Tackling Wicked Problems through Deliberative Engagement

Martín Carcasson
Director of the Center for Public Deliberation
Professor, Department of Communication Studies

CENTER FOR
PUBLIC DELIBERATION
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Dedicated to enhancing local democracy through improved public communication and community problem solving

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Workshop materials folder: https://col.st/XlzYL

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Text **CSUCPD210** to **37607** once to join

Which statements best describe your view of the current quality of public discussion and debate? (choose up to three)

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Wicked Problems & Wise Cities: Building Community Capacity for Authentic and Productive Engagement

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CPD Projects, 2006-2021

- Civic mission of schools
- Grade configuration of Poudre School District schools
- Statewide dropout rate
- Colorado Health Care Reform
- Student housing
- Improving higher education
- Childhood obesity
- Bicycle safety
- Diversity Dialogues at CSU Diversity Conference
- STEM education in K-12
- Arts Engagement Summit
- CSU/Old Town collaborative project
- School budgeting issues/school closures
- Medical Marijuana
- Regional visioning process
- Water and growth issues
- Poverty in Larimer County
- PSD Student Think Tank facilitator group
- K-12 school improvement
- Improving higher education through student-faculty reciprocity
- Politics of food
- Issues surrounding aging
- Early childhood education
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- On campus stadium proposal
- Senior transportation
- Campus smoking
- School safety
- Bullying
- Mental health
- Nature in the City
- Larimer County Landfill/Wasteshed
- Diversity and Inclusion in Fort Collins
- CSU Innovation and Economic Prosperity
- CSU parking and affordable housing
- Backyard wood burning
- Housing affordability
- Fort Collins City Plan
- K12 substance abuse
- City sales tax proposals
- Data and democracy
- Housing and health equity
- Intergenerational dialogues
- Decarbonization of electricity/Platte River
- CSU Strategic plan

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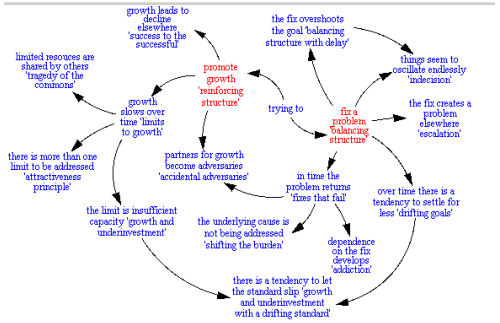
Overview: Three Key Arguments

#1 – The Basic Reality

Most of the key problems we face are best understood through a wicked problems lens



#2 – The Bad News

Human nature and many of our primary institutions and processes are woefully ill-suited to address wicked problems

#3 – The Hopeful News

Once we realize #1 and #2, we can build capacity for the kinds of conversations, processes, and institutions that cultivate the wisdom so critical to addressing wicked problems, particularly at the local level

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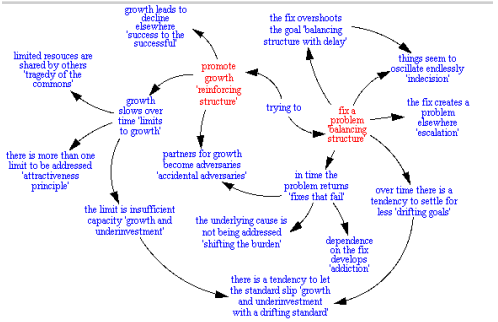

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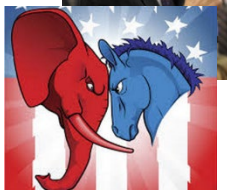

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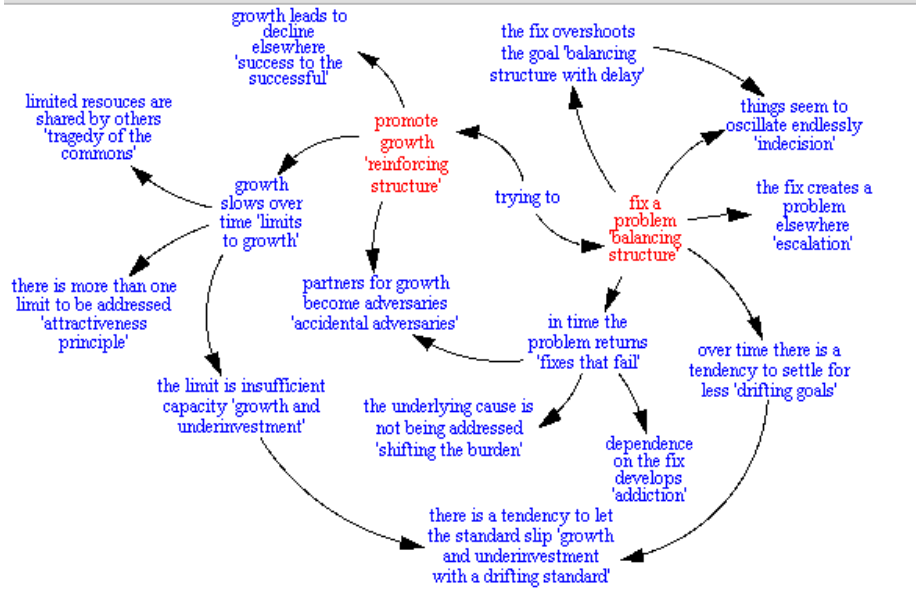
Wicked problems inherently involve **competing underlying values**, paradoxes, and tradeoffs that **cannot be resolved** by science.



Key Deliberative Responses

1. Balancing (the long-term focus)

2. Prioritizing/Re-calibrating (short term corrections)

3. Transcending (short term ideal)

FOOD AS A WICKED PROBLEM

WE WANT OUR FOOD TO BE:

Inexpensive

Fresh

Nutritious

Safe

Long lasting

Delicious

Convenient
(Accessible, Easy to prepare)

Ethically grown
(labor/animal welfare)

Our choice

Supportive of a local economy

Supportive of an agriculture community

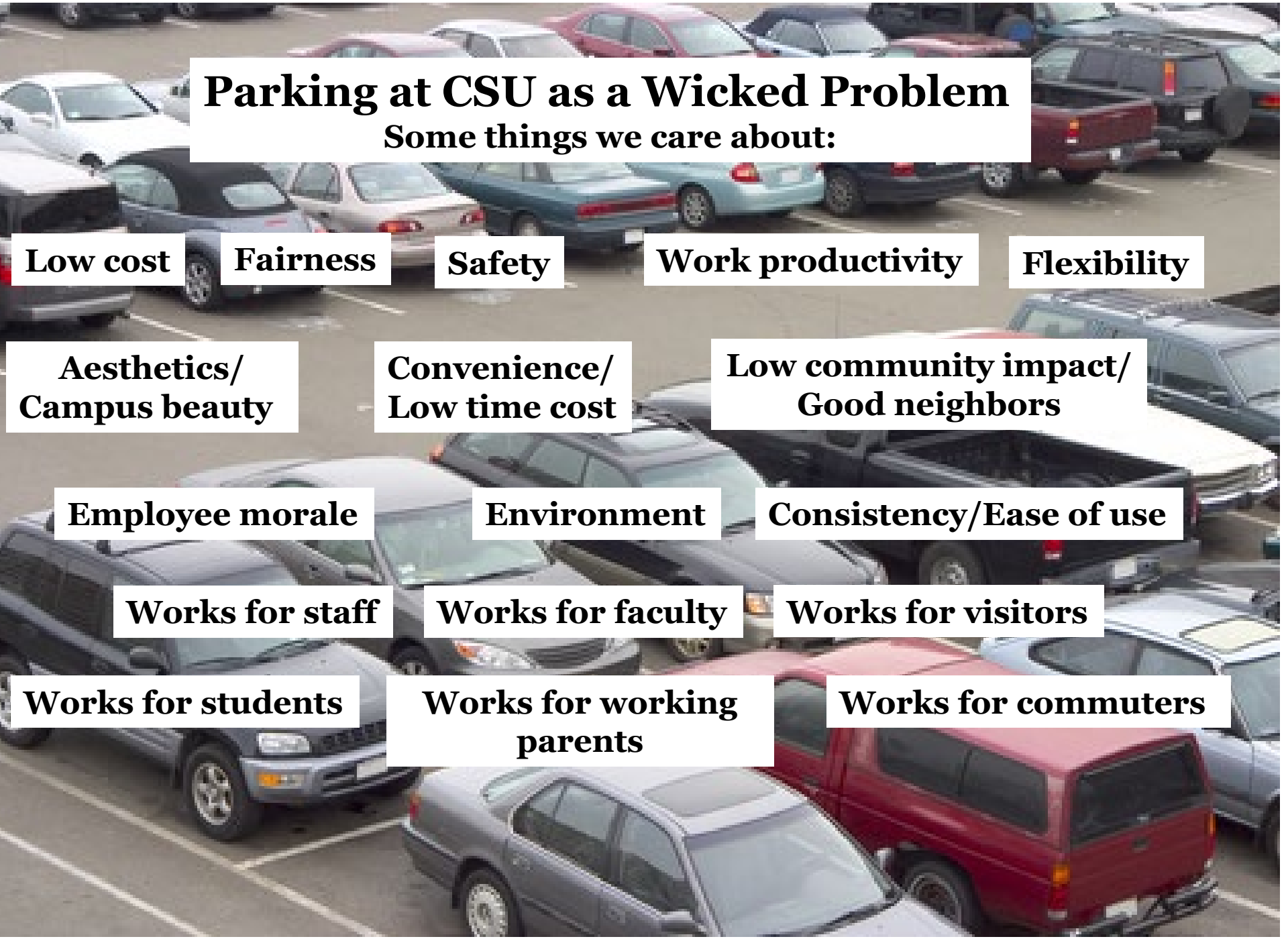
Grown and delivered in an environmentally responsible manner

Supportive of efforts to reduce hunger locally and globally

HEALTH CARE AS A WICKED PROBLEM

Competing Values in Downtown Fort Collins

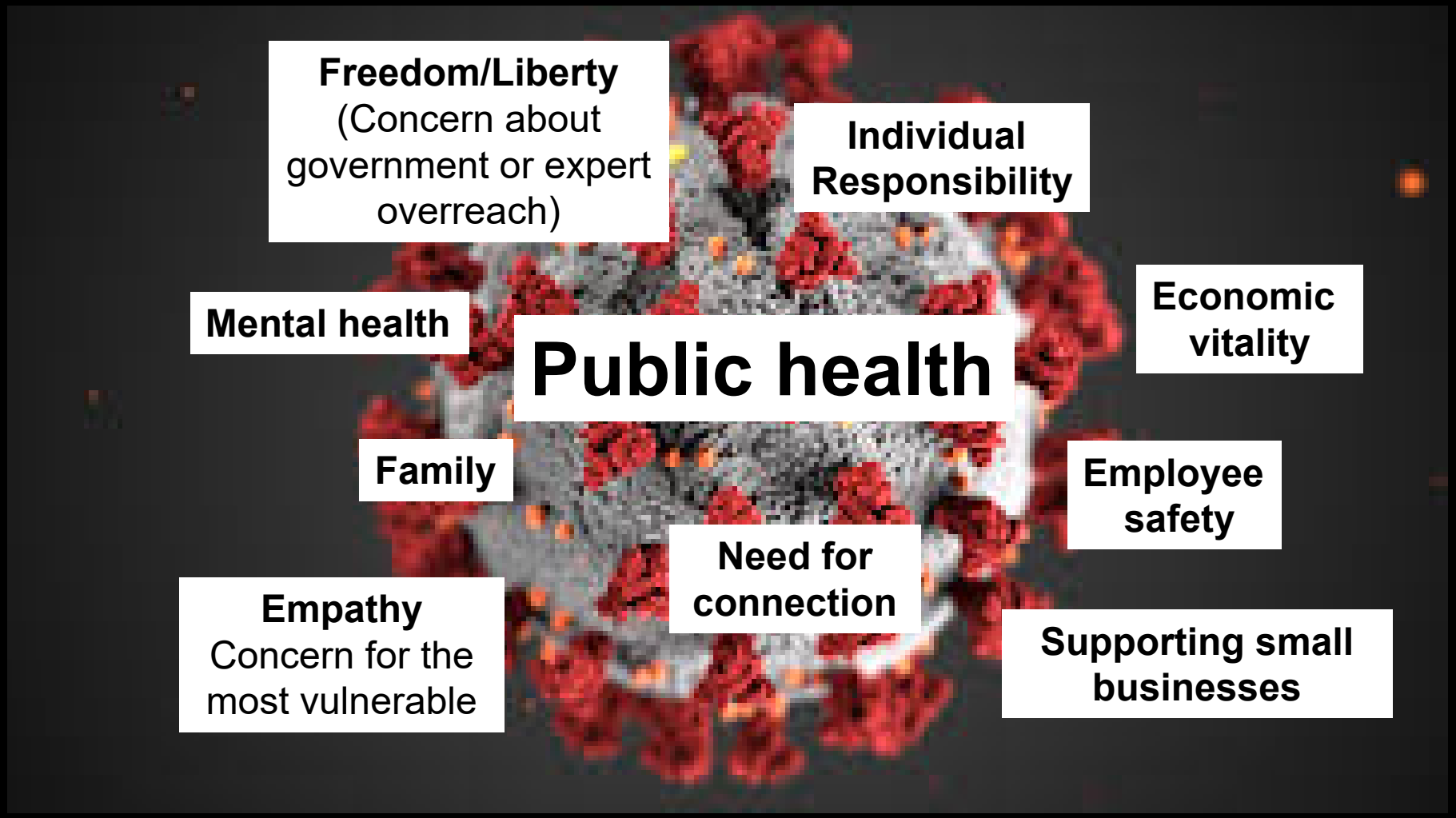
- Aesthetics/Beauty
- Compassion
- Diversity/Inclusivity
- Economic health/vitality
- Effective use of public resources
- Equality
- Excitement/fun
- Family
- Individual freedom
- Individual responsibility
- Individual rights
- Justice/Fairness
- Public health/ environment
- Respect for law
- Respect for others
- Safety


Parking at CSU as a Wicked Problem
Some things we care about:
Low cost
Fairness
Safety
Work productivity
Flexibility
Aesthetics/
Campus beauty
Convenience/
Low time cost
Low community impact/
Good neighbors
Employee morale
Environment
Consistency/Ease of use
Works for staff
Works for faculty
Works for visitors
Works for students
Works for working
parents
Works for commuters

Capitalism or Sustainability as a Wicked Problem

- The "Triple Bottom Line" of
  - Profit (economics, also tied to jobs and taxes)
  - People (social justice, equality, fairness)
  - Planet (environment)

COVID 19 and our community response as a wicked problem



We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

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Key American Values

Preamble	Current Phrasing
Justice	Justice
Domestic Tranquility/ Common defense	Security/Safety
General Welfare	Equality
Liberty to ourselves	Freedom (for us)
Liberty for our posterity	Freedom (for future generations)/Sustainability

American Values as a Wicked Problem
1. Justice
2. Security/Safety
3. Equality
4. Freedom for us
5. Freedom for future generations
(sustainability)

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Which of these values is most important to you?

Justice

Equality

Security/Safety

Freedom

Freedom for future generations

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Which of these values is least important to you?

Justice

Equality

Security/Safety

Freedom

Freedom for future generations

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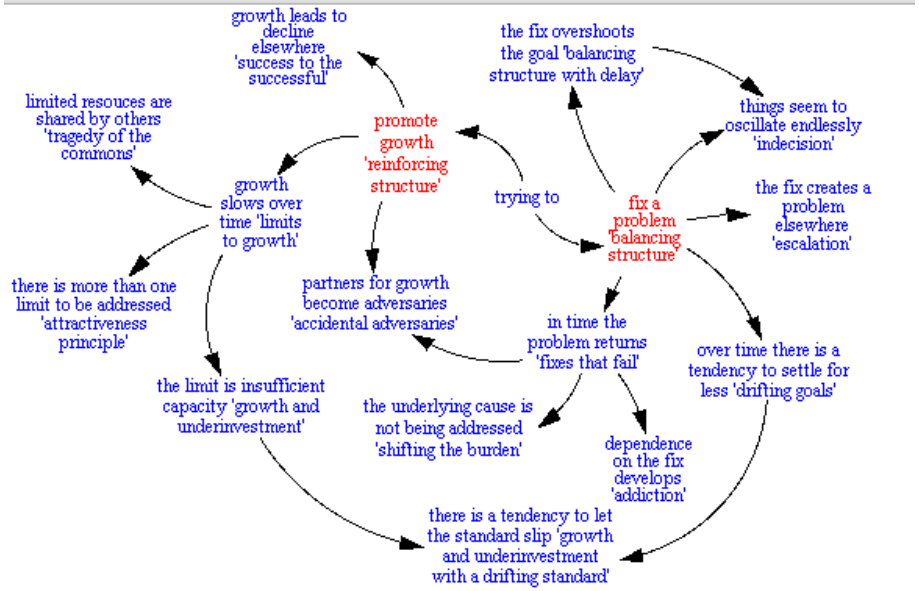
Inherent Democratic Tensions

- Freedom and Equality (and Equality and Equity)
- Our Freedom and Freedom of Future generations (Sustainability)
- Freedom and Security
- Justice is a tension within itself (justice as the ideal between too much and too little credit or punishment)

Some others

- Short term and long term
- Individual rights and community good
- Unity and diversity
- Cooperation and competition
- Structure and agency (or opportunity and individual responsibility)
- Flexibility/Innovation and Consistency/Tradition
- Best use of resources (money, time, people)

Wicked problems inherently involve **competing underlying values**, paradoxes, and tradeoffs that **cannot be resolved** by science. They call for ongoing high quality **communication**, **creativity**, and broad **collaborative action** to manage well.



What questions do you have for after the presentation? (you can add new ones or react to others)

Top

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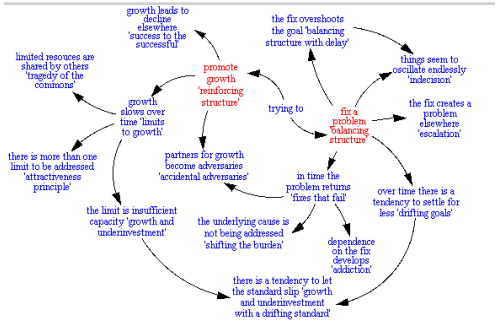

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"A tonic to the noxious sw
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the quirks of being hu
"A SPLENDID, INFORMED, ACCURATE, WITTY, CLEAR, COMMONSENSE BOOK."
–Martin Gardner, author of The New Ambidextrous Universe
THE RIGHTEOUS MIND
WHY GOOD
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I'm Right and You're an Idiot
THE TOXIC STATE OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND HOW TO CLEAN IT UP
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with Grania Litwin
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A book? I can find all the info I need online for free, thank you very much.
THE DEATH OF EXPERTISE
AGenfusIRL
Is that really how you spell expertice?
The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters
DrMom_312
This title just sounds like yet another elitist appeal to authority.
TOM NICHOLS
Luv2Read
And why do we care what this so called "expert" has to say???
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What Are We Learning from Brain Science and Social Psychology?

The Problematic

We crave certainty and consistency

We are suckers for the good v. evil narrative

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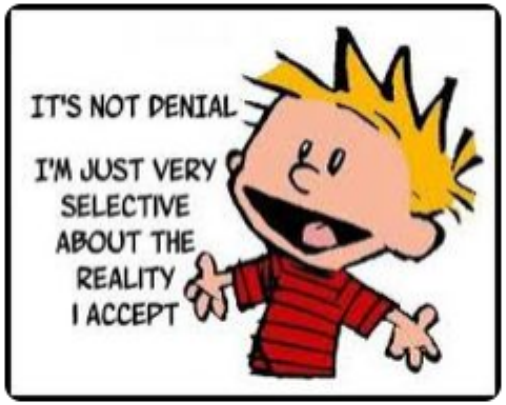
- We are suckers for the good v. evil narrative
- We are “groupish” (prefer to gather with like-minded)
- We filter & cherry pick evidence to support our views



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What and who we expose ourselves to	*selective exposure / echo chambers/ filter or media bubbles*

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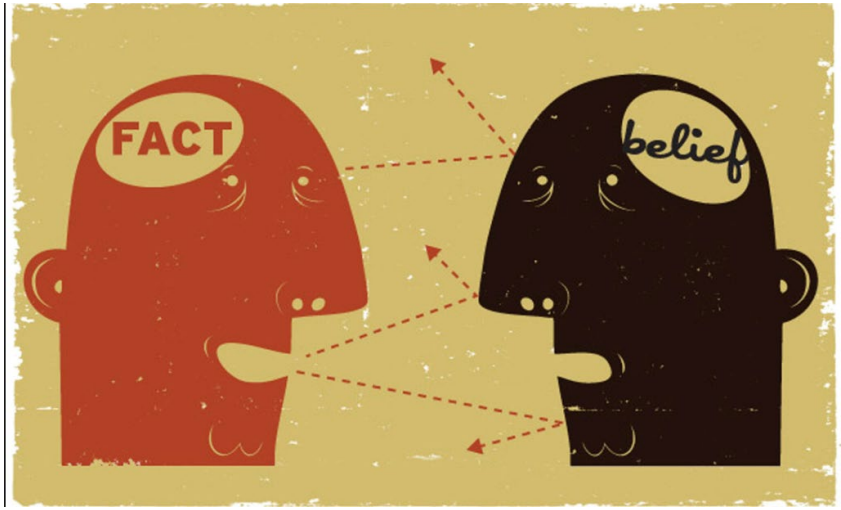
How we interpret new evidence	*confirmation bias, backfire effect, cognitive dissonance*



How we interpret new evidence

*"**when we want to believe something**, we ask ourselves, '**Can I believe it?'** Then…we search for supporting evidence, and if we find even a single piece of pseudo-evidence, we can stop thinking.… In contrast, **when we don't want to believe something**, we ask ourselves, '**Must I believe it?'** Then we search for contrary evidence, and if we find a single reason to doubt the claim, we can dismiss it"*

- *Jonathan Haidt and Tom Gilovich*

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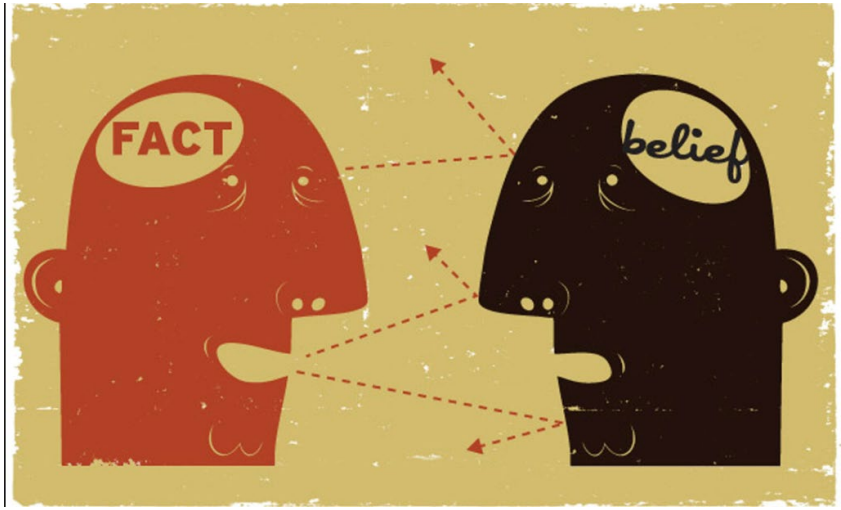

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How we make attributions and tell stories	*egoism, illusory correlation, negativity bias*

Bush: 'Too often we judge other groups by their worst examples, while judging ourselves by our best intentions'

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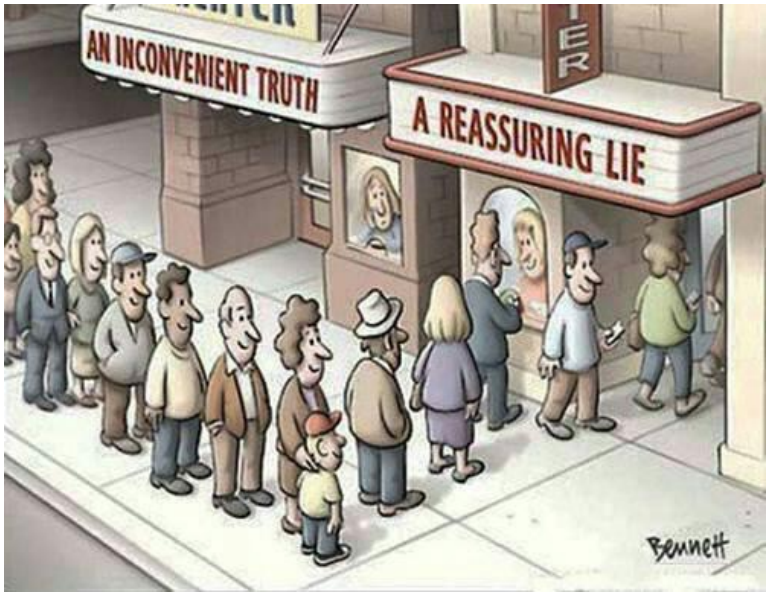
How we make decisions	*heuristics, self-serving bias, social proof*
What we remember	*availability bias*

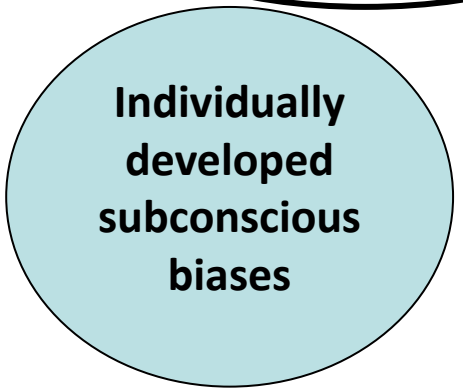
What We Are Learning from Brain Science

The Problematic

- We crave certainty and consistency
- We are suckers for the good v. evil narrative
- We strongly prefer to gather with the like minded
- We filter & cherry pick evidence to support our views
- We avoid values dilemmas, tensions, and tough choices



The Vicious Cycle of Exaggerated Polarization



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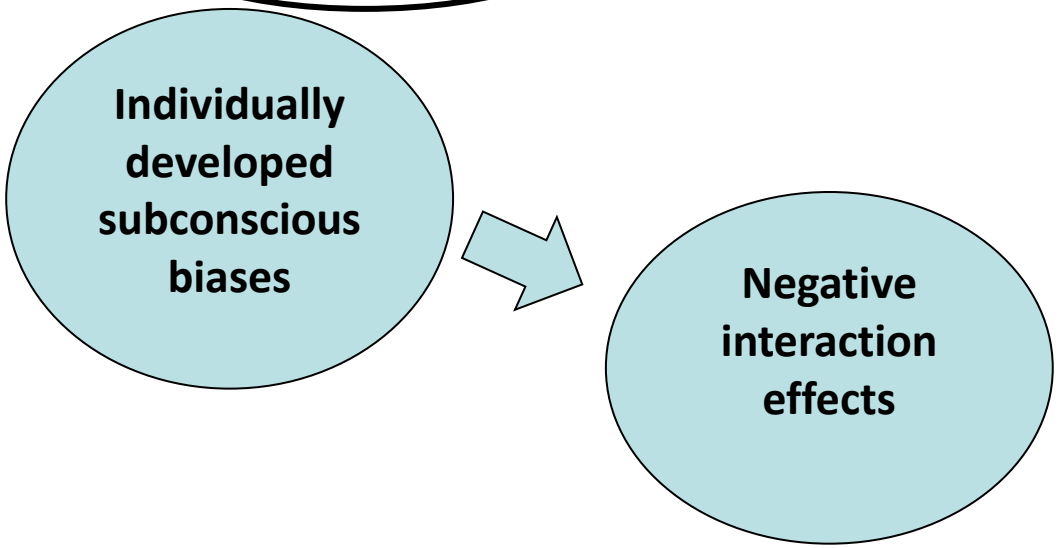

Negative Interaction Effects

Kathryn Shultz – *Being Wrong*

- First step: Ignorance assumption
- Second step: Idiot assumption
- Third Step: Evil assumption

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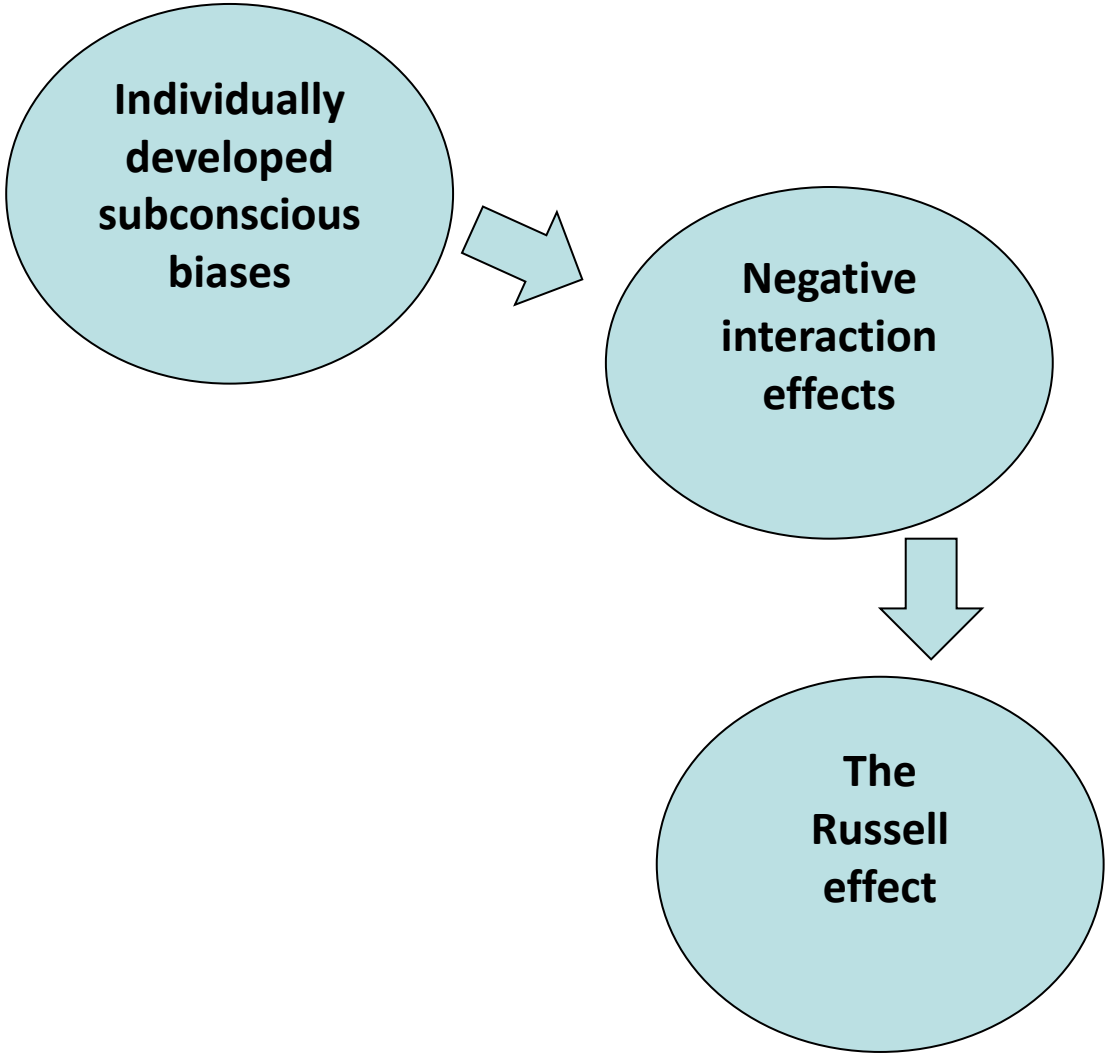

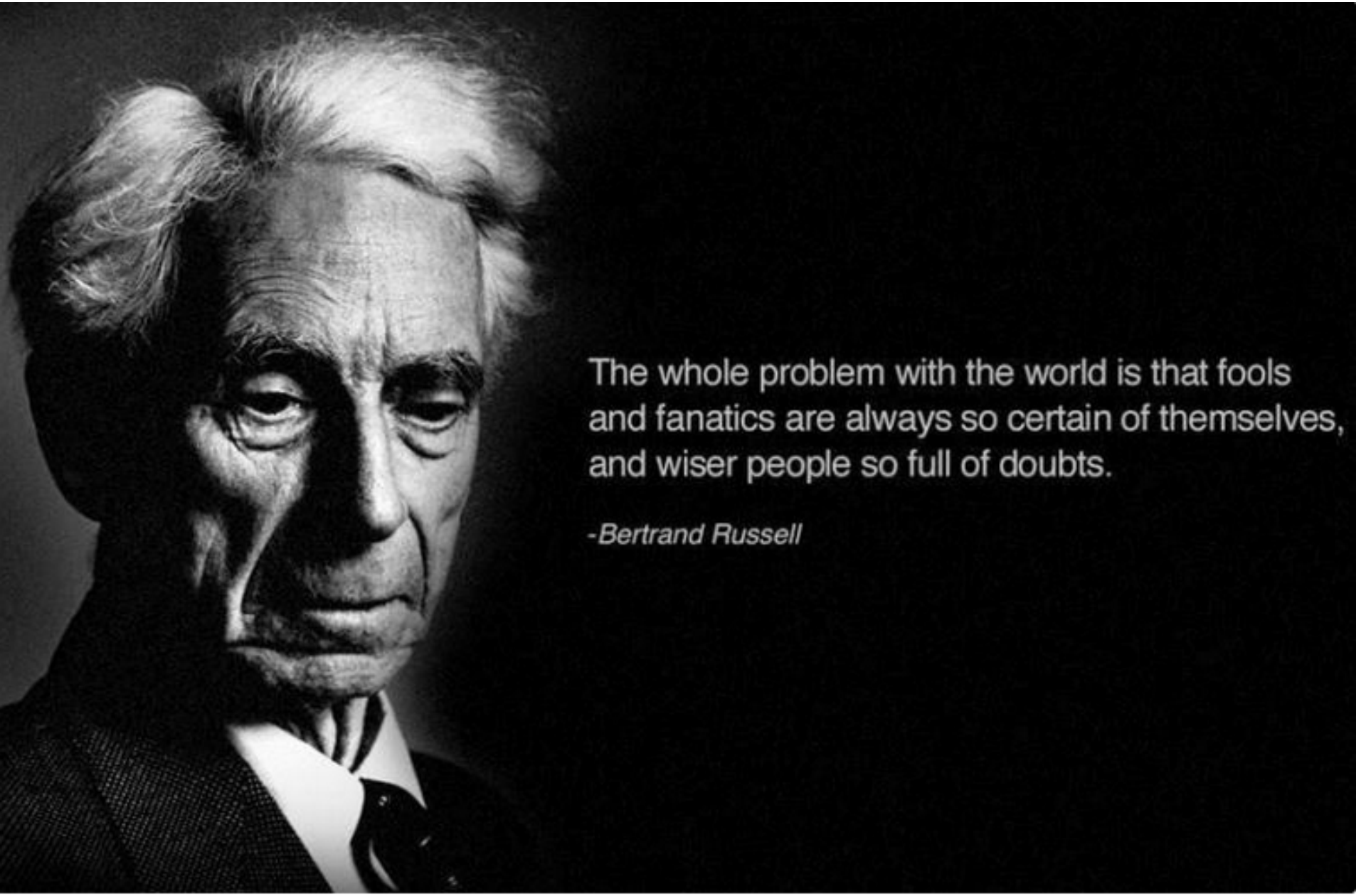
The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts.
-Bertrand Russell

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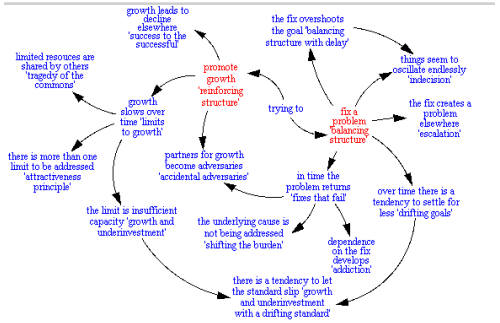

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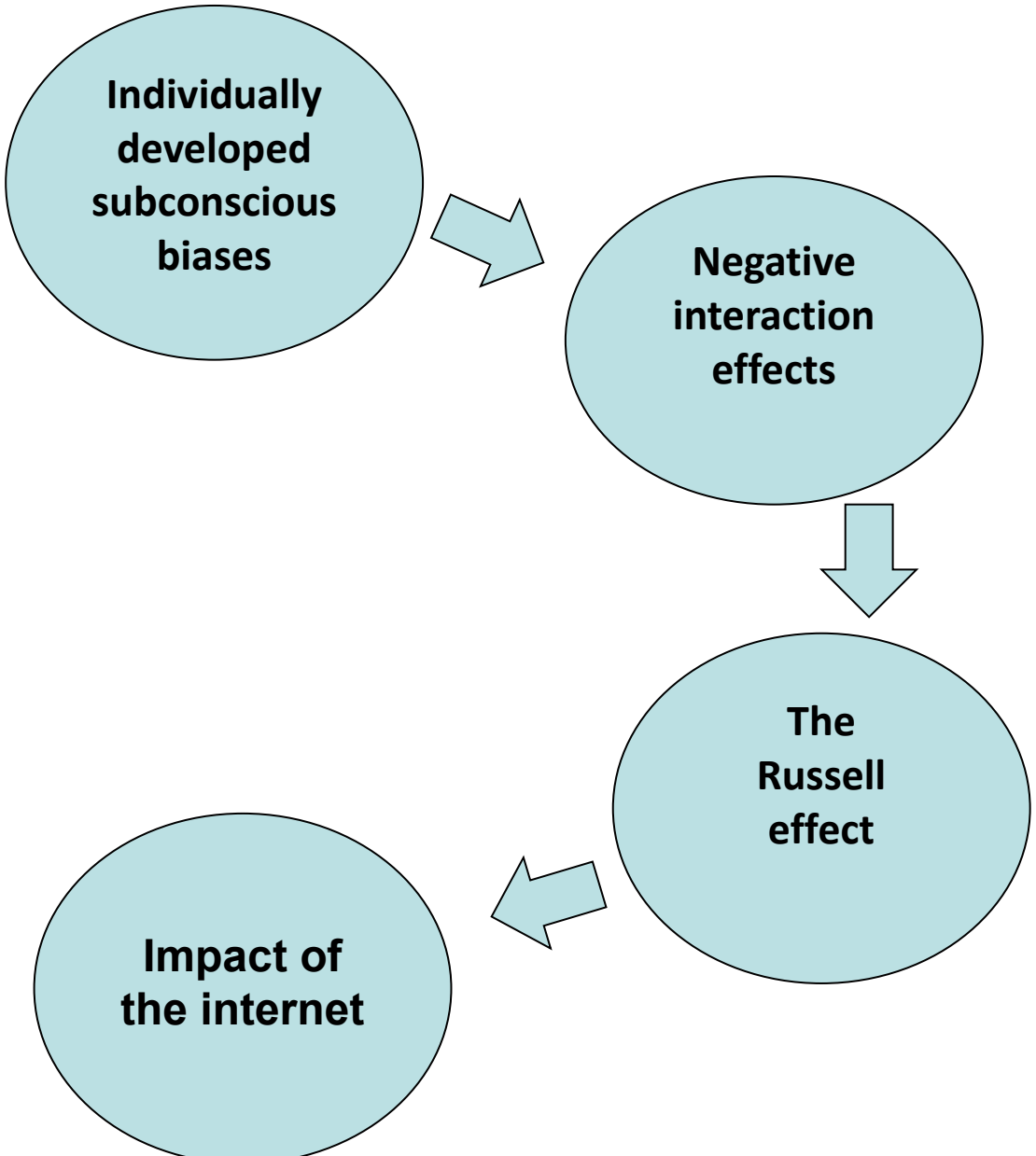

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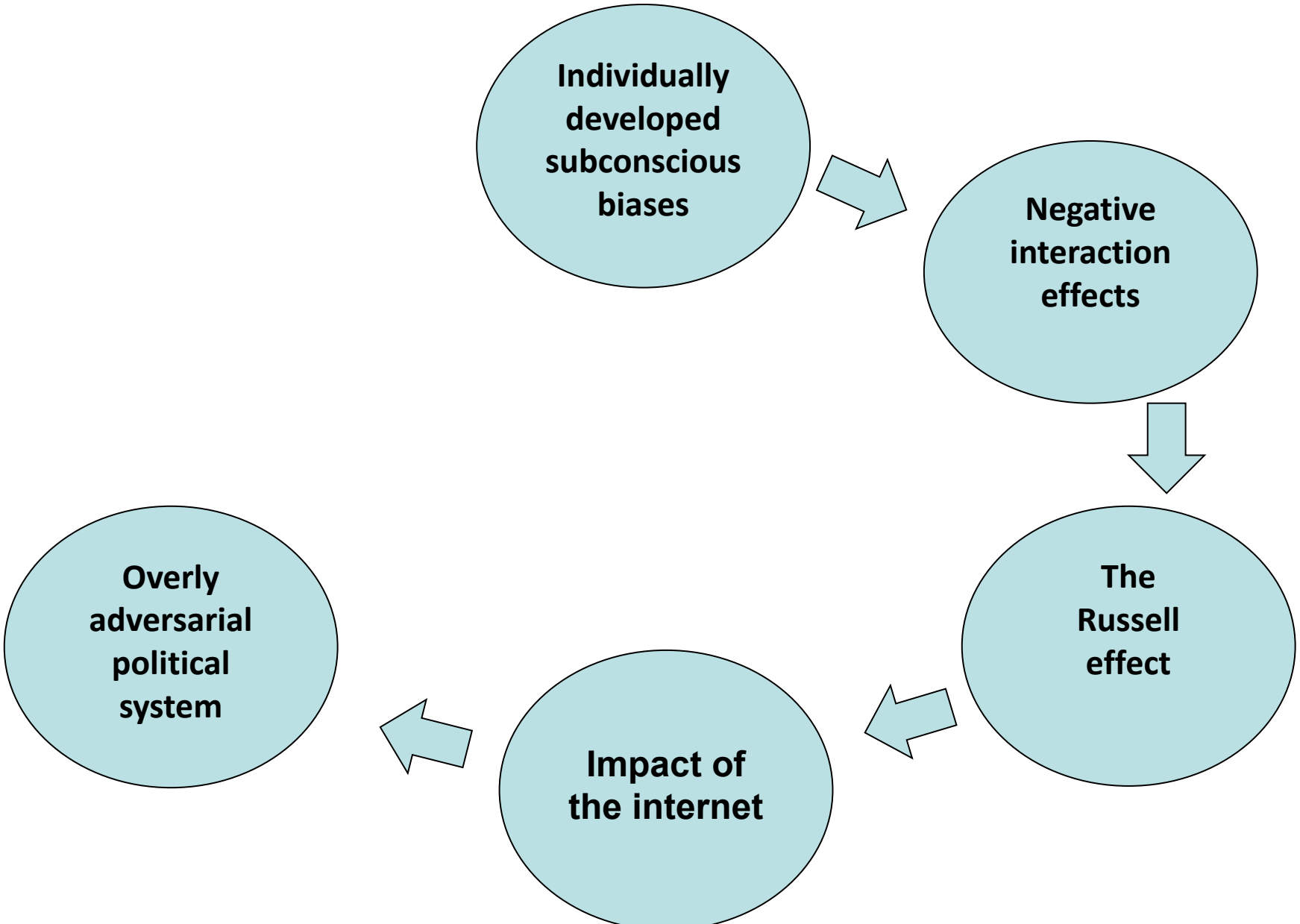

Drawbacks of an Overly-Adversarial Political System

- Plays into flaws of human nature
- Often focuses on “winning” vs. solving problems
- Zero-sum game incentivizes “bad” communication, strategic research, and problematizes implementation
- Often focuses on blaming (them) vs. taking accountability (us)
- Relies on narrow value frames (thus avoids tensions)
- Attracts/privileges organized, entrenched voices
- Negative side effects like polarization, cynicism, and apathy (which then cause even worse communication)
- Assumes a narrow role for citizens (citizens as voters, consumers, or spectators)

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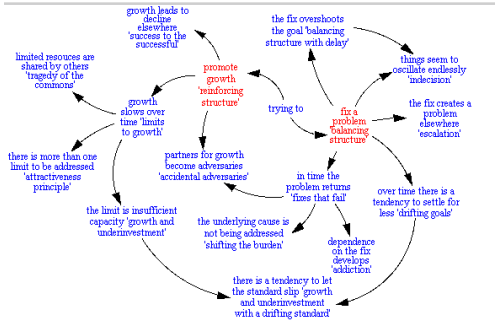

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Consider our Typical Public Processes

- *Our two-party system*
- *Campaigns, referenda, and elections*
- *“Town halls”*
- *Interest groups and lobbyists*
- *Political debates*
- *Congressional deliberations and legislative debate*
- *Social media political engagement*
- *Citizen comment and public hearings*
- *Expert panels*
- *Letters to the editors*
- *Emails and email campaigns to policymakers*

Key Problems with our Typical Public Processes

- *Engage too late in the process when issues are simply framed as "yes" or "no" and teams are already set*
- *Primarily provide opportunities for individual or group expression*
- *Caters to entrenched and organized voices*
- *Little to no effective interaction or learning/refinement of opinion*

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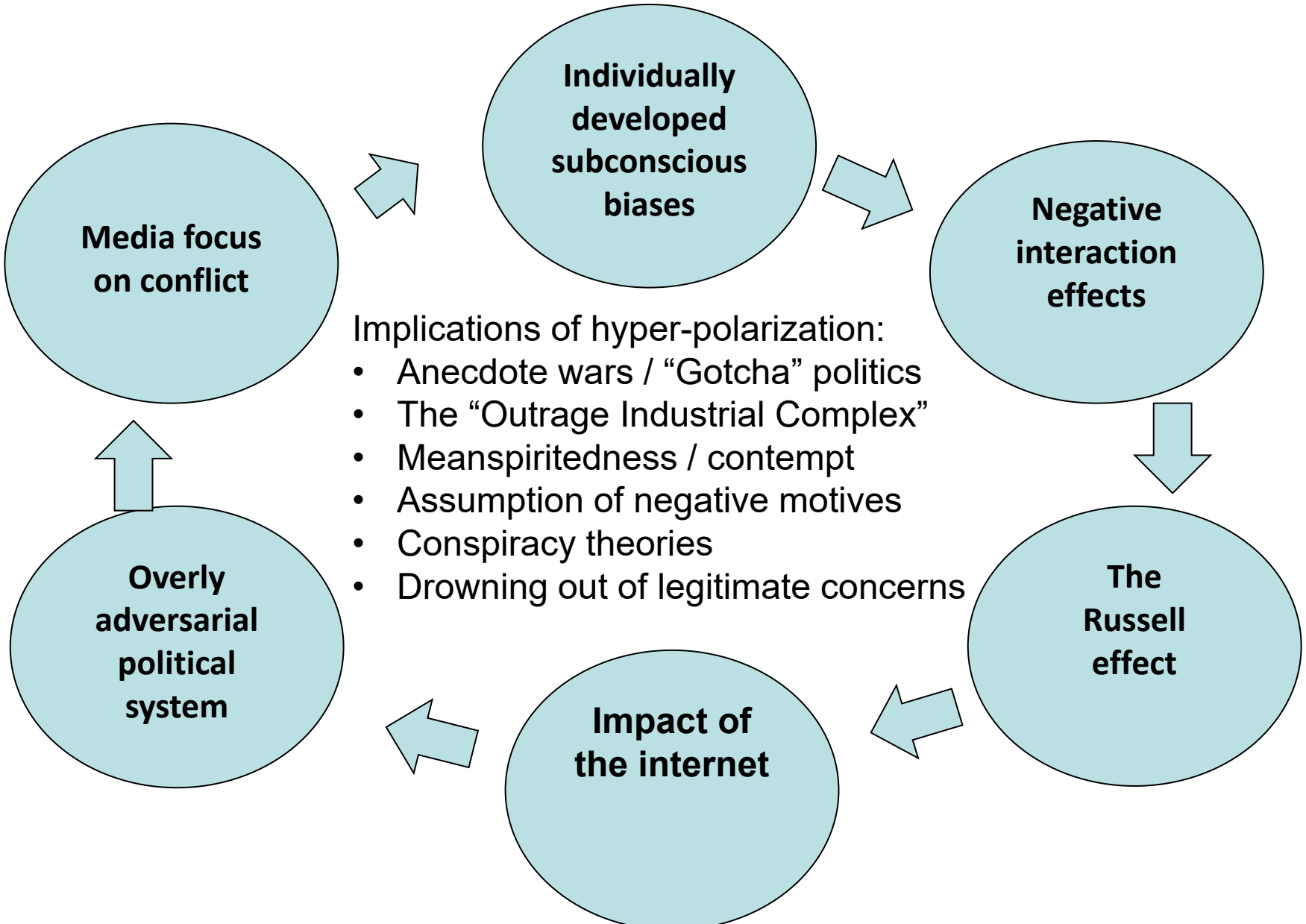

Implications of hyper-polarization:

- Anecdote wars / "Gotcha" politics
- The "Outrage Industrial Complex"
- Meanspiritedness / contempt
- Assumption of negative motives
- Conspiracy theories
- Drowning out of legitimate concerns

Why Experts Can't Save Us
(though they can certainly help when used well)

- Experts by definition are focused on a specific, narrow aspect of the problem (i.e. they struggle with wicked problems).
- Experts often focus on being "value free" (they tell us what *is* or what *could* be, not what *should* be)
- Expert perspectives can overemphasize what can be measured and underemphasize what cannot
- Good data is undermined in a polarized environment
- Facts don't change minds or behavior
- Expert dominated processes shut out the public

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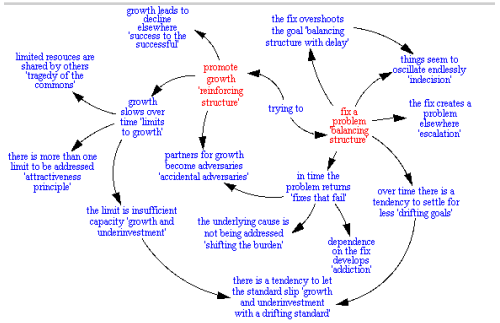

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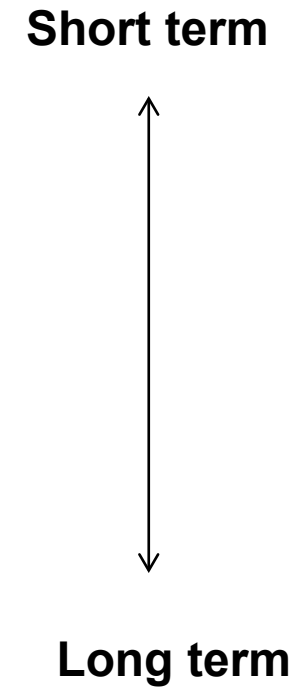
Key Steps for Local Communities

- Adopting a wicked problems mindset



The Wicked Problems Mindset

- Presume wicked problems, not wicked people
- Become more comfortable with uncertainty

Traditional v. Facilitative Leadership

Traditional

- *Strong opinion*
- *Charisma*
- *Public speaking skills*
- *Mobilization of the like-minded*

Facilitative

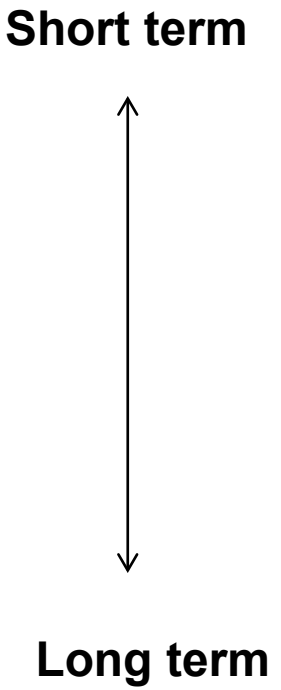
- *Strong on process*
- *Trust and respect*
- *Facilitation skills*
- *Collaboration between broad perspectives*

The Wicked Problems Mindset

- Presume wicked problems, not wicked people
- Become more comfortable with uncertainty
- Focus on elevating the conversation not just winning the argument
- Put your energy toward identifying, engaging, and negotiating inherent tensions
- Work toward creating a learning community

Key Steps for Local Communities

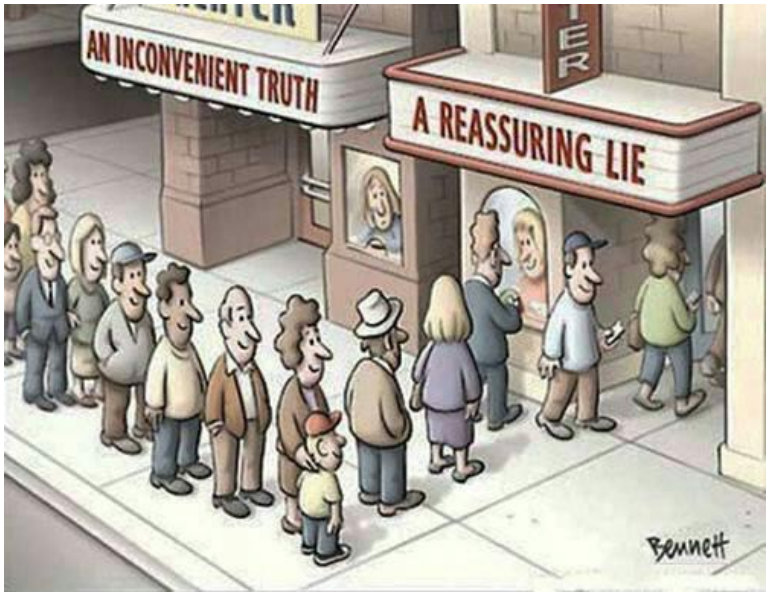
- Adopting a wicked problems mindset
- **Better processes - tap into different aspects of human nature**



What We Are Learning from Brain Science

The Problematic

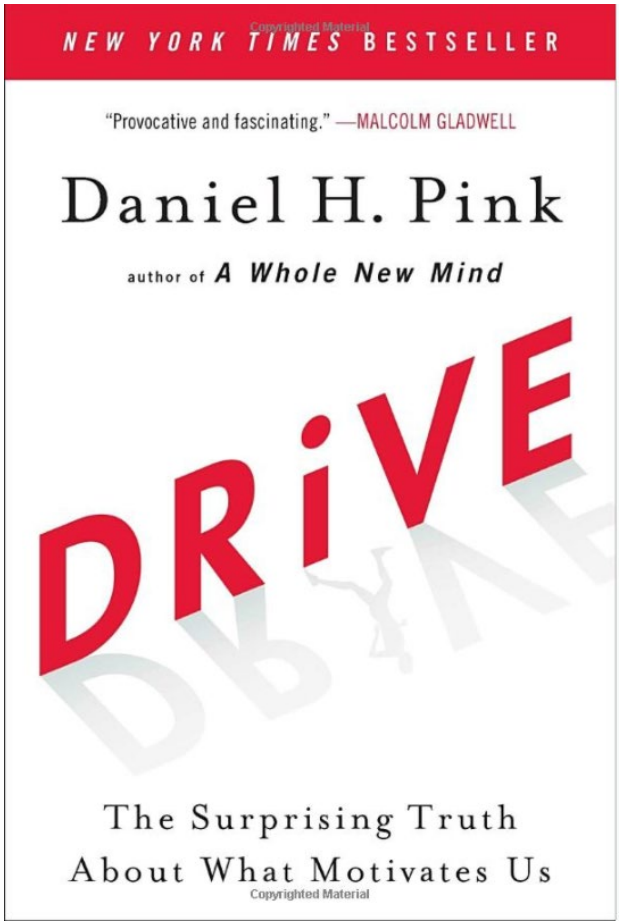
- We crave certainty and consistency
- We are suckers for the good v. evil narrative
- We strongly prefer to gather with the like minded
- We filter & cherry pick evidence to support our views
- We avoid values dilemmas, tensions, and tough choices



What We Are Learning from Social Psychology and Brain Science

The Good

We are inherently social and seek purpose and community



What Are We Learning from Brain Science and Social Psychology?

The Good

- We are inherently social and seek purpose and community
- We are inherently empathetic
- We are inherently pragmatic and creative
- We can overcome our bad tendencies and build better habits

What We Are Learning from Social Psychology and Brain Science

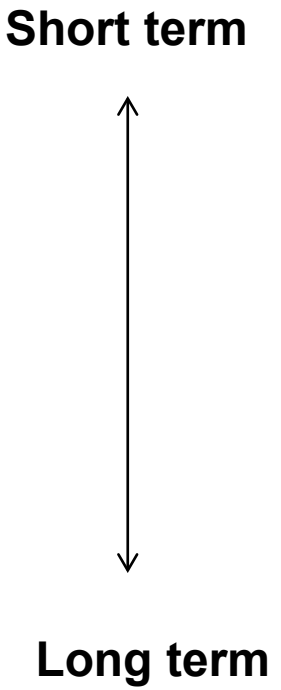
Bottom line: The most powerful thing to help people overcome their biases and tackle wicked problems well is **genuine conversation with people they respect**.

The Four Key Shifts of Deliberative Engagement

- From wicked people → to wicked problems
- From adversaries → to collaborators
- From inciting the worst of human nature → to bringing out the best of human nature
- From facts as cherry picked ammunition or “fake news” → to facts as tools for addressing problems together

Key Steps for Local Communities

- Adopting a wicked problems mindset
- Better processes - tap into different aspects of human nature
- **Build local capacity for deliberative engagement**



What is Deliberative Engagement?

Deliberative democracy

Community problem-solving

Collaborative problem-solving

Participatory decision-making

Slow democracy

Strong democracy

Multi-stakeholder dispute resolution

Public participation

Democratic governance

Collaborative governance

Organic or community politics

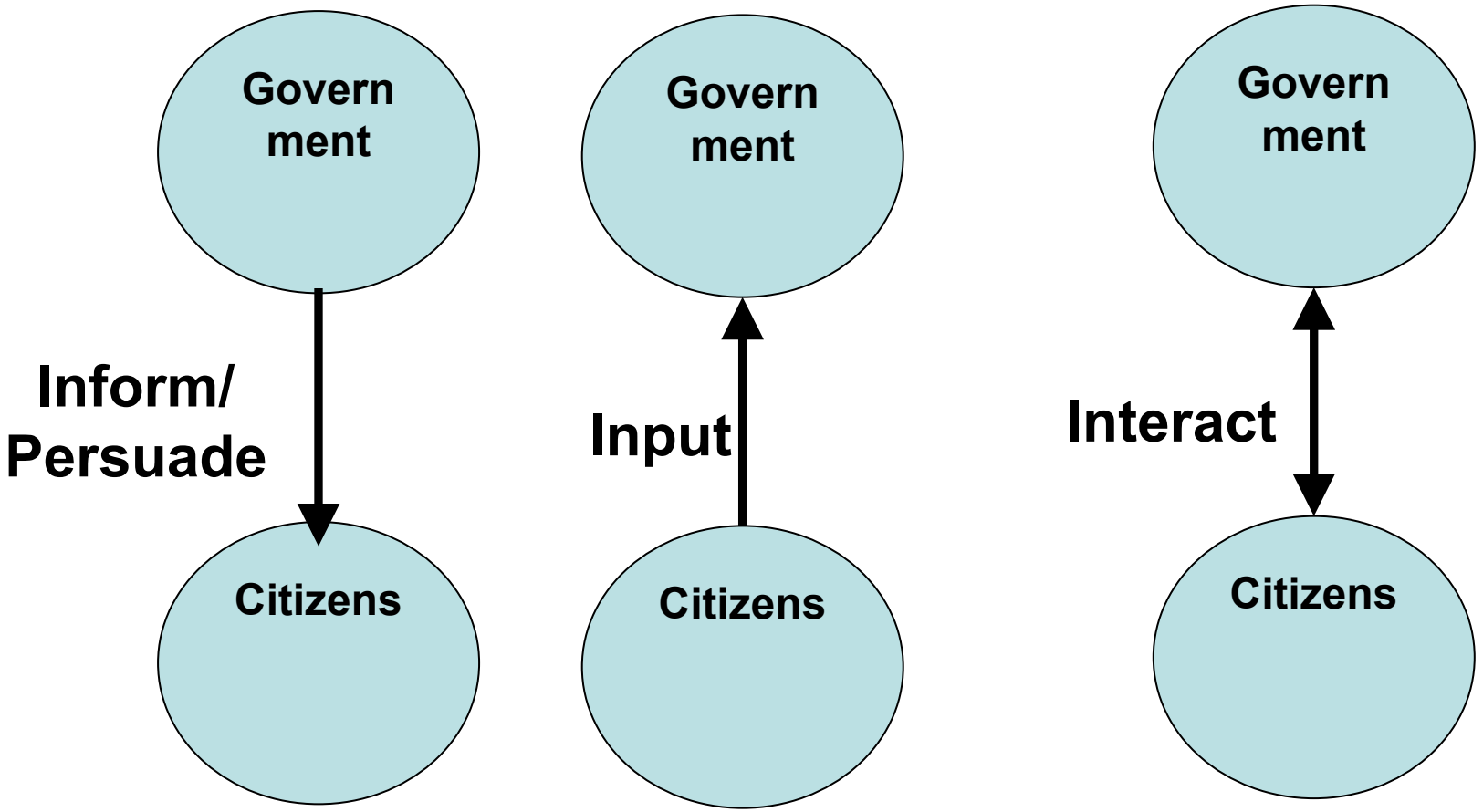
Consensus building or seeking processes

Organic politics

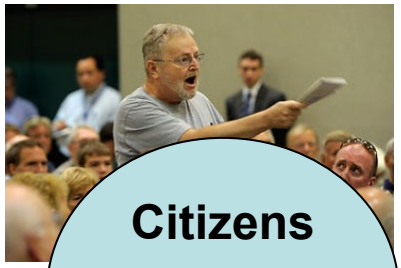
Key Components of Deliberative Engagement

- Overall deliberative framing
  - Wicked problem, multiple approaches, broad range of actors, starting discussion “upstream” (before polarization)
- Discussion guides/backgrounder
  - Base of information, something to react to, framed for deliberation, not persuasion
- Small, diverse, representative groups
- Processes designed for interaction and learning

Traditional Forms of Public Engagement



Traditional Forms of Public Participation



Citizens

Govern ment

Citizens

Input

Citizens

Citizens

Citizens

Traditional Forms of Public Participation

Freedom !

Govern ment

Equality!

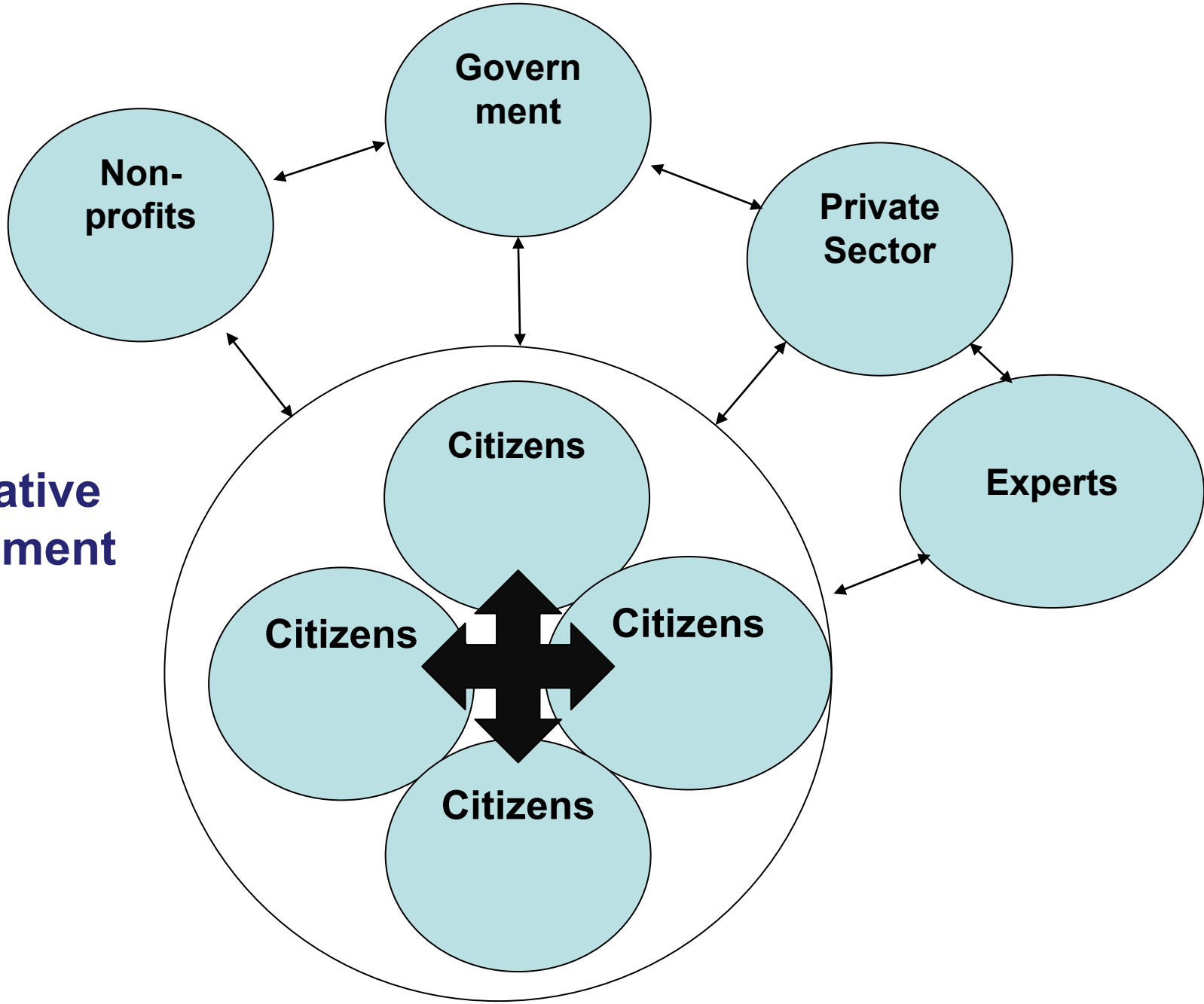
Input

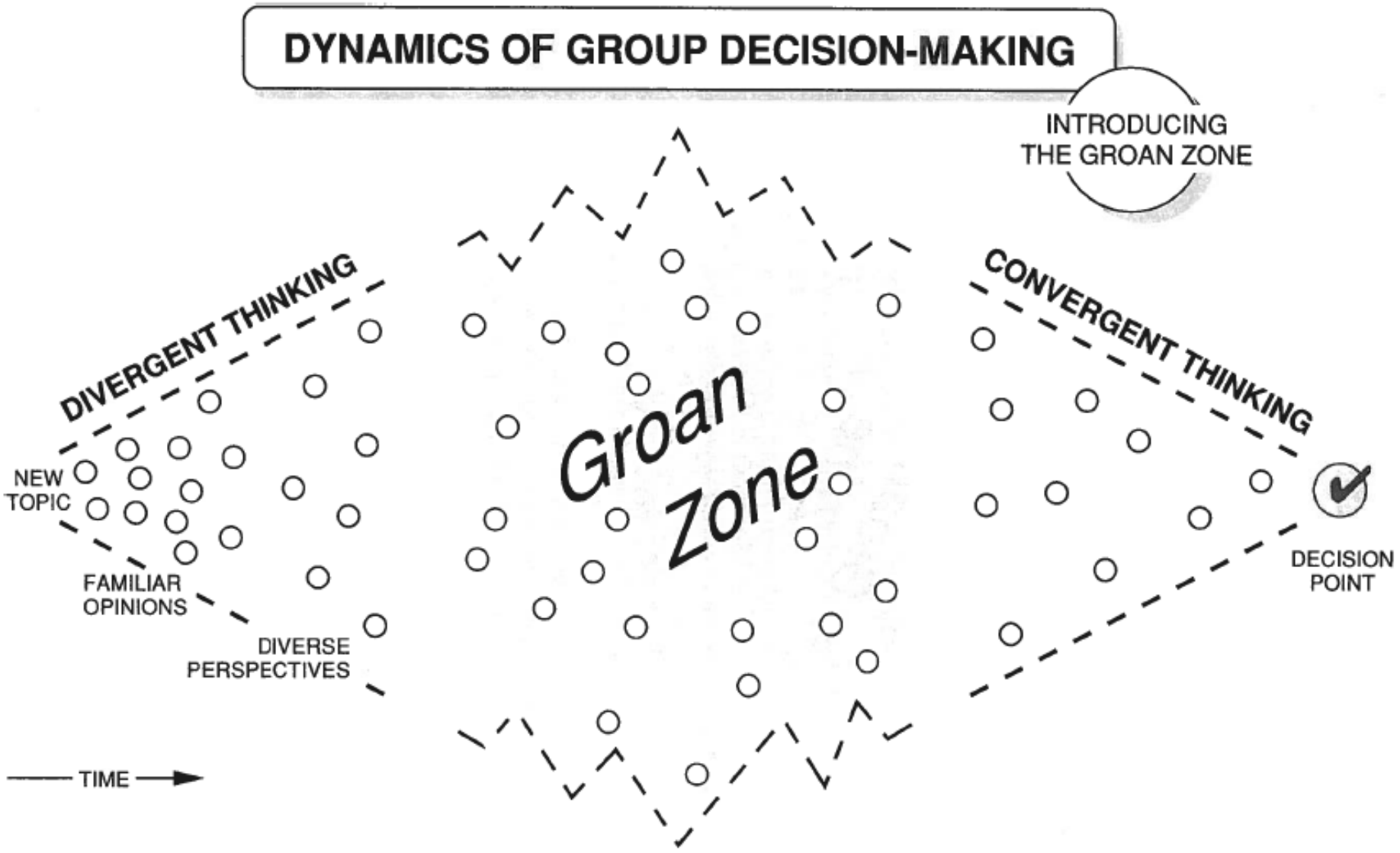
Safety!

Justice!

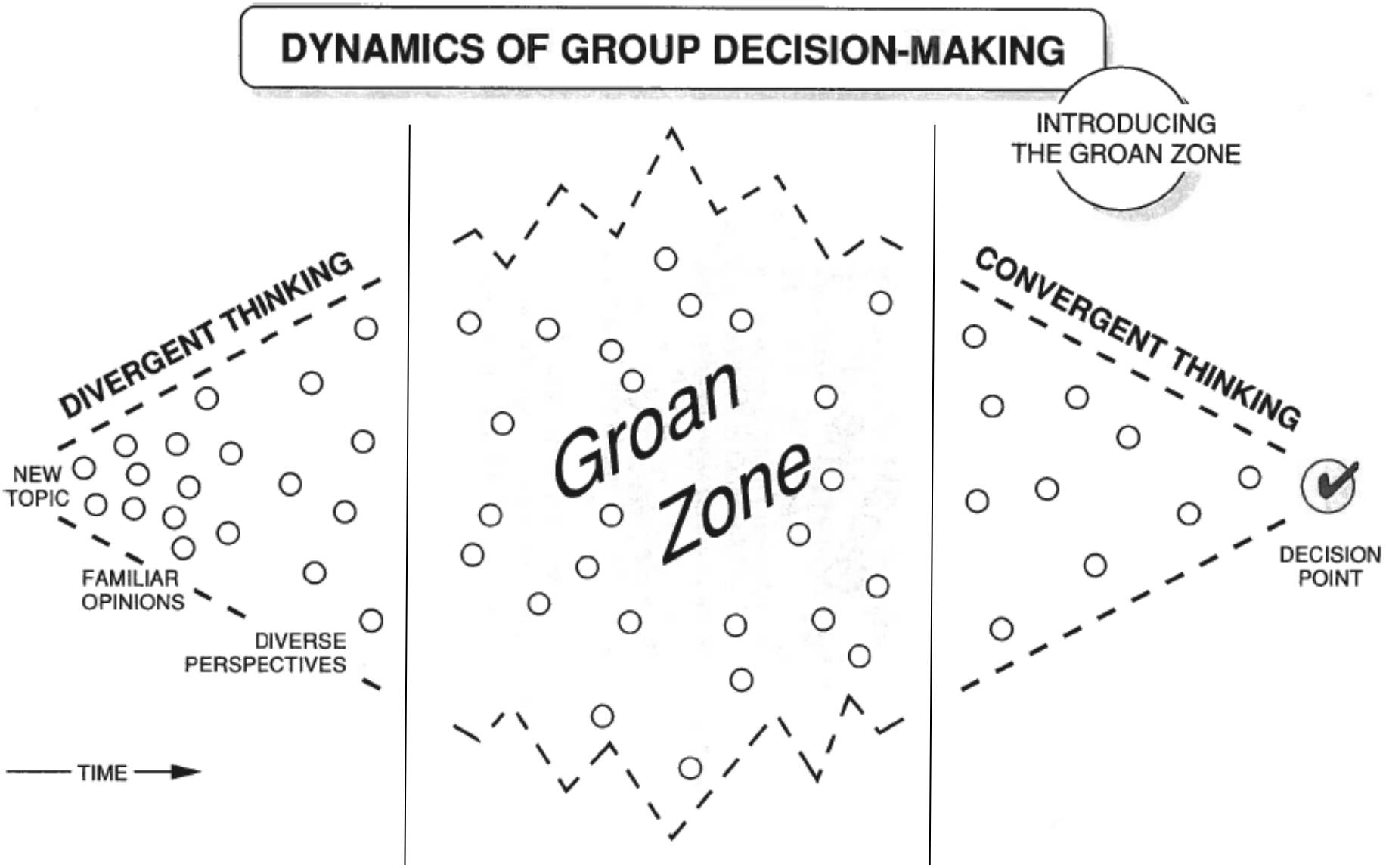
Sustain- ability!

Deliberative Engagement





Sam Kaner, *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*



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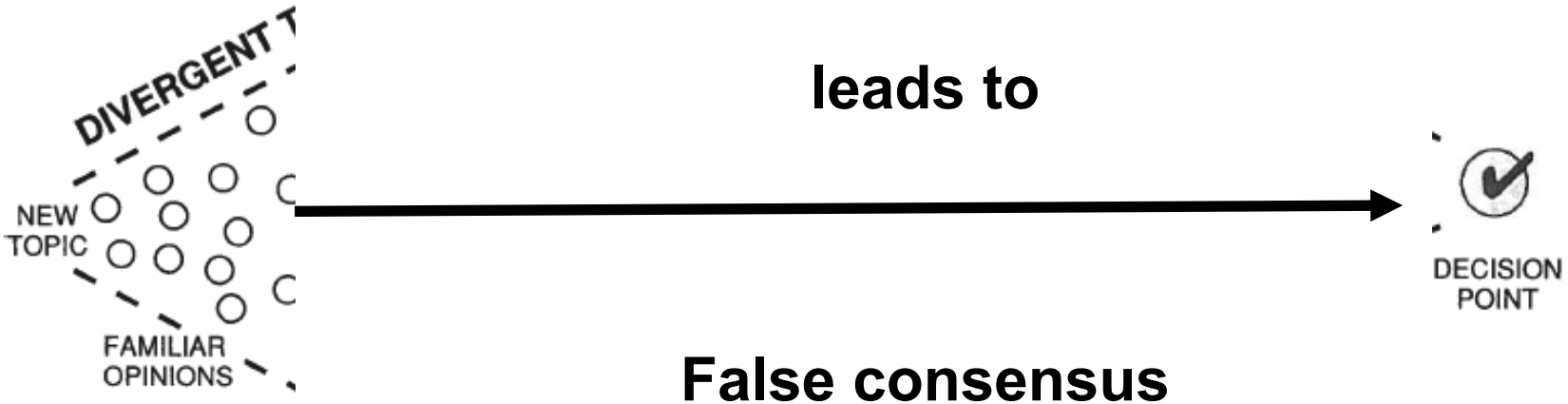
Not allowing enough divergent opinion



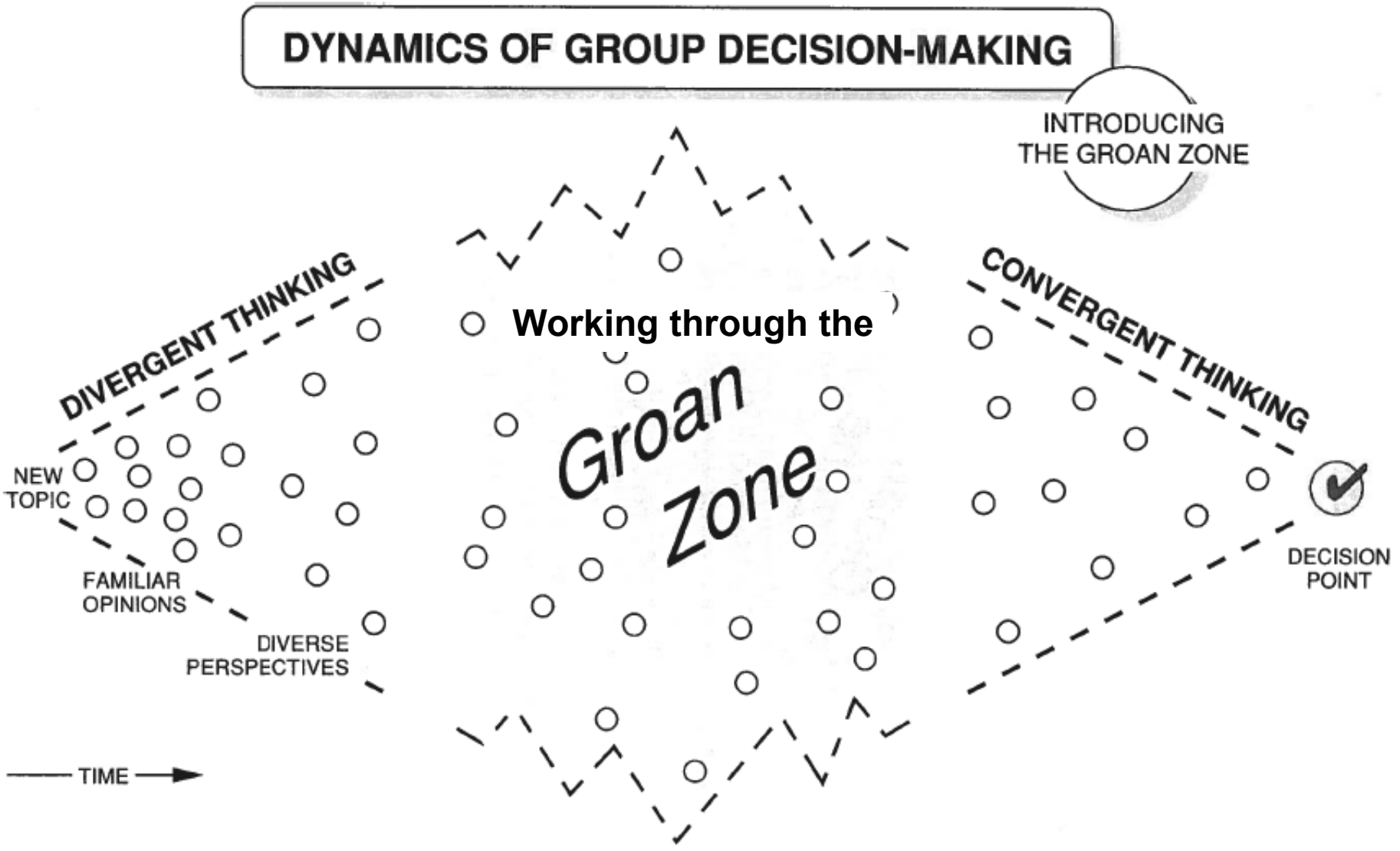
leads to

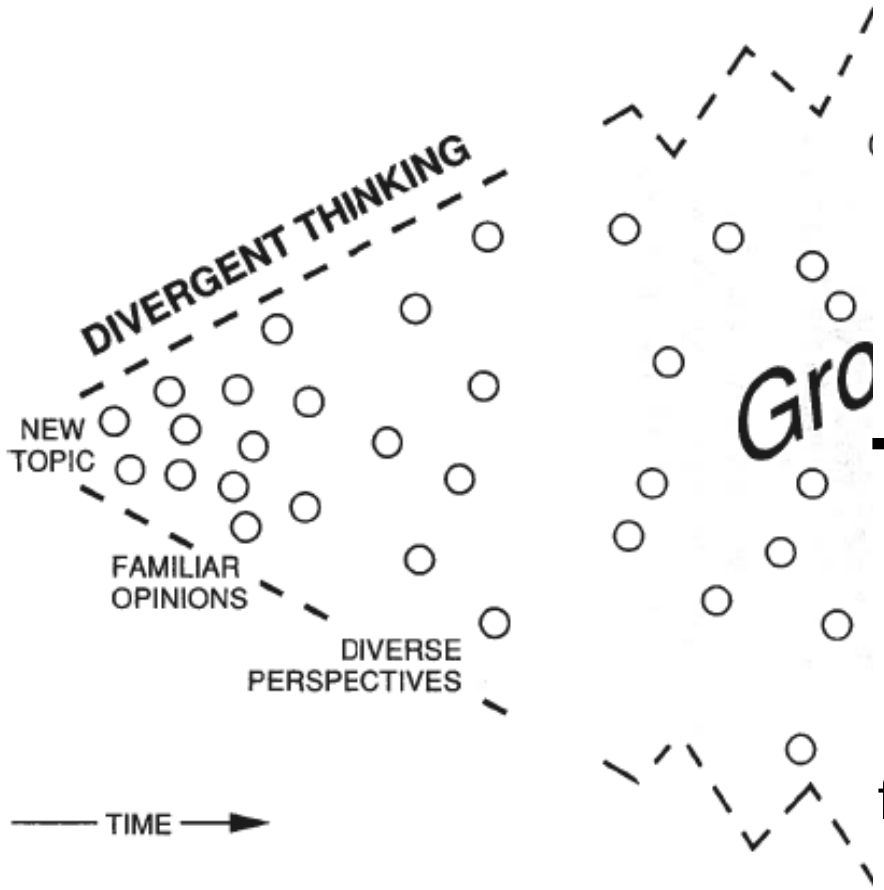
False consensus

(dissent not heard, wishful thinking supported, decisions likely either faulty or unsustainable, often attracting strong opposition)

To avoid false consensus:

Communities need better processes to insure adequate divergent thinking and that voices are heard.

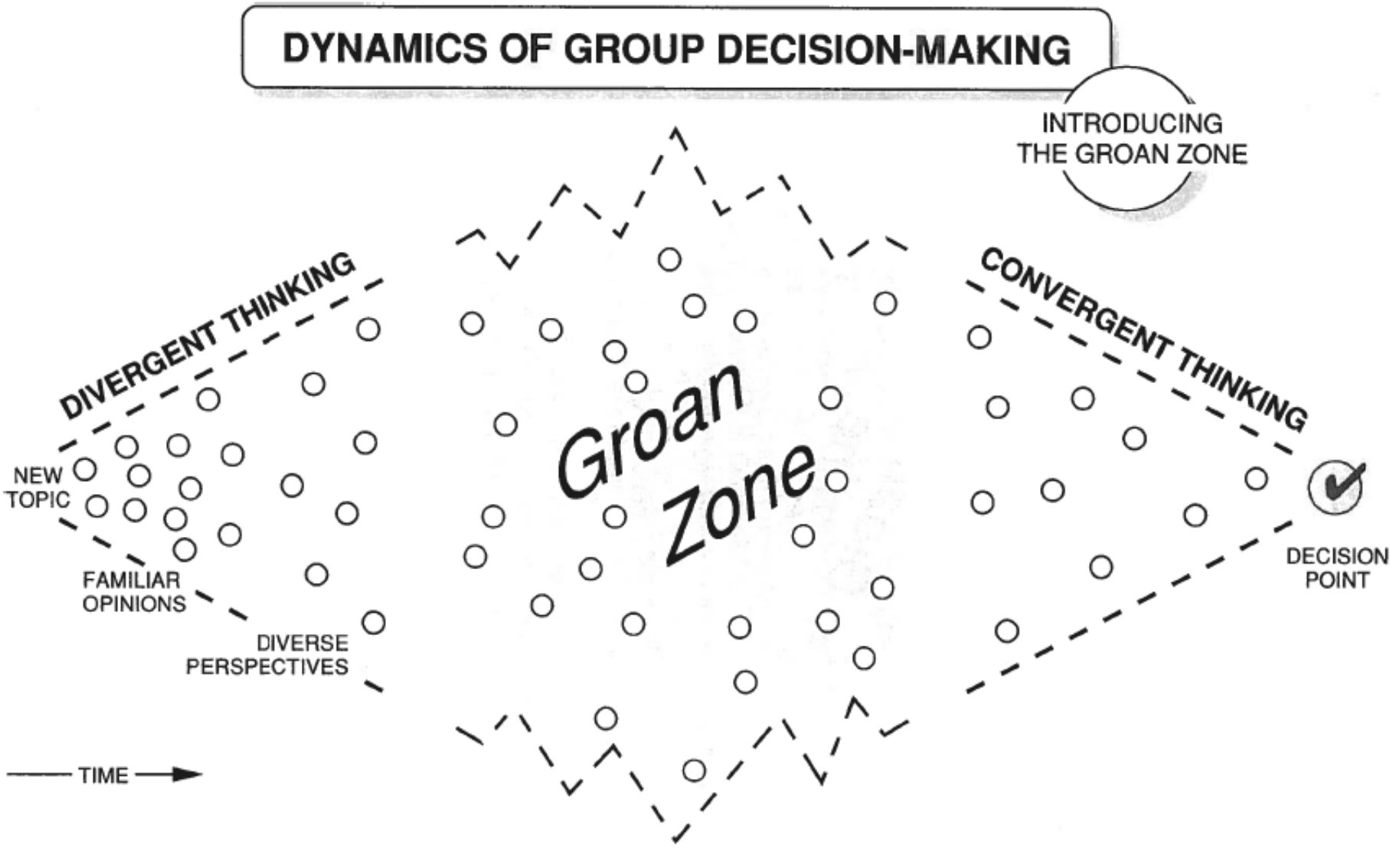

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING
INTRODUCING THE GROAN ZONE
DIVERGENT THINKING
NEW TOPIC
FAMILIAR OPINIONS
DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES
Working through the
Groan Zone
CONVERGENT THINKING
DECISION POINT
TIME



Exiting groan zone too early leads to

False polarization
(sparks misunderstanding, distrust, unsustainable one-sided solutions, wishful thinking can dominate, fact wars develop, spirals of conflict)

To avoid false polarization:
Communities need better processes to help them interact and work through tough issues. Key elements include trusted conveners, high quality issues framing, and opportunities for genuine interaction.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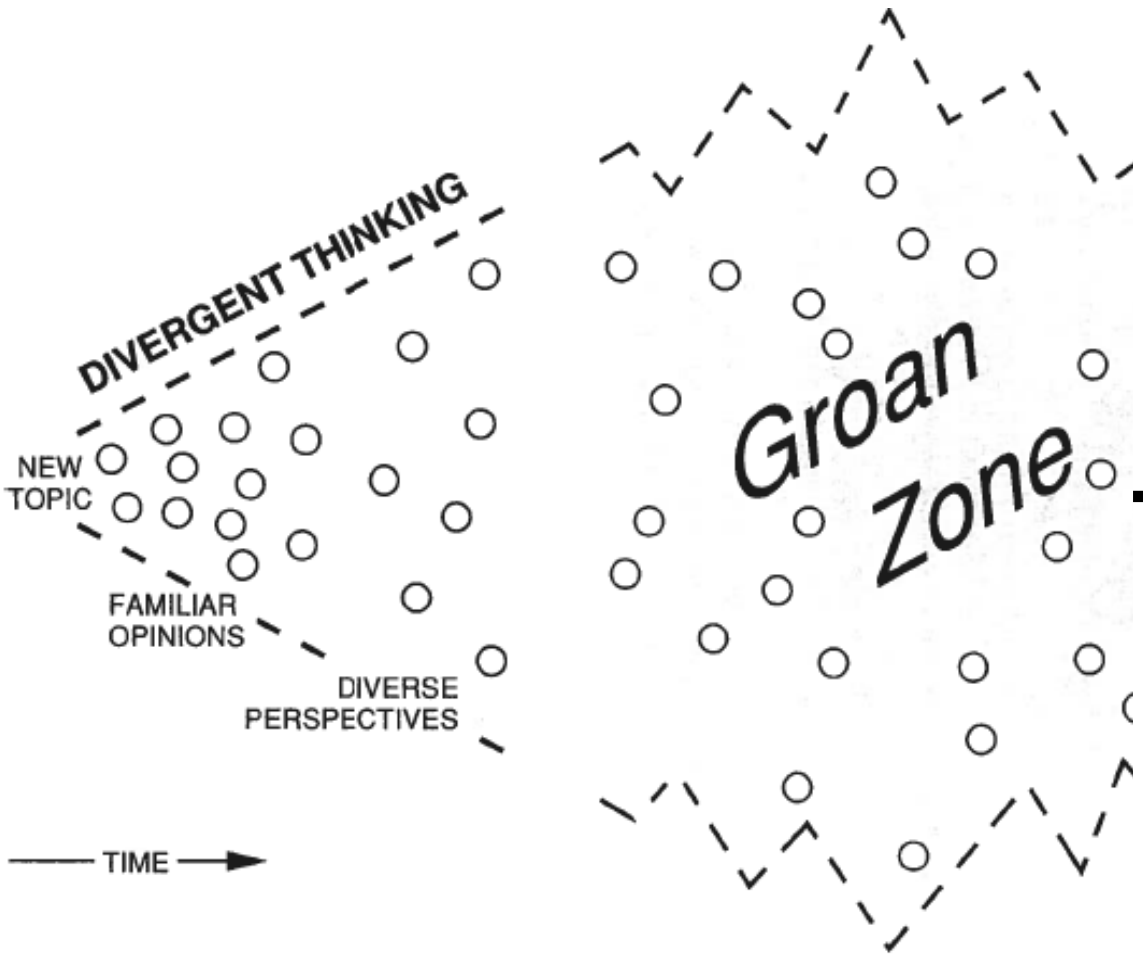
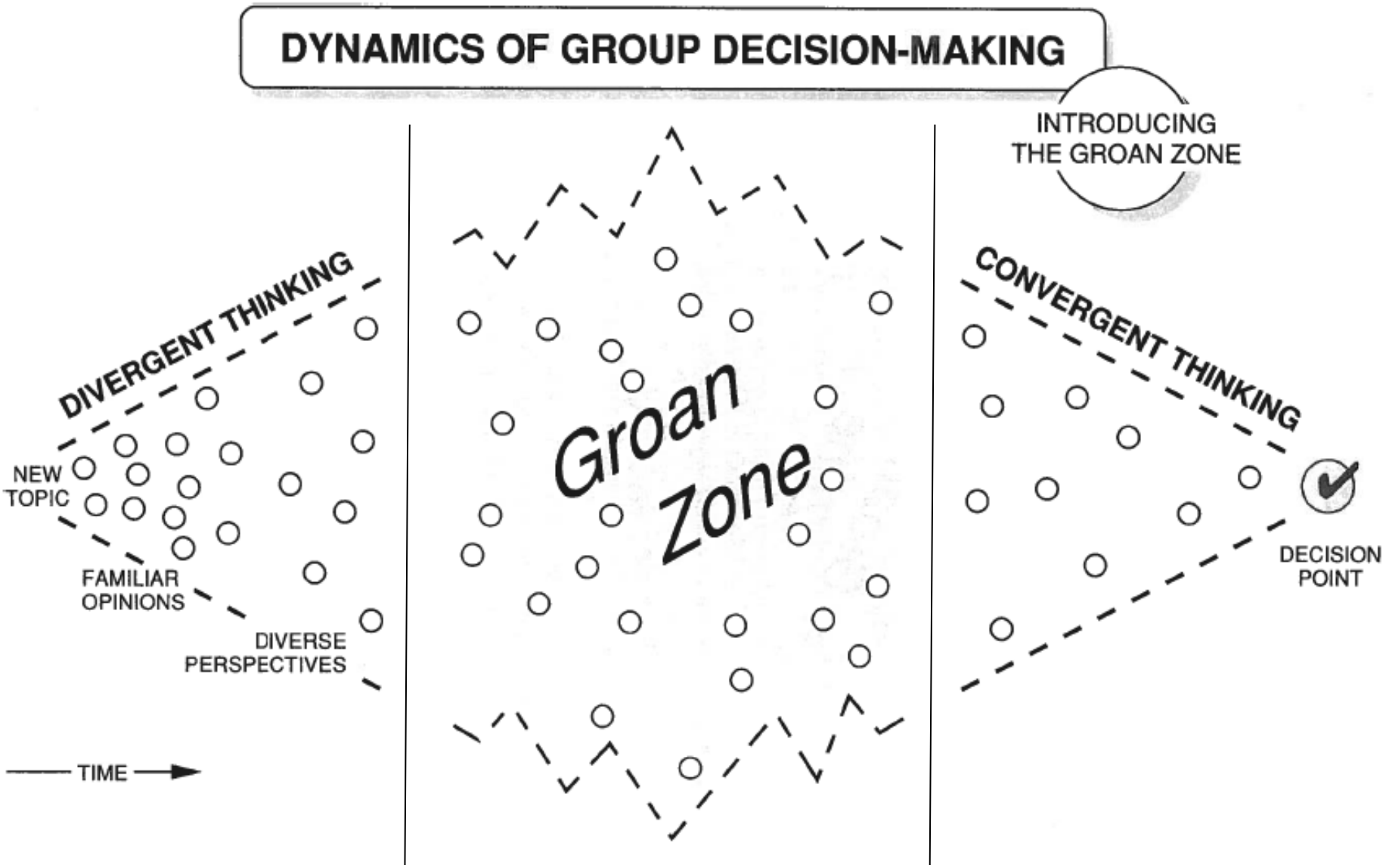


Getting stuck in groan zone leads to

Paralysis by Analysis
(no decisions, frustrations with process, chilling effect for future engagement)

To avoid paralysis by analysis:
Communities need better processes for convergent thinking and moving from talk to action



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Key Steps for Local Communities

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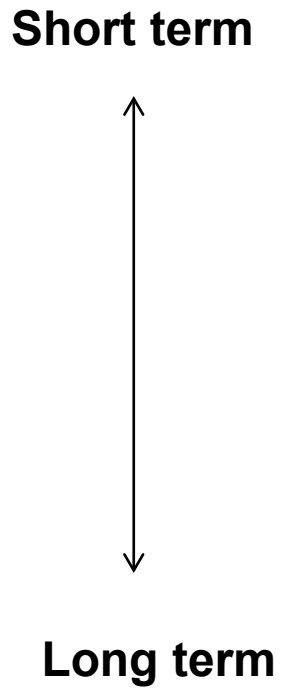
- Better processes - tap into different aspects of human nature
- Build local capacity for deliberative engagement
- **Reinvigorate or create new key bridging institutions**



Institutional Troubles

Bridging v. Polarizing Institutions

More polarizing

More bridging

- Political parties/elections
- Advocacy groups
- Internet / Social media
- Media/Press
- Experts
- School districts
- Universities
- Community organizations like Leadership Foundations, League of Women Voters, United Way, Community Foundations, , Leadership programs, Boards and Commissions

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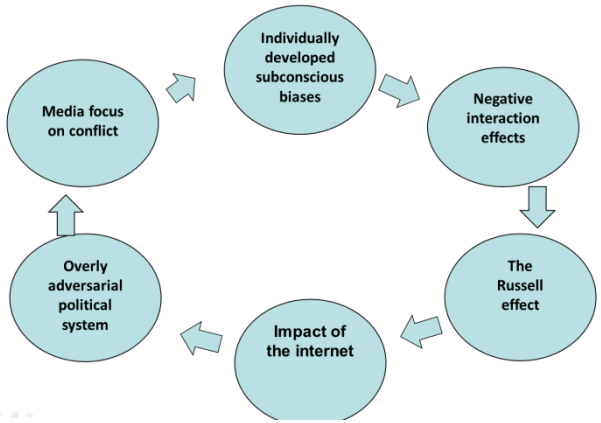

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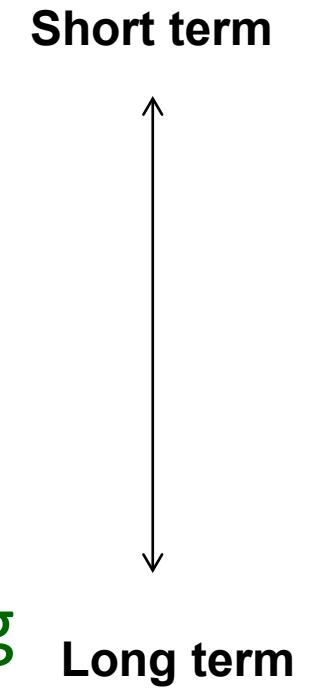
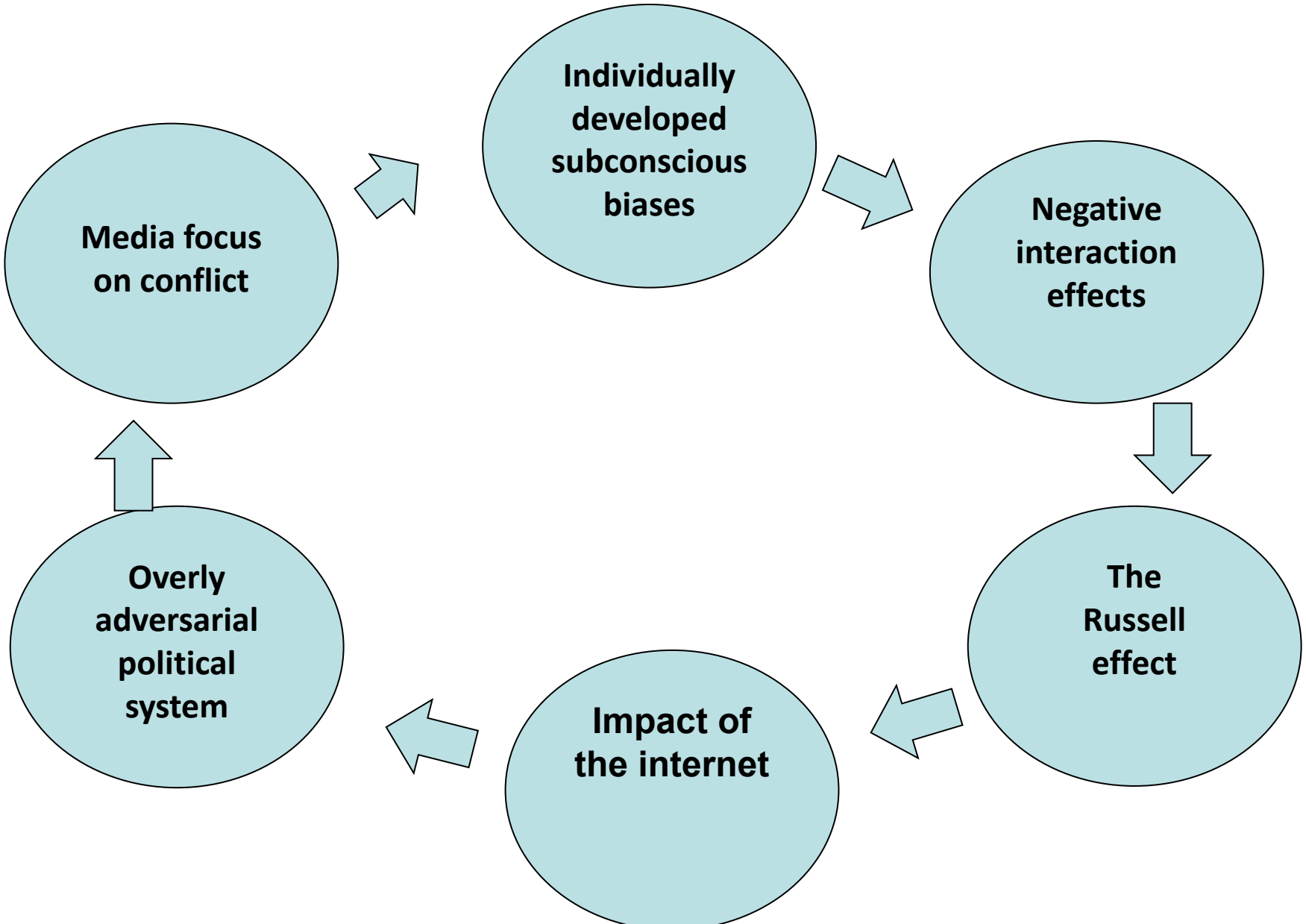
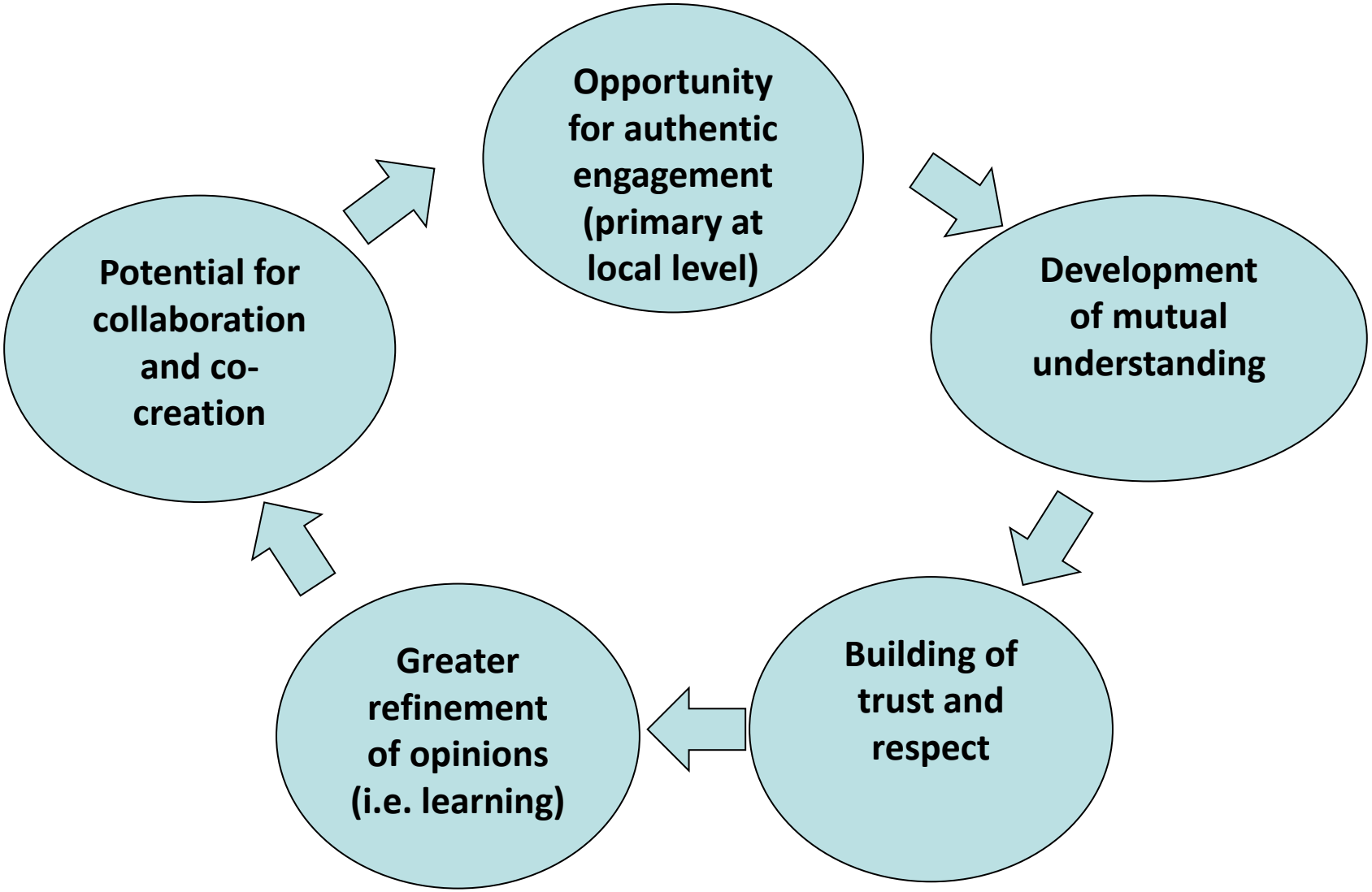
- **Cultivate citizens as wise collaborators**



The Vicious Cycle of Exaggerated Polarization



The Virtuous Cycle of Authentic Engagement