

Building and Sustaining Complexity Capabilities in Public Service Organisations

Chris Abbott – Defra Continuous Improvement Service & PhD Student Public Administration and Policy
Talk

Room CMR 1 (ground)
Day one from 1335 to 1410



Scan the QR code to learn more about SCiO membership, subscribe to our newsletter and access SCiO resources.

Hello

Thank you for Joining me



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



UNIVERSITY
of HULL

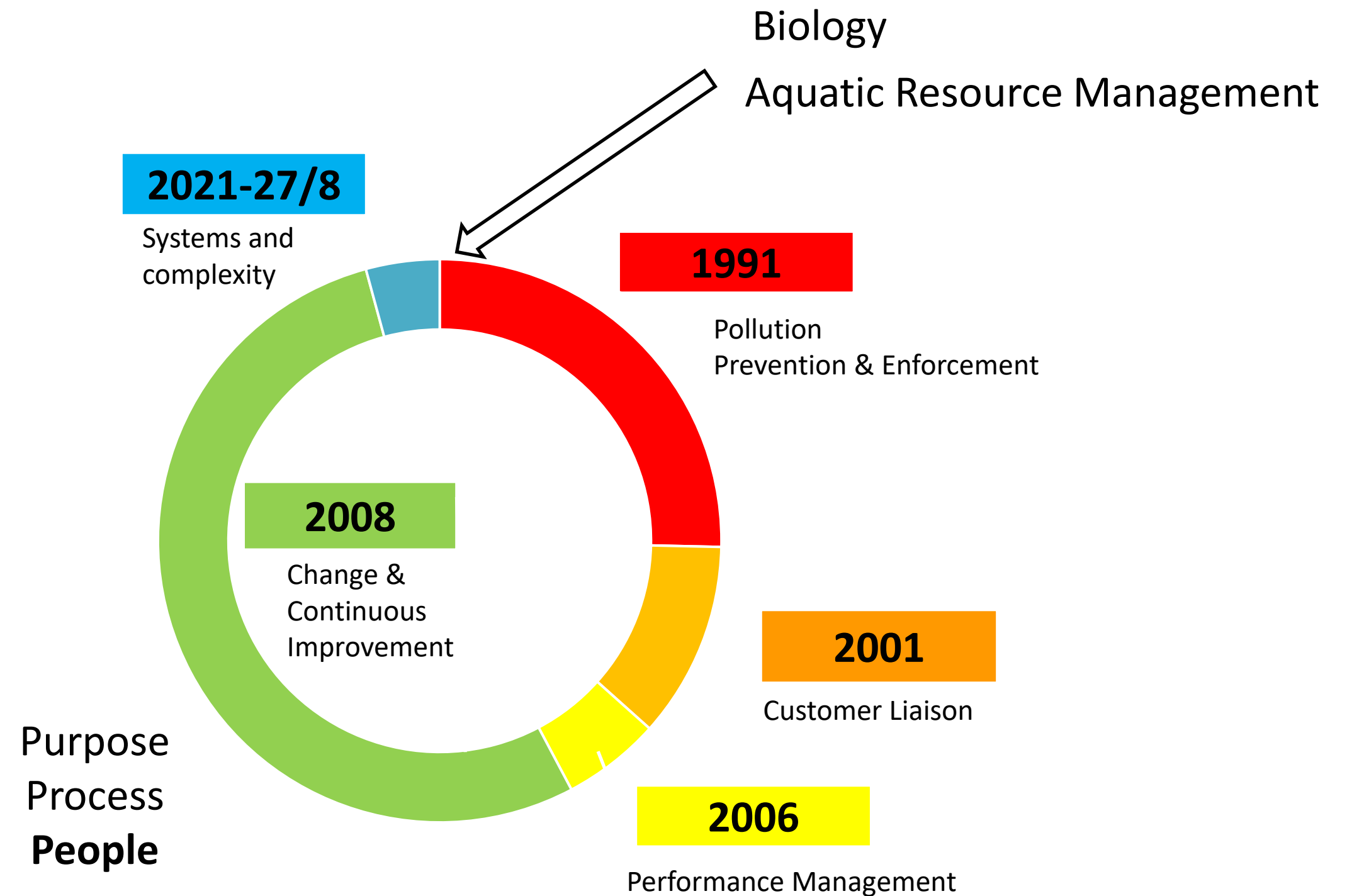


Chris Abbott

pracademic

Christopher.abbott@defra.gov.uk

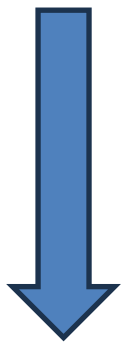
Principal Consultant – Complex Challenges
Defra group Continuous Improvement Service



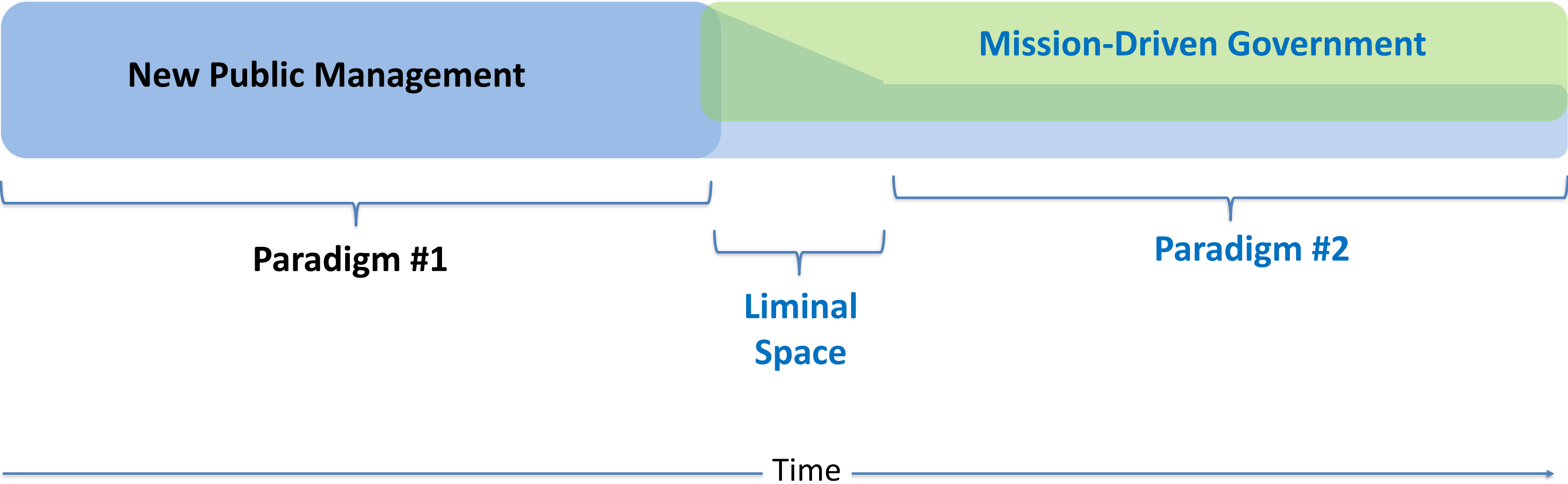
On the cusp of something big...

“Government delivery too often focuses on a top down, target-led approach to accountability. This **command and control** management technique is good at raising poor performance to a minimum standard, but the model is less capable of..

We are here

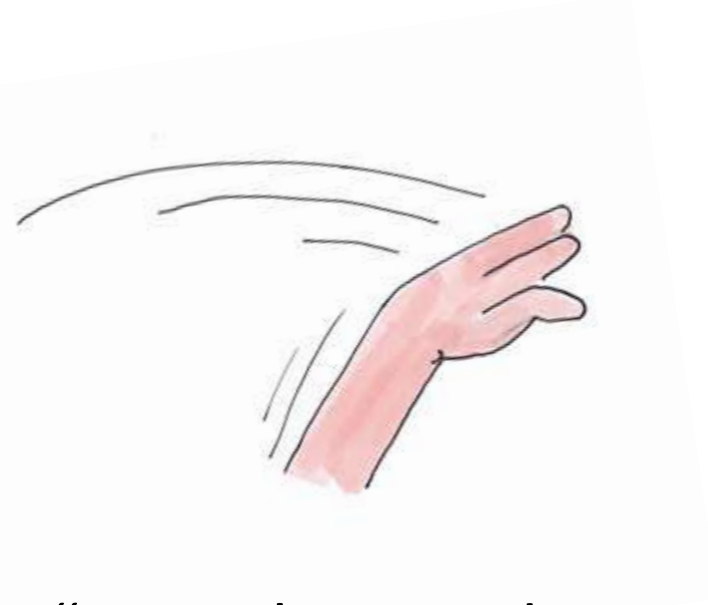


...allowing systems to adapt to meet **ambitious goals**, and encourage the innovative, locally-led approaches that are often needed to drive excellence.”



Working differently requires thinking differently

How might we accelerate an organisation's ability to nurture and sustain complexity capabilities in, and beyond this liminal space?



“Be realistic and grounded”

Practice



Pracademic



“Be academically robust”

Academia

How might we accelerate an organisation's ability to nurture and sustain complexity capabilities in, and beyond this liminal space?



We need...

A vehicle

One that

- is scalable
- is sustainable
- takes us to places we want to go

...even if we don't yet know that's
where we want to go!

What better way to be grounded than in the soil – the social soil?

A social field has a visible part above ground (the tangible part of the system) and an invisible part below the surface: the social soil— that is, **the qualities of awareness and relationships that people in a system operate from.**

The concept of the social field builds on the profound work of systems thinking over many decades and seeks to further evolve it to reckon with the complexities of the twenty- first century. **The concept of social fields expands systems thinking by grounding it in the sources of attention, intention, and agency— that is, the quality of the social soil.**

What soil is for the biosphere— a connector, enabler, and regulator— attention is for the social sphere.

Attention

Intention

Agency

Eco-system leadership is the capacity to align attention, intention, and agency at the level of the whole.

Scharmer, C. Otto; Kaufer, Katrin. Presencing: 7 Practices for Transforming Self, Society, and Business (p. 6). Berrett-Koehler Publishers. Kindle Edition.

Research Propositions and Research Questions - **Three areas of focus**

Proposition 1 (Attend):

The efficient and effective delivery of goals contributing to the **delivery of missions** requires an understanding of the complexity capabilities available, and those that are required.

Proposition 2 (Intent):

Leaders of organisations who are **aware of the potential benefit** in complexity capabilities, as enablers of efficiency and effectiveness, will seek to build and sustain them.

Proposition 3 (Agency):

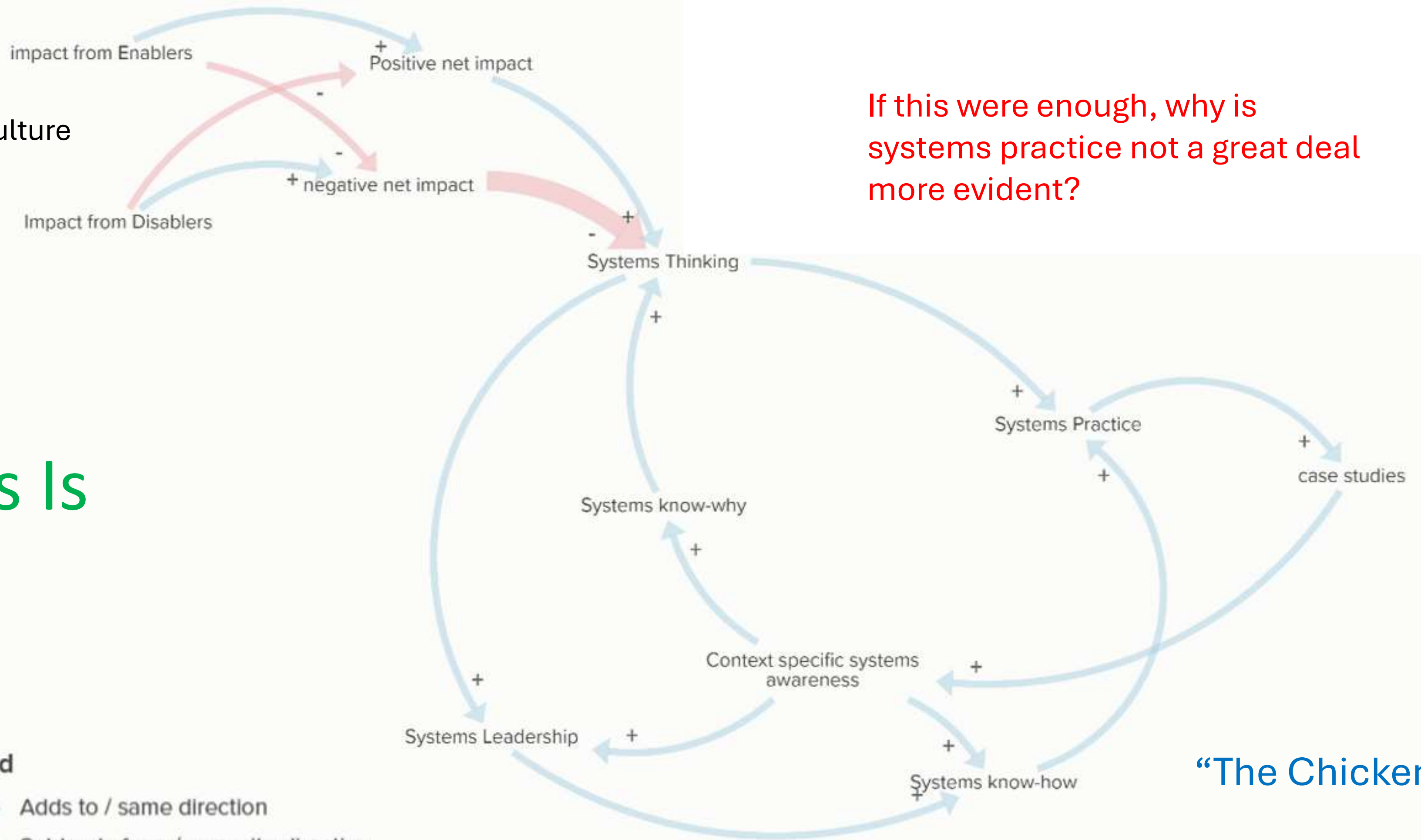
An organisation seeking to build complexity capabilities, to become more effective and efficient, **already has the means** to do so.

Culture

As Is

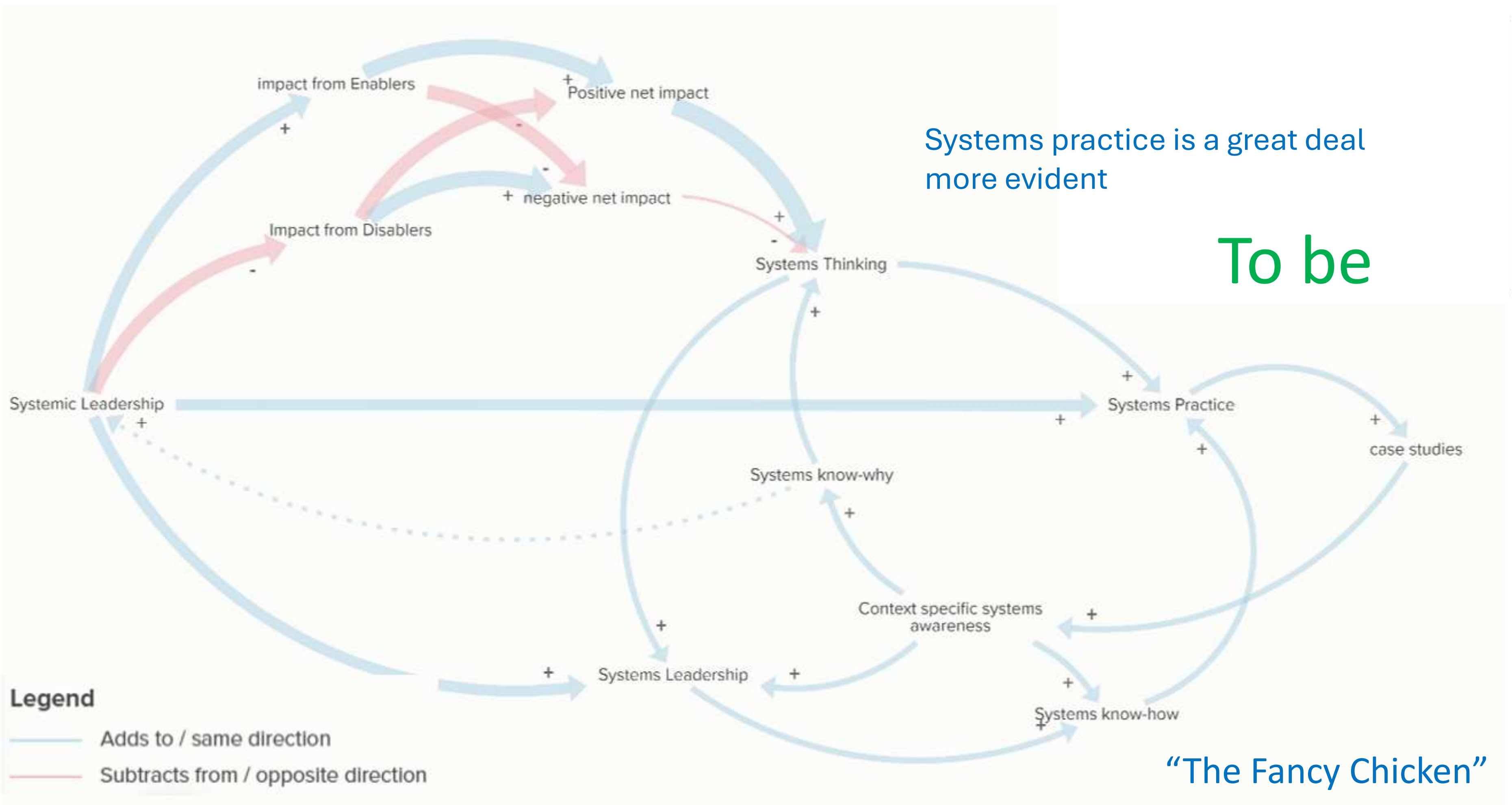
Legend

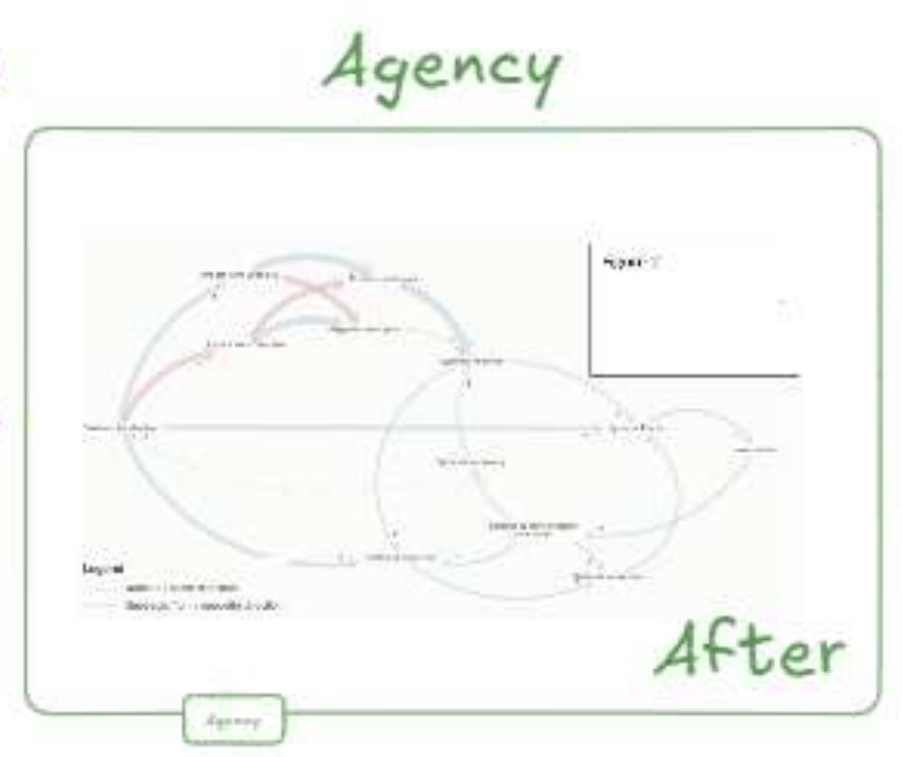
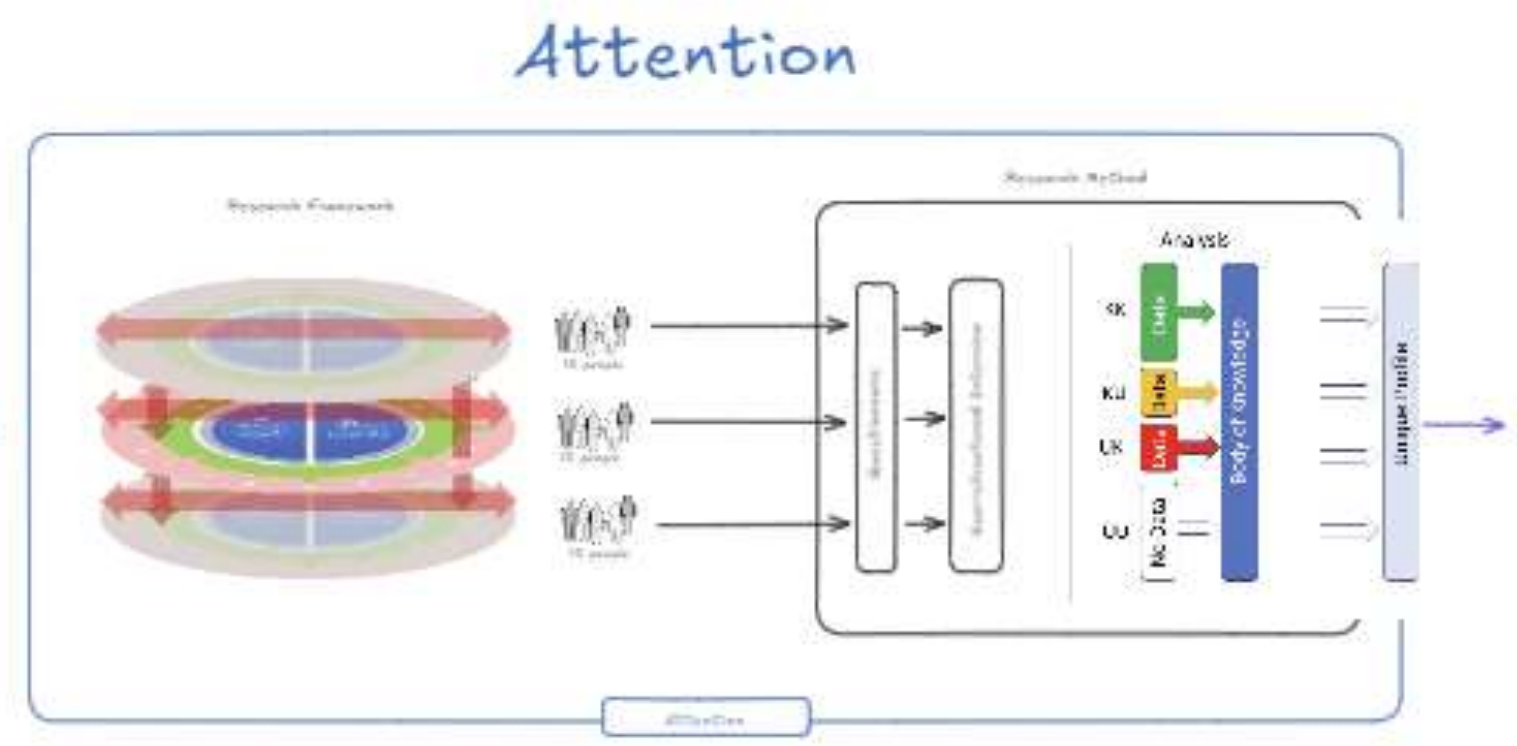
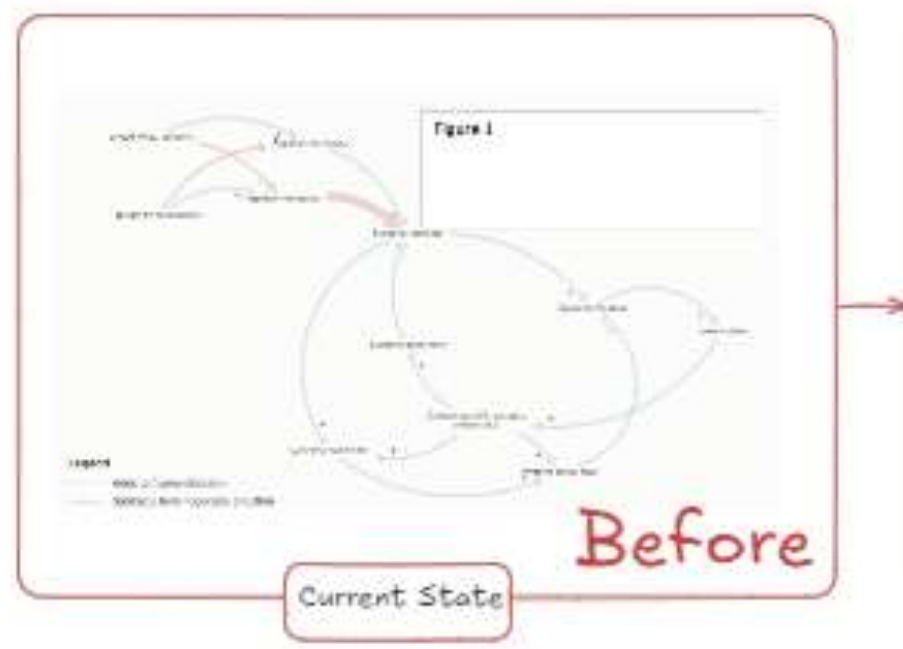
- Adds to / same direction
- Subtracts from / opposite direction



If this were enough, why is systems practice not a great deal more evident?

“The Chicken”







The vehicle

One that is *people positive*

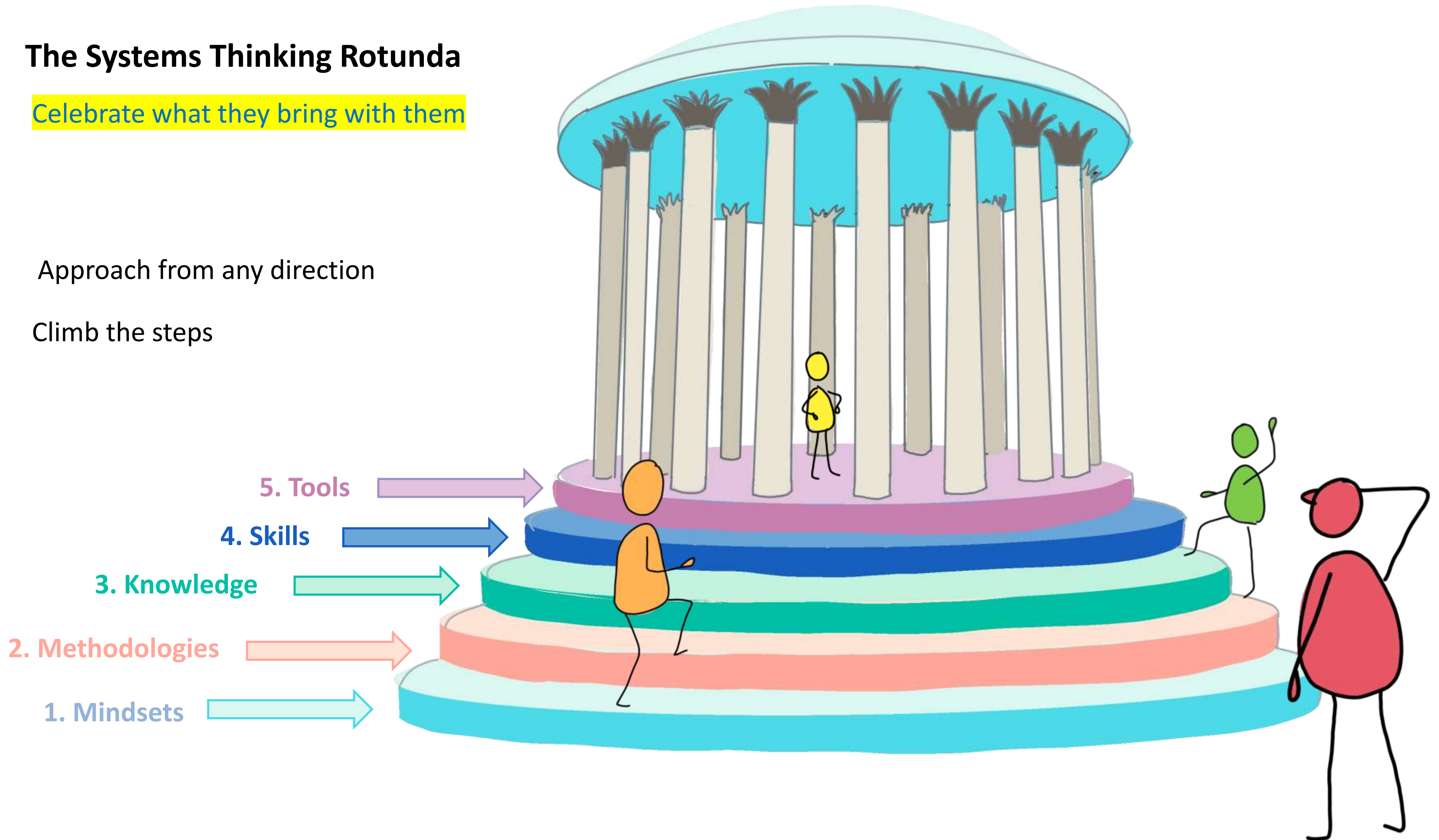
- a nucleus for focus - a ***community of practice***
 - Find the curious
 - *Celebrate what they bring with them*
 - Feed their curiosity
 - *Don't teach – guide*
 - *Engage – don't overwhelm*
 - Inspire them to
 - set off on their *personal learning journeys*
 - support others as they start their journeys
 - embrace ***systems convening***
- An *inquiry process*,
 - that is...
 - adaptable to diverse contexts
 - not unnecessarily complicated

The Systems Thinking Rotunda

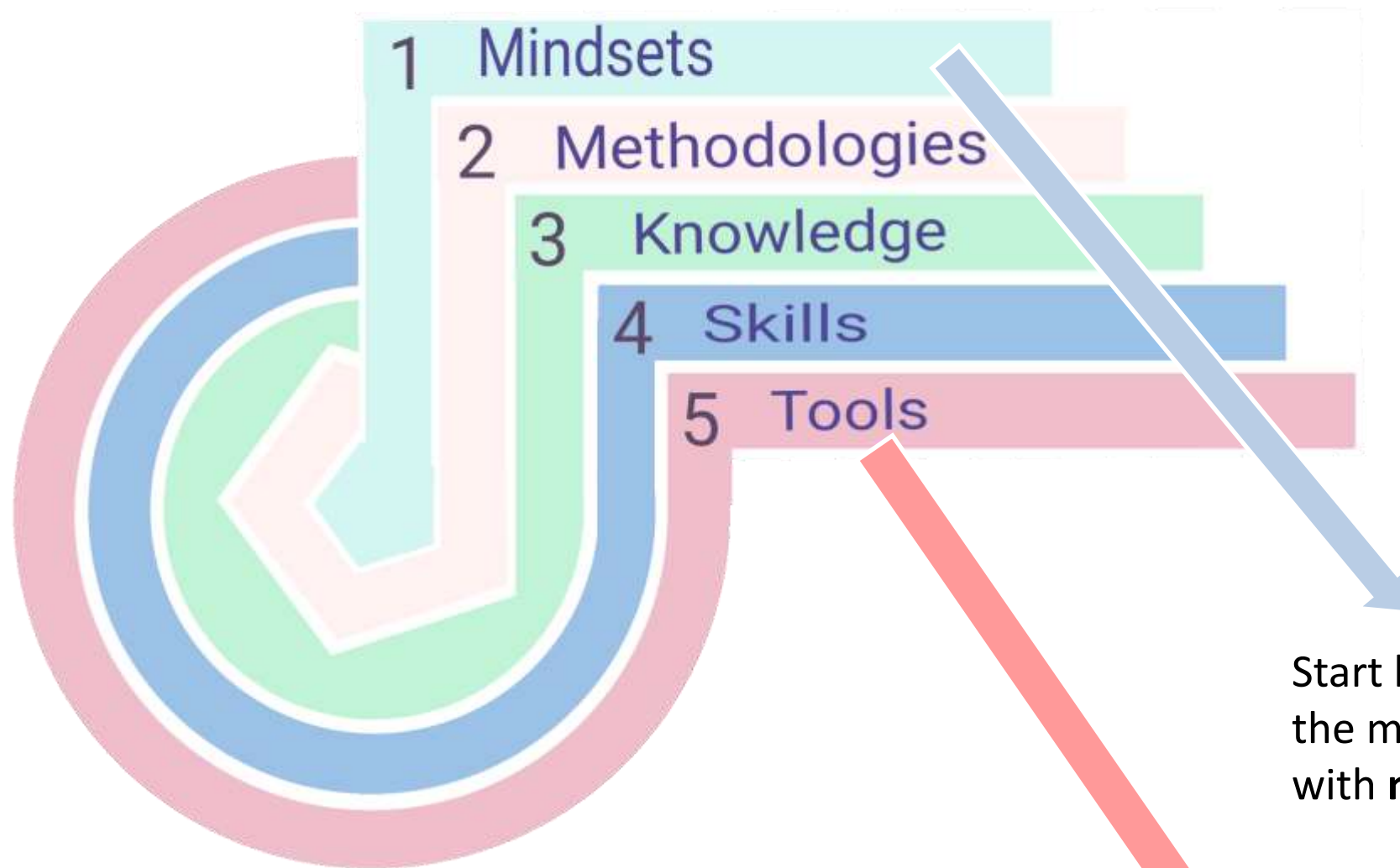
Celebrate what they bring with them

Approach from any direction

Climb the steps

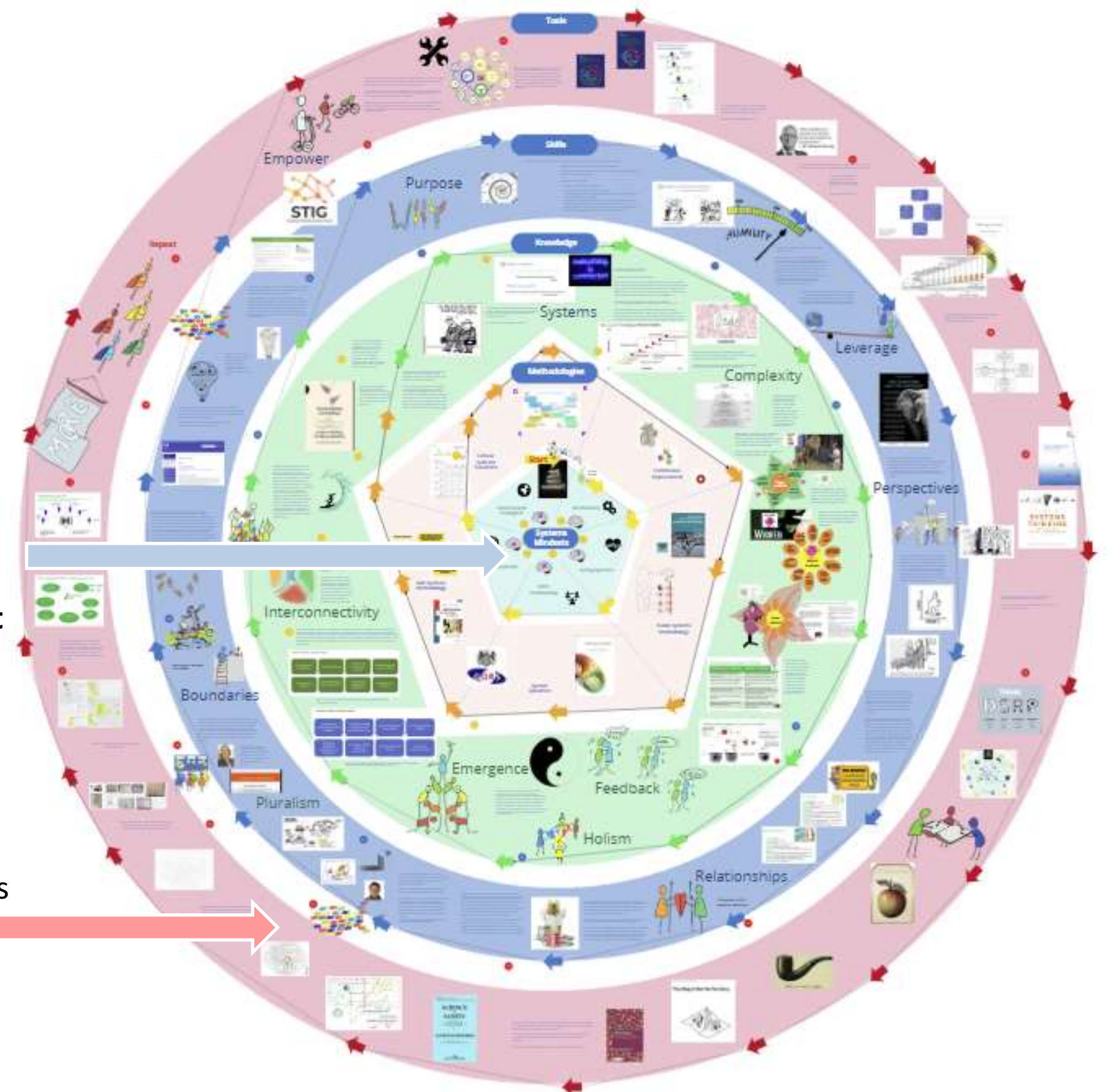


Don't teach - guide: Systems Thinking on a Page



Start here, in the middle, with **mindset**

Spiral out through each layer, towards the **tools**



Personal Learning Journey

Inquiry Process

Research Method Design

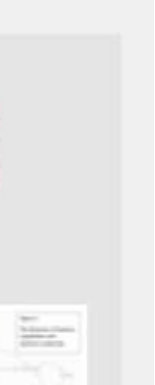
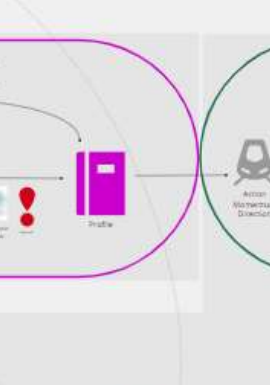
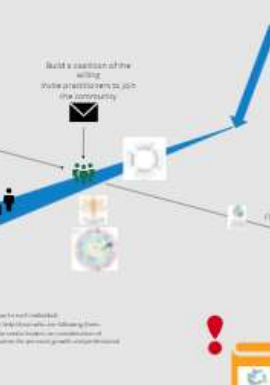
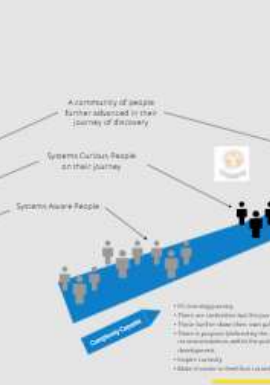
Attend

Intent

Agency

Attend

Intentional design and action



Key

! a single product

People Positive

Don't teach – guide
Tailor to context & co-create

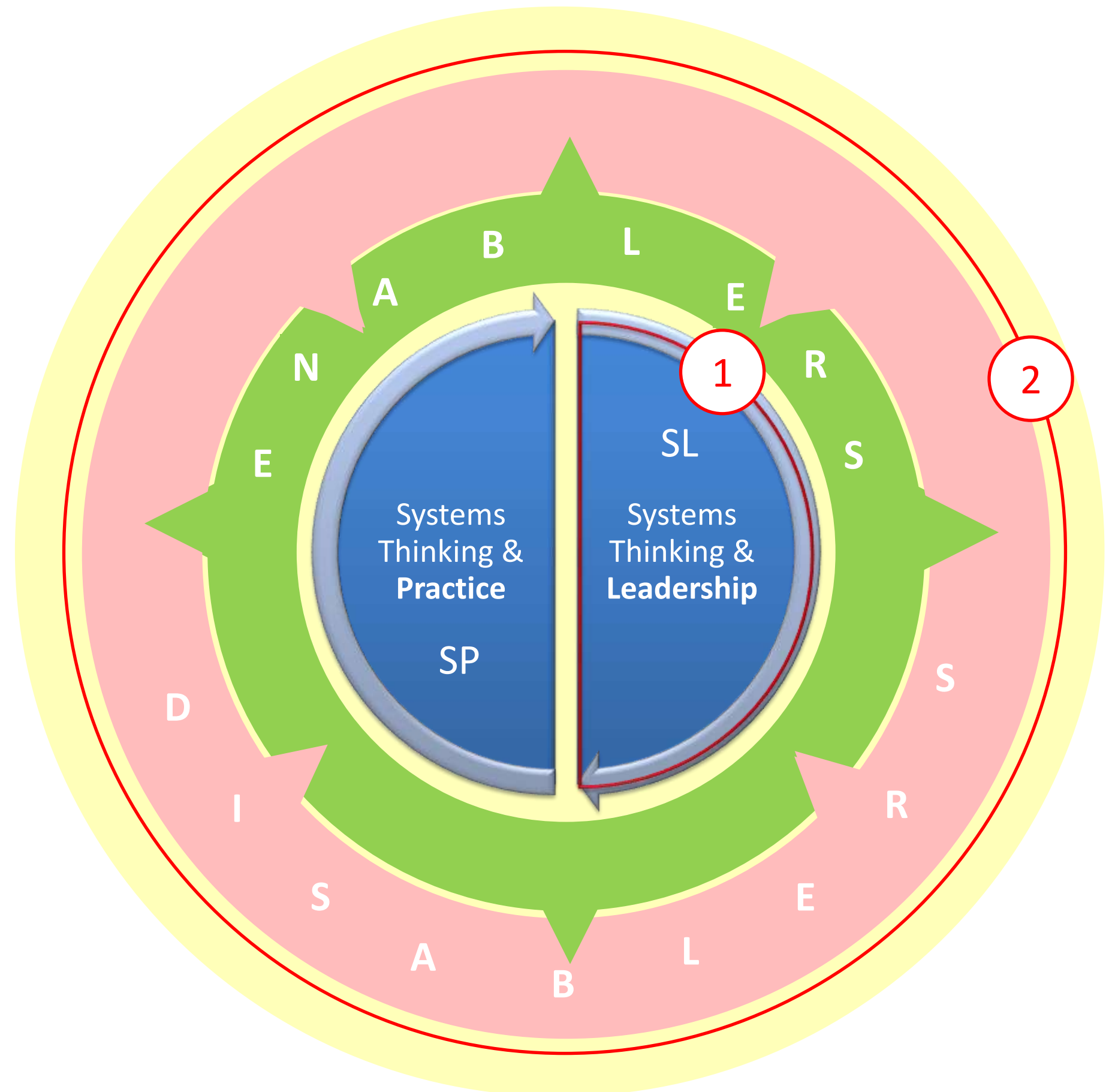
Attend

Is there a gap?

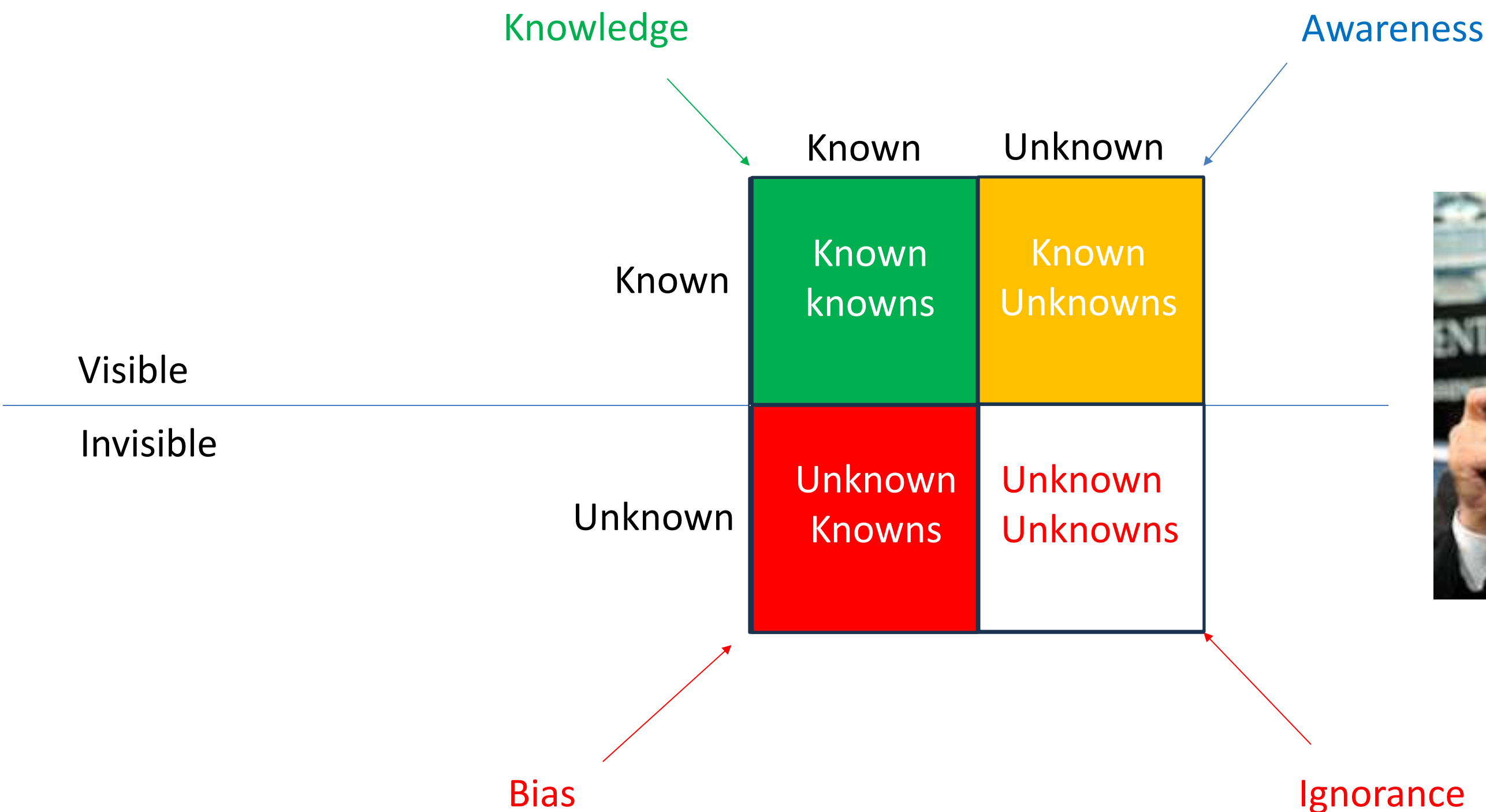
To guide our attention, we require a **research framework**.

This is the basic building block.

It looks at organisational culture as a whole, and it recognises the pivotal role of leadership.



Attend Analysis



Bias

Do we have unhelpful pre-conceptions or bias that saps our curiosity?

Ignorance

Is our knowledge out of date incomplete, or maybe even wrong?

Attend

Select case

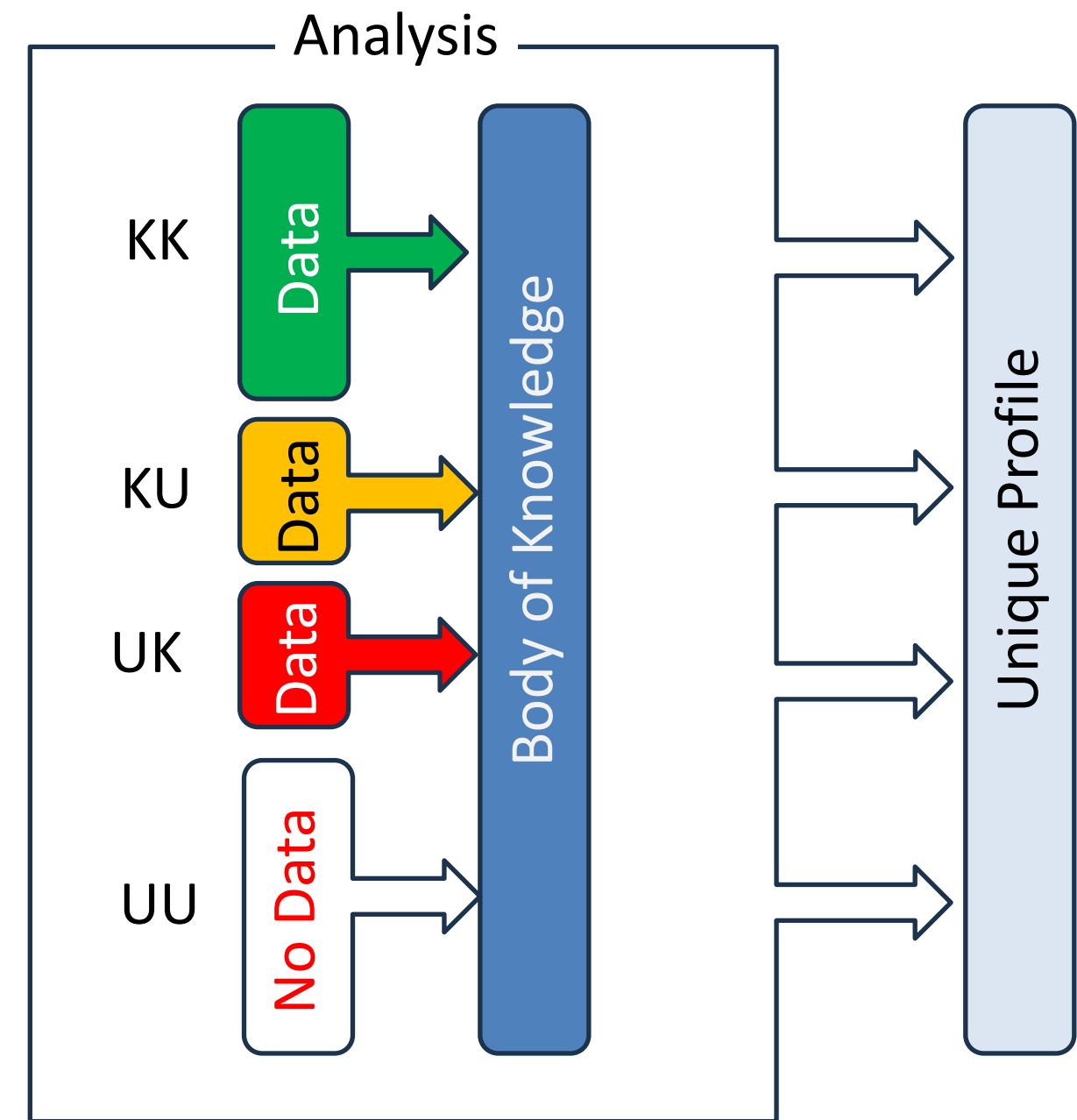
Select 30 participants

Conduct questionnaire
and semi-structured interview

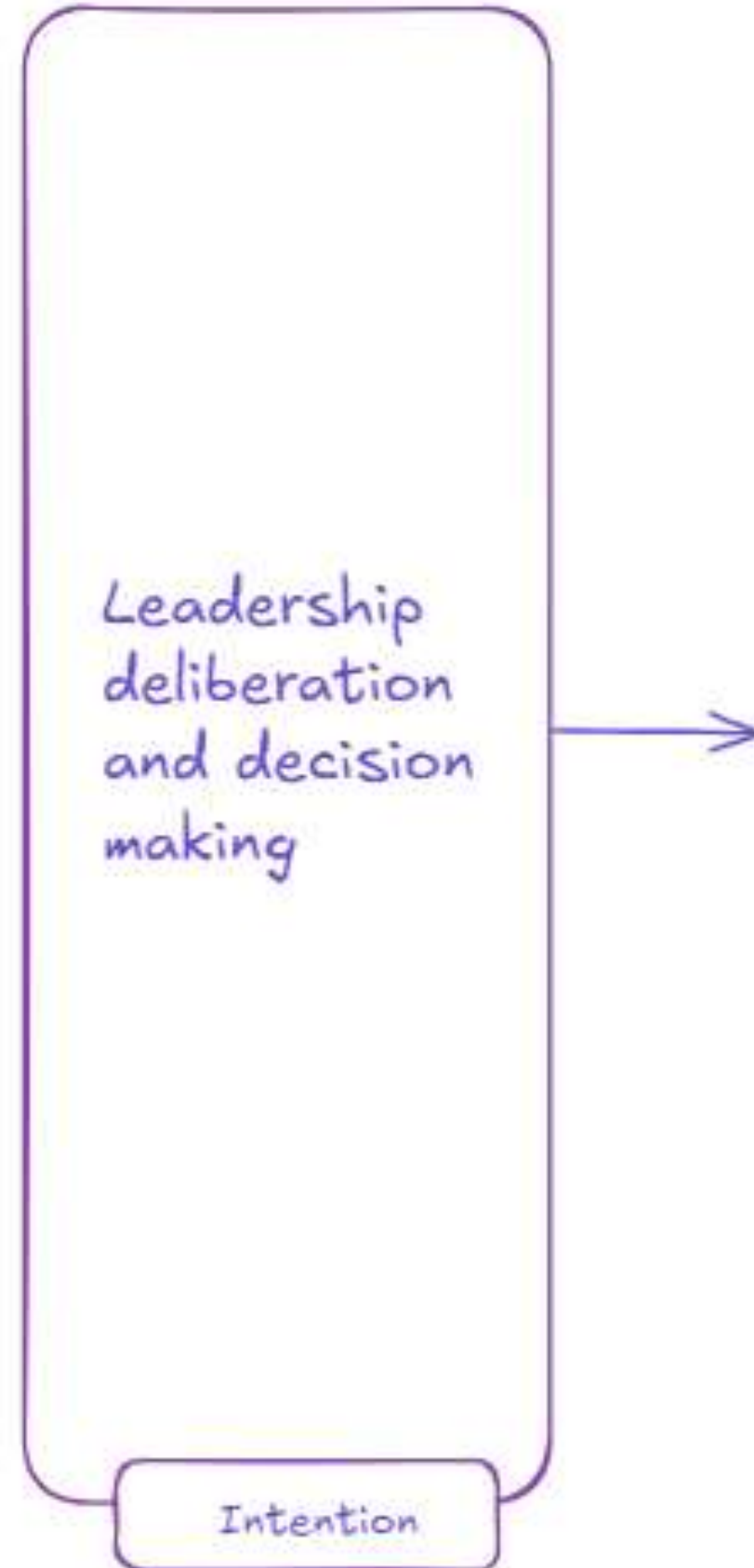
Analyse

Publish **Profile** document

The role of the research data and its analysis is to inform a unique and insightful profile of capabilities that are present and absent.



Intention



Intent

Do we need to do anything?



A blue seesaw beam is tilted upwards from left to right, supported by a blue triangular fulcrum in the center. The text 'Linear Thinking' is written in a large, black, sans-serif font along the lower part of the beam on the left side. The text 'Systems Thinking' is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font along the upper part of the beam on the right side.

Linear
Thinking

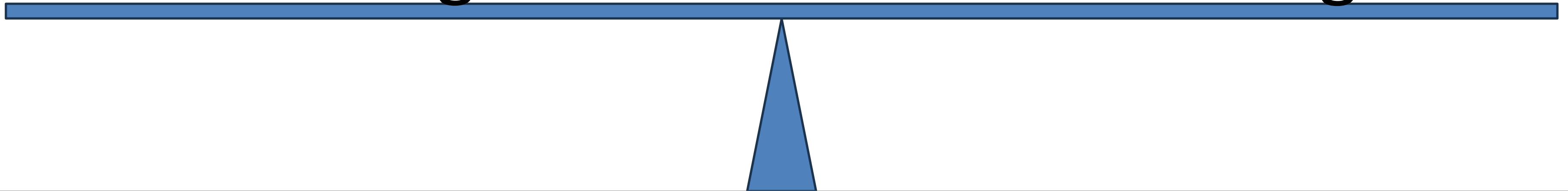
Systems Thinking

Intent

The **intent** is to guide decisions that will bring about a more effective balance between linear and systems thinking.

Linear
Thinking

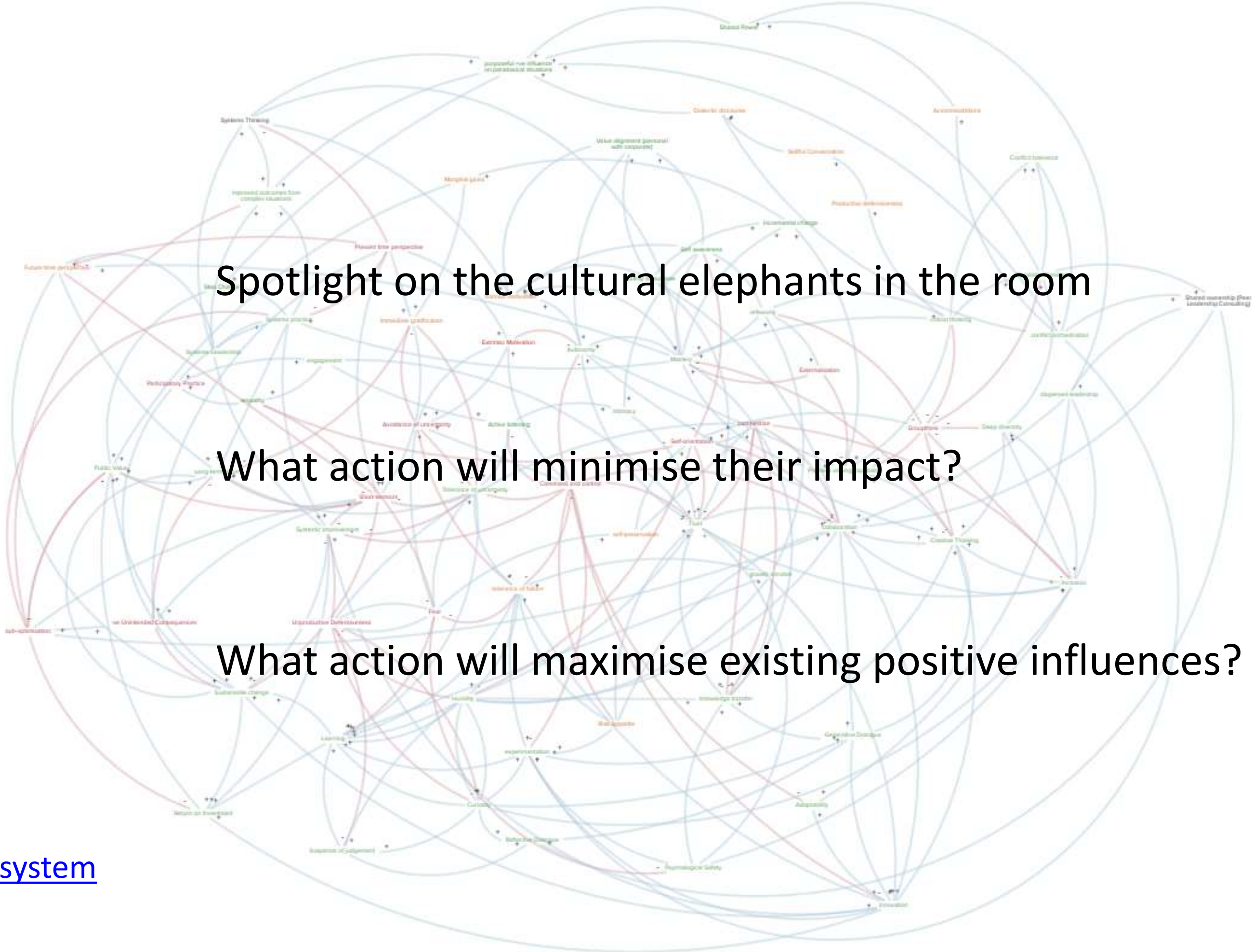
Systems
Thinking



Intent

Web Whyconfer Reviewer
2011 Key Competencies
in Sustainability

- Inter-cultural thinking
- communicating skills
- relating skills
- negotiating skills
- leadership skills



Spotlight on the cultural elephants in the room

What action will minimise their impact?

What action will maximise existing positive influences?

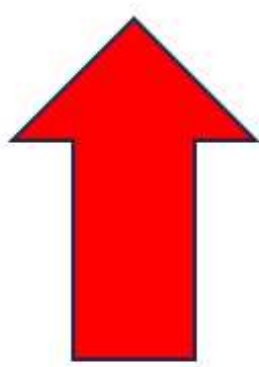
Culture as a system

Legend
— Adds to / same direction
— Subtracts from / opposite direction

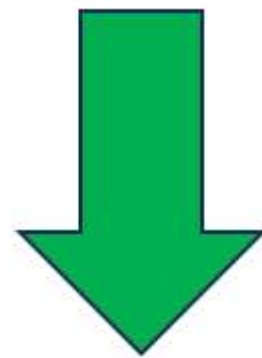
Intent

To this...

Minimise



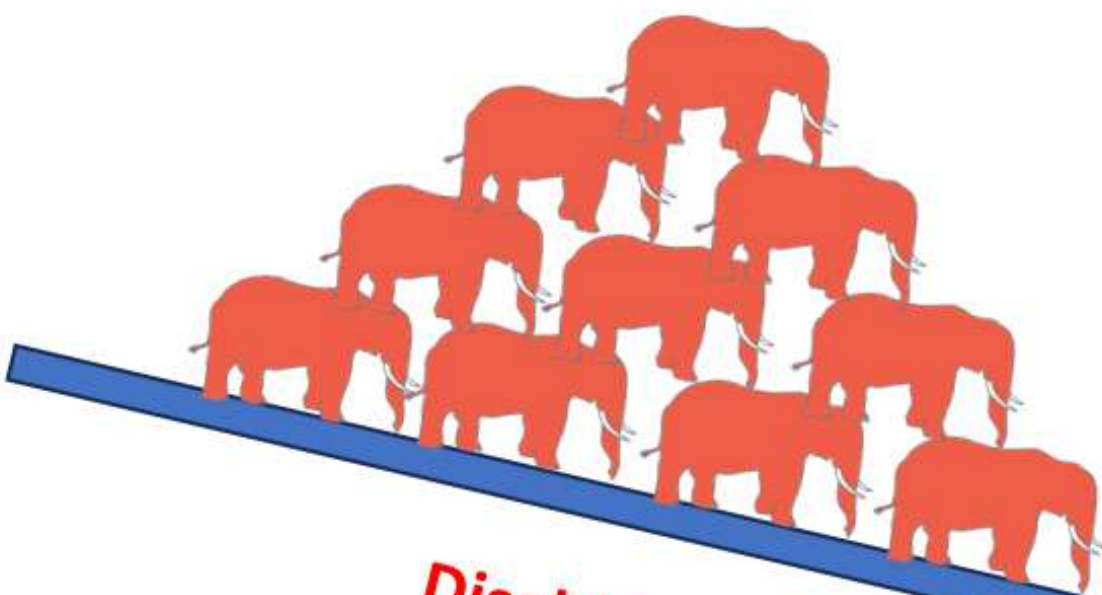
Maximise



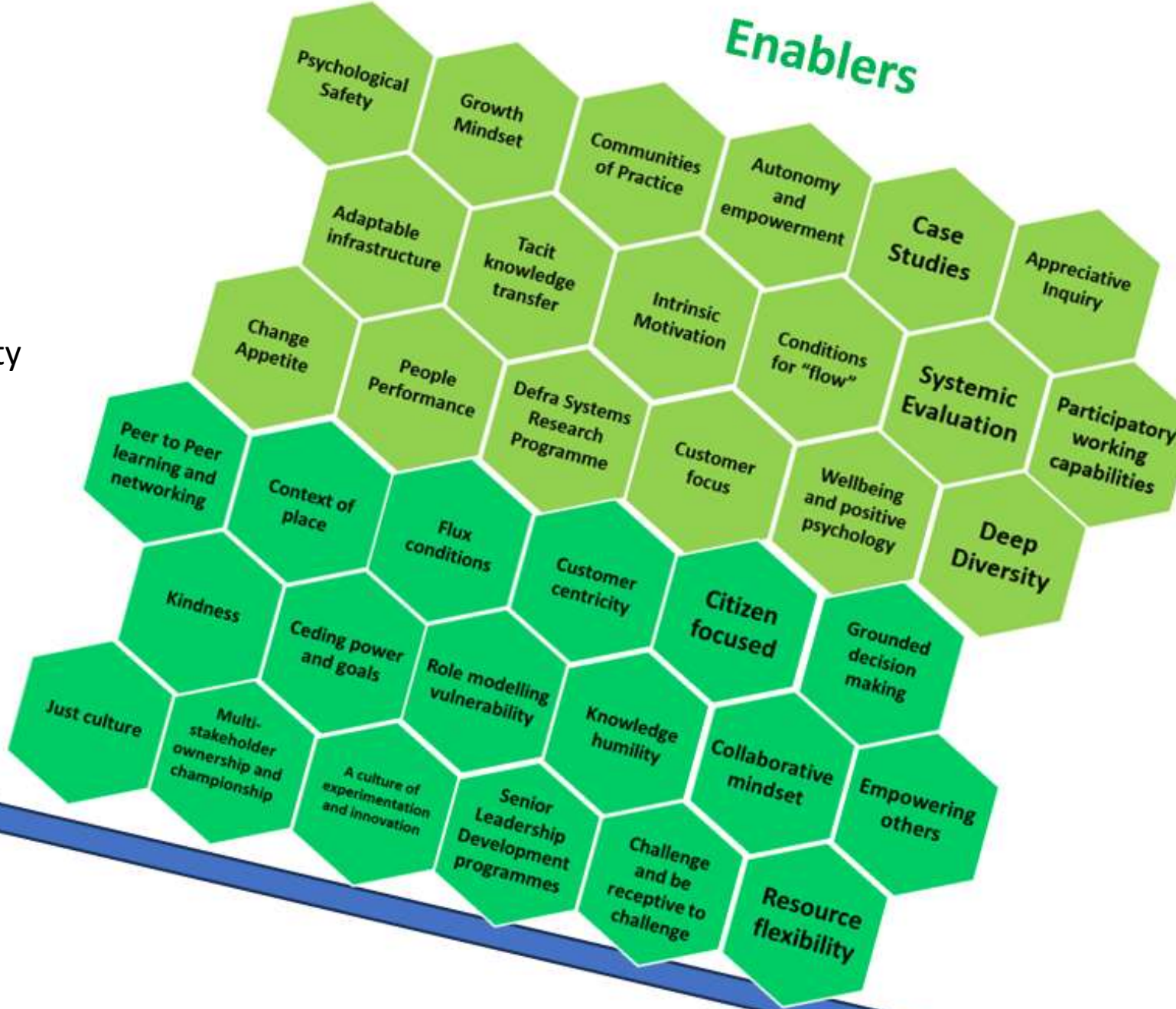
Variety Engineering

The orchestration of deliberate action to:

- enhance the impact of corporate enablers of capability for working effectively with complexity
- minimise the impact of disablers.



Disablers

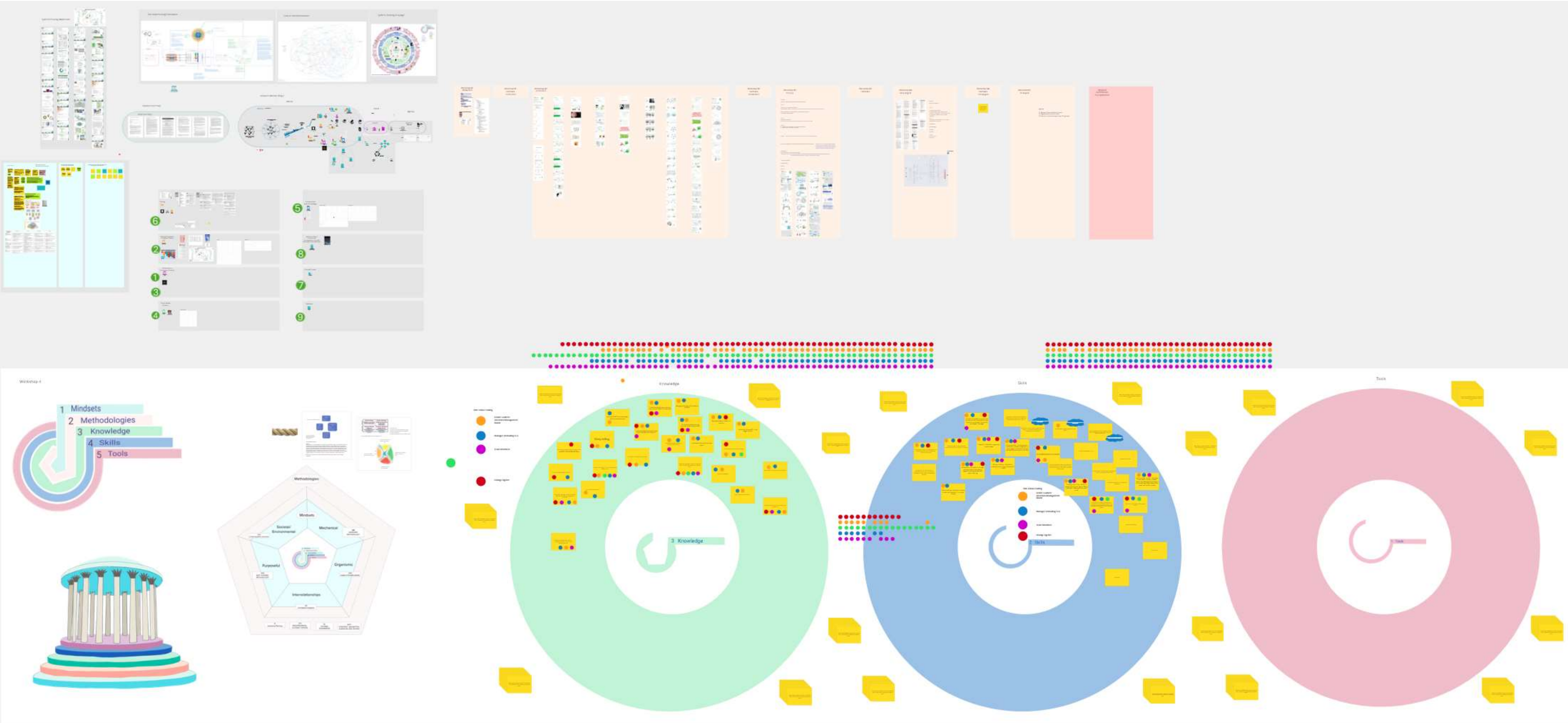


Rebalancing is scalable. It may be directed within one organisation, or across a number of organisations.

Agency

What can we do?

At this point - we've already started - virtual whiteboards – a living resource & chart for the journey



Agency

The framework shapes a repeatable process for revealing a unique **profile**.

This establishes a common language to enable useful comparisons between profiles, but its primary purpose is to guide bespoke “**change Aikido**”

i.e., a coherent set of subtle changes across a broad front that tip the balance to favour the development of sustainable complexity capabilities.

© Kesara Rathnayake



The vehicle

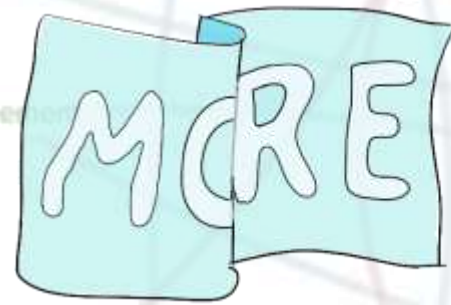
One that is *people positive*

- a nucleus for focus - a ***community of practice***
 - Find the curious
 - Celebrate what they bring with them
 - Feed their curiosity
 - Don't teach – guide
 - Engage – don't overwhelm
 - Inspire them to
 - set off on their **personal learning journeys**
 - support others as they start their journeys
 - embrace ***systems convening***
- An inquiry process,
 - that is...
 - adaptable to diverse contexts
 - not unnecessarily complicated

- Don't teach – guide
- Engage – don't overwhelm



an agile and adaptable workforce



Aligned governance and shared power



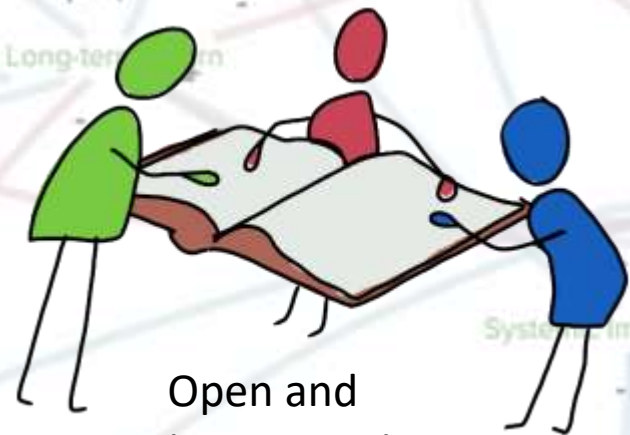
Learning through reflective practice



Orchestrating conflict



Shared and adaptive leadership



Open and transparent



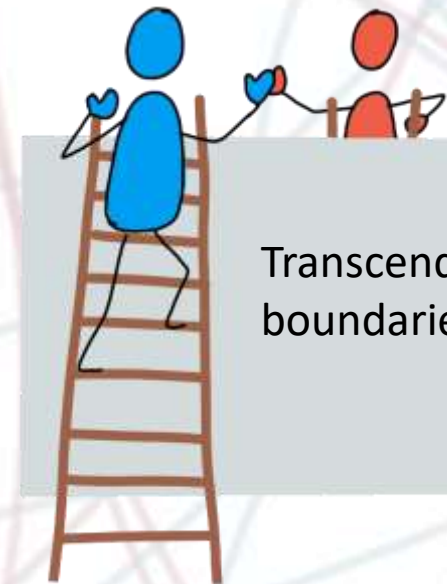
Co-design
Co-creation



Shared Purpose



Nurturing and
harnessing emergence



Transcending
boundaries



Feedback
driven

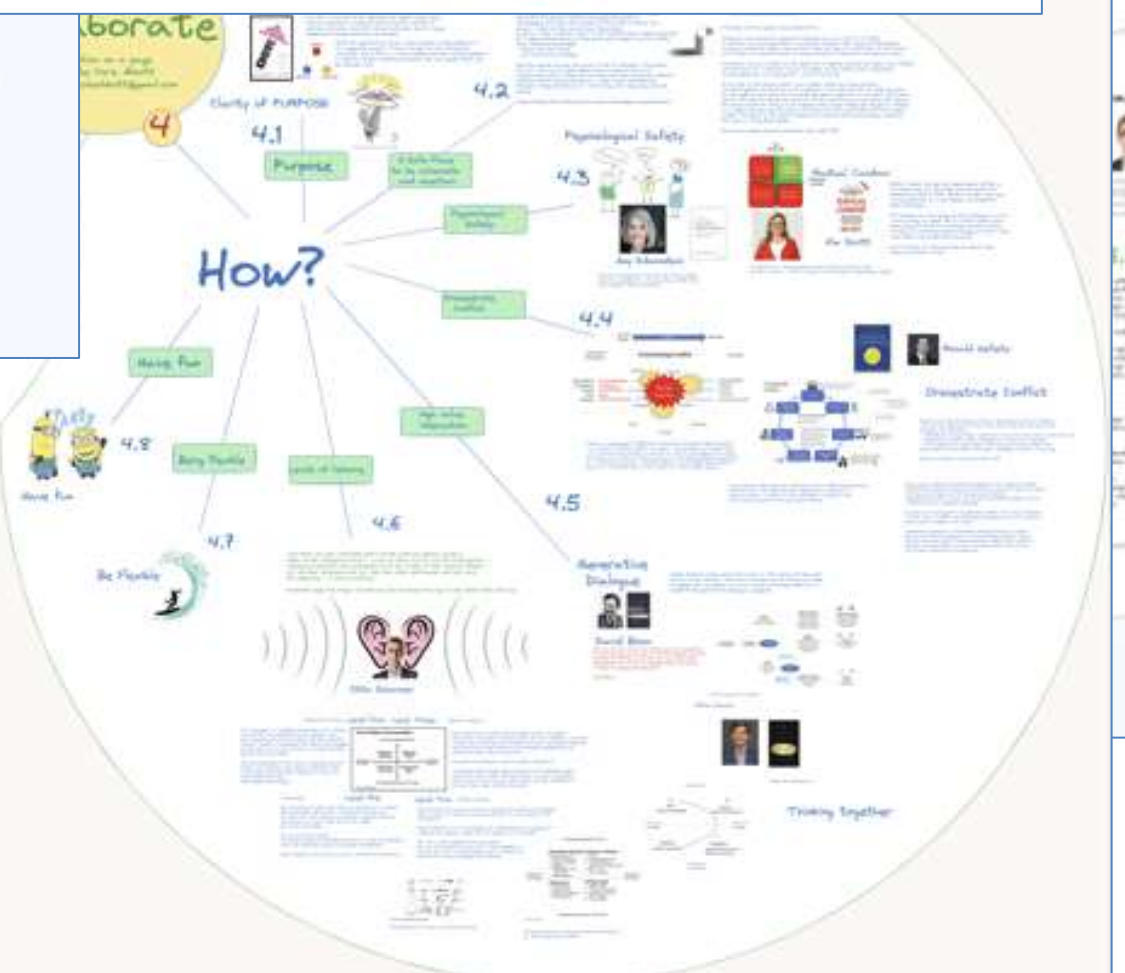


Integration



Change through
leverage

Systems Thinking is either impenetrable to non-specialists or it's over-simplified and too easily misunderstood.



Thank you for Listening

Thank you for listening.

What questions do you have for me?

Chris Abbott

Community of Practice and Systems
Thinking lead for Defra group Continuous...



Would you like to know more?

cxa414@student.bham.ac.uk



Chris Abbott

Christopher.abbott@defra.gov.uk

Principal Consultant

Complex Challenges and Systems Thinking