



WHAT LIES BENEATH: POWER SYSTEMS IN ORGANIZATIONS SEEING THE SYSTEM

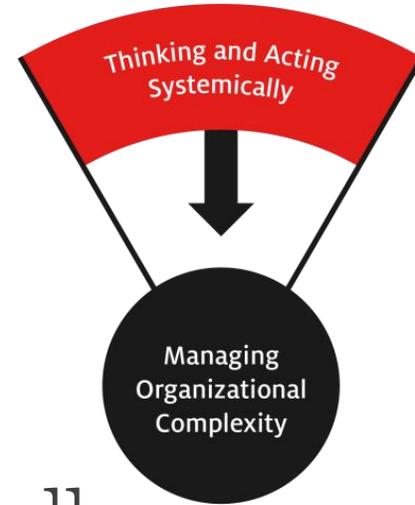
J.P. ORLANDO, ED.D, PCC

JENNIFER L LETOURNEAU, DO, MCR, FACP, FCCM

APRIL 2026

Power  Systems

Program Objectives



After this workshop, you will be able to:

1. Increase your ability to think and act more systemically,
2. Identify the issues, dilemmas, and “reflex responses” people face at all levels of the organization, that impact individual, team, and organizational success.
3. Develop strategies to increase your effectiveness in your organization.

HOW DO YOU GET ANYTHING DONE IN ORGANIZATIONS?

- All I want is:
 - For the scheduler to give the R-1s fewer than 10 patients per half day in July
 - A biostatistician to support my residents and faculty in research
 - Is to review the clinic schedule with the practice manager before it goes out
 - For my residents and faculty to show up at conference
 - Is for the cardiologist to show up and do one lecture

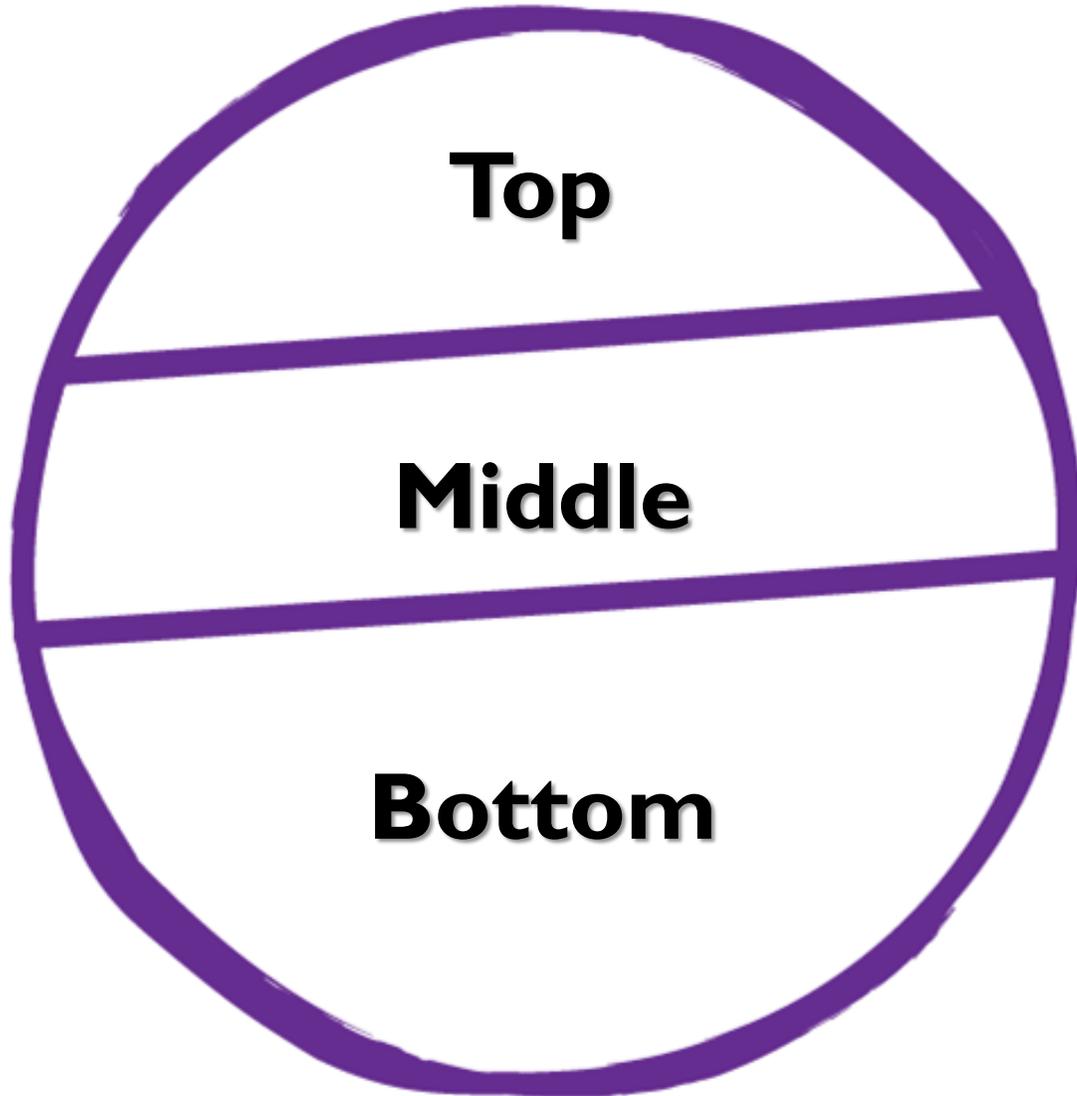


AGENDA

- 📅 Organization Exercise
- 📅 Time Out Of Time (TOOT)
- 📅 Strategic Framework
- 📅 Applications



THE ORGANIZATION



Tops have overall responsibility for the organization.

Middles execute the vision of the Tops. Middles approve the Bottoms' ideas and communicate them to the Tops

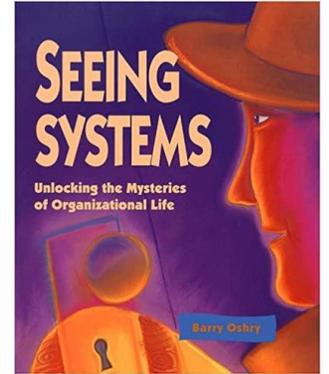
Bottoms produce the organization's products and services. They communicate their ideas through their Middle

Power Systems in Organizations

- Theoretical roots: 1970's research, Dr. Barry Oshry, Ph.D, Boston University.
- Power Lab experiments to reveal power structure behaviors and conditions.
- Systems (individuals, groups, org) seek to: survive, develop capabilities, cope with danger, and prospect opportunities.



- **Takeaway:** by understanding how power structures work, we are better equipped to achieve systems' purpose because we are aware of the dynamics.



Oshry, Barry
(2008), Seeing
Systems: Unlocking
the Mysteries of
Organizational Life,
Berrett-Koehler.

The Organization Challenge: Rules of Engagement

1. Two hospitals; you will be randomly dropped into role as Top, Bottom, or Middle
2. 15 minutes to create and make a 1-minute, creative presentation of how the organization is going to address these challenges.
3. Tops, Middles, Bottoms will have their own work areas.
4. Tops and Middles can travel. Bottoms cannot.
5. I will take a few minutes to orient the Tops while Middles and Bottoms get organized.
6. We do not provide help with the assignment. The organization must figure it out.

Disclaimers

1. Oversimplifications but rings true
2. Conditions; not necessarily hierarchical.
3. Short time frame; won't be enough.
4. Intentionally giving you a complex and ambiguous task.
5. Intentionally creating a “pressure cooker” to have an elevated experience.



Awesome Hospital



Tops A (5 people)

Middles A (5 people)

Bottoms:

A1 (5) A4 (5)

A2 (5) A5 (5)

A3 (5)

Best Hospital



Tops B (5 people)

Middles B (5 people)

Bottoms:

B1 B4

(5) (5)

B2 B5

(5) (5)

Chance Hospital



Tops C (5 people)

Middles C (5 people)

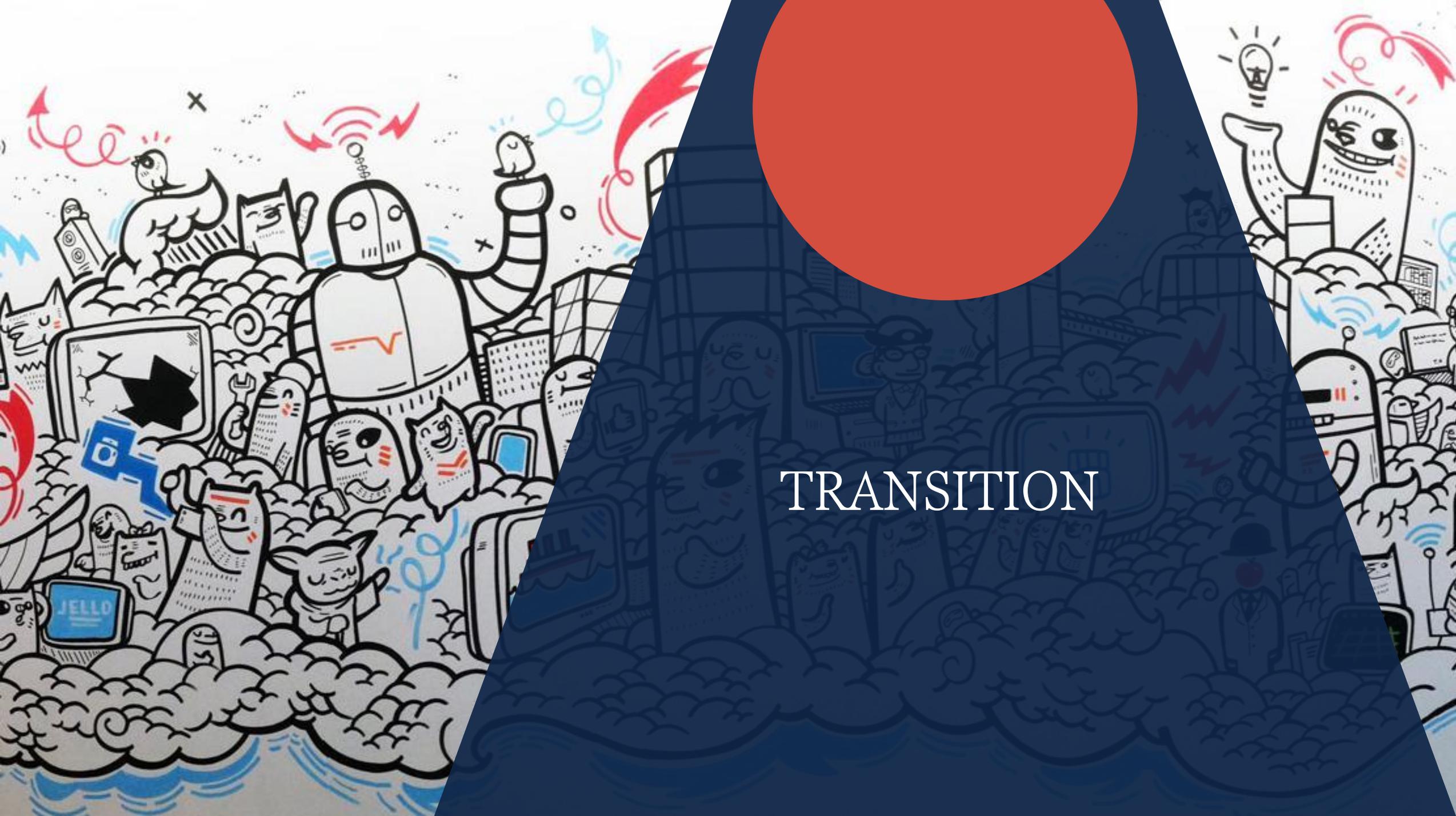
Bottoms:

C1 C4

(5) (5)

C2 C5

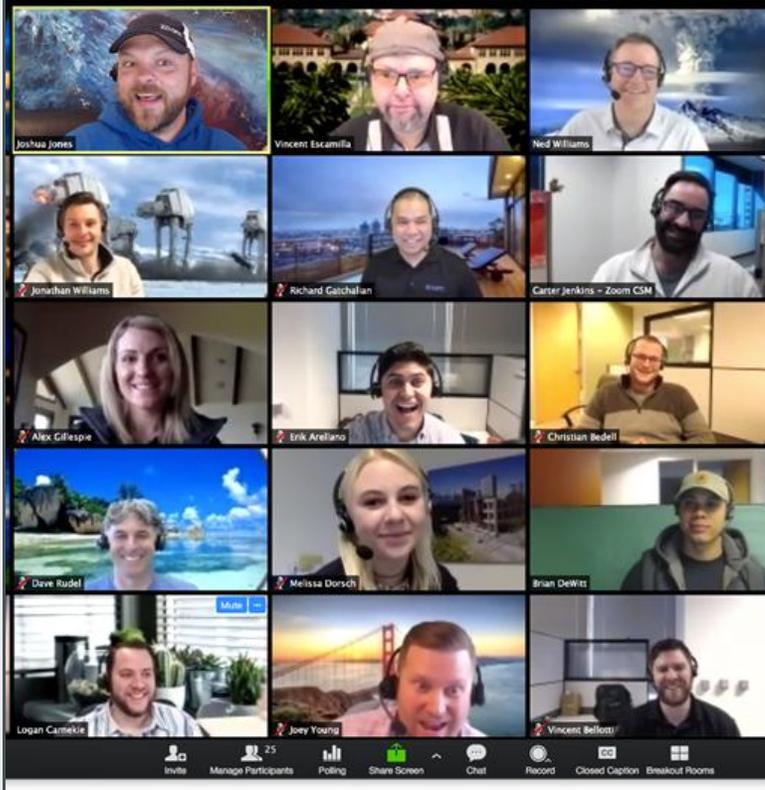
(5) (5)



TRANSITION

TOOT

(TIME OUT OF TIME)



To create a setting in which all members of the system can become clearer about how the system is experienced from many different vantage points.

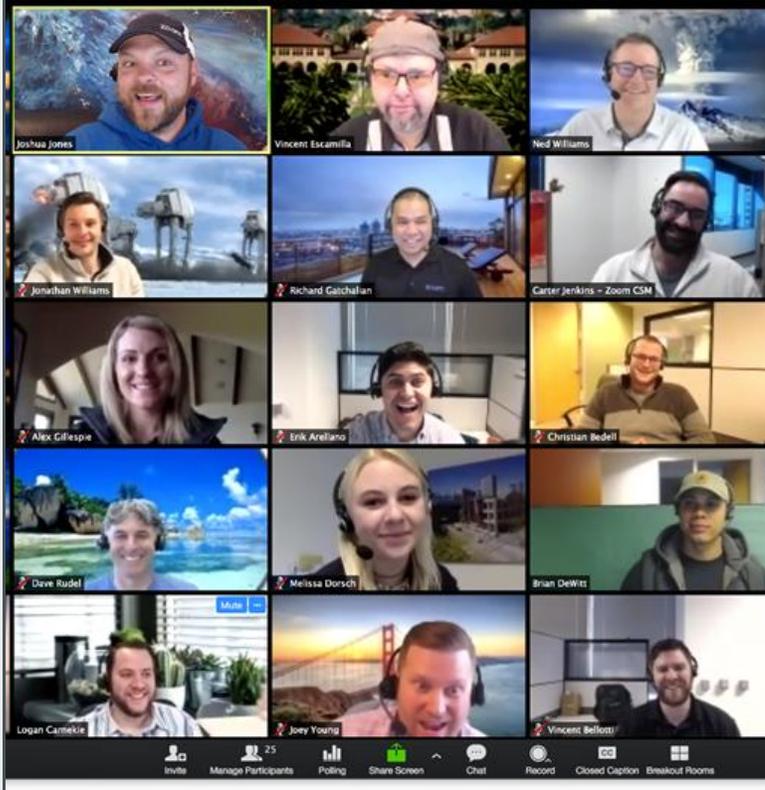
THE ORGANIZATION CHALLENGE

The Top Leaders must agree to select one of (or a combination of) the following business challenges:

Identify ways to:

1. Increase funding for resident scholarly activity.
2. Increase the quality of the clinical learning environment for all learners.
3. Increase faculty engagement in teaching, committees, interviews, mentoring/advising

GUIDELINES

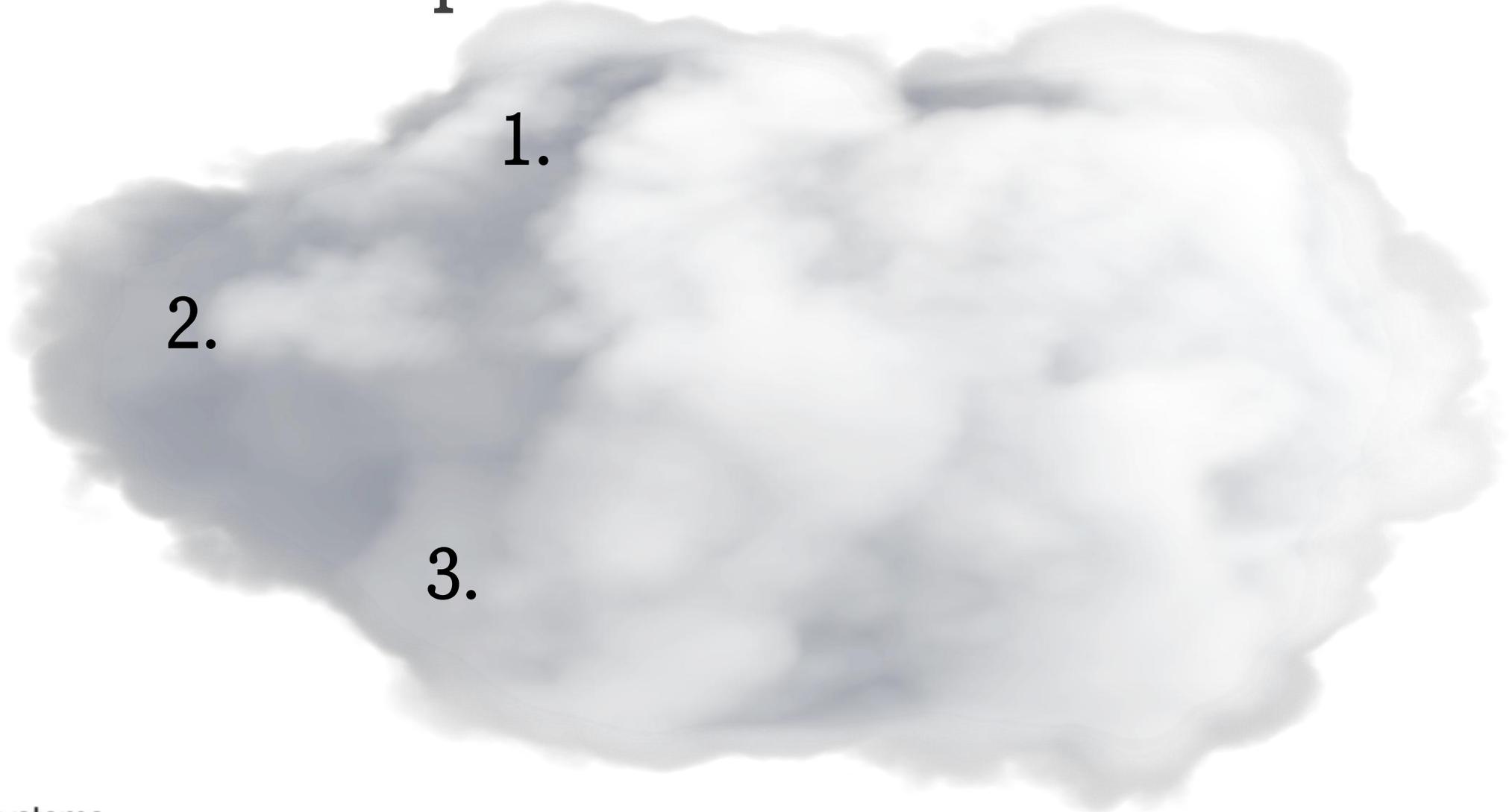


- ➦ No Work needed
- ➦ Sit/stand by your group
- ➦ Speak to your experience
- ➦ Listen carefully to others
- ➦ Observations about how things are working and should not be taken personally.

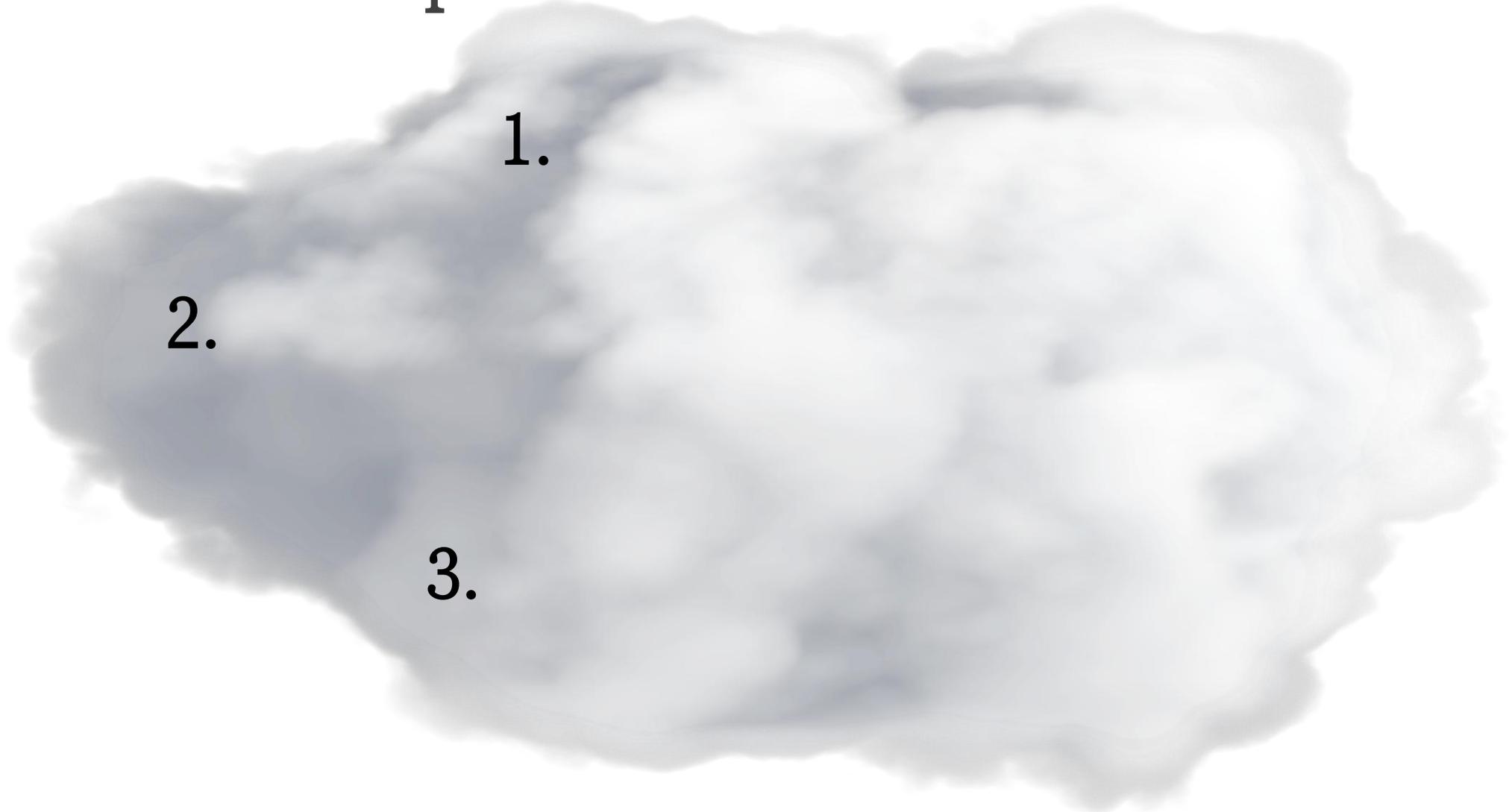
Top World Experience?



Bottom World Experience?



Middle World Experience?



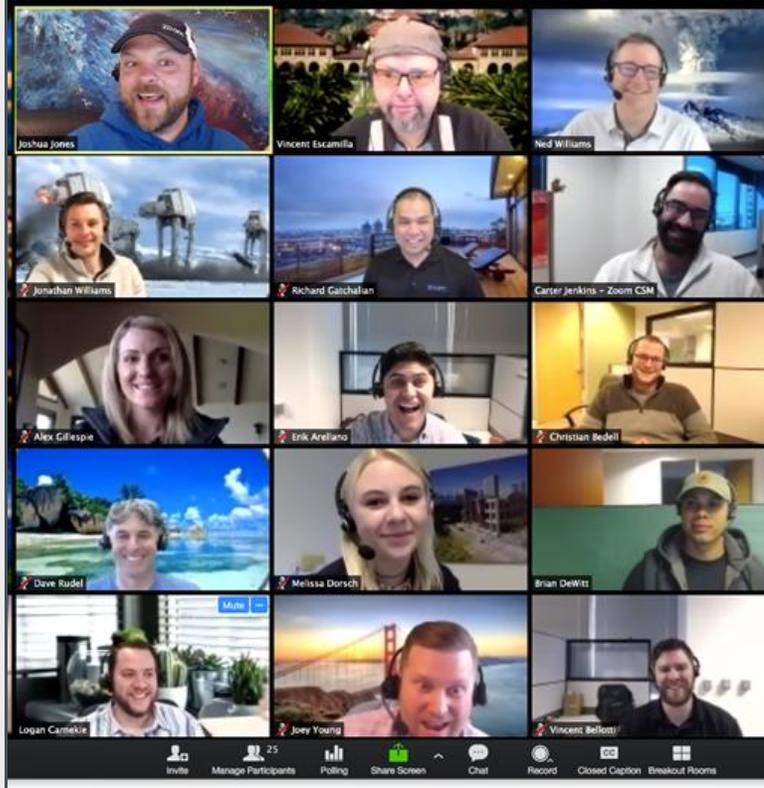
1.

2.

3.

TOOT

(TIME OUT OF TIME)

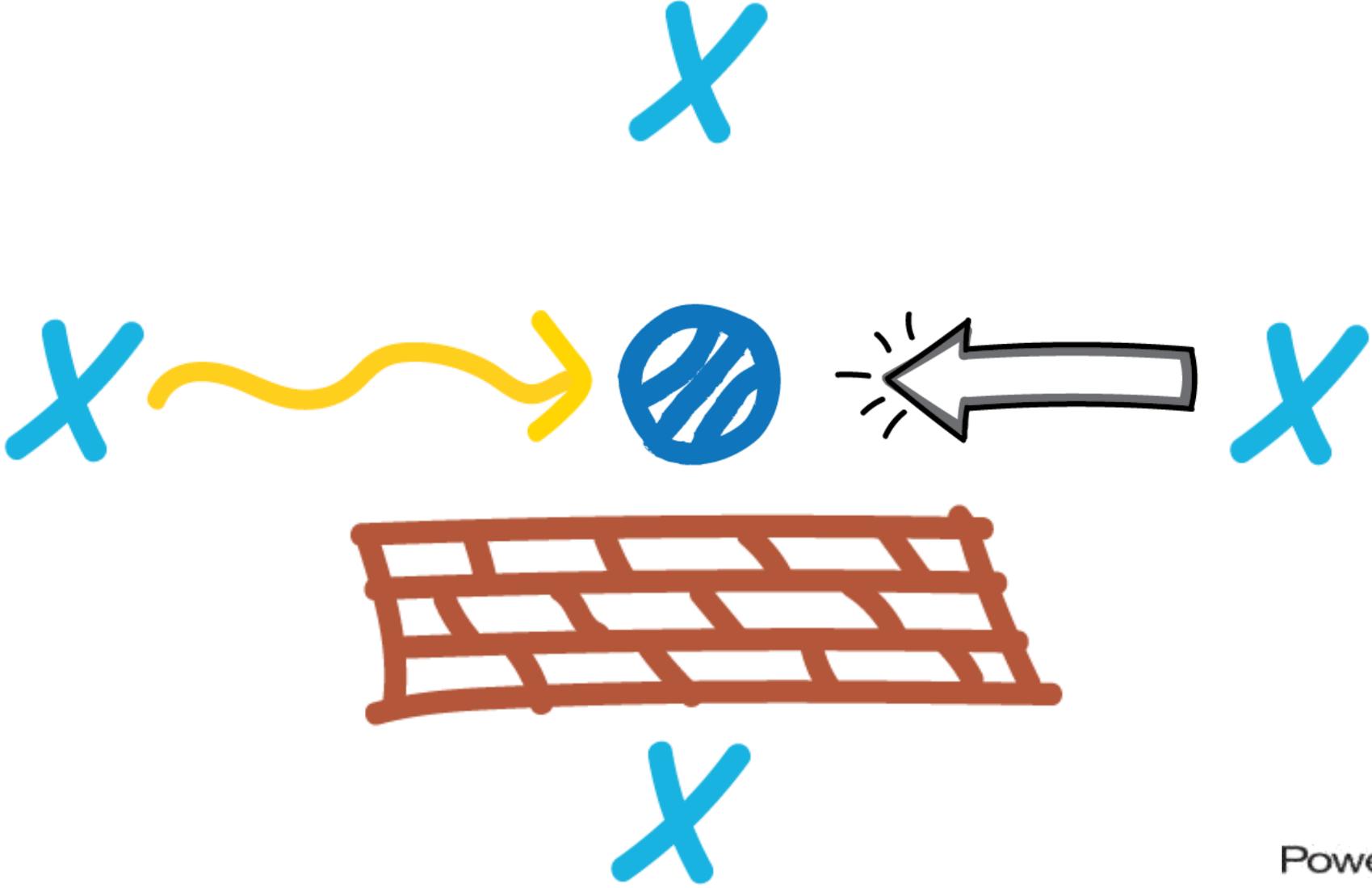


Debrief:

1. What is your experience of being in the “Time Out of Time”?
2. What is this process doing for you?

**“STUFF”
HAPPENS!!!**

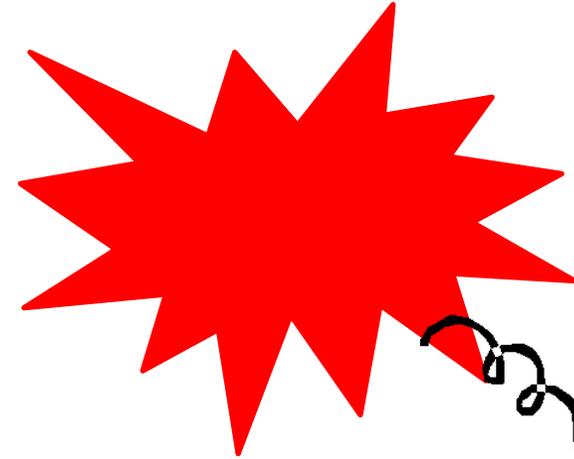
Examples of “Stuff”



SIDE SHOW

NOT ALWAYS,
NOT EVERY
TIME, BUT
WITH GREAT
REGULARITY

- Make up a Story
- Evaluate Others
 - Malicious
 - Insensitive
 - Incompetent
- Take it Personally
- React
 - Get Mad
 - Get Even
 - Withdraw
- Lose Focus
- Partnership



Door A or Door B?

**MUCH THAT SEEMS PERSONAL
IS NOT PERSONAL.**

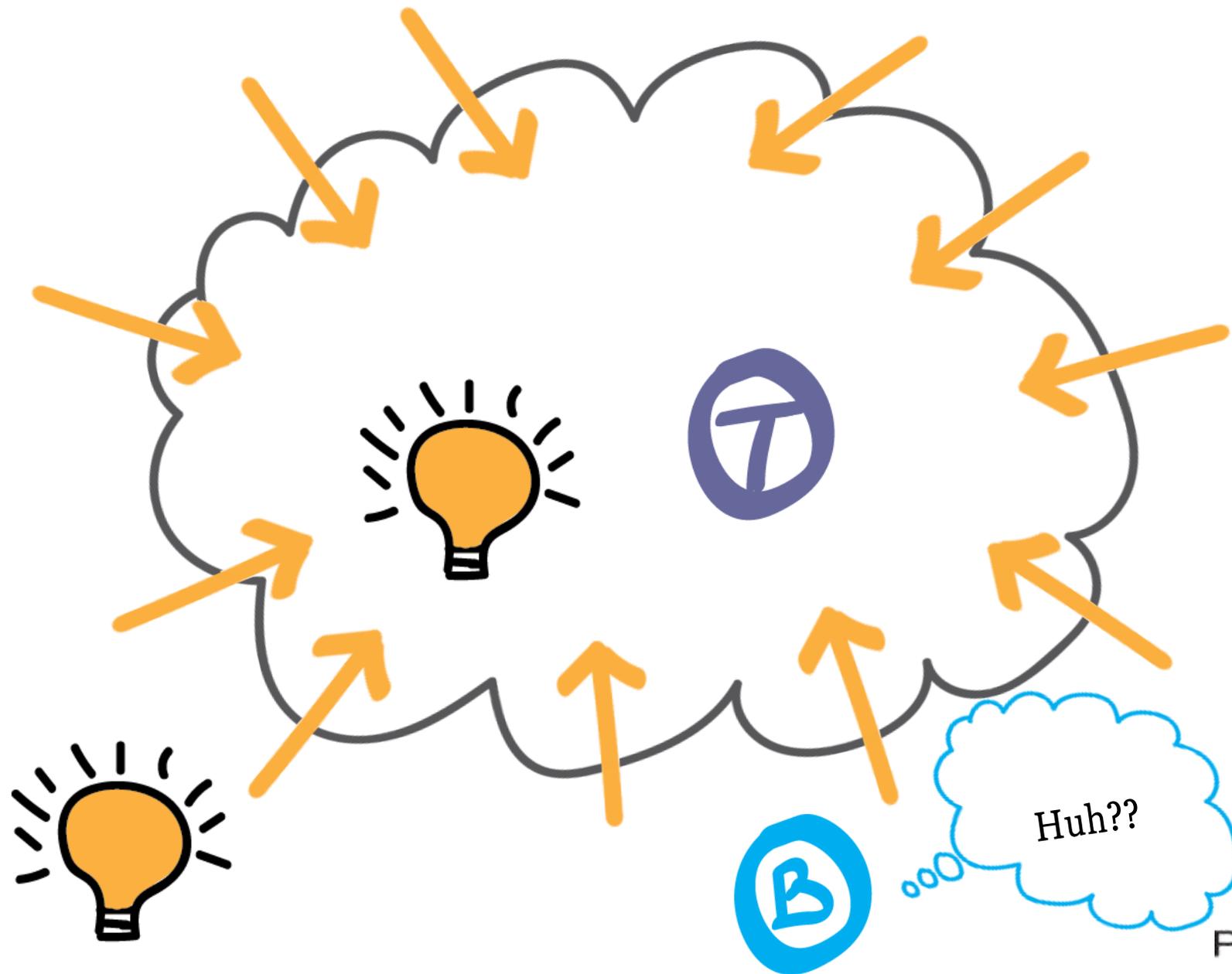
It's “World” to “World”.

Examples of Stuff – how does it relate?

Top World







Power  Systems

SIDE SHOW

NOT ALWAYS,
NOT EVERY
TIME, BUT
WITH GREAT
REGULARITY



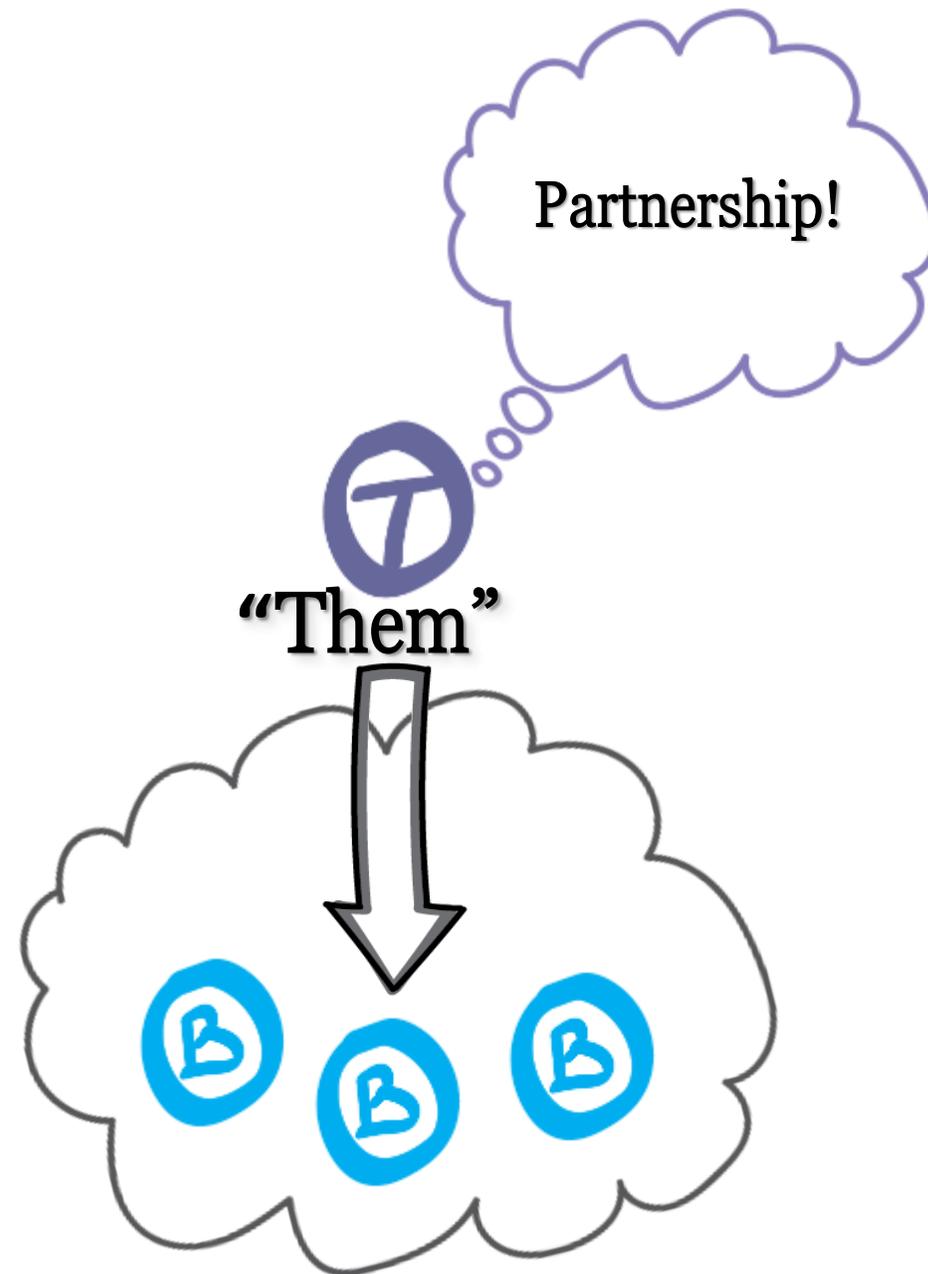
- + Make up a Story
- + Evaluate Others
 - Malicious
 - Insensitive
 - Incompetent
- + Take it Personally
- + React
 - Get Mad
 - Get Even
 - Withdraw
- + Lose Focus
- + Partnership



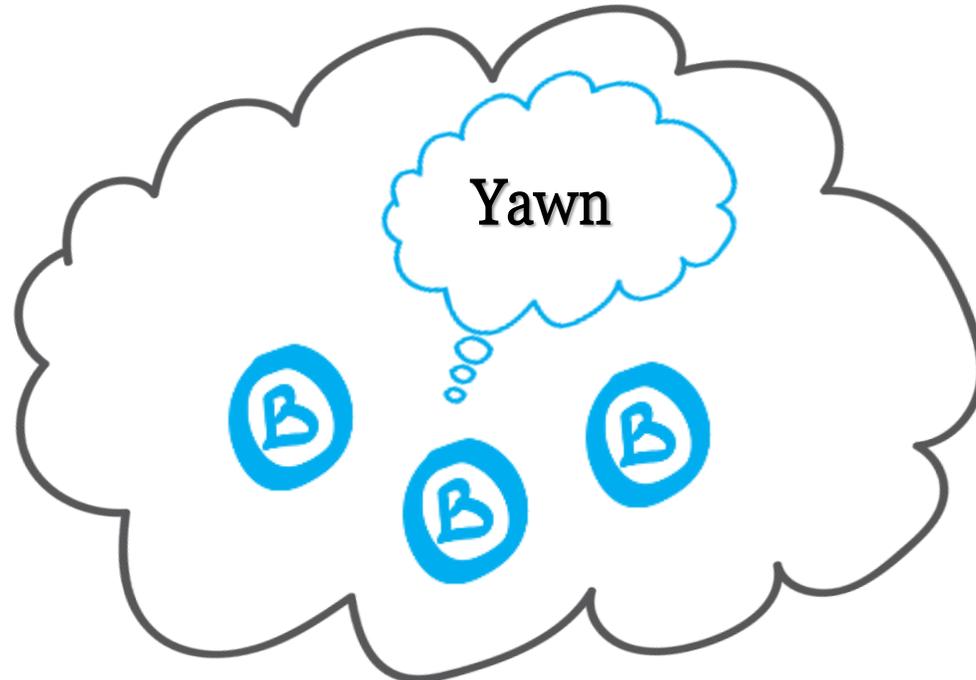
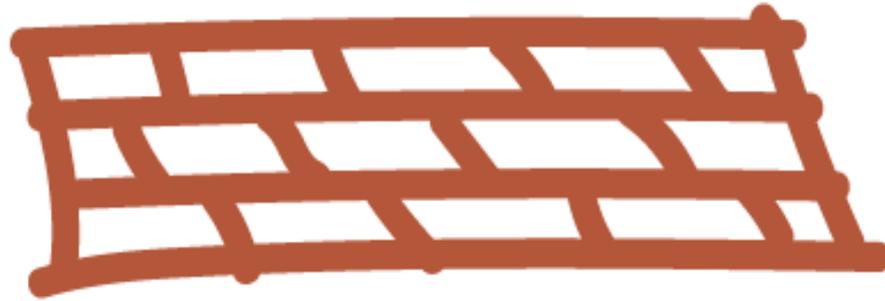
Bottom World

“Them”





T



SIDE SHOW

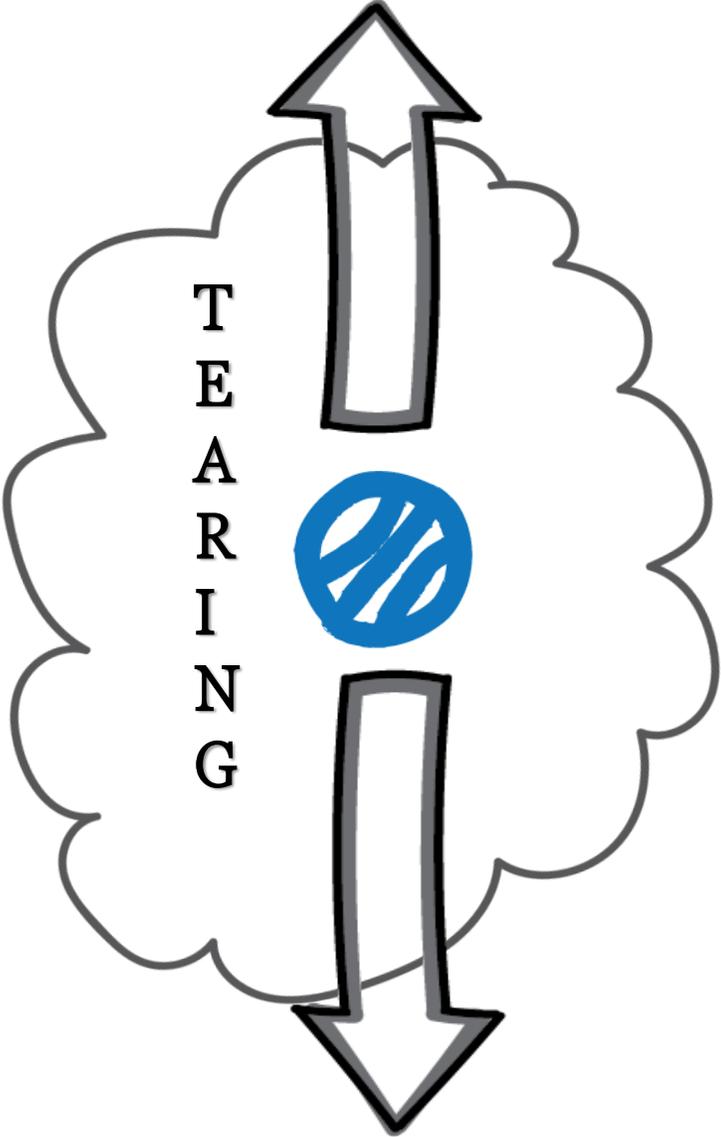
NOT ALWAYS,
NOT EVERY TIME,
BUT WITH GREAT
REGULARITY



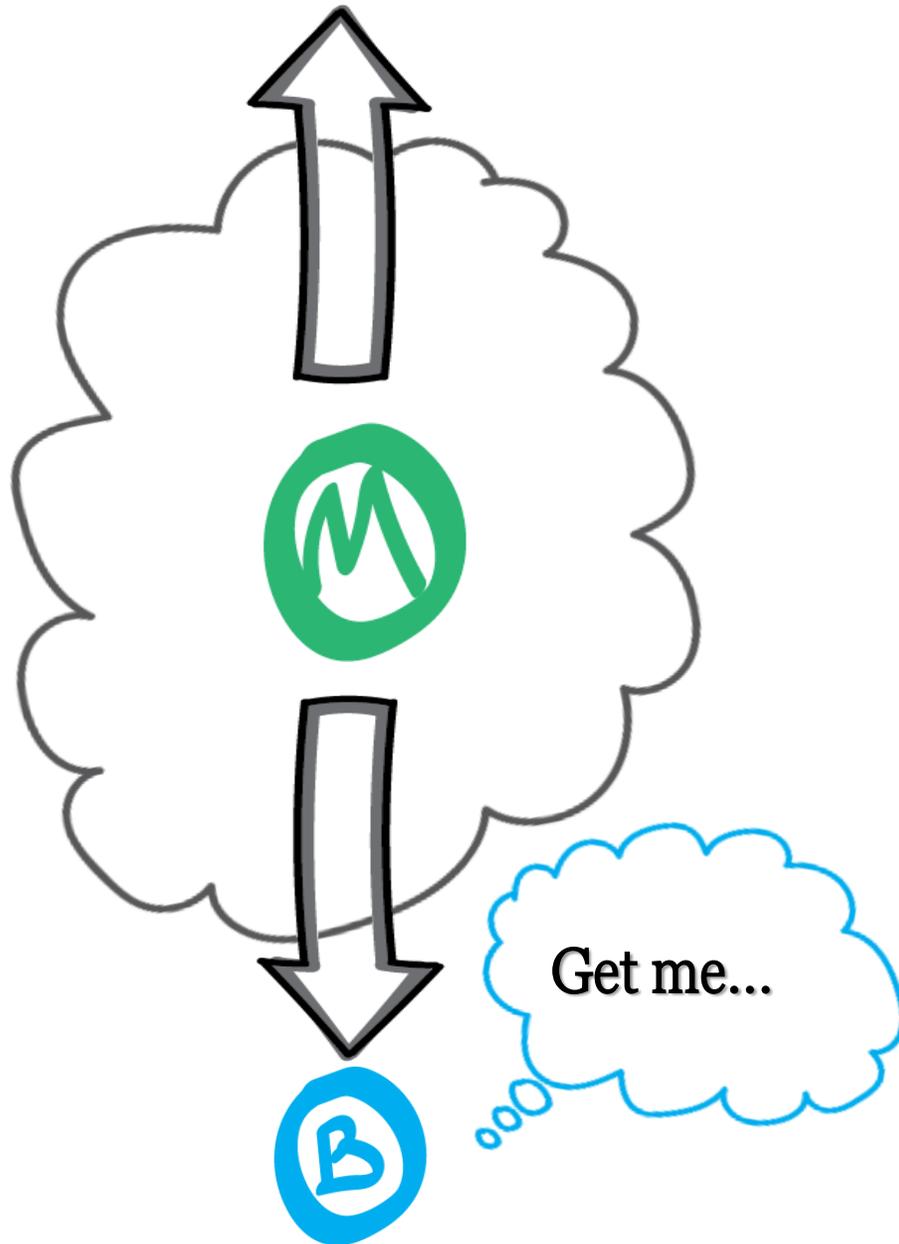
- + Make up a Story
- + Evaluate Others
 - Malicious
 - Insensitive
 - Incompetent
- + Take it Personally
- + React
 - Get Mad
 - Get Even
 - Withdraw
- + Lose Focus
- + Partnership



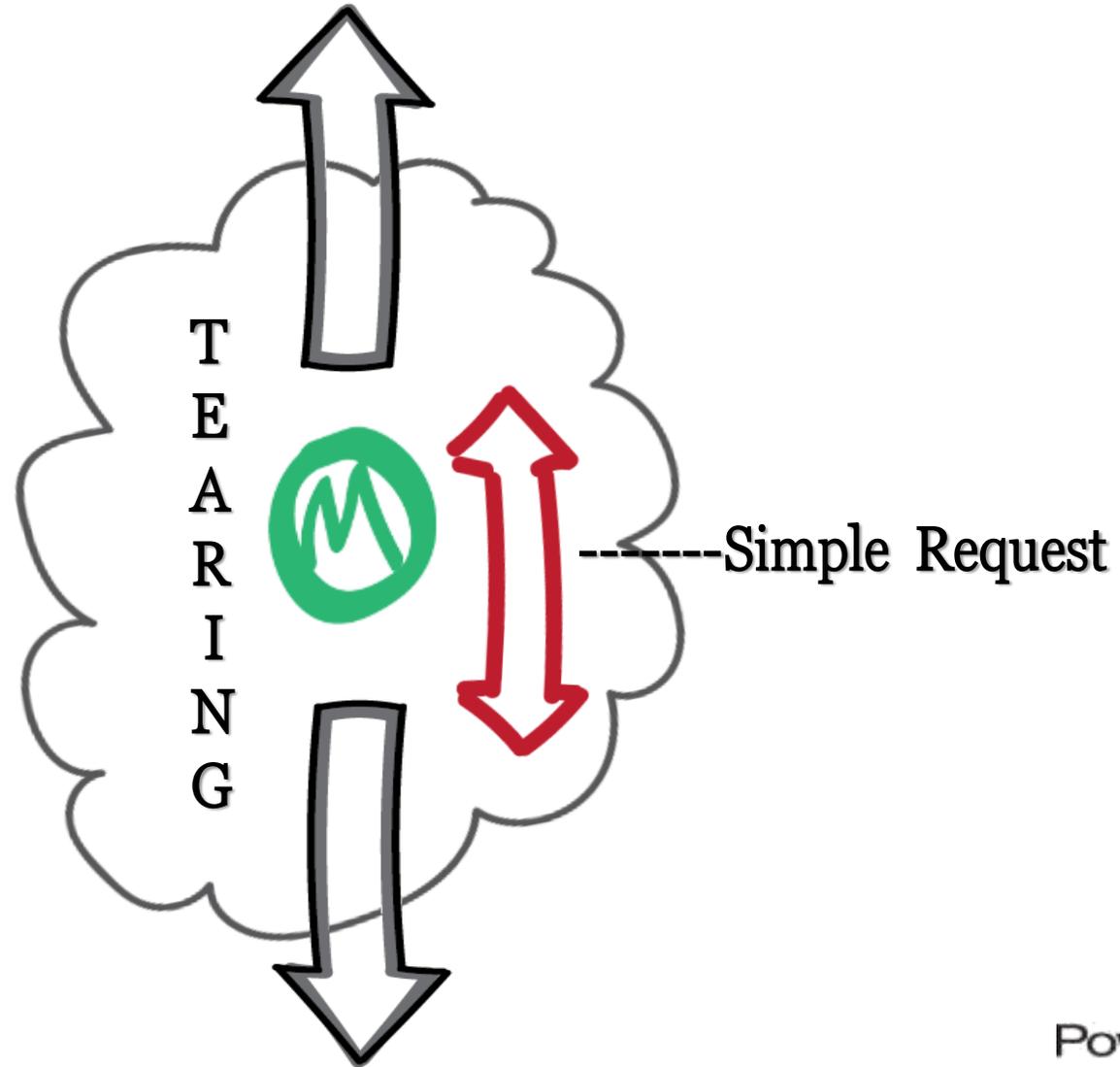
Middle World

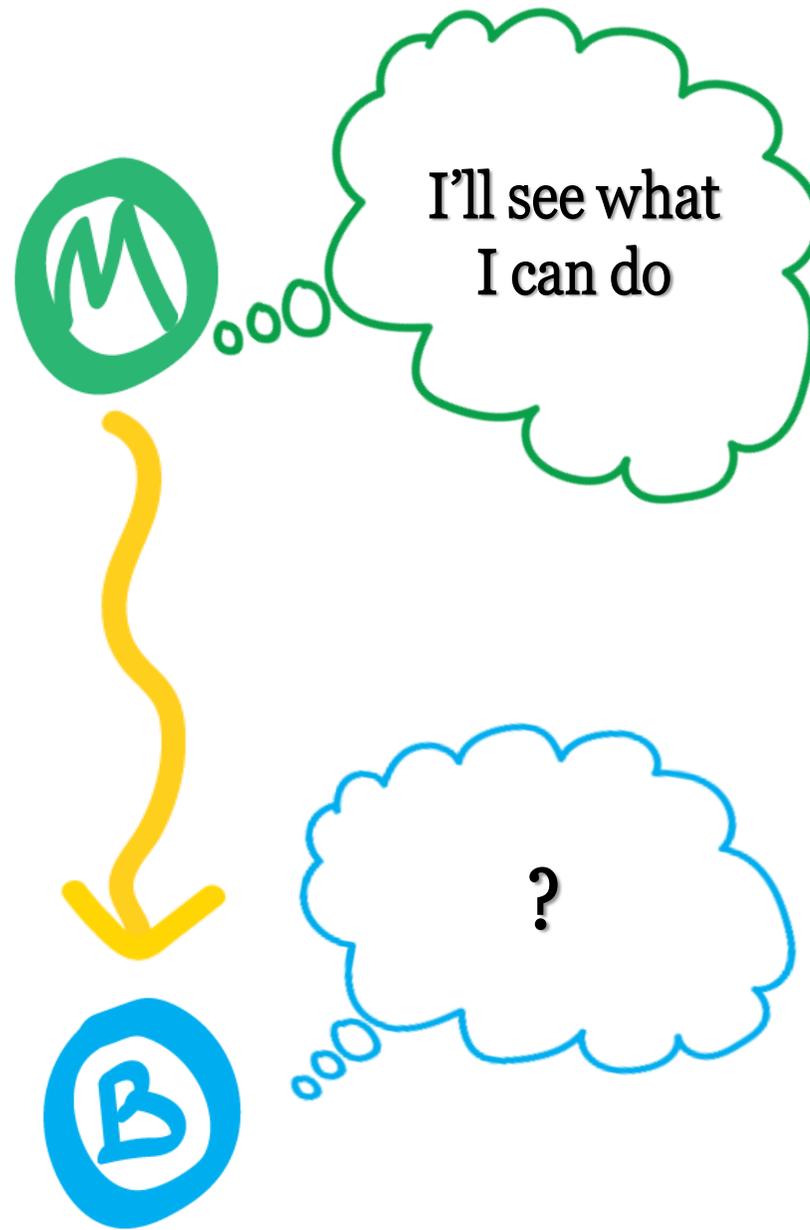


CRUNCH



MORE TEARING





SIDE SHOW

NOT ALWAYS,
NOT EVERY
TIME, BUT WITH
GREAT
REGULARITY

+ Make up a Story

Evaluate Others

Malicious

Insensitive

Incompetent

+ Take it Personally

+ React

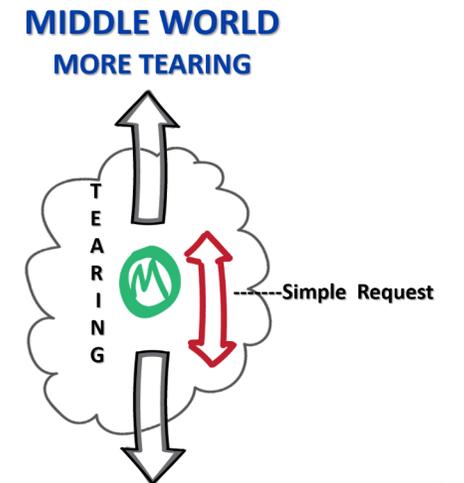
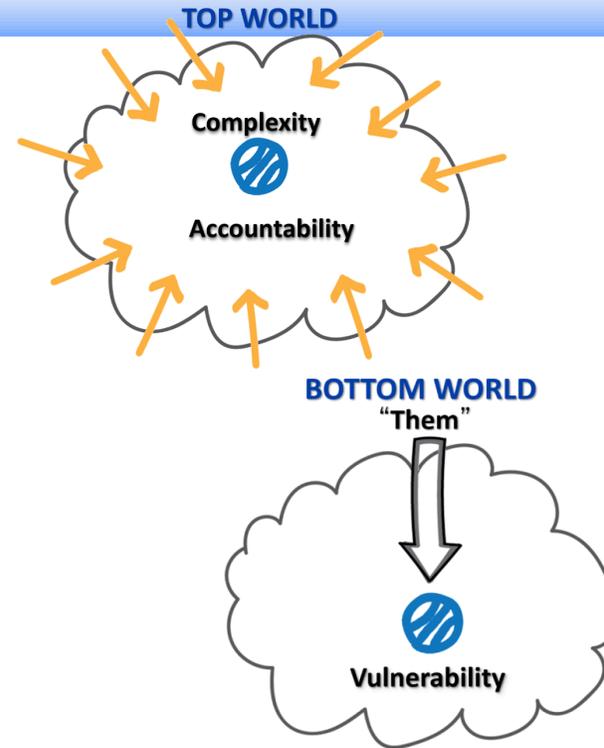
- Get Mad
- Get Even
- Withdraw

+ Lose Focus

+ Partnership

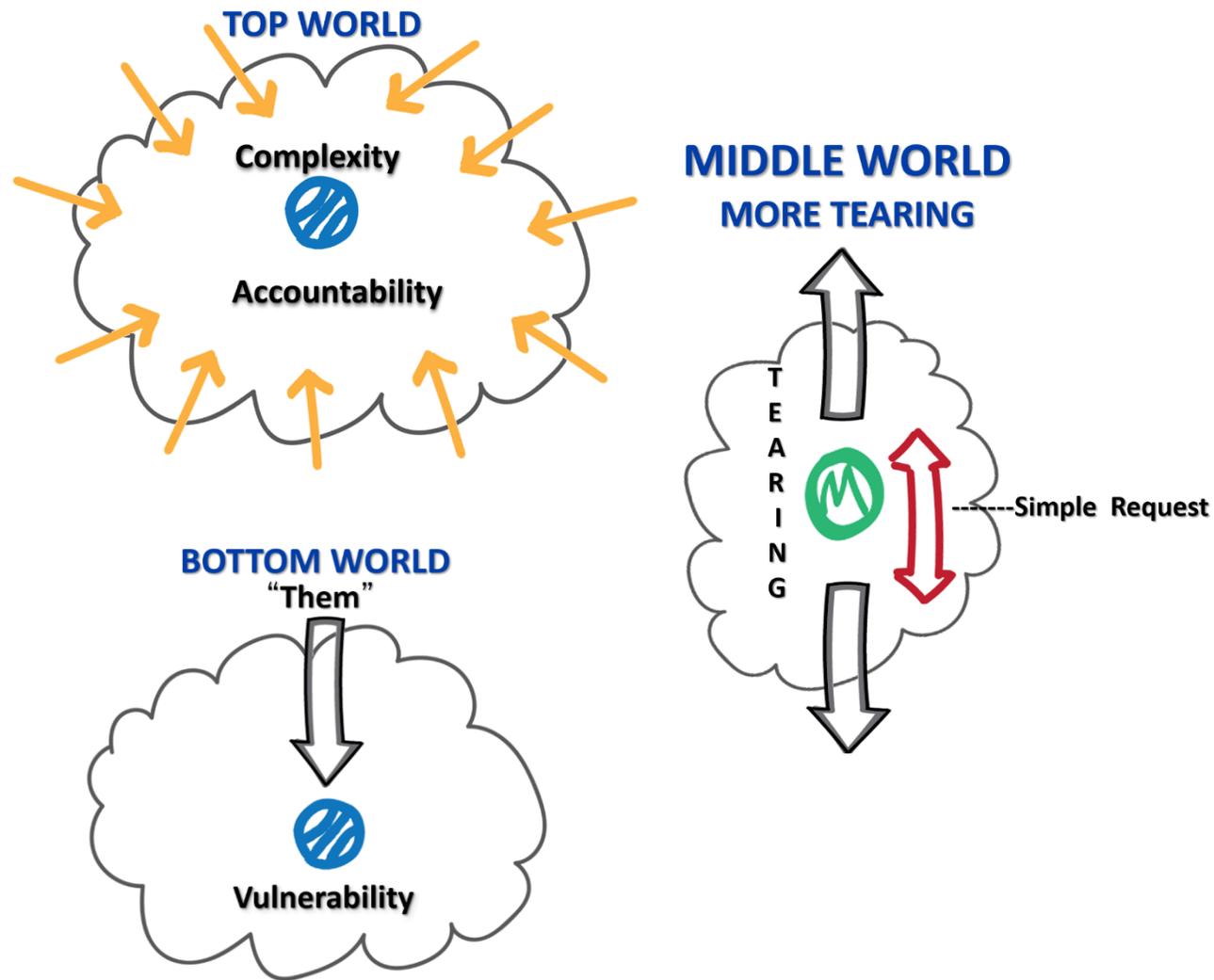


We begin to have “system-sight” when we look at organizational interaction as “World-to-World”.

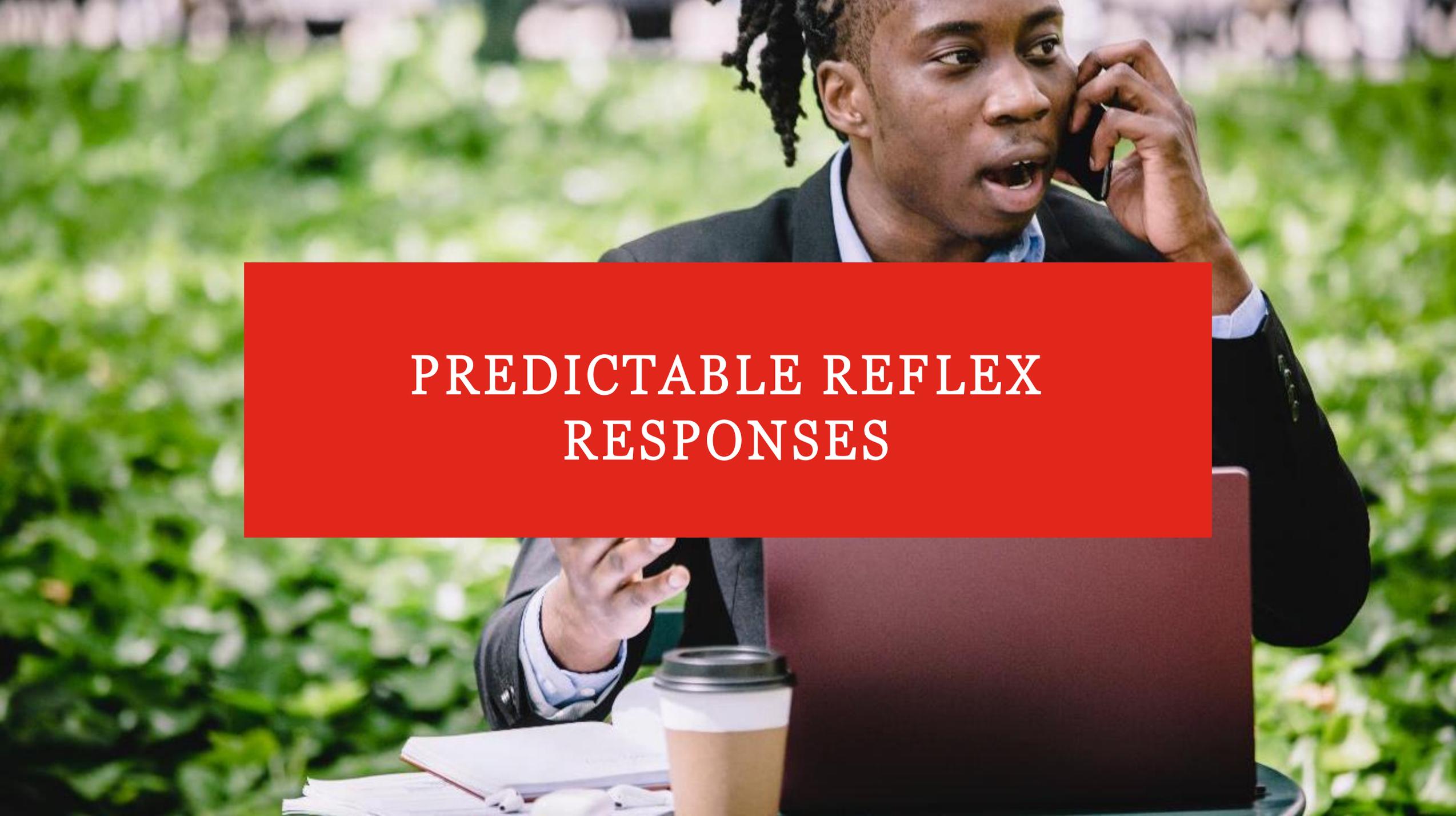


Power  Systems

Application:



1. What difference does it make if we see "stuff" as coming from "worlds" rather than "people"?
2. How can we leverage "System Sight" to be more effective leaders?

A young Black man with short dreadlocks, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light blue shirt, is shown in profile, talking on a black mobile phone held to his ear. He is outdoors, with a blurred background of green foliage. In the foreground, a brown paper coffee cup with a black lid sits on a table next to a laptop and some papers. A red rectangular box is overlaid on the image, containing white text.

PREDICTABLE REFLEX
RESPONSES

PREDICTABLE
CONDITIONS



PREDICTABLE
REFLEX RESPONSE



FAMILIAR EXPERIENCE:
FEELING POWERLESS

Top Overload

Suck it Up

Burdened

Bottom Disregard

Hold THEM Responsible

Oppressed

Middle Crunch

Caught in Middle

Torn

Customer Neglect

Holding IT Responsible

Righteously Screwed

Choices

DOOR A is predictable,
but not inevitable.

DOOR B is not
predictable, but it is a
human possibility.



How do Tops sabotage themselves (aka Door A)?



- Challenges: accreditation, CMS funding, clinical learning environment, growth plans, AIR, etc.
- Reflex Response: They suck up responsibility or micro-manage.
- Familiar Experience: Burdened and burnout.
- Impact: deprive others of growth, under develops organizational capabilities.





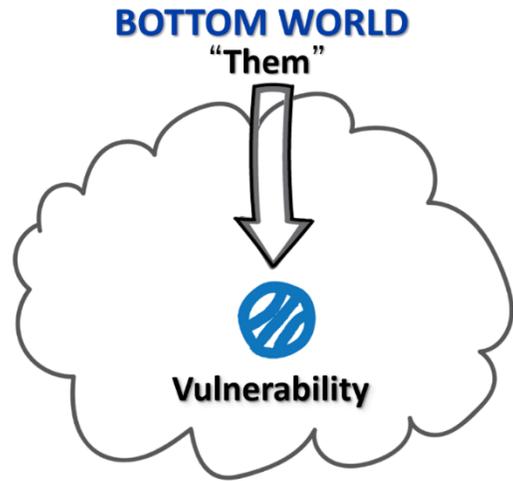
Better Tops: Walk through Door B

Leading:

- Enable others to act
- Delegate (purposefully)
- Create and communicate a shared vision, goals, and strategies.
- Encourage the heart
- Coach and mentor

Be a System Shaper

How do Bottoms sabotage themselves (aka Door A)?



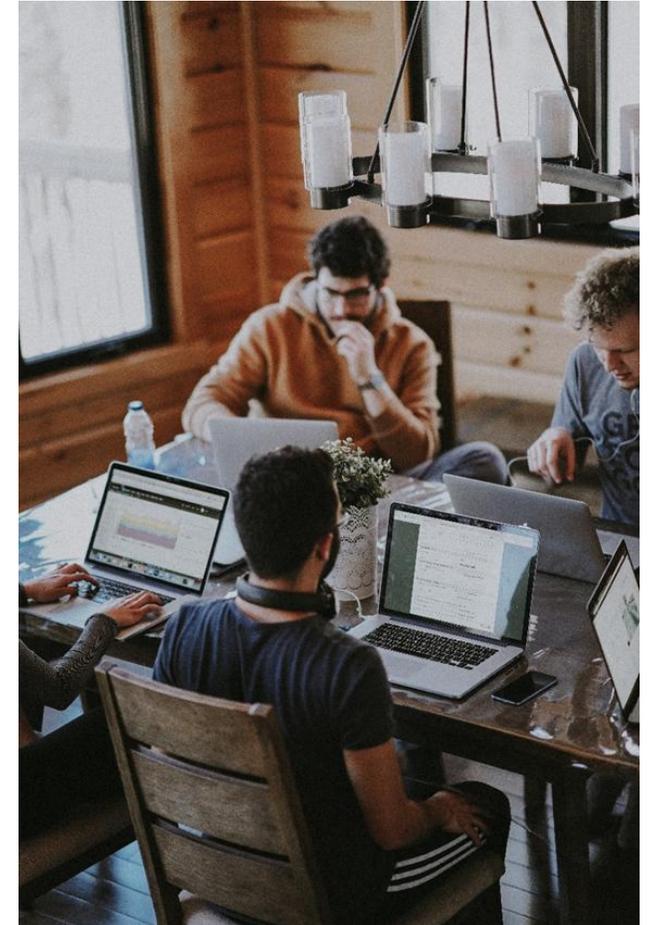
- Challenges: hospital purchased or closes, health and retirement benefits change, 10% budget cut, etc
- Reflex Response: Hold higher-ups responsible and do not contribute to a solution.
- Familiar Experience: Oppressed and disengaged.
- Impact: diminishes organizational capacity to fix itself; leaves solutions to people furthest away from problem.



Better Bottoms: Walking through Door B.

Leading

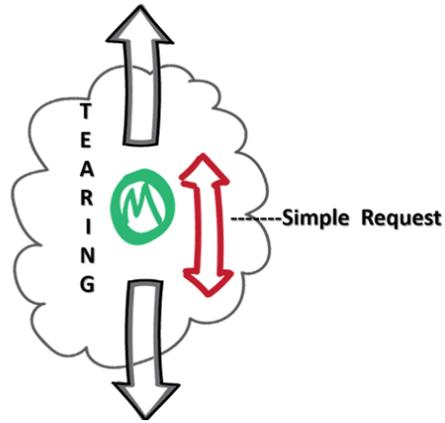
- Take action - Let higher-ups know about the problems.
- Use our closeness to the situation to elaborate a vision.
- Problem-solve to address organizational challenges at the local levels.
- Use of Language (ex. FOMBs)



Be a System Fixer

How do Middles sabotage themselves (aka Door A)?

MIDDLE WORLD
MORE TEARING



Challenges: conflicts between departments, hospital, practice, medical school, mandatory training, etc.

Reflex Response: Staying locked in our silo and not connecting with other middles.

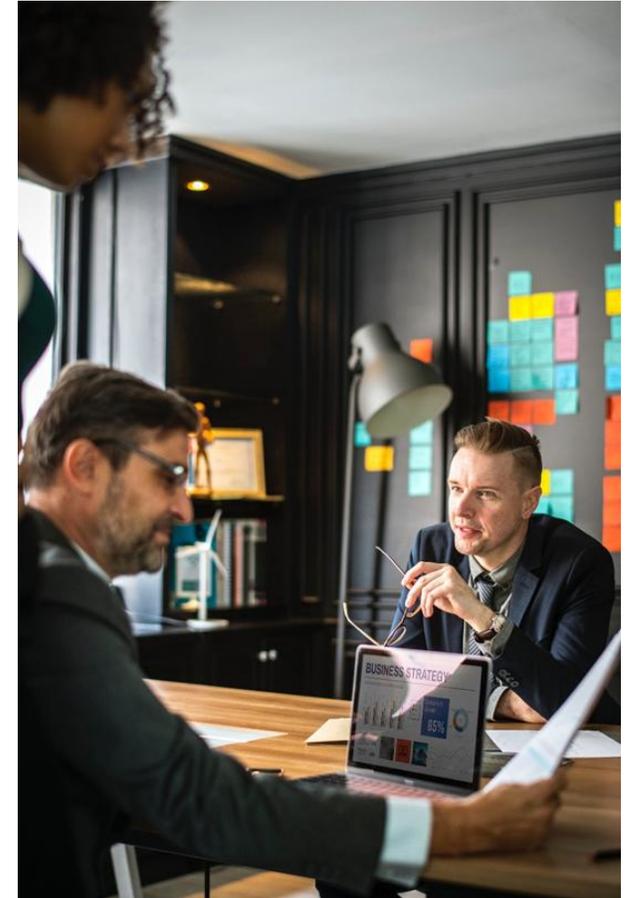
Familiar Experience: Torn

Impact - deprive organization of process improvements and spreading best practices.

Better Middles: Walking through Door B

Leading:

- Maintain independence
- Be Top when you can
- Be Bottom when you should (to get the reality check)
- Be Coach and Facilitator
- Integrate Regularly with your Peers to improve processes and spread best practices.



Be a System Integrator

PREDICTABLE
CONDITIONS



PREDICTABLE
REFLEX RESPONSE



FAMILIAR EXPERIENCE:
FEELING POWERLESS

Top Overload

Suck it Up

Burdened

Bottom Disregard

Hold THEM Responsible

Oppressed

Middle Crunch

Caught in Middle

Torn

Customer Neglect

Holding IT Responsible

Righteously Screwed

DOOR B STRATEGIES



- Be a TOP who gives up some control. Create responsibility throughout the organization.



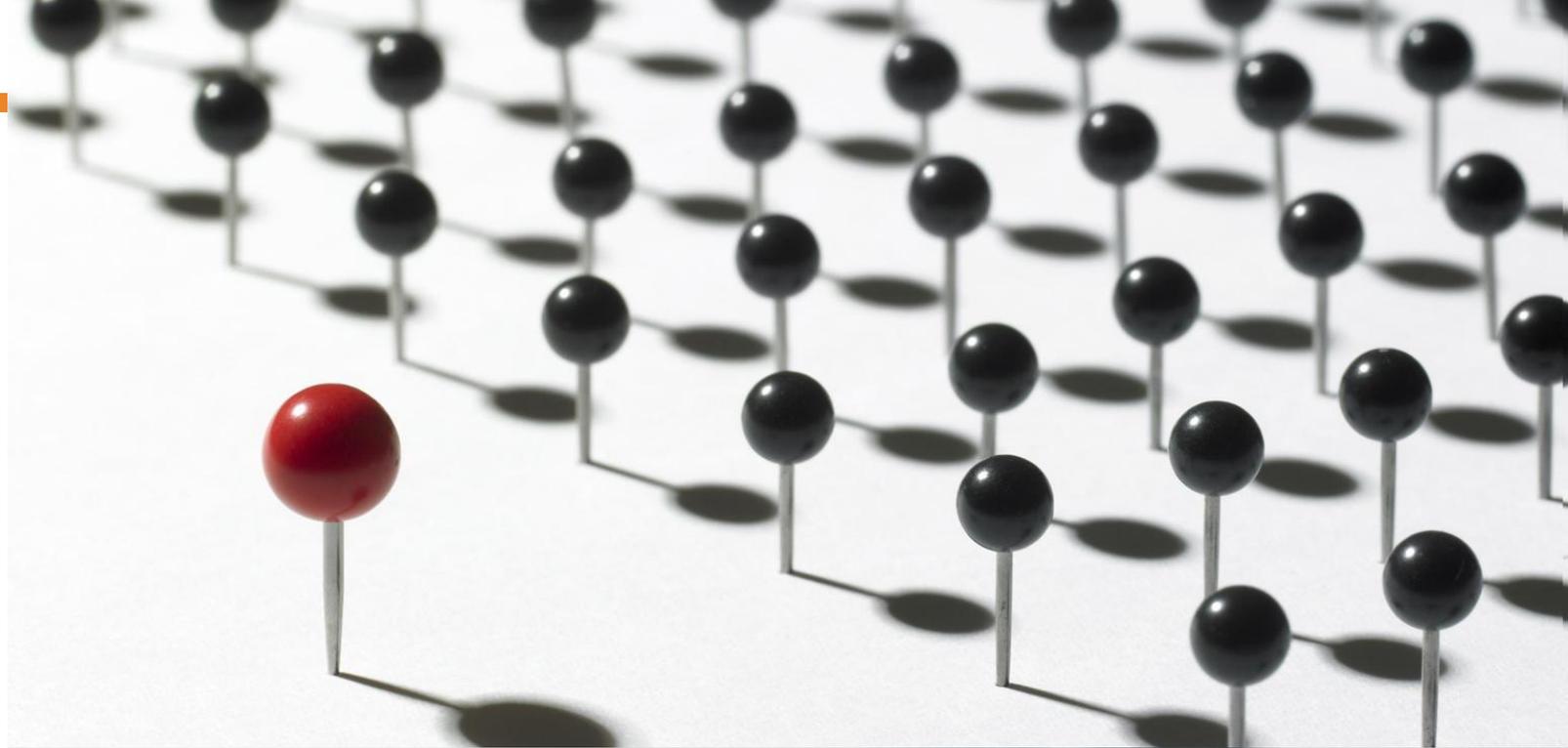
- Be a BOTTOM who gives up dependency. Take responsibility and proactively communicate a vision and work to solve a problem/issue.



- Be a MIDDLE who gives up our need to please everyone. Maintains independence of thought and action. Be a facilitator, a coach!

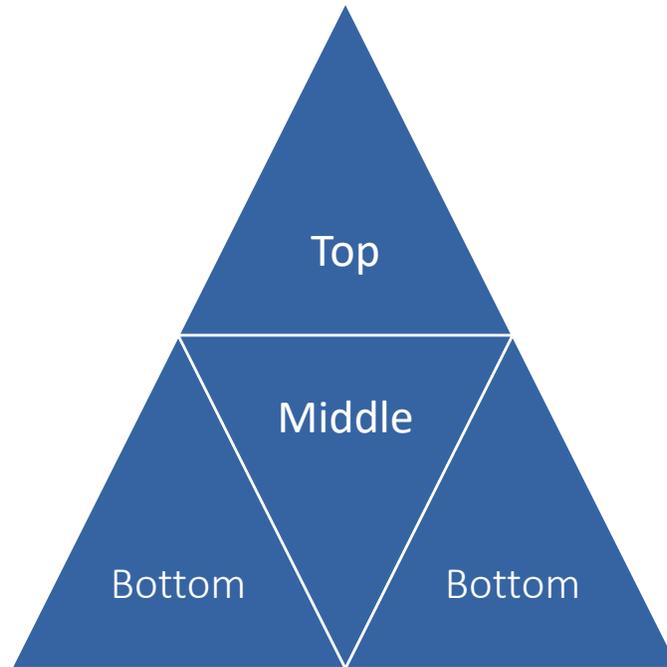
SELF- ASSESSMENT

WHAT ONE
THING ARE YOU
GOING TO
ADDRESS AND
WITH WHO
AFTER TODAY'S
LECTURE?



Stakeholder Analysis

1. Select an area from your self assessment that represents an opportunity
2. Circle your position relative to the opportunity you identified



3. List individuals who hold differing positions in the organization

Develop a SMART Action Item

Identify an action to further your work in this area



Specific



Measurable



Achievable



Realistic



Timebound

Action item description	Responsible for completion	Goal completion date

“When we are blind to whole system phenomena, we are at their mercy; only when we see and choose our actions (aka lead) are we able to “partner” and create sane and healthy social systems for all humankind.”

-B. Oshry, 1999, Lessons from the Power Labs

