

Board Retreat
Sunday, March 8, 2026 9:00 AM

Dr. Matthew Prophet Education Center - Board
Auditorium
501 N. Dixon St
Portland, OR 97227

Agenda

1. Call to Order and Introductions
2. Retreat
 - Welcome and Setting the Stage
 - Recap of last session
 - Navigating the Governance Ecosystem
 - For our tool belt: The Empowerment Dynamic
 - Practicing our skills
 - Wrapping up and next steps
3. Adjourn

Leadership in Polycrisis: Essential Capabilities for Navigating Global Challenges

Our research provides a foundation for understanding the complex leadership needs of an increasingly interconnected and crisis-prone world — filling a significant gap on leadership amid polycrisis.

Published November 12, 2024



In the face of global crises, leaders now encounter unprecedented challenges in a rapidly changing landscape characterized by complex, interconnected issues. This new reality necessitates an understanding of “polycrisis” and demands a set of leadership capabilities specifically suited to navigate such turbulent times.

As we stand at the crossroads of multiple global emergencies — from geopolitical tensions and economic instability to climate change and social inequalities — the need for effective leadership transcends organizational boundaries. It becomes a critical factor in shaping our collective future and building a better world.

What Is a Polycrisis?

A polycrisis describes a situation where multiple crises interact, creating a web of interconnected challenges that amplify each other's effects. It is characterized by numerous simultaneous crises, feedback loops, unexpected interactions, and difficulty in defining boundaries.

In a polycrisis, leaders are called upon not just to manage individual problems but to steer their organizations through a constantly shifting terrain of interconnected issues. The COVID-19 pandemic is one example of a polycrisis. It started as a public health crisis and quickly cascaded into economic turmoil, social upheaval, and geopolitical tensions. The pandemic exemplifies how a polycrisis can rapidly cross boundaries and domains, creating a complex landscape for leaders to navigate.

We need to understand these interconnected crises to redefine leadership. This will allow us to respond to current challenges, proactively navigate the complex landscape of multiple interacting crises, address large-scale global issues, and tackle problems that resist clear definitions and solutions.

The Need for Leadership Amid Polycrisis

Existing leadership approaches fall short when confronting the multifaceted nature of a polycrisis. Leaders must now:

1. Recognize the interconnectedness of global crises
2. Anticipate cascading effects
3. Collaborate across boundaries
4. Balance short-term responses with long-term resilience
5. Navigate ethical dilemmas in high-stakes situations

To address this, [we conducted a research study](#) examining leadership capabilities in the context of complex, systemic challenges. Our study — the first to examine leadership in the midst of polycrisis — drew from the literature on leadership, grand challenges, and wicked problems.

Grand challenges are large-scale, complex issues requiring multifaceted approaches and long-term commitment, such as ensuring renewable energy sources or global food security. [Wicked problems](#), like climate change or systemic inequality, resist clear definitions and solutions due to incomplete knowledge and complex interdependencies. Both are related to polycrisis.

Based on our research of these interconnected concepts, we identified 6 key leadership capabilities essential for navigating a polycrisis. These capabilities provide a framework for proactive measures against foreseeable challenges while building adaptability for unexpected developments. [Our subsequent research](#) examines the systemic barriers that can impede the effectiveness of these capabilities.

6 Key Leadership Capabilities to Effectively Navigate the Polycrisis

1. Complex Problem-Solving

Complex problem-solving demands a sophisticated set of capabilities working in concert. At the core is ambidextrous thinking, allowing leaders to balance seemingly conflicting elements through [“both / and” approaches](#). This skill is crucial when facing competing demands typical of a polycrisis, enabling leaders to act while maintaining a commitment to multiple sides of tensions.

Complexity awareness and systems thinking enhance this approach by framing problems within their broader context and recognizing interconnected factors. These skills enable leaders to assess long-term consequences, navigate shifting problem landscapes, and explore systemic patterns. As the polycrisis evolves, adaptive problem-solving becomes essential, encouraging creativity, experimentation, and flexibility while maintaining alignment with strategic goals.

2. Collaboration & Relationships

Leadership in a polycrisis demands a collaborative approach, orchestrating diverse stakeholders toward common goals. This involves bringing together various organizations, each with distinct roles and expertise, to address complex, interconnected challenges. Such collaboration requires skillful coordination and a deep understanding of each stakeholder's strengths and potential contributions.

At the heart of this collaborative leadership lies [effective communication](#). Leaders must adeptly adjust their communication style to resonate with varied stakeholders and engage in transparent public dialogue to foster trust. Facilitating the sharing of expertise, encouraging cross-domain learning, and actively seeking wide counsel, particularly from underrepresented perspectives, are crucial for navigating complexities effectively. Underpinning all these collaborative efforts is trustworthiness and reliability — consistently demonstrating integrity to maintain long-term partnerships.

3. Transformative Leadership

Transformative leadership encompasses 2 key components: disruptive leadership, which involves high-risk bets with uncertain outcomes and significant potential consequences, and visionary change, which focuses on mobilizing people and sustaining momentum. This approach is crucial for challenging the status quo and forging new paths in the face of polycrisis.

Leaders must be willing to question established norms, take calculated risks, and inspire others to embrace change. This often involves making difficult decisions with potentially far-reaching implications. The ability to articulate a compelling vision for the future and the persistence to see it through are essential. Transformative leaders in a polycrisis context must be prepared to navigate resistance, adapt to unforeseen challenges, and maintain focus on long-term goals while addressing immediate crises.

4. Inclusivity & Ethics

Inclusivity and ethics are critical leadership capabilities when facing a polycrisis. They encompass appreciation, empathy, equity, and justice, enabling [psychological safety](#) and fostering an [inclusive mindset](#). These capabilities anchor leadership in ethics, concern for others, and ensuring all voices are valued.

Leaders navigating a polycrisis should create environments where diverse perspectives are not only welcomed but actively sought out. This involves cultivating empathy, actively listening to marginalized voices, and making decisions prioritizing equity and justice. Psychological safety encourages open dialogue and [innovation](#), which is crucial for addressing complex, multifaceted challenges. An inclusive mindset helps leaders recognize and leverage the diverse strengths within their teams and communities, leading to more comprehensive and practical solutions.

5. Inner Capabilities

Inner capabilities are foundational for leaders facing the complexities of a polycrisis. These include resilience, adaptability, and visionary thinking. [Resilience](#) allows leaders to maintain composure and effectiveness despite ongoing challenges and setbacks. [Adaptability](#) enables quick pivots in strategy and approach as circumstances rapidly change.

Visionary thinking empowers leaders to see beyond immediate crises and guide their organizations toward long-term goals and opportunities. These inner strengths are crucial for maintaining clarity of purpose and inspiring confidence in others during turbulent times. Leaders must continually develop and refine these inner capabilities to effectively navigate the unpredictable and often overwhelming nature of a polycrisis.

6. Future Orientation

Future orientation encompasses 3 critical leadership capabilities for potentially navigating a polycrisis: futures thinking, collaborative community leadership, and sustainability. Given the unknown nature of the future, leaders must develop the capacity to envision different scenarios, make strategic choices, and learn iteratively.

Futures thinking involves engaging teams in scenario planning exercises that address the interconnected nature of multiple crises, preparing for potential cascading effects. Collaborative community leadership focuses on establishing structures that foster shared responsibility and facilitate collective decision-making among diverse stakeholders. Sustainability emphasizes implementing practices that promote resilience and growth while addressing multiple environmental, social, and economic challenges simultaneously. These capabilities enable leaders to anticipate, plan for, and shape a more sustainable and inclusive future in the face of a polycrisis.

How Leadership Development Helps Navigate Polycrisis

To cultivate these essential capabilities, organizations must evolve their approach to leadership development. Traditional, episodic training models are insufficient for preparing leaders to navigate the complexities of a polycrisis. Instead, we recommend 4 key practices for developing capable leaders in this new landscape:

1. **Shift from episodic to continuous learning:** Move beyond periodic training events to [create a culture of ongoing, organization-wide learning](#) integrated into daily work.
2. **Enable learning in action:** Provide opportunities for leaders to apply new skills and knowledge to real-world challenges, accelerating development through hands-on experience.
3. **Prioritize wellbeing and inclusivity to grow organizational resilience:** Foster environments that support [employee wellbeing](#) and value diverse perspectives, enhancing the organization's ability to adapt and thrive.
4. **Integrate [vertical development](#):** Focus on advancing leaders' cognitive capacities and adaptive mindsets, enabling them to navigate increasingly complex and uncertain environments.

By implementing these practices, organizations can create a comprehensive leadership development system that permeates all levels, equipping leaders with the adaptive mindsets, cognitive capabilities, and practical skills necessary for navigating a polycrisis.

Expanding Human Potential in the Face of Polycrisis

The polycrisis presents unprecedented challenges, but within these challenges lie unique opportunities to redefine what's humanly possible. By cultivating the 6 key leadership capabilities we've explored, leaders can not only respond to current challenges but also proactively shape a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable future.

Our research and recommendations are deeply rooted in our mission to advance leadership for the benefit of society worldwide. This mission takes on new urgency in a world grappling with multiple interconnected crises. The leadership capabilities we've discussed aren't just theoretical concepts; they're practical tools for turning the tide of global challenges toward positive change and sustainable progress.

The time for transformation in leadership development is now. By embracing continuous learning, enabling learning in action, prioritizing wellbeing and inclusivity, and integrating vertical development, organizations can build the leadership capacity needed to navigate the complexities of our global landscape. These approaches contribute to a larger vision — one where expanded human potential leads to breakthroughs in addressing our world's most pressing issues.

We invite you to see leadership development through this lens of possibility. [We stand for all things humanly possible](#) — and by nurturing leaders capable of navigating polycrisis, we're not just preparing for the future, we're actively creating it. We envision a future where the seemingly impossible becomes achievable, where global challenges become opportunities for transformative change, and where expanded human potential leads to a better world for all.

The journey through the polycrisis may be complex, but with the right leadership capabilities and development approaches, it's a journey that can lead us to new horizons of human achievement and global progress. Let's embark on this journey together, expanding what's possible in leadership and in our world.

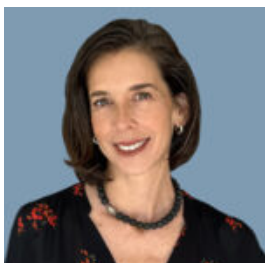
Written by



Jean Leslie, MA

Senior Fellow & Senior Research Scientist

Jean conducts applied research at the intersection of [leadership and polycrisis](#), investigating how leaders can navigate the complex, interconnected challenges facing our world today. She's published more than 100 pieces on leadership, assessment, and feedback — in the form of peer-reviewed articles, popular-press articles, book chapters, and books — and has presented over 70 papers at professional conferences such as the Academy of Management and the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychologists.



Kelly Simmons, MS

Leadership Solutions Partner / Faculty

Kelly designs and delivers leadership solutions for our clients in Europe. She led the design of our [women's leadership development](#) program that helps women in technical fields hone their leadership skills so they stay and rise to more senior roles, and she's the co-author of [Beating the Odds: Winning Strategies of Women in STEM](#).

At the Center for Creative Leadership, our drive to create a ripple effect of positive change underpins everything we do. For 50+ years, we've pioneered leadership development solutions for leaders at every level, from community leaders to CEOs. Consistently ranked among the top global providers of executive education, our research-based programs and solutions inspire individuals at every level in organizations across the world — including 2/3 of the Fortune 1000 — to ignite remarkable transformations.

Get our latest insights delivered to your inbox: ccl.org/subscribe.



STRENGTHENING OUR GOVERNANCE

Building a common understanding of how to leverage governance with students at the center

AMY CAST & SANDY HAYES



OUR DAY TOGETHER

- ✦ Welcome & setting the stage
- ✦ Recap of last session, review Elements of Trust
- ✦ Navigating the Governance Ecosystem
- ✦ Lunch
- ✦ For our toolbelt: The Empowerment Dynamic
- ✦ Practicing our Skills
- ✦ Wrapping up and next steps



“

To be good, and to do good, is all we have to do.

- **JOHN ADAMS**

CONVERSATION SCAFFOLDS

- 01 Stay Engaged
- 02 Honor Ourselves, Each Other and Our Group
- 03 Make Space for Everyone
- 04 "Yes, and..." over "No, but..."
- 05 Don't let the Perfect be the enemy of the Good

GET THE CONVERSATION ROLLING



RECAP OF LAST SESSION

- Reviewed OSBA Standards
- Reviewed "The Science of Student Achievement"
- Touched on "Truth Matters"



THEMES AND WONDERINGS THAT AROSE

- Strengths found in vision-directed planning, innovation/creativity, community engagement, financial leadership, data driven improvement, accountability
- Wonder: How to build a common understanding/definition of *accountability*, from systems to data to district-wide outlook?
- Wonder: What is the governance approach and philosophy? How do we align the board's work with the superintendent's + district's?
- Wonder: How to work as an effective team during an era of polycrisis?

THEMES AND WONDERINGS THAT AROSE

"Having students at the center of decision making, with a commitment to data-driven improvements lighting the way forward, creates a focus in all the diverse areas of governance responsibilities and allows the board to focus on strategy while the administrative team focuses on implementation."

WHY "TRUST MATTERS"

- Public education is people-centric work
- We must sustain support from the public, employees, students and partners in a low-trust environment
- Goals achieved only through interdependence - and interdependence brings vulnerability.



"TRUST MATTERS"

Benevolence

Caring, extending goodwill, demonstrating positive intentions, supporting teachers, staff and the Superintendent

Honesty

Showing integrity, telling the truth, keeping promises, honoring agreements, accepting responsibility

Openness

Sharing important information, delegating, sharing decision making

Reliability

Being consistent, being dependable showing commitment, expressing dedication, exercising diligence

Competence

Setting standards, dedication to the mission, working hard, setting an example, problem solving



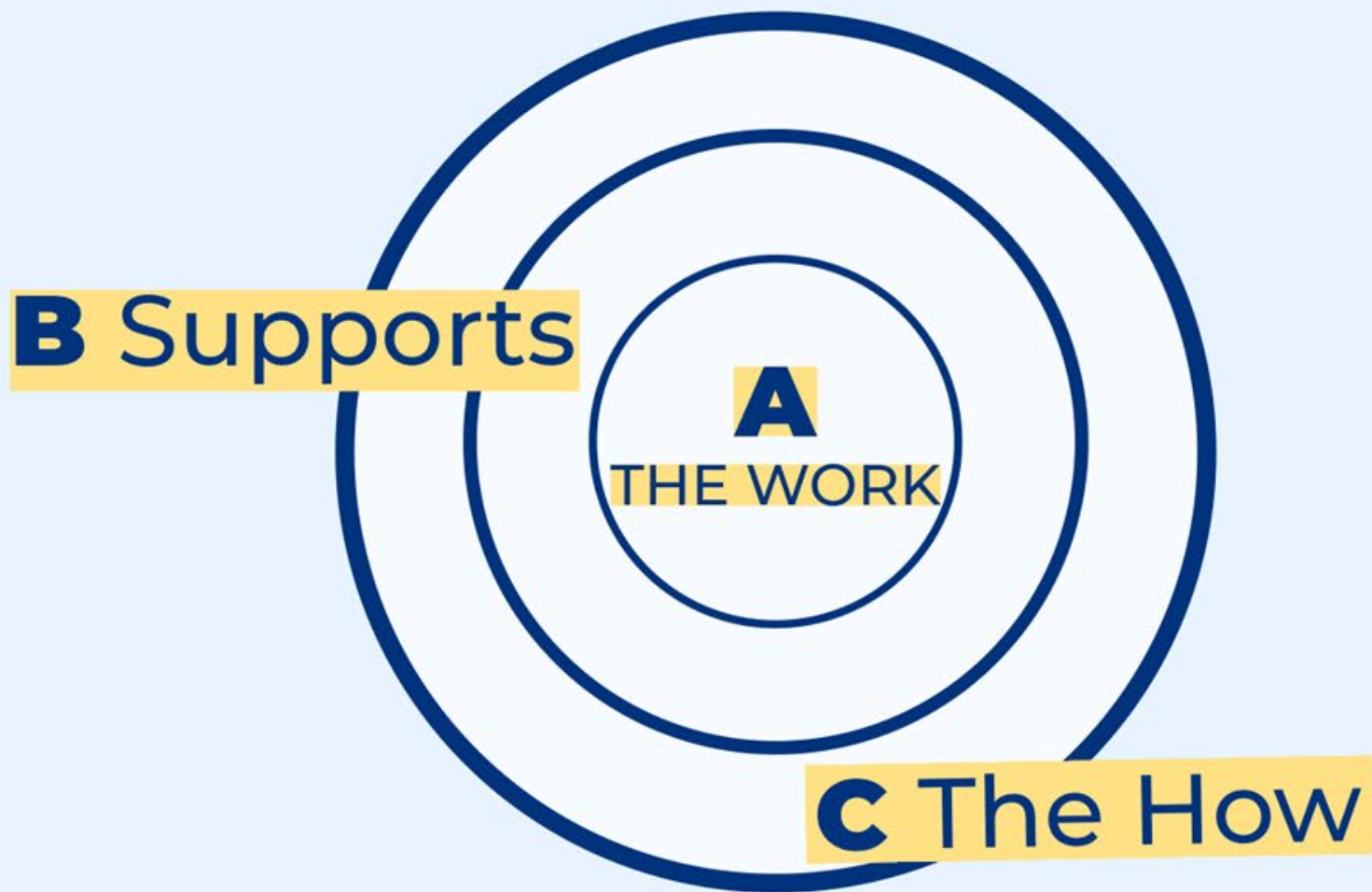
THE GOVERNANCE ECOSYSTEM

Aligning the mission, the structures, and leadership



THE ELEMENTS

From Douglas Englebart's ABC organizational model applied to school boards



THE ELEMENTS

From Douglas Englebart's ABC organizational model applied to school boards

A "The Work" or "The What"

THE ELEMENTS

From Douglas Englebart's ABC organizational model applied to school boards

A "The Work" or "The What"

- Goals for students
- Operational responsibilities (facilities, financial health, etc)
- Board moral, legal, fiduciary responsibilities (financial oversight, monitor progress for students, community engagement)

✦ The Board seeks input, defines, sets parameters, fulfills responsibilities in conjunction with the Superintendent.

THE ELEMENTS

From Douglas Englebart's ABC organizational model applied to school boards

B Supports, Processes, Structures = Governance

THE ELEMENTS

From Douglas Englebart's ABC organizational model applied to school boards

B Supports, Processes, Practices = Governance

- Policies that communicates and explains The What
- Processes that support monitoring, allowing adaptation over time.
- Practices that support relationships with partners, students, staff, families.
- Clarity around role of board + role of superintendent

✦ The Board promotes processes and approaches that support growth in outcomes, in conjunction with the Superintendent.

THE ELEMENTS

From Douglas Englebart's ABC organizational model applied to school boards



"How" we think, interact, take action

THE ELEMENTS

From Douglas Englebart's ABC organizational model applied to school boards



"How" we think, interact, take action

- Values light the way
- Culture and climate to support growth mindset within stressful conditions
- Trust as the grease of the gears
- Unspoken commitments
- Equity and justice at the core

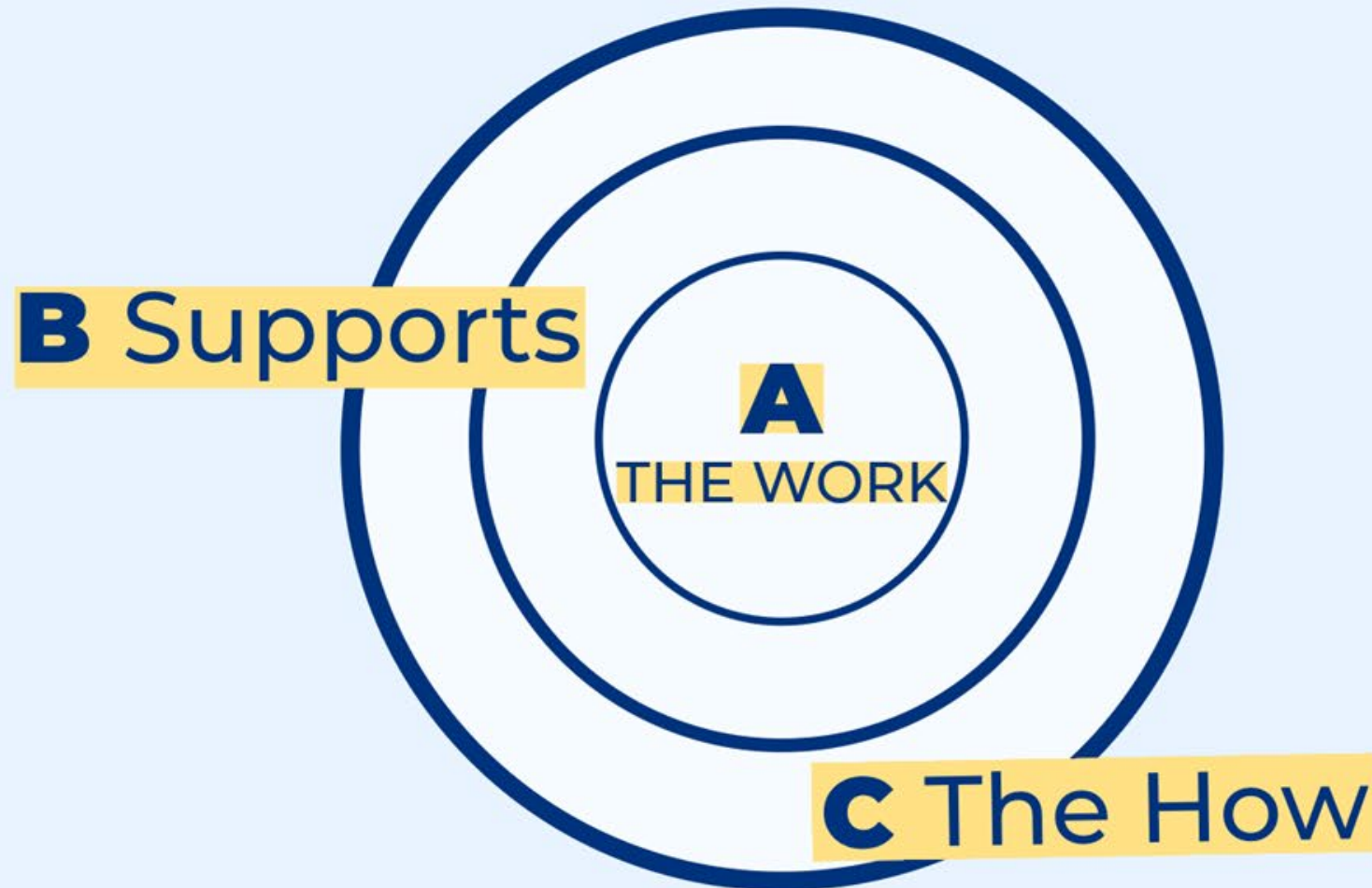


The Board models The How for the entire district, learns best practices for growth, sets the tone, leads, empowers others.

THE ELEMENTS



THE ELEMENTS



LET'S APPLY!

LUNCH BREAK

“We've got a responsibility to live up to the legacy of those who came before us by doing all that we can to help those who come after us.”

MICHELLE OBAMA



WHAT IF THE "HOW" GETS STUCK?

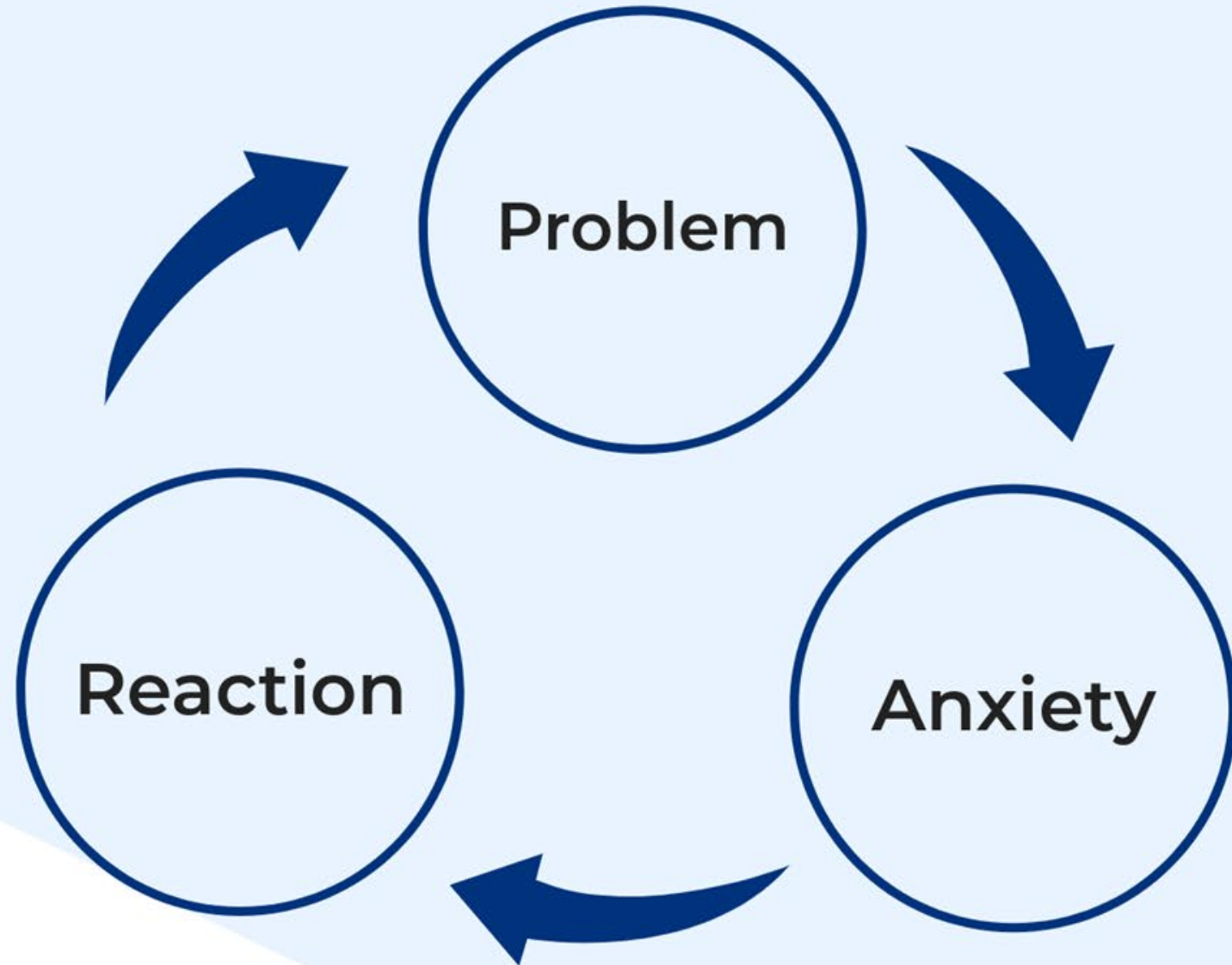
What tools can we have when our thoughts, interactions, and actions don't support growth?



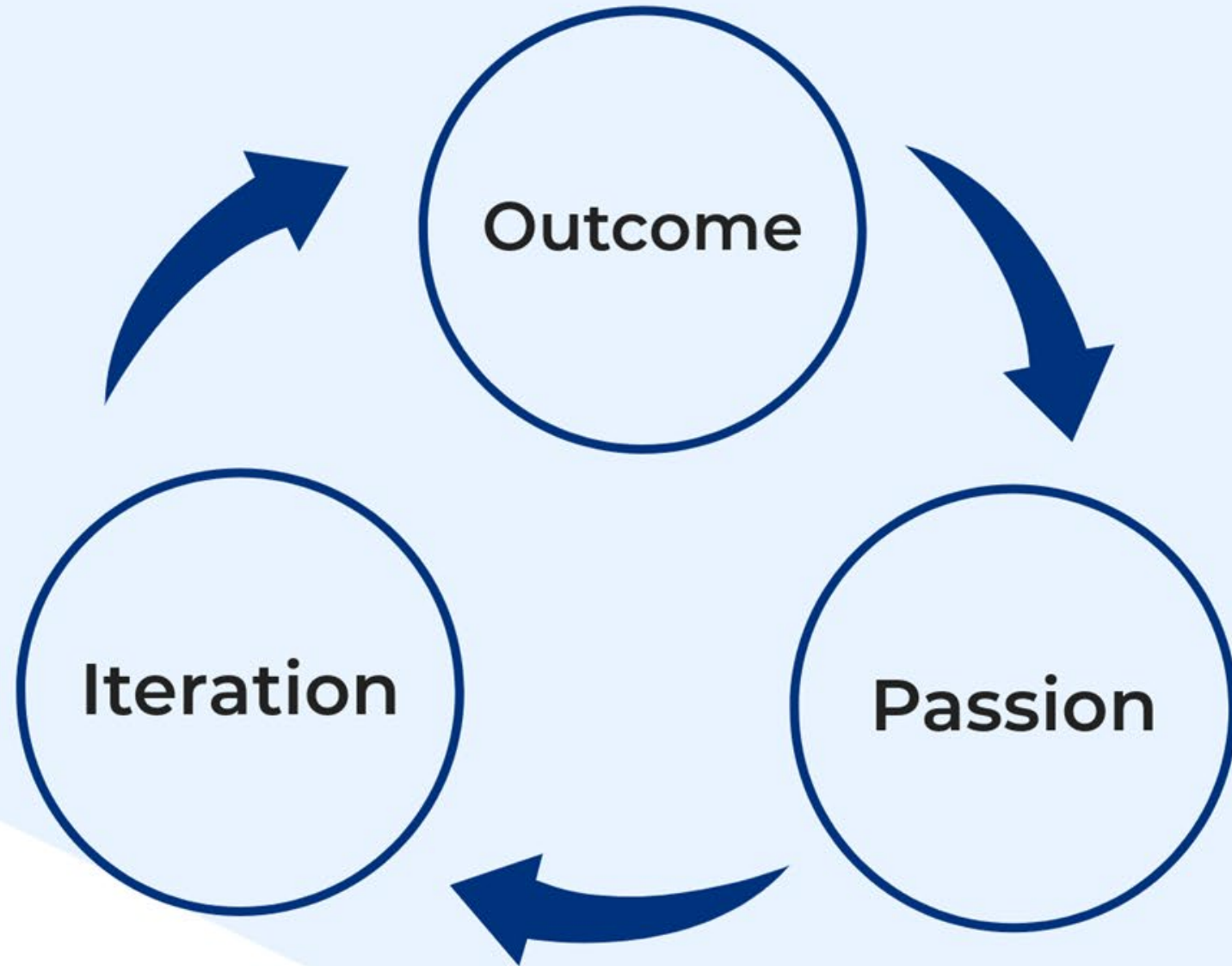
3 QUESTIONS WHEN WE ARE STUCK

- 01 **Where are we putting our focus:** problems or outcomes?
- 02 **How are we relating:** stuck in the status quo or empowering the team?
- 03 **What actions are we taking:** reacting or responding?

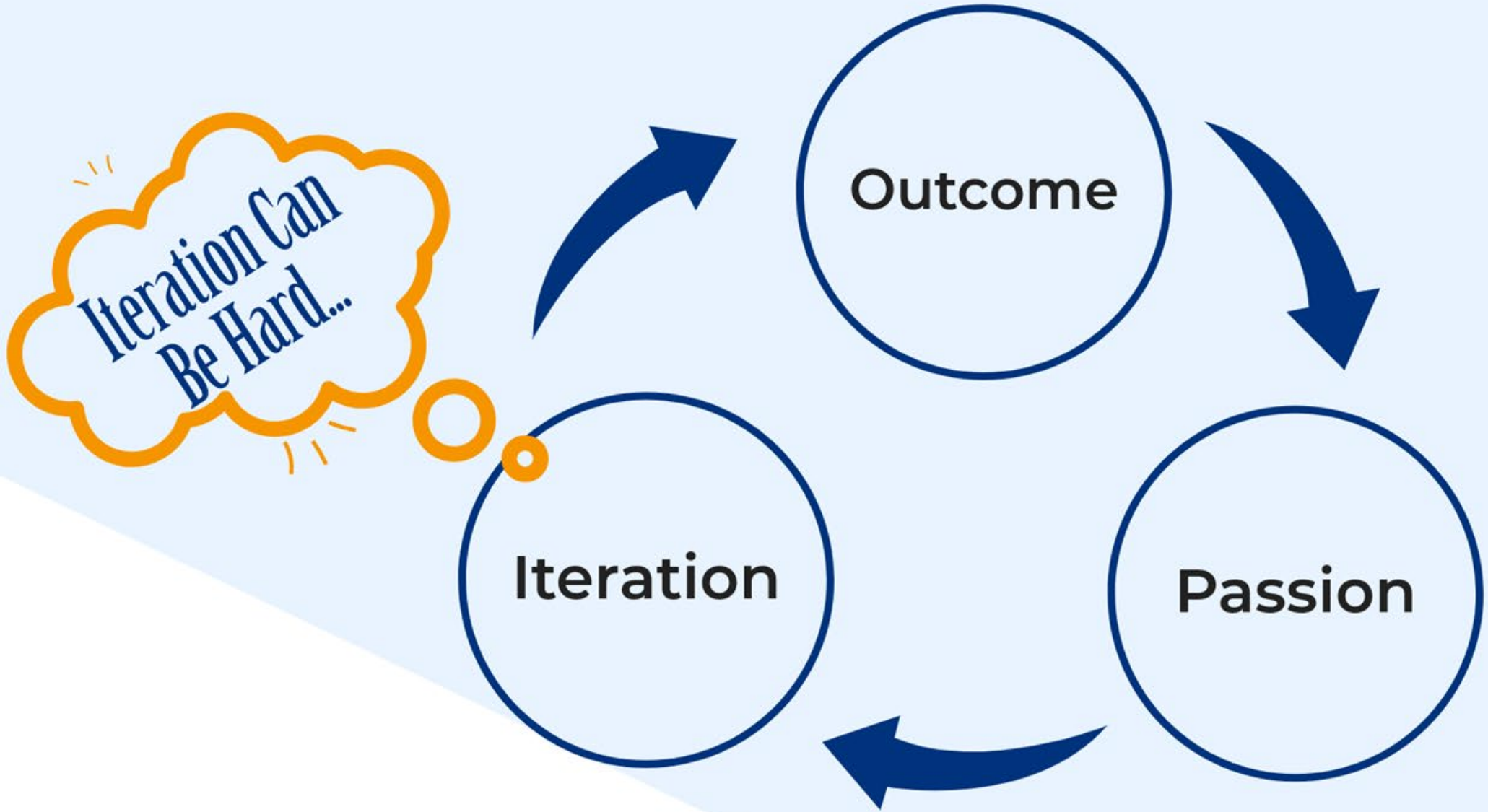
PROBLEM ORIENTATION



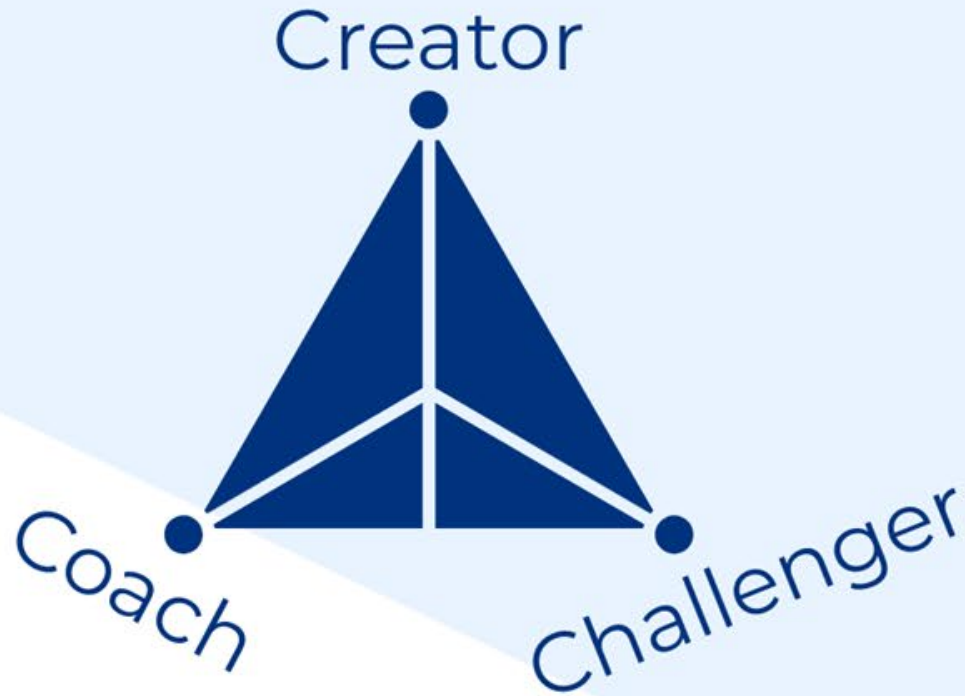
OUTCOME ORIENTATION



OUTCOME ORIENTATION



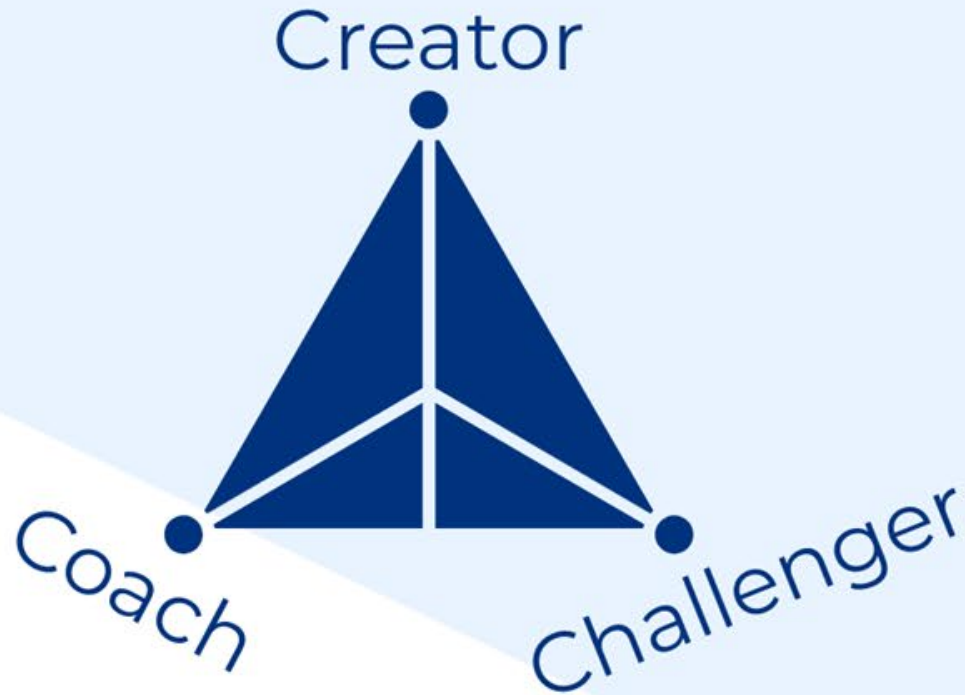
CREATE THE EMPOWERMENT DYNAMIC



Creator

- Focused on creating outcomes
- Takes responsibility for choosing how to respond

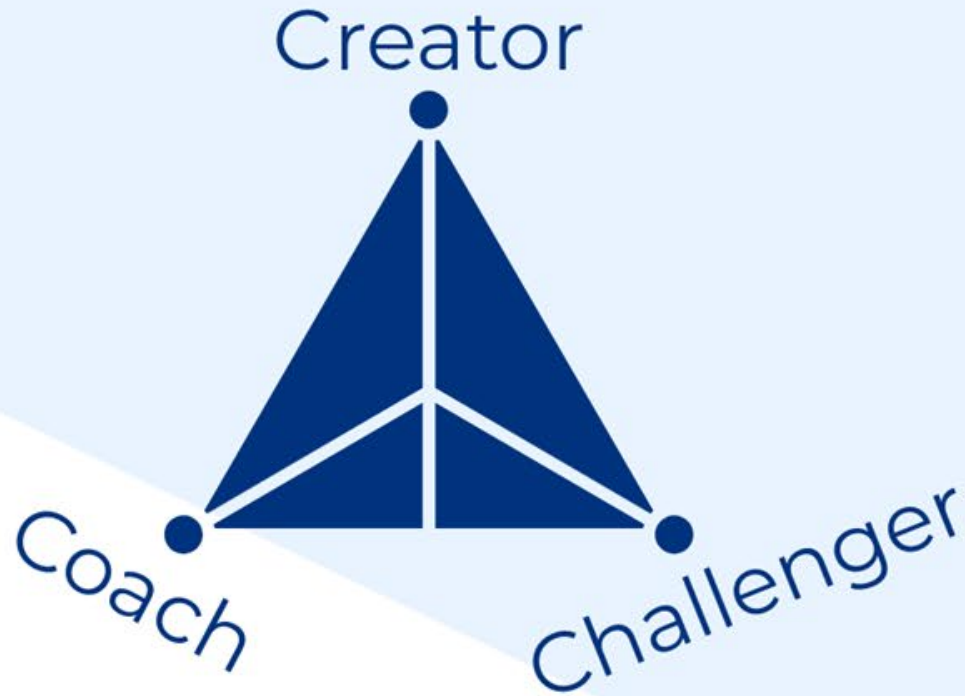
CREATE THE EMPOWERMENT DYNAMIC



Challenger

- The voice that focuses on learning and growth toward the outcome
- May be a person, or a situation (i.e. natural disaster that forces new approaches)

CREATE THE EMPOWERMENT DYNAMIC



Coach

- Asks questions to clarify outcomes, help others, thinks things through
- Respects people's agency in the process (i.e. not a Rescuer)

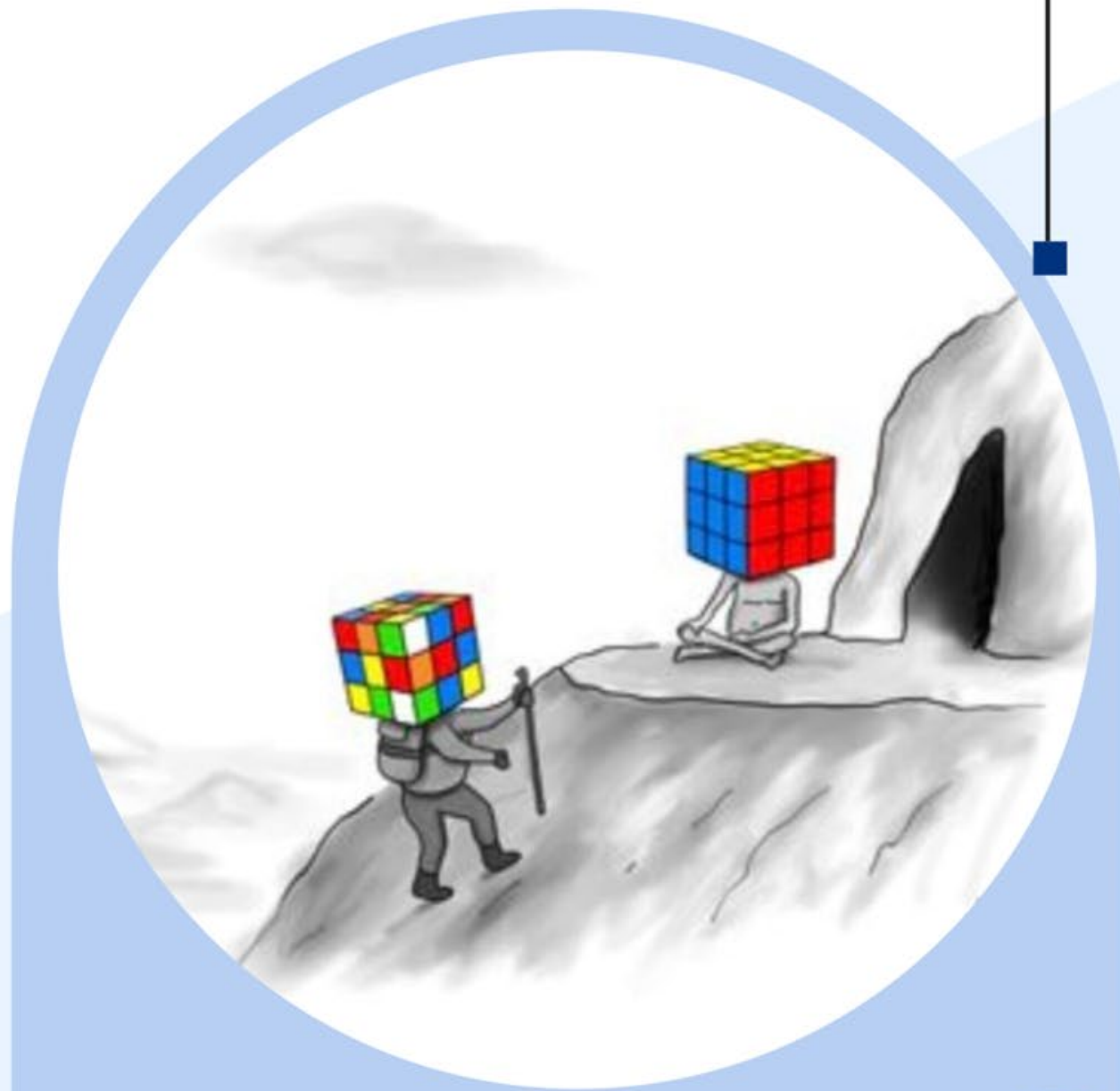
BREAK

“Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”

DESMOND TUTU



LINING IT ALL UP



PRACTICING OUR SKILLS - DESIGNING A PROCESS

- 01 Discuss desired outcomes
- 02 Recall relevant values, commitments
- 03 Any constraints to remember?
- 04 Start with a single example
- 05 What other cases could happen?
- 06 Create draft
- 07 Bring back for further reflection, finalization

REFLECTING

What?

Something you learned today

So What?

What resonated with you today

Now What?

What next steps are you looking forward to?



THANK YOU FOR OUR TIME TOGETHER.

We'd appreciate
your feedback.

