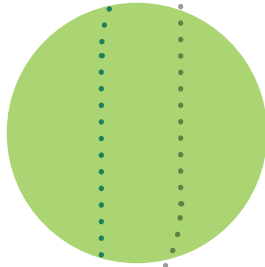




Interaction Institute
for Social Change



Using Systems Thinking to Address Structural Racism

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Facing Race 2014

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Materials in this handout are excerpts from the workshop Facilitative Leadership.

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FL4SC-PM-004

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ABOUT IISC

People all over the world are trying to work together in more collaborative ways in order to change things for the better – within their organizations, within their communities, and beyond. IISC builds the capacity of people to collaborate for greater social impact by modeling, practicing, and teaching the skills and tools of collaboration. We view all of our work through these three lenses:

- Building power, pursuing equity, ensuring inclusion
- Leveraging networks for social change
- Harnessing love as a force for social transformation

IISC's work demonstrates the power of bringing together key stakeholders at all levels of a system or issue, including those most impacted, to create a shared vision and strategies for concerted action to achieve that vision. We are particularly committed to building the leadership and collaborative capacity of grassroots leaders to engage, speak out, and participate fully in determining the policies and decisions that affect their lives and their communities.

IISC was founded in 1993 by Interaction Associates (IA) as an expression of its commitment to social change and as a way of bringing collaborative methodologies into the social sector. IISC adapted IA's methodologies to create new and innovative approaches to working with and meeting the needs of social change leaders. The relationship between the two organizations remains strong and vital to this day.

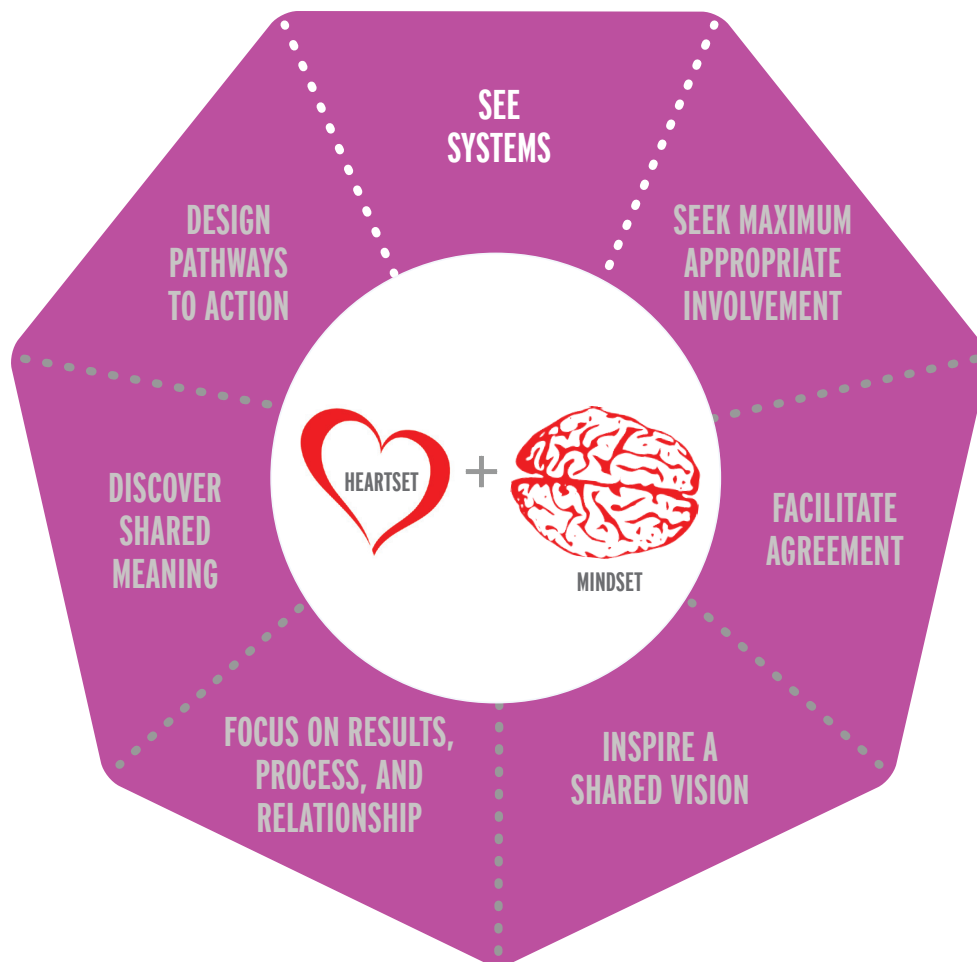
“Systems thinking leads to another conclusion, however, waiting, shining, obvious as soon as we stop being blinded by the illusion of control. It says that there is plenty to do, of a different sort of ‘doing.’ The future can’t be predicted, but it can be envisioned and brought lovingly into being. Systems can’t be controlled, but they can be designed and redesigned. We can’t surge forward with certainty into a world of no surprises, but we can expect surprises and learn from them and even profit from them. We can’t impose our will upon a system. We can listen to what the system tells us, and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone.

We can’t control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them!”

DONELLA MEADOWS
AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENTIST AND TEACHER
THINKING IN SYSTEMS

1. SEE SYSTEMS

Facilitative Leaders are vexed by the question, “*Why, despite our best efforts, does this situation persist?*” Facilitative Leaders recognize the complexity of the situations they face and acknowledge that their own perspectives are incomplete. To achieve sustainable and deep change, Facilitative Leaders know that multiple perspectives are necessary to fully comprehend the forces at play and to co-discover the most impactful strategies to address them. They realize that systems are like organisms—change is constant and everything is interconnected.



What is a System?

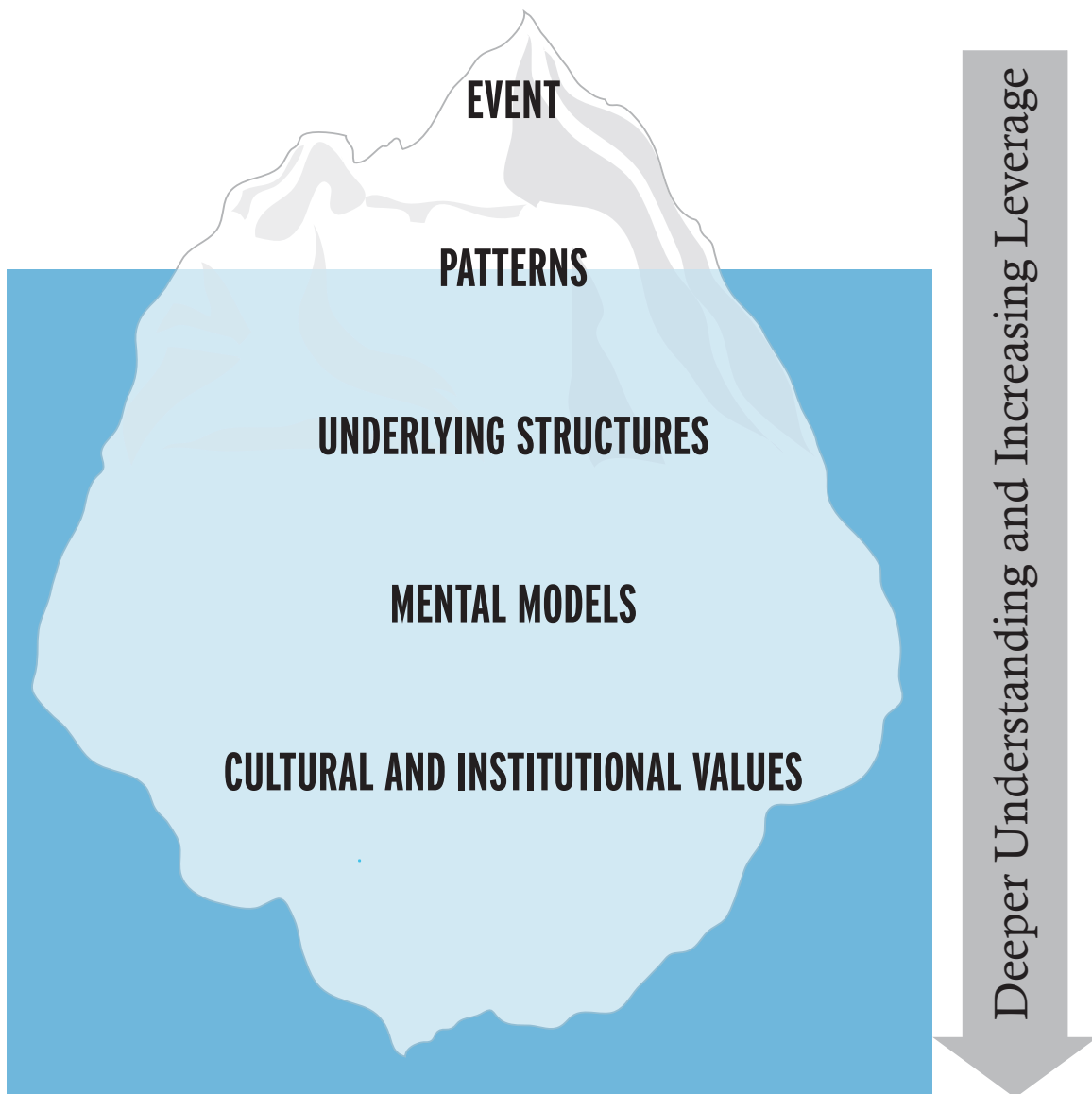
A **SYSTEM** is made up of interrelated parts, components, and elements that interact to produce intended and unintended outcomes.

FEATURES OF A LIVING SYSTEM INCLUDE:

- A system is not the sum of its parts; it is the product of their interaction
- A system is dynamic and alive; it is less a thing than a pattern
- Each element of a system has an effect on the functioning of the whole; each element is affected by at least one other element in the system
- Outcomes in a system have multiple and mutual causality
- Systems produce outcomes over time and across social contexts; causation is cumulative
- An interplay of multiple systems affects the landscape of opportunity (education, healthcare, workforce development, etc.)
- Mental models (paradigms, mindsets, beliefs, assumptions, cultural narratives, norms, expectations, or simply perceptions) significantly impact how people behave and perform in systems
- Systems self-organize and self-correct to resist change
- Feedback loops are essential building blocks of systems
- The system is not “out there.” We are a part of it and it is the way we work together. If we don’t see ourselves as part of the system we are trying to affect, we cannot shift it.

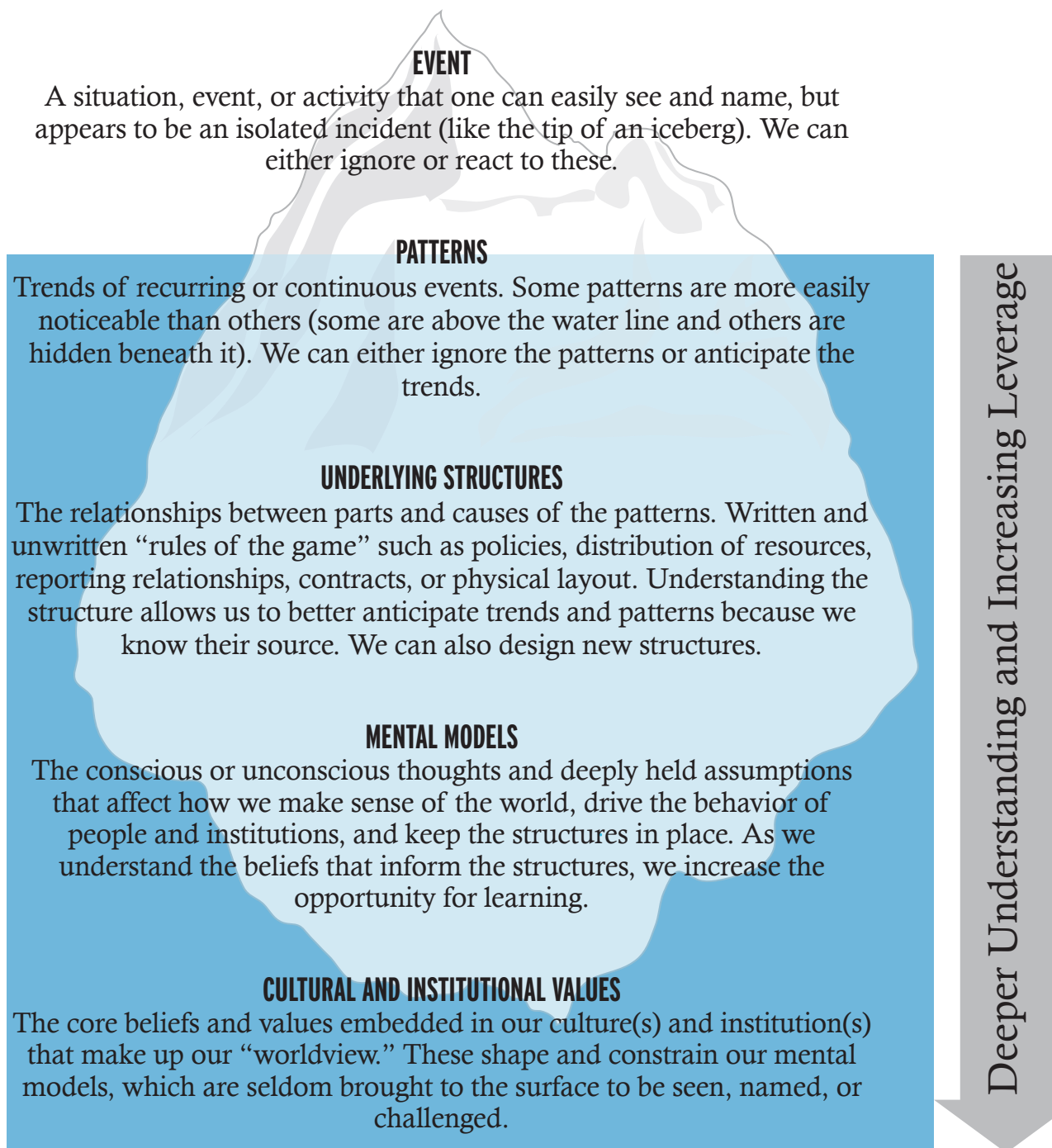
A Systems Approach Iceberg

A systems approach iceberg helps leaders identify the more imperceptible layers of phenomena producing the outcomes they want to change. Facilitative Leaders seek to understand how these layers of a system work so that they can more effectively introduce shifts that generate better outcomes.

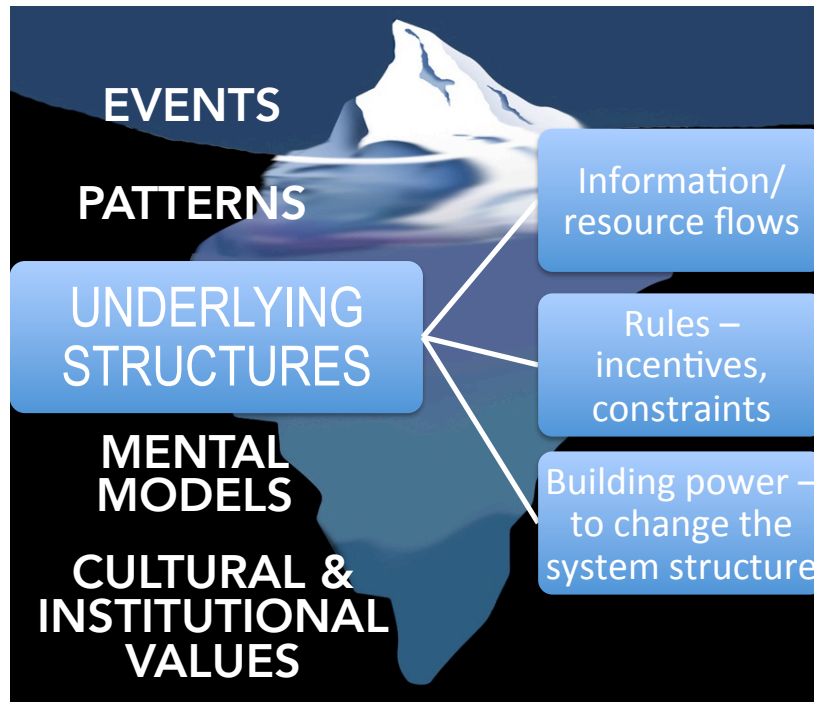


A Systems Approach Iceberg (continued)

Facilitative Leaders convene actors in a system to collectively discern what is going on at each level of a system, how these are interconnected, and how they influence one another. A system can be impacted at multiple levels. Facilitative Leaders are strategic about which level(s) to focus their interventions on, understanding that the deeper the level of intervention, the more seismic the shift.



Places to Intervene in a System: Underlying Structures



Taking it Home

What are your personal next steps to bring systems thinking to your work for racial justice? They could be concrete actions like sharing what you learned with your colleagues, or beginning to analyze data, etc. They could also be a commitment to new practices, like looking for root causes before identifying strategies or solutions.