Making Difficult Conversations Productive
Individual and Organizational Learning Approaches

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April 23, 2008

What is your experience with organizational change?

"You can choose not to change, but you can't do it here."

- Jack Welch

- what limits or obstructs change?

- what makes change go well?

Moving from change to learning

- avoiding unintended consequences

Dewey's Experiential Learning Model
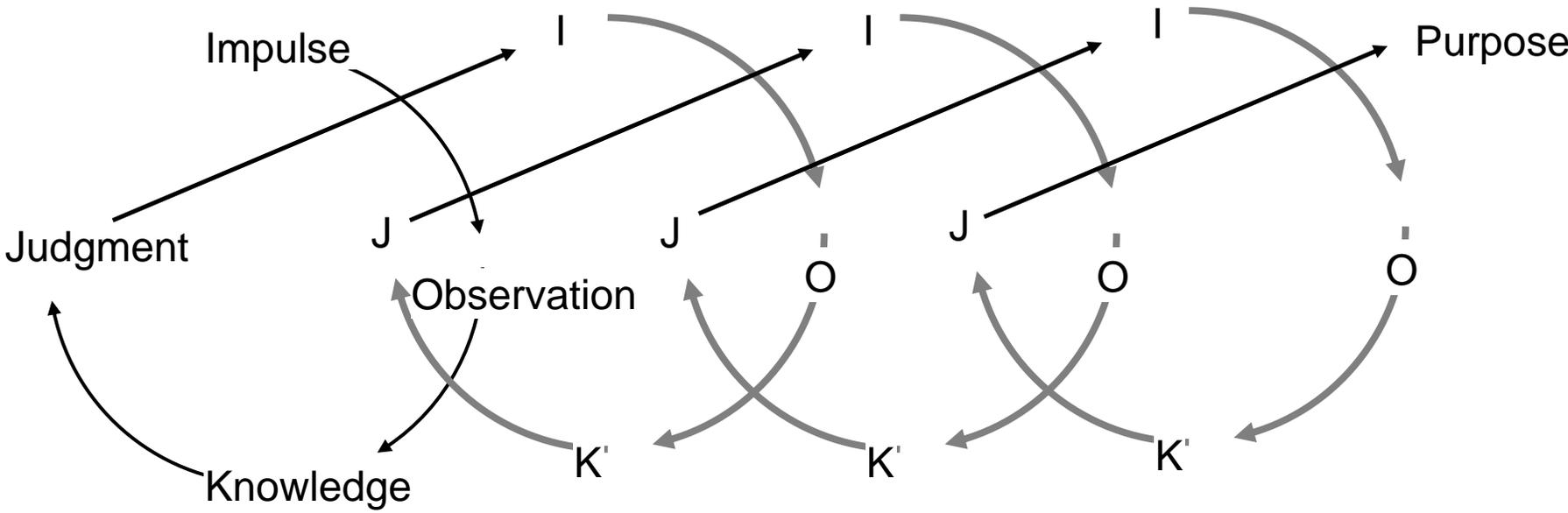
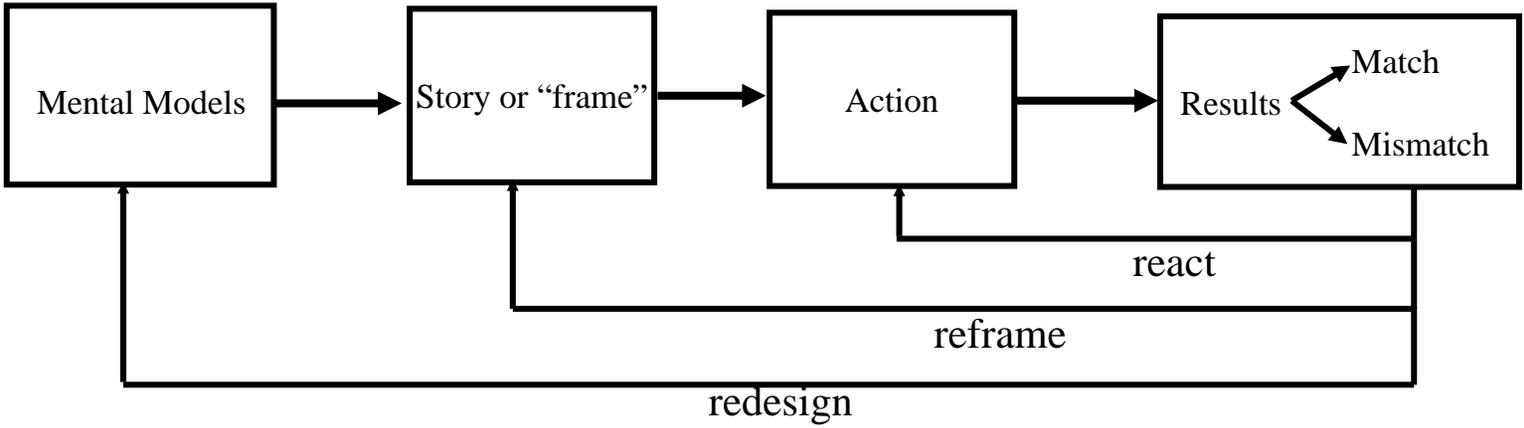# The Five Disciplines…

- **Shared Vision**
  - building a common sense of purpose
- **Personal Mastery**
  - personal commitment to create one's future
- **Mental Models**
  - surfacing and testing assumptions
- **Team Learning**
  - managerial practice fields, dialogue
- **Systems Thinking**
  - understanding how our actions create our reality
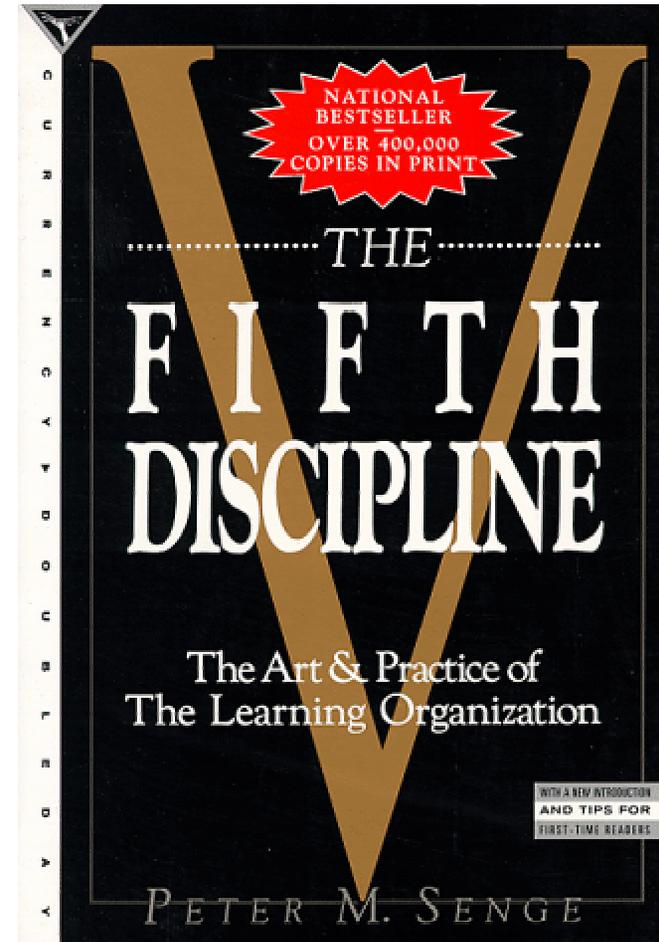
source: Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*

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│              │      │              │      │              │      │              Match    │
│Mental Models │─────▶│Story or "frame"│───▶│   Action     │─────▶│Results  ╱             │
│              │      │              │      │              │      │         ╲             │
│              │      │              │      │              │      │              Mismatch │
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Blocks to Surfacing and Changing Mental Models

- Our reasoning and acting is highly skilled
- We apply our mental models transparently
- Mental models are taken for granted
- We do not want to risk losing, being wrong, upsetting or embarrassing others or ourselves

As a result:

- We take steps that are invisible to us
- When we do make errors we are unlikely to discover them

Working with Mental Models
~ Two Column Case ~
Left Hand/Right Hand Column Case

- Understand the architecture of effective conversations

Left Hand/Right Hand Case

- Think of a current concrete situation from your work from which you would like to learn.
  - you can't reach agreement with close associates
  - you believe you have been assigned unfair work
  - you believe someone else isn't pulling their weight
  - a task is going in a direction you feel to be incorrect
  - your point of view is being ignored or discounted
- Or, think of a conversation you had in the recent past which didn't go as you wanted.
- Write a brief description of the situation, including the context, important facts, what you tried to do, and what happened

Consider the following example:

Left Hand/Right Hand Case

I need to talk to Jim after he gets back from vacation. Jim is the head operator in a machine shop. He is in his late 50's, and this work pretty much defines his life. Jim is much older than the other people working there, and helps them learn the machines and work. He hasn't taken a vacation in year, partly because he feels that he can't get away without there being problems.

Unspoken thoughts and feelings:	Discussion: What was actually said
1. I'll start by creating a positive atmosphere. I'm sure he isn't even aware that there is a problem.	**George**: Hello Jim! How was your trip? Are you feeling better now? **Jim**: It was wonderful, but the truth is that I really missed work. At work I forget all of my troubles. When I go home, I'm alone again and all of the problems come back.
2. I'll try to channel him into the issue correctly	**George**: I'd like to take this opportunity to hear your views about the integration of younger members into the department and the state of the department in general. **Jim**: Listen, George. I have to work hard to teach these kids. They have no respect for the machinery. It costs the department a fortune and they think maintenance is a joke.
3. I'll bring the issue up directly now and try to explain the problem to him.	**George**: I greatly appreciate your dedication to the issue of maintaining the machinery, but we have a problem. Production is structured in such a way that each department is dependent upon the other.

Your LH/RH Column Case

1. Description of situation:

3. Unspoken thoughts and feelings:	**2. What was actually said:**

Left Hand/Right Hand Case

Find a partner – you will share your case *only* with this learning partner

Create your own two column case; situation:
- you believe you have been assigned unfair work
- you believe someone else isn't pulling their weight
- a task is going in a direction you feel to be incorrect
- your point of view is being ignored or discounted

1. Write a brief description of the situation, including the context, important facts, what you tried to do, and what happened

2. Write out what was said (you and other person (people))

3. Write out what you were thinking and feeling *but did not say*

Exercise Steps

Two rounds - decide who will be Presenter and Helper first (switch when done)

1. Context Setting: Presenter explains situation (1 minute)

2. Present Case (read what was said; and what you were thinking; 3 minutes)

3. Helper questions and comments (3 minutes)

Switch roles and go through sequence again

Left Hand/Right Hand Case

Helpful questions to ask partner:

- – What was your intention… what were you trying to accomplish?
- – Did you achieve the results you intended?
- – Why didn't you say what was left hand column?
- – What do you think was in the left hand column of the other person/people?
- – What were the costs for operating this way… what were the payoffs?

Exercise Debriefing

- What happened?
- What did you learn about your conversation?
- What are the benefits of not communicating what is in your left-hand column?

- What are the *costs* of not communicating what is in your left-hand column?

Exercise Debriefing

- What can you do with your LHC?
  - What are the consequences of *burying* your LHC?
  - What are the consequences of *dumping* your LHC?
- What can you do to process your LHC?

The Ladder of Inference

Beliefs, Assumptions & Values

Conclude: Decide What to Do
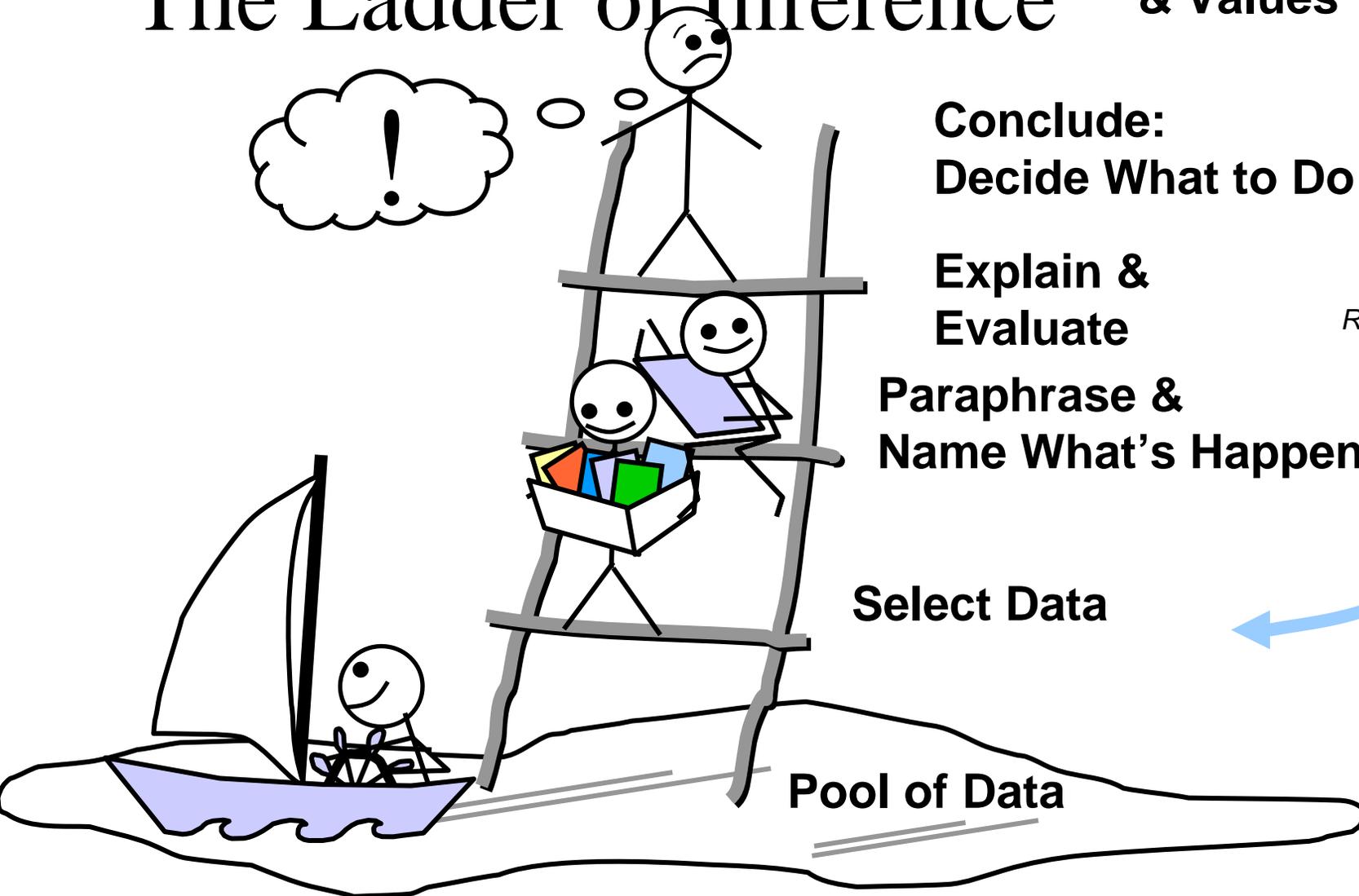
Take Action

Reflexive Loop

Explain & Evaluate

Paraphrase & Name What's Happening

Select Data

Pool of Data

We Jump up the Ladder

– We <u>select</u> what we will treat as important.

– We <u>paraphrase</u> what is happening according to the sense we make of it

– We <u>name</u> what is happening in order to characterize it into general categories

– We <u>explain</u> and sometimes <u>evaluate</u> what is happening, drawing on our stock theories,

– We <u>decide what to do</u>, drawing on what we have done before.

– Our <u>contexts, assumptions and values</u> influence what data we select, and how we paraphrase and name what's happening.

Ladder of Inference Exercise

With your partner, review each of your cases and use the ladder of inference to consider:

- Where is the data?
- Where is the paraphrasing?
- Where is the evaluating?
- Where is the concluding?
- Where are the assumptions?

Ladder of Inference: Debrief

- What did you find?

- Each of us continuously creates our own world, moment by moment and it's different from everybody else's world!

We Jump up the Ladder

1. How we act depends on how we understand the situation we are in.

2. How we understand the situation we are in often depends on our beliefs, assumptions and values -- and <u>not</u> on the situation.

Ladder of Inference: Next Steps

- Norms:
  - Keep the Ladder in front of you!
    - **Notice your conclusions as based on your inferences, not as self-evident facts.**
    - **Assume that your reasoning process could have gaps that you don't see.**
    - **Paraphrase aloud the meanings you hear in what others say. Ask others to do the same for their thinking.**
    - **Explain the steps in your thinking. Ask others to do the same for their thinking.**
    - **Assume the ladder is alive and well with others, too -- and that they may reach other conclusions.**
  - If you're not sure what is happening, ask!
  - Be open to your own explanations and decisions, and invite others to help you test them.

What Makes Conversations Difficult?

- **What happened**
  - I know "the Truth" and who's to blame
  - Purpose: persuade/prove
- **Feelings**
  - Feelings are messy and irrelevant
  - Purpose: avoid
- **Identity**
  - This is not about me
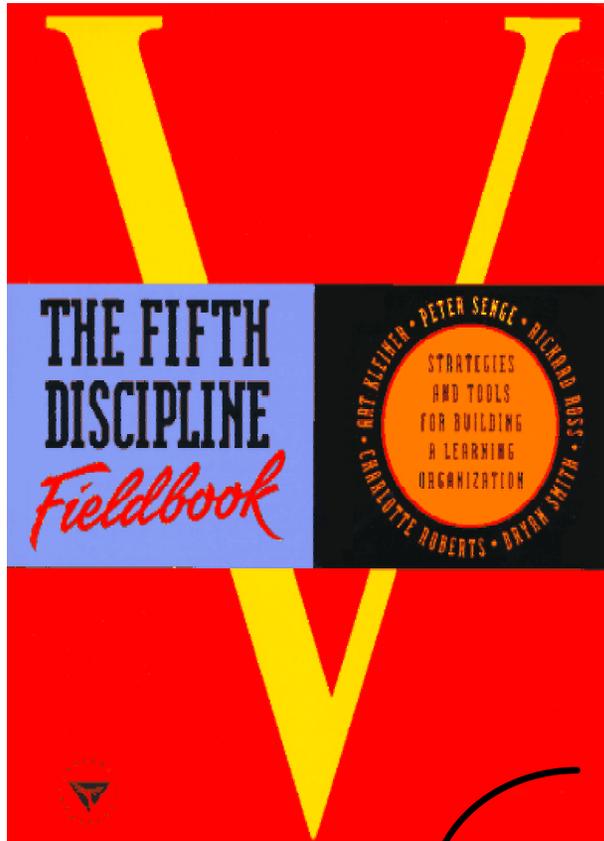 - Purpose: protect and defend myself

What can make difficult conversations productive?

- **Your Thinking:** Appropriately humble
  - My story ≠ "the truth"
    - Turn judgments into hypotheses
  - My reaction may say as much about me

- **Your Stance:** Authentic curiosity
  - How do they see it?
  - How did we each contribute?

- **Your Actions:** Inquiry ≥ Advocacy
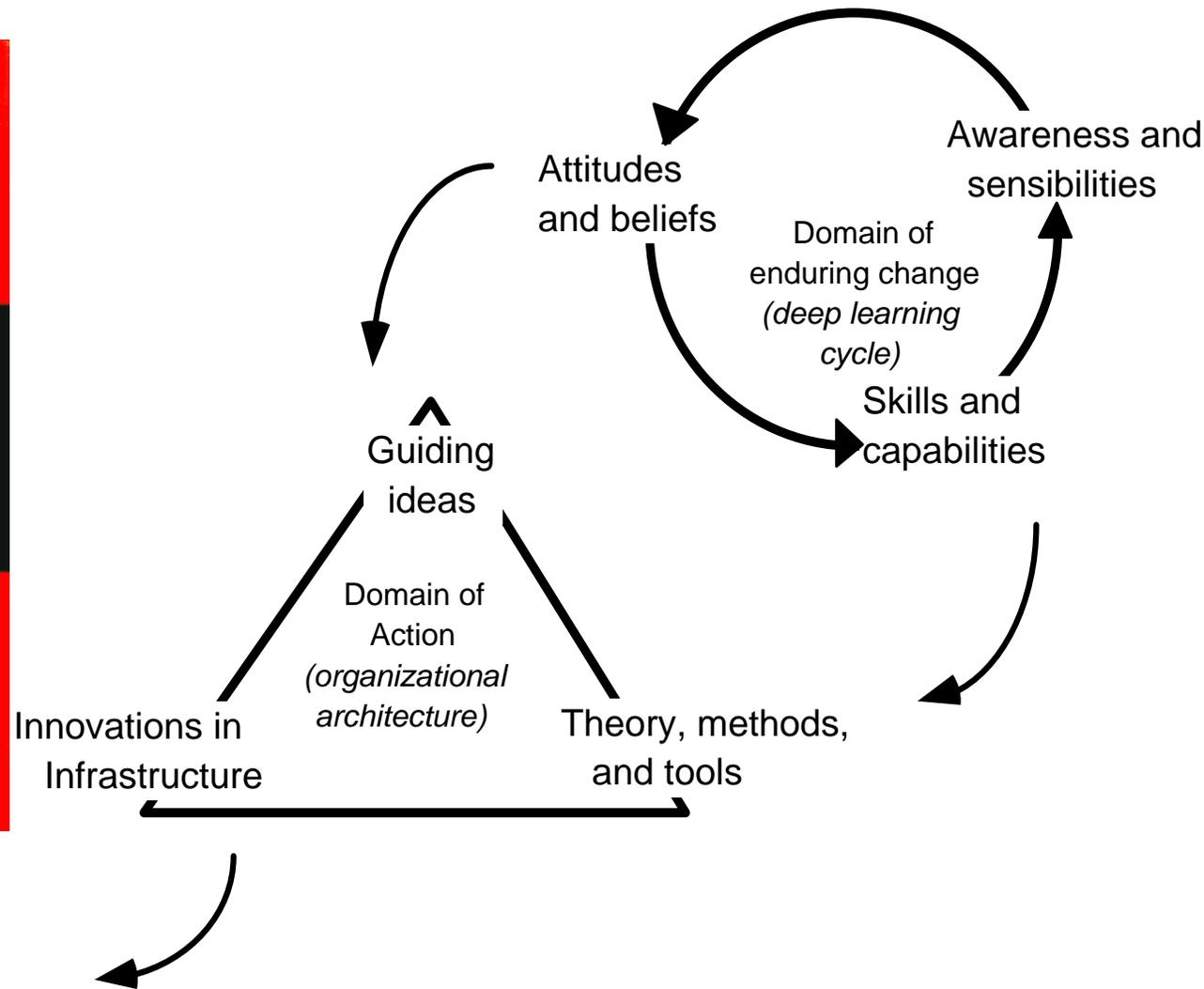 - Explore data and reasoning behind conclusions

Tools for Organizational Learning

- Action Inquiry/Communication Tools
  - Ladder of Inference
  - Left Hand/Right Hand Column
  - Action Maps
- Organization Development/TQM
  - KJ Process   - OADI cycle
  - Force Field Diagrams   - Visioning
  - Creative Tension   - Language
- System Dynamics
  - causal loop diagrams
  - system archetypes
- Dialogue   • Learning Histories
- Managerial Practice Fields/Mgmt. Flight Simulators
  - learning away from work
  - learning as part of work

Thinking strategically & moving forward

Attitudes and beliefs

Awareness and sensibilities

Domain of enduring change *(deep learning cycle)*

Skills and capabilities

Guiding ideas

Domain of Action *(organizational architecture)*

Innovations in Infrastructure

Theory, methods, and tools

Results

Difficult Conversations

HOW TO DISCUSS
WHAT MATTERS MOST

DOUGLAS STONE ■ **BRUCE PATTON** ■ **SHEILA HEEN**
OF THE HARVARD NEGOTIATION PROJECT

With a foreword by Roger Fisher, coauthor of GETTING TO YES