Systems Thinking: Help Your Giving Create Greater Change

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BRIDGEWAY PARTNERS

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For Today's Session, we will be focusing on:

Understanding what systems thinking is and why it is important

Introducing basic systems thinking principles and tools

Sharing examples of systems thinking in action

Applying systems thinking to your own work

Learning how to take systems thinking "home"

1

WHAT IS SYSTEMS THINKING AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Getting Started: Definitions

System

an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something
(Donella Meadows)

Systems Thinking

the ability to understand these interconnections in such a way as to achieve a desired purpose

In the News

Homeless shelters perpetuate homelessness

Food aid leads to increased starvation

"Get tough" prison sentences fail to reduce fear of violent crime

Job training programs increase unemployment

Drug busts increase drug-related crime

What do these stories have in common?

Failed Solutions have Common Characteristics

Address symptoms vs. underlying problems

Obvious and often succeed in the short run

Short-term gains undermined by long-term impacts

Negative consequences are unintentional

If the problem recurs, we do not see our responsibility

This is Our Philanthropic Challenge:

Fixing It Now
vs.
Helping Over Time

The Philanthropic Challenge:
Fixing Now vs. Helping Over Time

When you are confronted by any complex social system … with things about it that you're dissatisfied with and anxious to fix, you cannot just step in and set about fixing with much hope of helping. This is one of the sore discouragements of our time.

If you want to fix something you are first obliged to understand … the whole system.

Lewis Thomas

Two Types of Thinking

Conventional

appropriate for simple problems

Systems

appropriate for chronic, complex problems

Conventional vs. Systems Thinking at Work

Conventional Thinking	Systems Thinking
The connection between problems and their causes is obvious and easy to trace.	The relationship between problems and their causes is indirect and not obvious.
Others, either within or outside our organization, are to blame for our problems and must be the ones to change.	We unwittingly create our own problems and have significant control or influence in solving them through changing our own behavior.
A policy designed to achieve short term success will also assure long term success.	Most quick fixes have unintended consequences: they make no difference or make matters worse in the long run.
In order to optimize the whole, we must optimize the parts.	In order to optimize the whole, we must improve relationships among the parts.
Aggressively tackle many independent initiatives simultaneously.	Only a few key coordinated changes sustained over time will produce large systems change.

Why Do People Get
Caught in the Dominoes?

Solving the immediate problem is rewarding

Many stakeholders are involved

There can be a long time delay before the last domino falls

It is easy to blame a new problem on the last domino that falls

We don't see the dominoes circling back
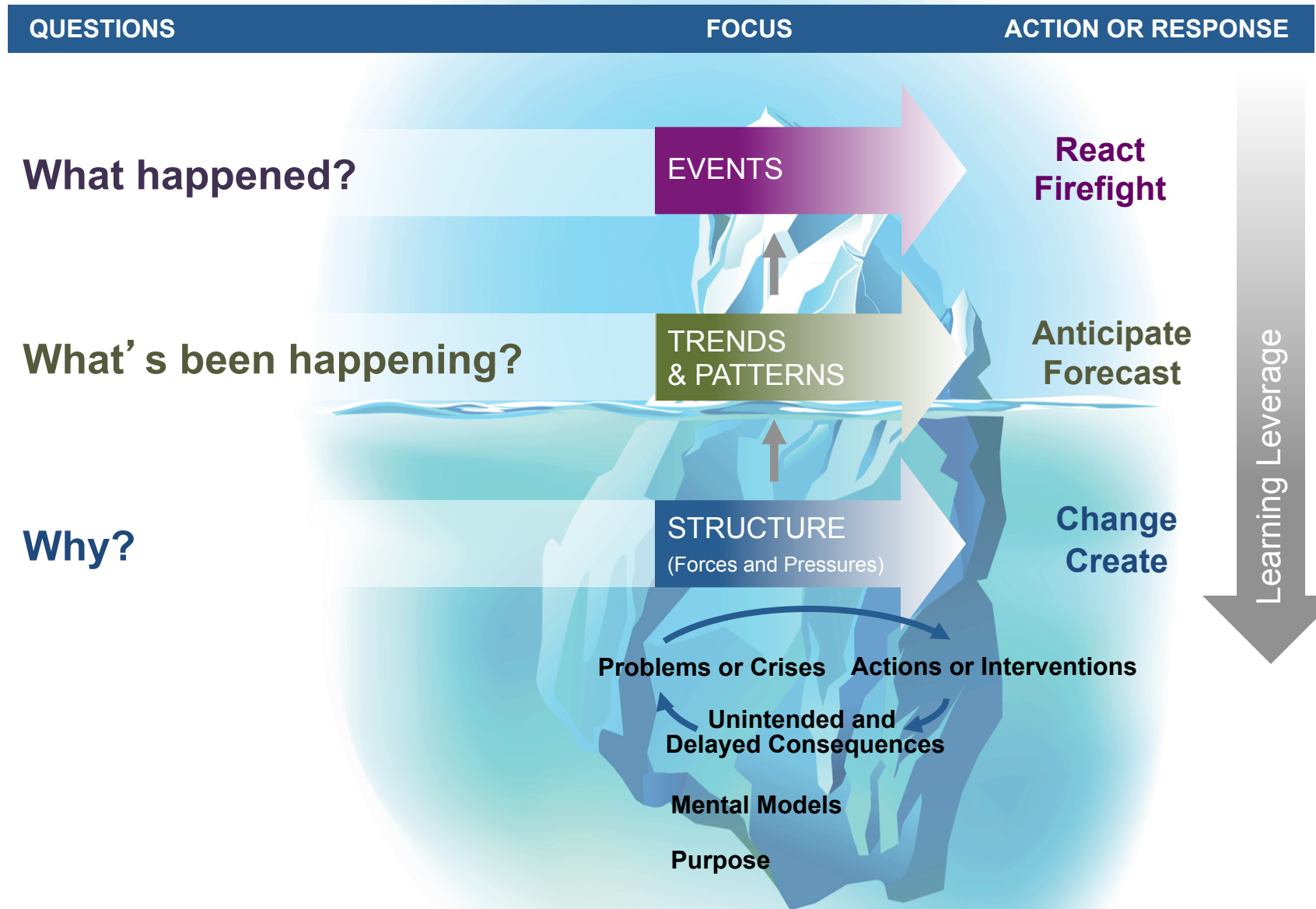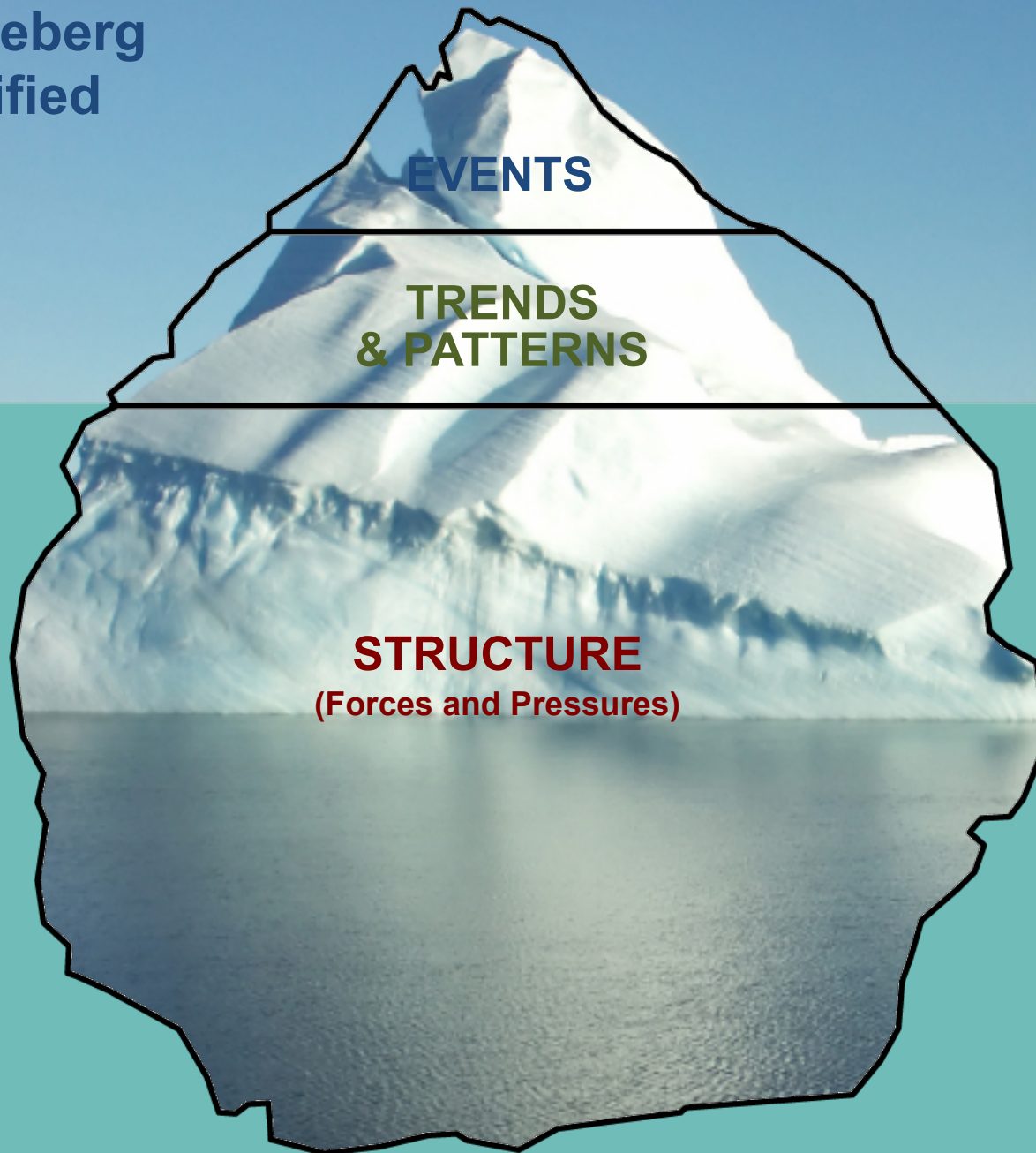
2 THE ICEBERG

The Tip of the Iceberg
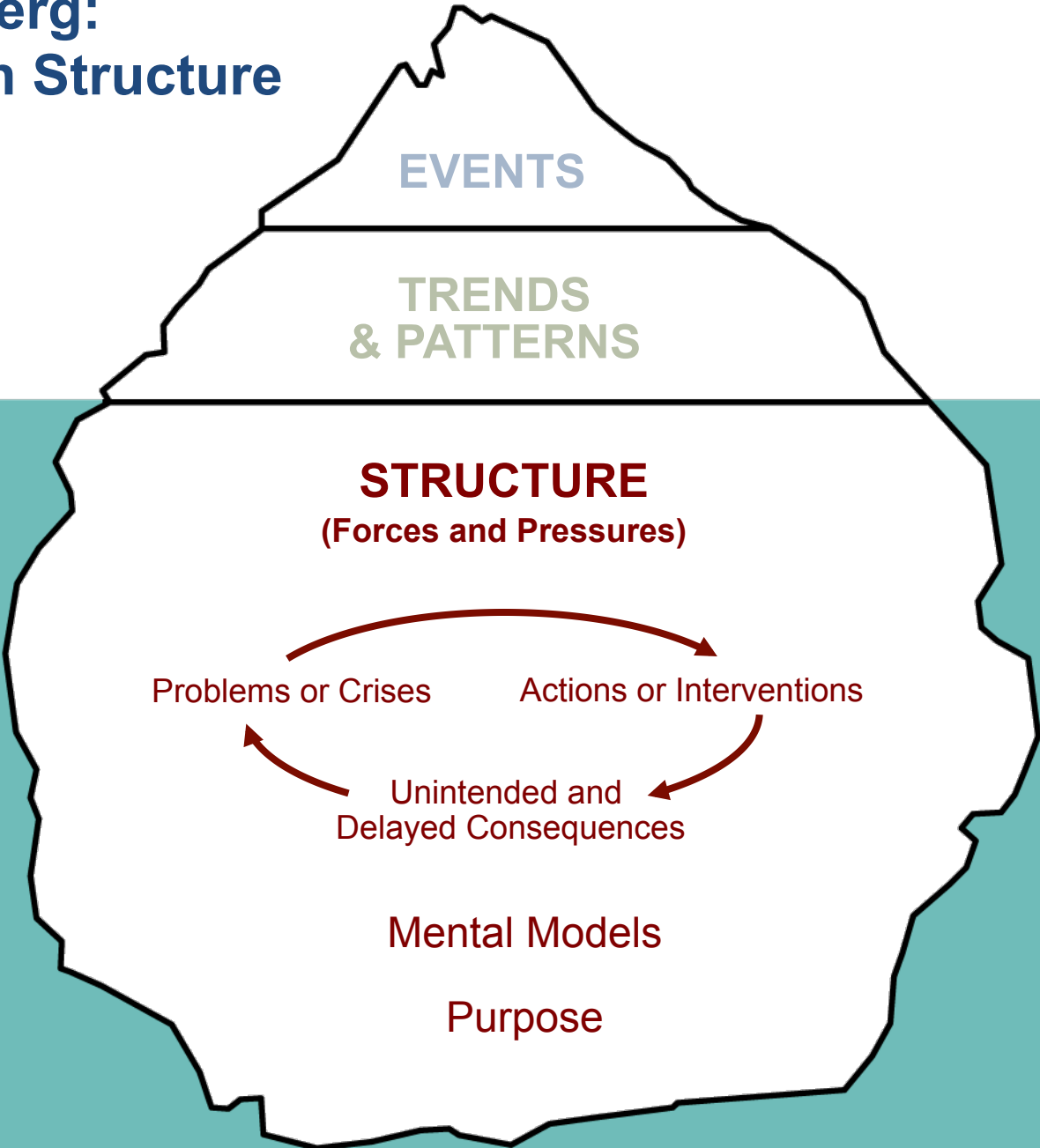
The Iceberg

The Complete Iceberg

Deepening Our Understanding of Problems: The Iceberg

QUESTIONS | FOCUS | ACTION OR RESPONSE

What happened? — EVENTS — **React Firefight**

What's been happening? — TRENDS & PATTERNS — **Anticipate Forecast**

Why? — STRUCTURE (Forces and Pressures) — **Change Create**

Problems or Crises   Actions or Interventions

Unintended and Delayed Consequences

Mental Models

Purpose

Learning Leverage

The Iceberg Simplified

EVENTS

TRENDS & PATTERNS

STRUCTURE
(Forces and Pressures)

The Iceberg:
Focus on Structure
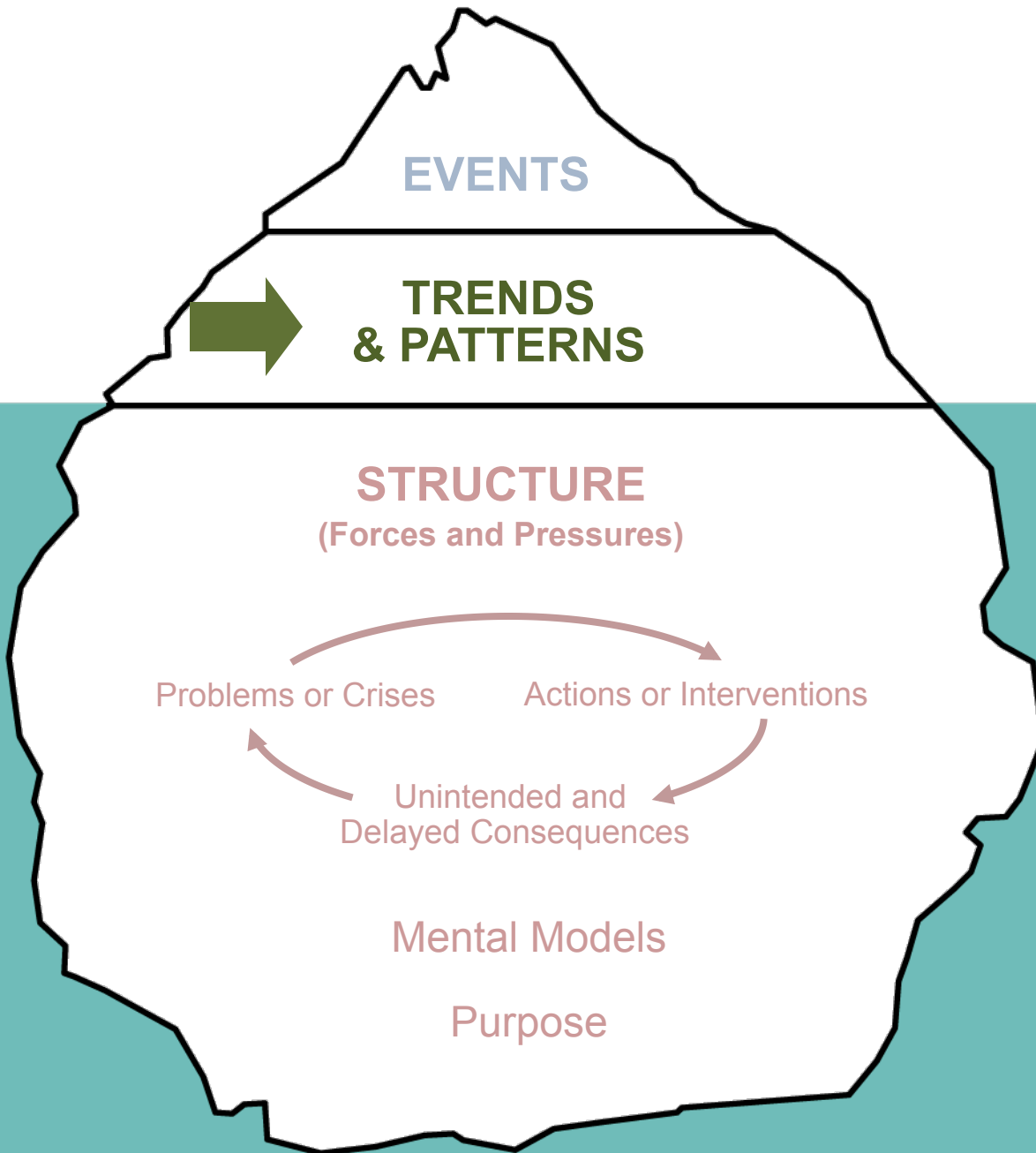
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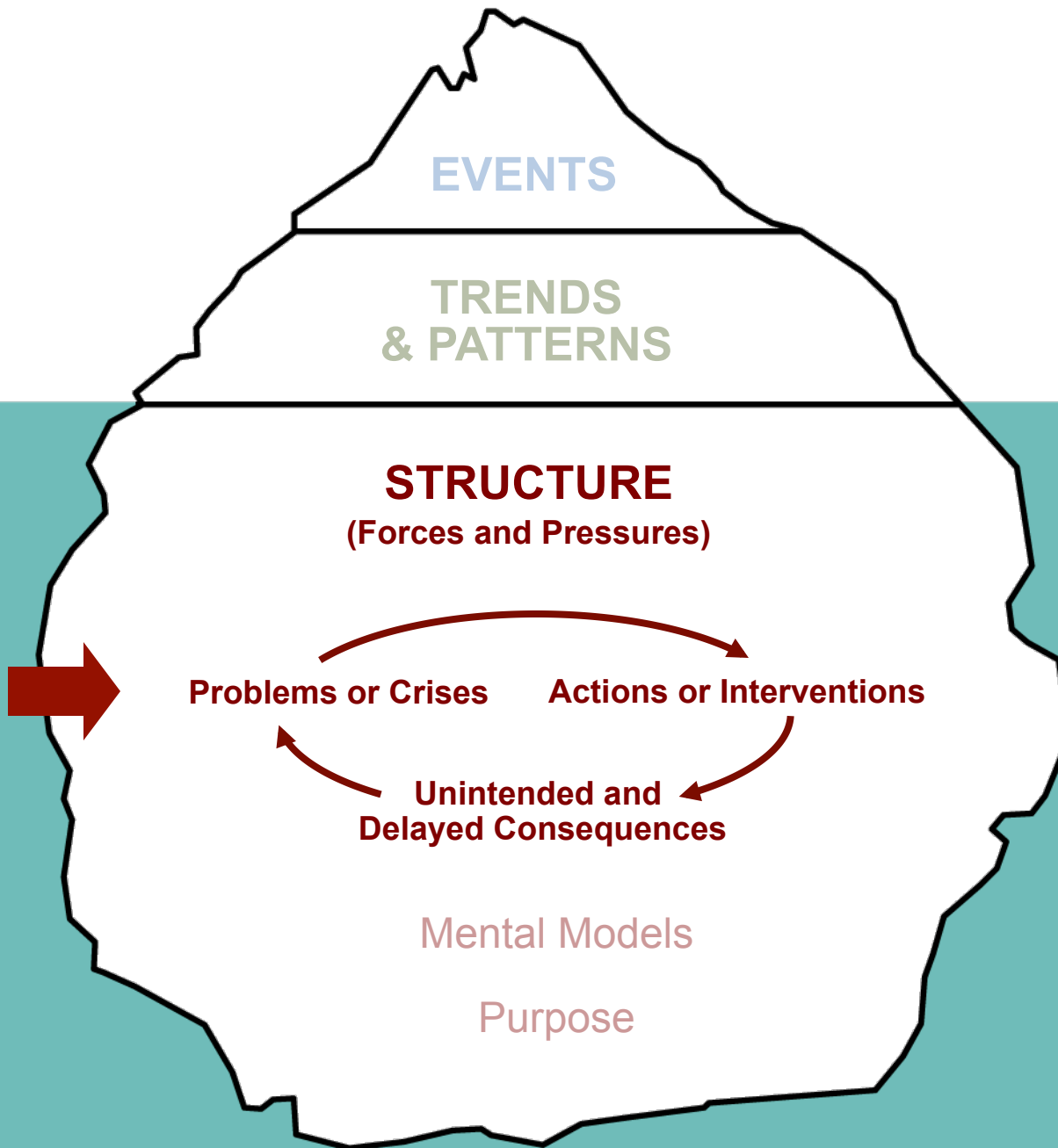
Unintended and Delayed Consequences

Mental Models

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Ending Homelessness: Events

Focusing Question

Why, despite our best efforts, have we been unable to end homelessness in Calhoun County?

Calhoun County, MI: estimated 250-500 people homelessness among population of 100,000

Homeless Coalition meetings again fail to deal with the problem: disagreements, competition, and lack of knowledge cited

Opportunity to receive funding to develop ten-year plan to end homelessness

Systems thinking integrated with community building process – involving political and business leaders, service providers, and homeless people – to produce the plan

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Ending Homelessness: Trends

Ending Homelessness:
Unintended Consequences of Temporary Shelters

QUICK FIX:
Temporary Shelters
& Supports

Donor Desire
For Short-Term
Results

PROBLEM:
Homeless People

Permanent Housing
with Critical Services

Funding to Individual
Organizations

TIME
DELAY

Willingness, Time & Funding
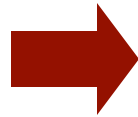to Innovate and Collaborate

EVENTS

TRENDS
& PATTERNS

STRUCTURE
(Forces and Pressures)

Problems or Crises → Actions or Interventions

Unintended and
Delayed Consequences

Mental Models

Purpose

Mental Models in Your Own Iceberg—
A Chance to Reflect

1

Find a partner and discuss the following question:

Can you see how mental models play out in philanthropy?

Mental Models in Your Own Iceberg—
A Chance to Reflect

2

Take a moment to personally reflect and jot down an issue where you are not making as much progress as you think you should be.

As your reflect on this issue, make note of any mental models that you (and your colleagues) have that might be impeding your effectiveness.
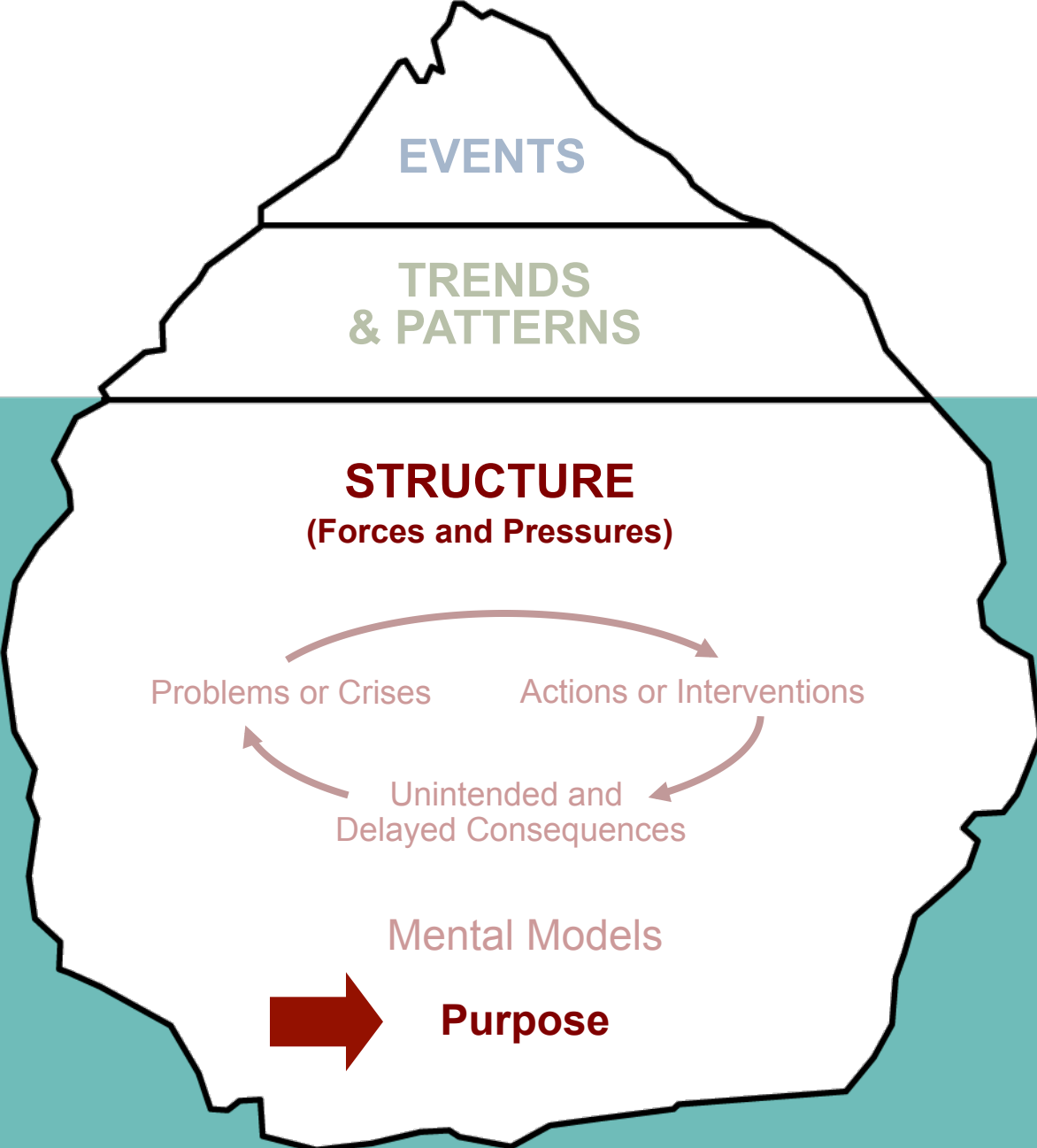
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Mental Models in Your Own Iceberg—
A Chance to Reflect

3

Reconnect with your partner

Share your issue and mental models
with one another

Ending Homelessness: Choosing the Purpose

Current Benefits

Feel good about helping people *cope* with homelessness

Reduce *visibility* of problem

Reduce *severity* of problem

Receive *funding* for current work

Espoused Purpose

End homelessness

Ending Homelessness: Results

Plan funded: Leverage points identified by a shared understanding of why homelessness persisted became the basis for state approved plan

Collaborative breakthrough: Homeless Coalition voted unanimously to reallocate HUD funding from one service provider's transitional housing program to permanent supportive housing program run by another provider

Quantitative results: In the plan's first three years of operation (2007-2009), the county reported the following results

> Homelessness decreased by 13% (from 1658 to 1437) and eviction rates declined by 3% ... *DESPITE* a 70% increase in unemployment and 15% increase in bankruptcy filings

3
WHEN AND HOW TO USE SYSTEMS THINKING

When to Use a Systems Approach

☑ The problem is chronic and has defied people's best intentions to solve it

☑ Diverse stakeholders find it difficult to align their efforts despite shared intentions

☑ They try to optimize their part of the system without understanding their impact on the whole

☑ Stakeholders' short-term efforts might actually undermine their intentions to solve the problem

☑ People are working on a large number of disparate initiatives at the same time

☑ Promoting particular solutions (e.g. best practices) comes at the expense of engaging in continuous learning

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How to Use Systems Thinking

Use it early to diagnose why a problem persists

Use systems thinking to invite others in

Look for unintended consequences, mental models
and underlying purpose

Be patient and persistent in working towards the long-term

Create small successes within the long-term context

Ask systemic questions

Ask Systemic Questions

Why have we been unable to solve this problem despite our best efforts?

How might we be partly responsible, albeit unwittingly, for the problem?

What might be unintended consequences of our proposed solutions?

What might we have to give up for the whole to succeed?

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Resources

Articles, Papers, and Blogs

- David Peter Stroh, "Leveraging Grant-making: Parts 1 and 2," The Foundation Review, 2009 Vol. 1:3 and 2010 Vol. 1:4; cof13.foundationreview.org

- Articles applying a systems approach to social issues, e.g. homelessness, urban crime, economic crisis, identity-based conflicts: http://www.bridgewaypartners.com/OurPublications/Articles/SocialChange.aspx.

- Blogs on such topics as "Thinking AND Acting Systemically" and "The Ironic Addictions of Policy Makers": http://www.bridgewaypartners.com/Blog.aspx.

Books

- *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge
- *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, Peter Senge et al
- *Thinking in Systems,* Donnella Meadows

Websites

- Bridgeway Partners (www.bridgewaypartners.com)
- Pegasus Communications (www.solonline.org)
- Applied Systems Thinking (www.appliedsystemsthinking.com)

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