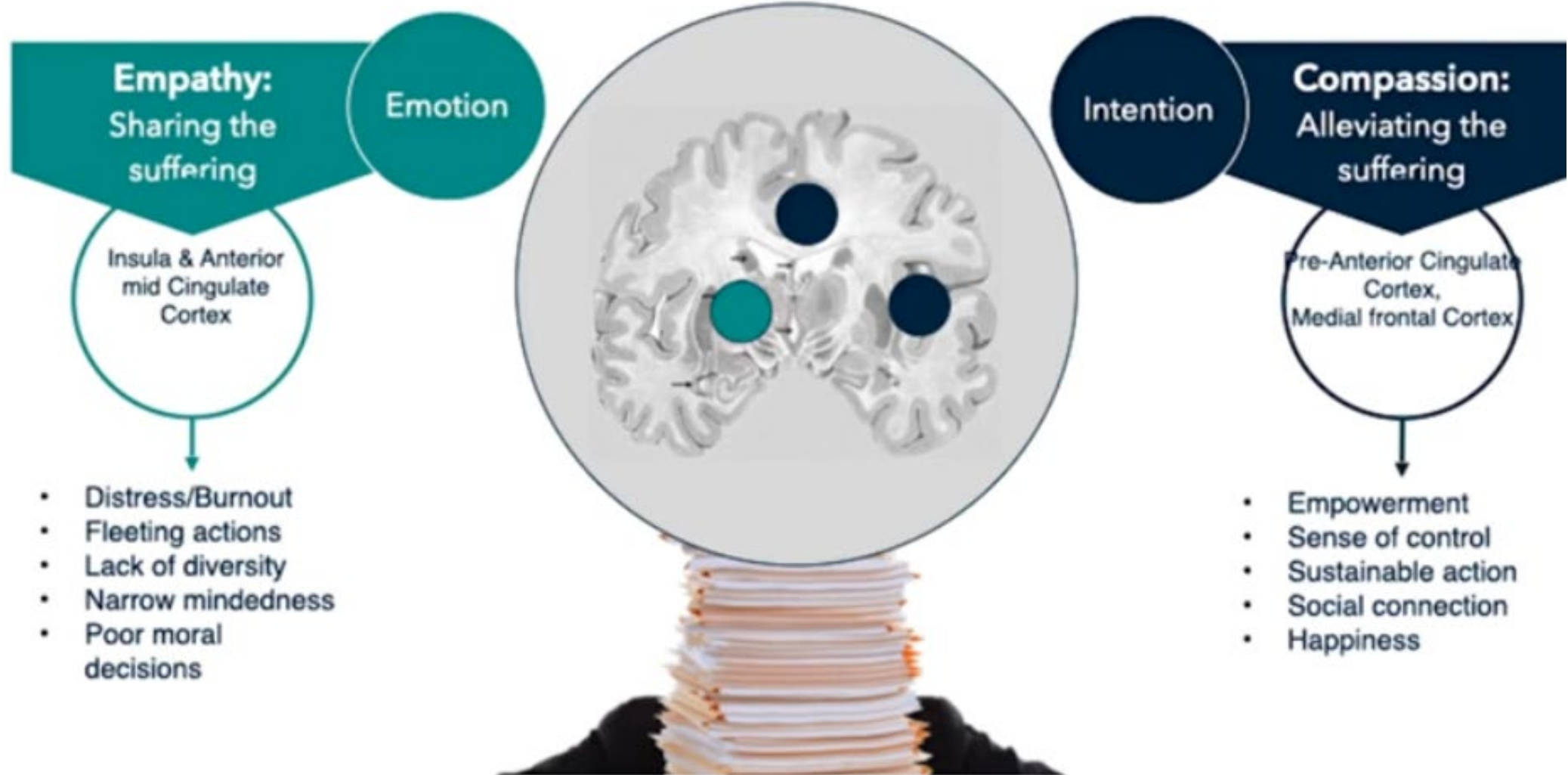
v.

Empathy



**Empathy + Action = Compassion**

# Understanding Empathy versus Compassion





**Compassionate  
Systems BC**



# What is Leadership?

The collective capacity of a human community to shape its future

Not based on hierarchy fundamentally

The ability to nurture a generative field

Growing as a leader is synonymous with growing as a human





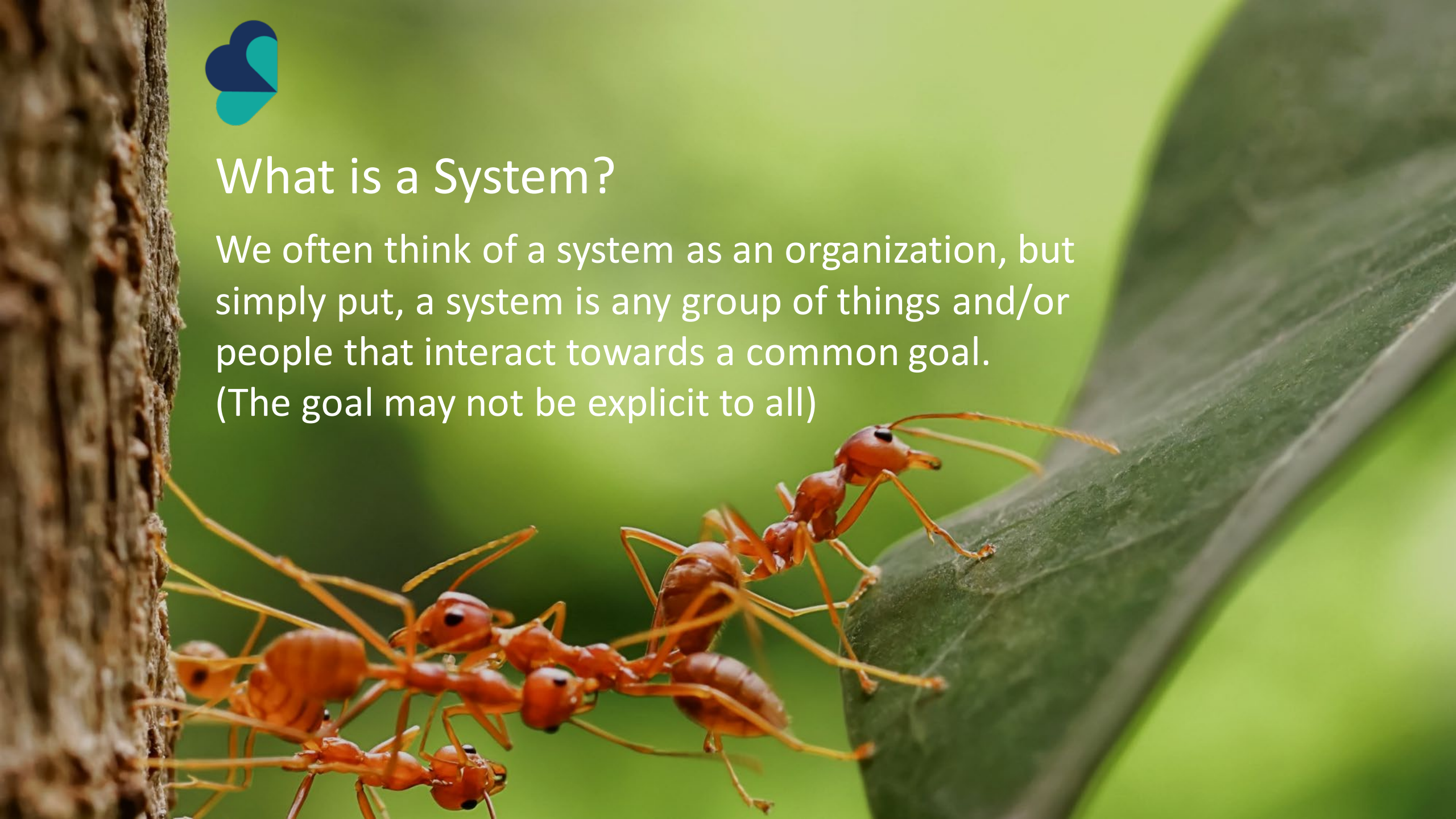
# Systems Thinking: Always Seeing the World in Motion





## What is a System?

We often think of a system as an organization, but simply put, a system is any group of things and/or people that interact towards a common goal.  
(The goal may not be explicit to all)





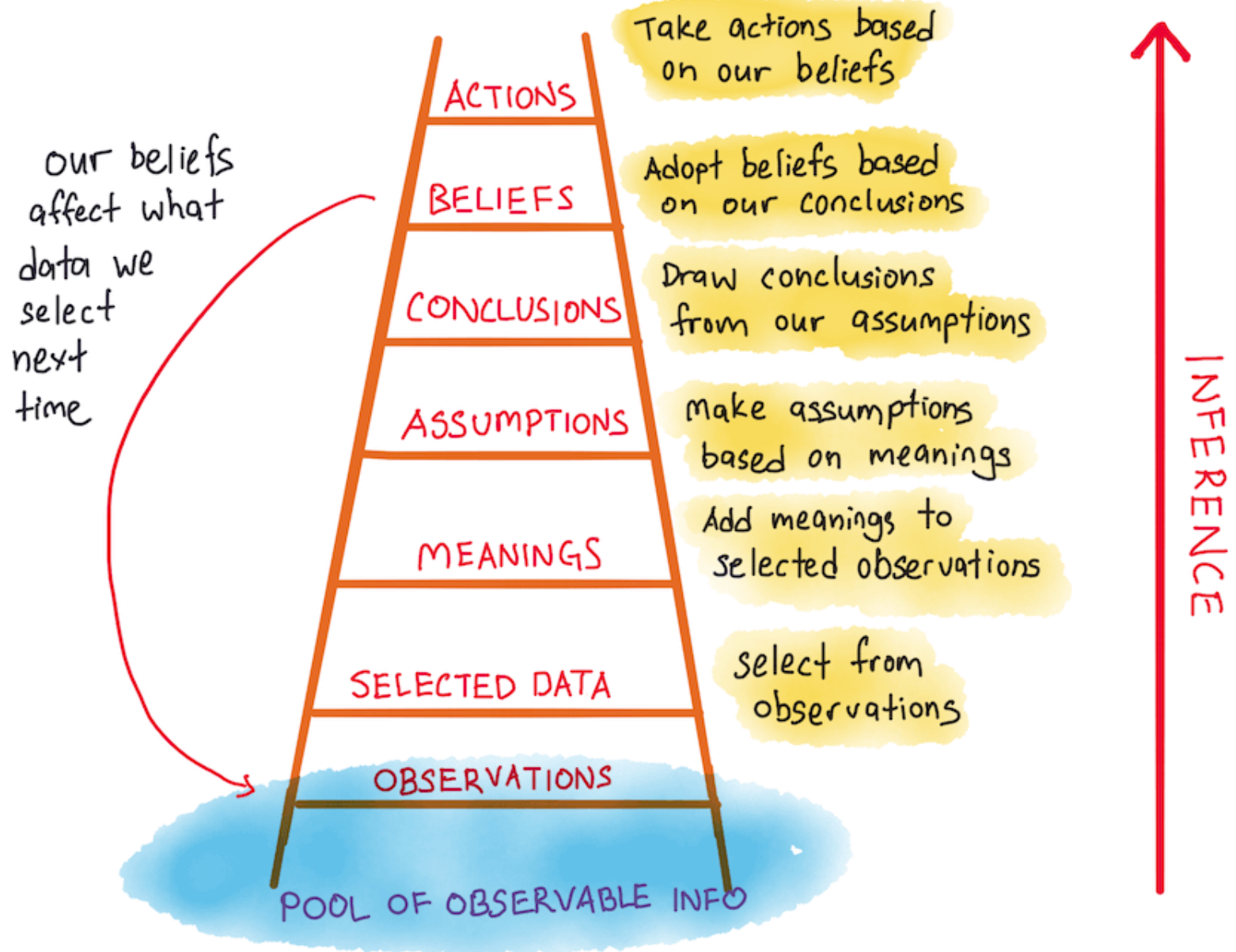
Every system is perfectly  
designed to achieve exactly  
the results it gets



We are the system ...  
and how we show up makes a difference



[The Ladder of Inference - YouTube](#)



Chris Argyris  
Peter Senge

# Creating Generative space

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Holding the space is a capacity that requires us to not move in too much, micromanage, impose our own will and so on, but also not too little. It's not about disappearing. It's not about over imposing. But it's being there, being with, staying with, and holding this space for something that is wanting to happen and to arrive at its own schedule.

Otto Scharmer

*So, to do that in complex group processes and change processes, it requires us to pay attention to the physical space, to the digital space, to the social environment.*





VALUES

CULTURE

POWER

TRAUMA

LANGUAGE

FORMALITY

EXPECTATIONS

INCLINATION

**social environment**

SAFETY

RELATIONSHIPS

HISTORY

PERSPECTIVES

**Explorer** – You're eager to discover new ideas and insights, and want to learn as much as possible.

**Shopper** – You will look over all the available information, and you're happy to leave with one new useful idea.

**Vacationer** – You're not too interested in the meeting, but are happy to take a break from the day-to-day work.

**Prisoner** – You feel forced to attend, and you'd rather be doing something else.



## Table Dialogue

- Is there a regular space that you experience as generative?.
- What were the characteristics of the space?
- How did you sense it was generative?

# CREATIVE TENSION

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The difference between our aspiration and our current reality creates a **tension or energy** for change.

A **clear vision** and an honest assessment of **current reality** are both essential.

Keeping your aspiration **obtainable** given your current reality maintains the tension.



A vision is.....

Personal

Heart felt

Reflective

Future focused

Individual and Collective

Multi-dimensional

Detailed

Creative



# The Systemic Iceberg

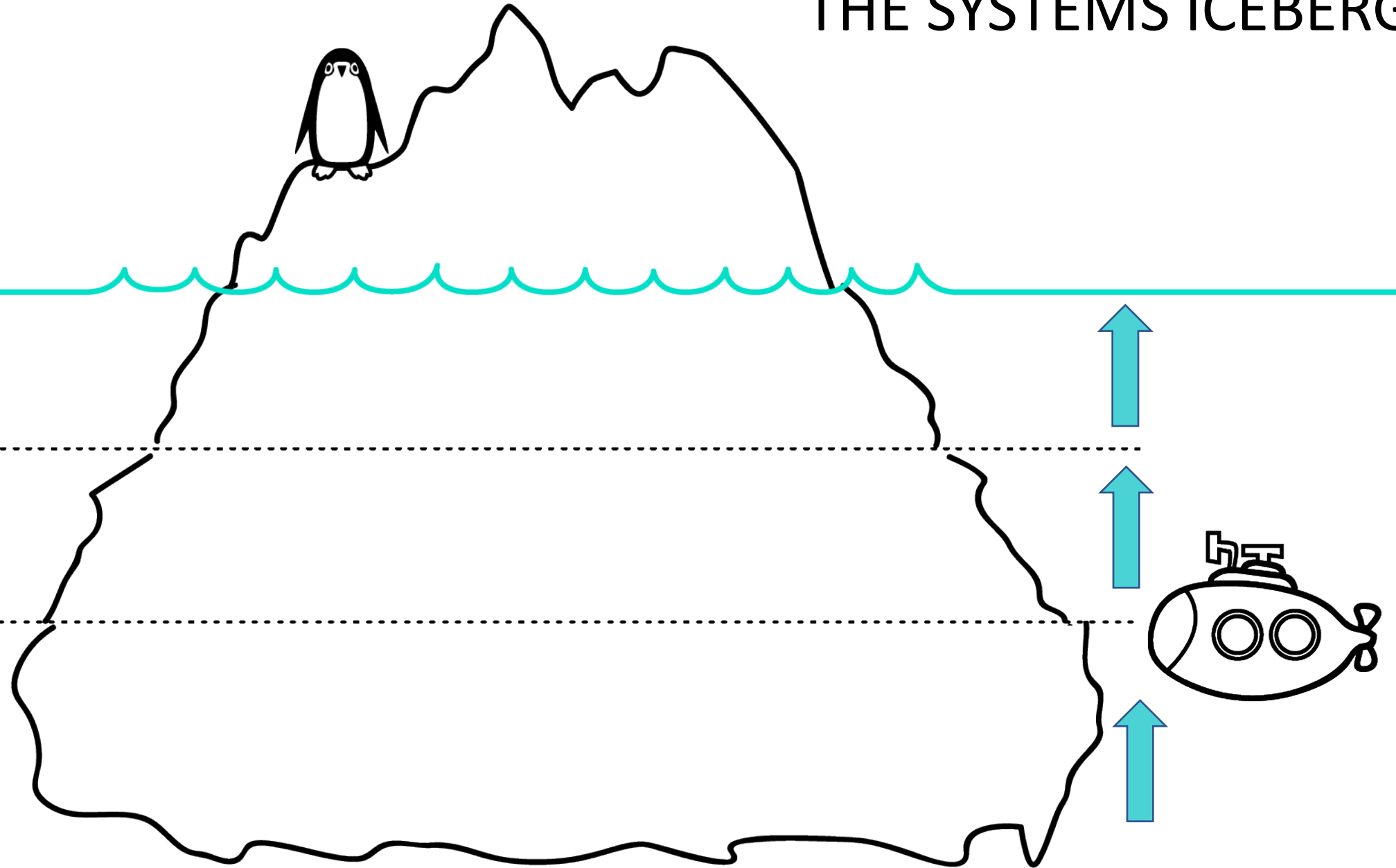
# THE SYSTEMS ICEBERG

REACT

ANTICIPATE

DESIGN

TRANSFORM



# THE SYSTEMS ICEBERG

REACT

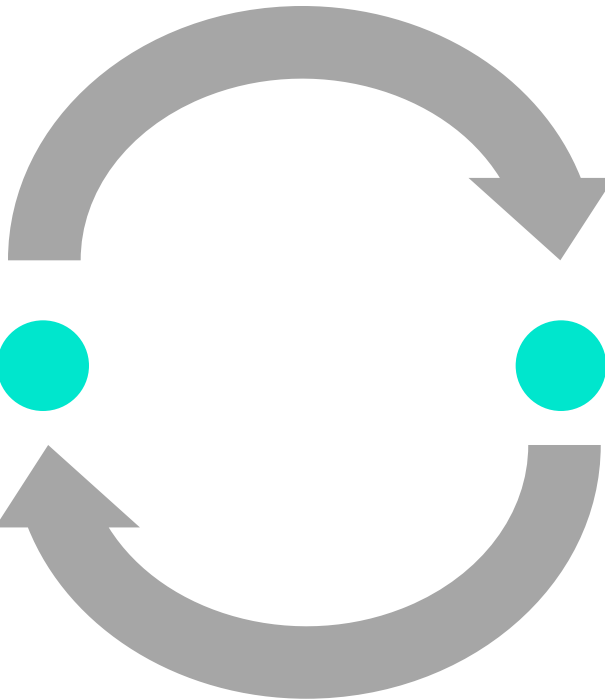


SYMPTOMS

Symptom



Reaction

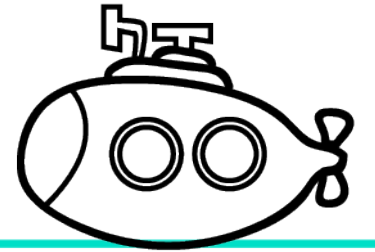


# THE SYSTEMS ICEBERG

REACT

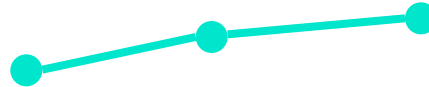


SYMPTOMS



ANTICIPATE

PATTERNS & TRENDS



Thinking about trends can allow us to  
*forecast* and potentially *forestall*  
challenges

# THE SYSTEMS ICEBERG

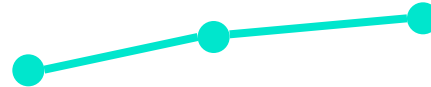
REACT

SYMPTOMS



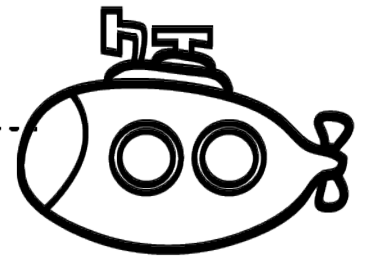
ANTICIPATE

PATTERNS & TRENDS



DESIGN

STRUCTURES & PROCESSES



The system creates these patterns,  
trends and outcomes

# Structures and Processes Are

“...rules, programs, norms, policies, guidelines, power structures, distribution of resources, cultural rules or informal ways of work that have been embedded and institutionalized”

# THE SYSTEMS ICEBERG

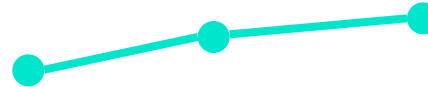
REACT

SYMPTOMS



ANTICIPATE

PATTERNS & TRENDS

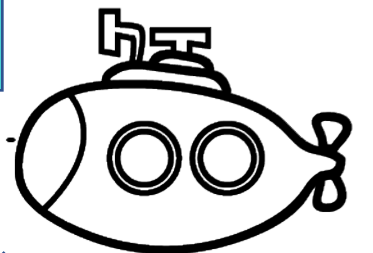


DESIGN

STRUCTURES & PROCESSES

TRANSFORM

MENTAL MODELS





# Onward

How would you like to grow the work? (an intention or two)

What support or tools do you need?

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