

Courageous Dialogues: *Changing the dance of polarization*

April 22, 2023



Our journey
together...

Introduction

What is polarization?

Breakout Discussions

Conflict versus Polarization

Five Promising Practices

Activity



About us

Project Overview

Funder:



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Research Team:



COURAGEOUS DIALOGUES:
MOVING BEYOND POLARIZATION



MIR CENTRE FOR PEACE
& SELKIRK INNOVATES



Project Overview

Year 1

- Literature Review & Annotated Bibliographies
- Surveys

Year 2

- Environmental Scan
- Community Learning Circles
- Participatory Research

Year 3

- Interactive “road map” of resources





Social media



Instagram



Facebook



Twitter



What is Polarization?

What is polarization?

Polarization is a **complex social dynamic** that occurs when an issue that involves many different people, concerns, and opinions is reduced to **two opposing sides**- “for or against”, “us vs them”.

De-polarization is **not**...

- Neutrality
- Saying that the point between two extremes is always correct
- A substitute for other types of social change work

What are the characteristics of polarization?

- Polarization is characterized by both over-simplification and oppositionality
- Five features common to polarized environments:

Personal attacks

Describing
conflicts in
epic terms

Distorted
information

Relentless
obsession

Intractable
negotiations

Brubaker, D. R., Brubaker, E. N., Yoder, C. E., & Haase, T. J. (2019). *When the center does not hold: Leading in an age of polarization*. Fortress Press.

Why is polarization
and changing its
dance important for
local governments?





Social Dynamics of Polarization

...it's not just other people who are polarized!

SOS = Call for help



S – Sorting

We get together in like groups



O – Othering

We push off against groups opposed to us



S – Siloing

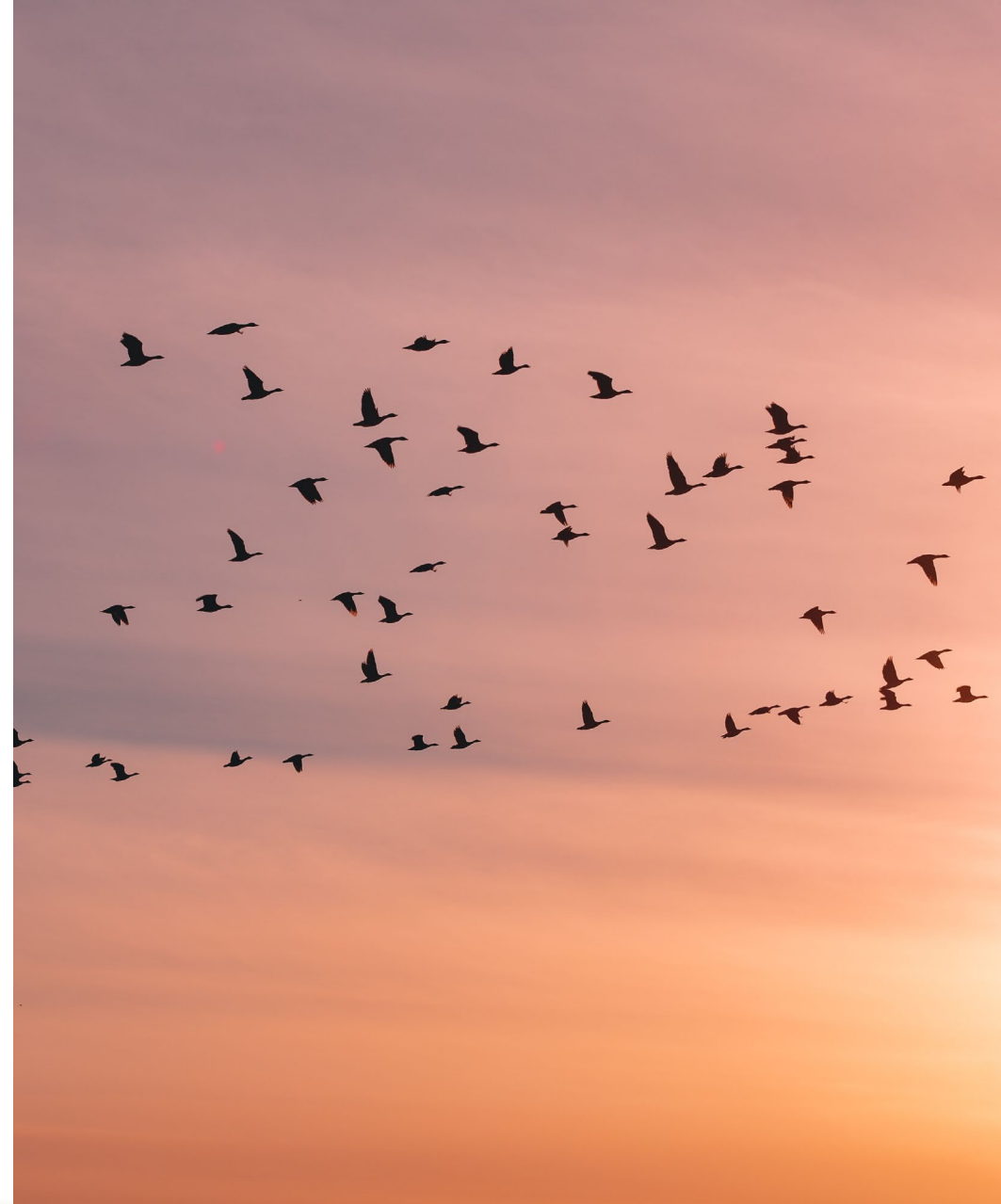
We only hear stories from our group

Sorting

- We crave being around people who are like us
 - “Birds of a feather flock together”
- We feel happy and less bothered
- It causes blind spots and ignorance
- It does not allow for the diversity needed to address complex issues (e.g., reconciliation, climate change)

Digital world:

- Easy to find your people
- Efficient sorting
- Gives warped view of the world



Othering

- Once we have an “us” we create a “them”
- No “us” can see “them” clearly – distorts the world between us
- We see exaggerated fiction that distorts people’s actual beliefs
- Social media makes it easier – we “unfollow” others
- Othering shrinks our world rather than expanding it



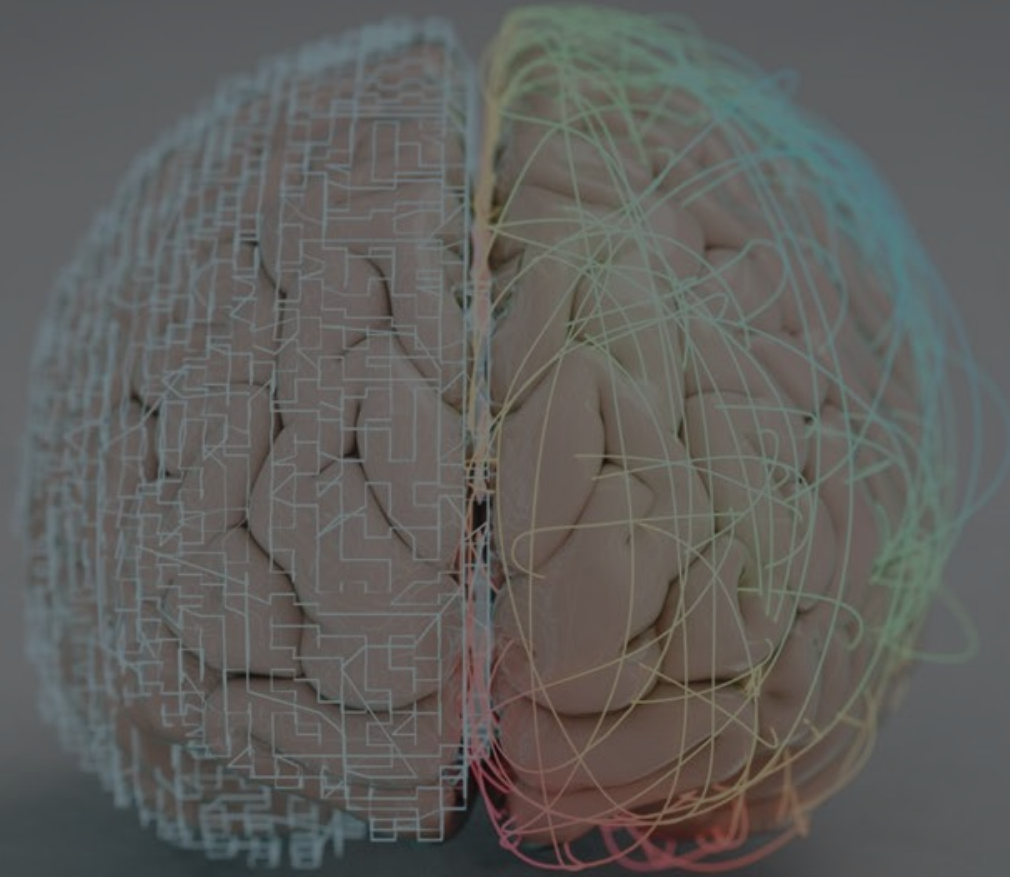
Siloing

- We get our news from within our silos
- It **filters stories** you hear and don't hear
- Messages bounce around and seem more substantial than really are (**echo chamber**)
- We become a team with shared values and open-mindedness shuts down (**tribalism**)

Digital world - makes this efficient

- We get rewarded by dopamine releases
- We have poverty of attention
 - we need to allocate attention efficiently





Cognition & Polarization


We are hard-wired for this (unless we learn to hack it!)

- We are uncomfortable with inconsistent (or contradictory) facts/beliefs/opinions (**cognitive dissonance**)
- We have a desire for certainty and an aversion to uncertainty (**cognitive closure**)
- We have a hard time changing our minds based on the time invested (**justification of effort**)
- We rely on info from **trusted networks** to confirm what we think and make-decisions



We aren't as rational as we think

- We conform our beliefs to the values that define our cultural identities (**cultural cognition**)
- We look for information that confirms our beliefs and ignore anything contradictory (**confirmation bias**)
- We have an unconscious tendency to process information that suits some end or goal (**motivated reasoning**)
- We often believe those who disagree with us are wrongdoers (**advocacy trap**)



Research shows the more intelligent you are, the more likely you will have polarized thinking, as you are able to search out and interpret information to match your beliefs

Disagree

Question values

Question motives

See as aggressors

Get defensive

Get offended & angry

Draw stance

See as wrong-doer

See as enemy

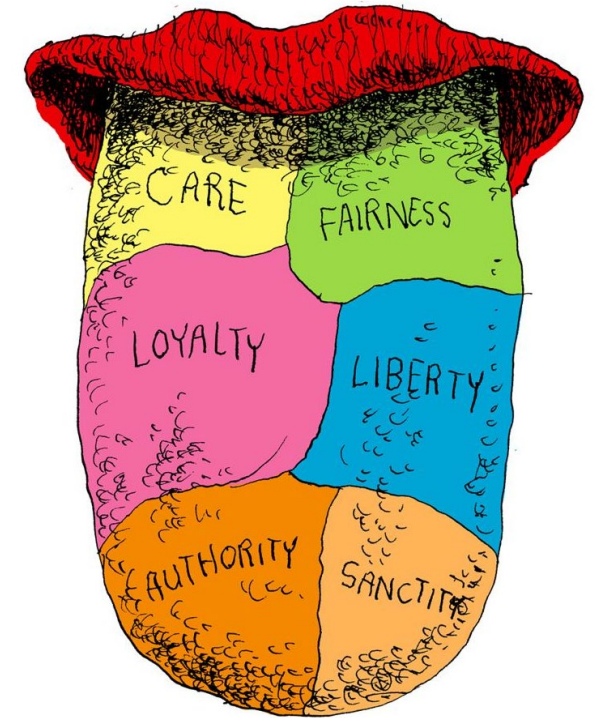
A top-down photograph showing four hands, two from the top and two from the bottom, gently cupping a bright red heart. The hands are positioned symmetrically around the heart, with fingers slightly curled. The background consists of horizontal wooden planks painted in a muted teal or light blue color. The overall composition is centered and balanced, conveying a sense of care, unity, and love.

Role of Morals & Values

Being mindful of our moral foundations

- Our moral foundations are influenced by genetic predispositions and experiences
- Our morals can fit into six “tastes”

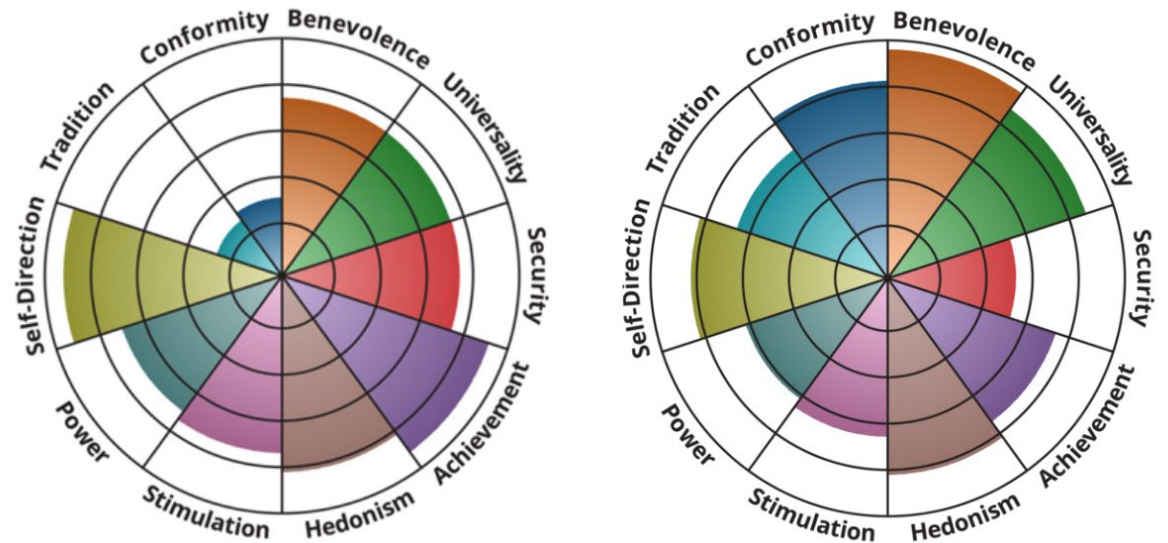
Positive	Negative
Care	Harm
Fairness	Cheating
Loyalty	Betrayal
Authority	Subversion
Sanctity	Degradation
Liberty	Oppression



Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. Pantheon.

We all have similar values, what's different is how we weigh them!

- Our values motivate our behaviour
- We judge the motivations for others' beliefs because of how we weight/prioritize our values
- Our values bias blocks curiosity



Guzmán, M. (2022). *I never thought of it that way: How to have fearlessly curious conversations in dangerously divided times*. BenBella Books.

Breakout Discussion

Think about a polarized dynamic you've experienced. What happened?

What did it look like?

What did it sound like?

How did it make you feel?

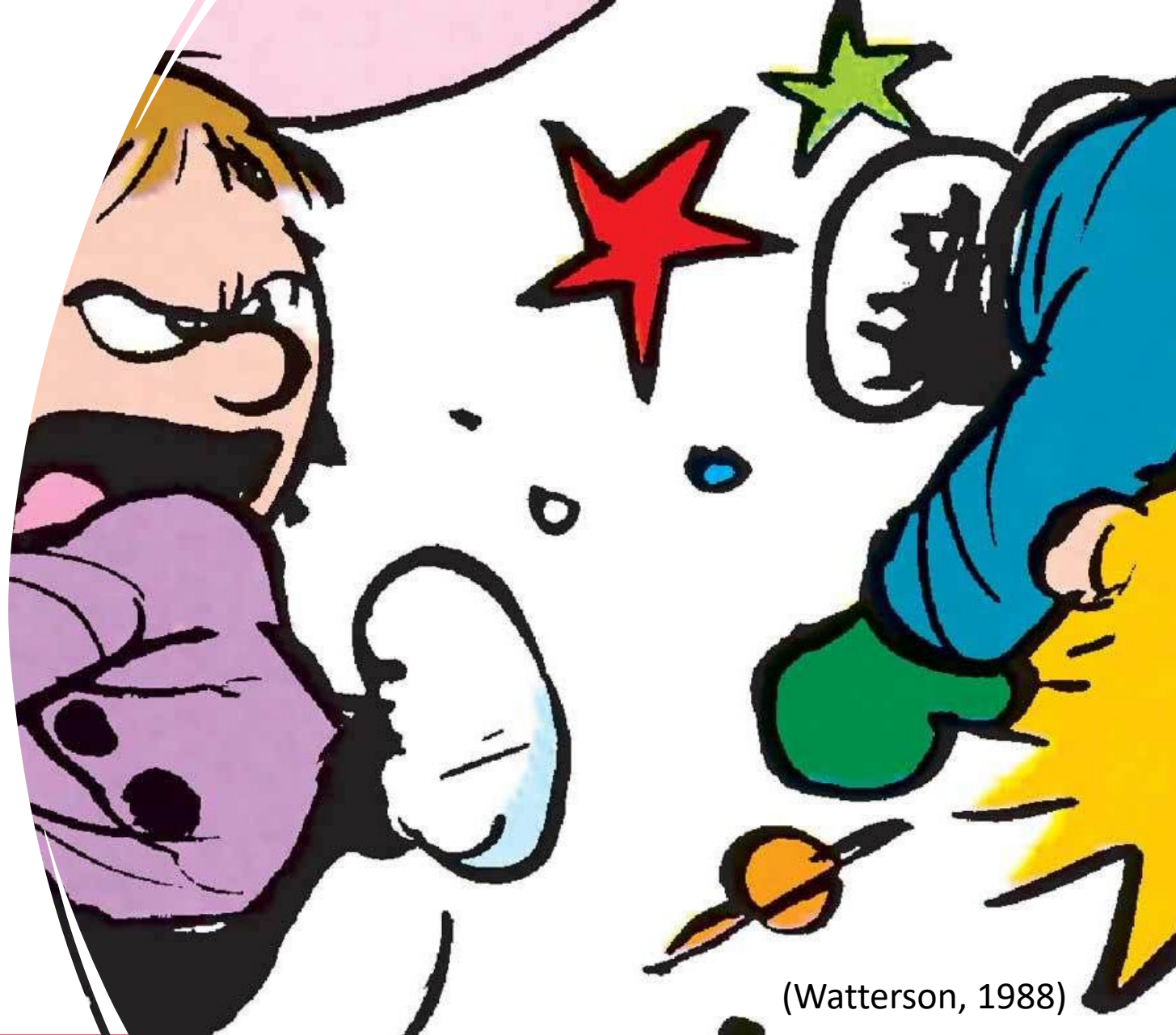
Do you wish the experience went differently? If so, how?

Conflict versus Polarization



Conflict is Different From...

- Disputes
- Competition
- Aggression
- Violence
- War
- Polarization



(Watterson, 1988)

Making Friends with Conflict

Myth

- Conflict is unnecessary
- Conflict is abnormal, wrong or bad
- Conflict should be avoided or minimized
- Effective teams avoid conflict
- Peaceful people don't engage in conflict

Reality

- Conflict is inevitable
- Conflict is normal
- Conflict can be constructive and healing
- Effective teams experience conflict
- Conflict must often be intensified to bring about change

Comparing healthy conflict and polarization

Dimension	Ordinary conflict dynamic	Polarized conflict dynamic
Characterization of problems	Problems are understood with complexity, nuance; shades of grey; multiple positions are seen to be possible	Problems are over-simplified, reduced to two sides, often opposites - right vs wrong, true vs false, good vs. evil – such that positions appear irreconcilable
Orientation to conflict	We can face the conflict; difficult topics & people are manageable	We avoid the conflict by avoiding certain topics and people; the stakes in a conflict are seen as very high
Emotional engagement in conflict	Minimal to moderate emotional engagement around differences and conflict	Intense emotional engagement around differences and conflict
Behavioural change in response to conflict	No change or only temporary change in our behavioural patterns and practices	We may boycott establishments; “cancel” people
Regard for different ideas & opinions	Respectful, open to listening to others’ perspectives	Dismissive, intolerant, close-minded, defensive when presented with intolerance, close-mindedness
Relationship to our own beliefs	Open to listening to others’ perspectives that might end up modifying our beliefs	Dismissive, intolerant, close-minded, defensive when presented with new or challenging information
Stance toward others who think differently	Curious, inquiring, willing to contemplate others’ beliefs	Dismissive, judgmental, even contemptuous, in regard to others’ beliefs (“I’m right and you’re an idiot!”)
Effects of disagreement on relationships	We can agree to disagree; it does not significantly interfere with or threaten our relationships	We struggle to maintain relationships across the divide created by our disagreement(s)
Alliances (e.g., on a City Council)	Alliances form differently around different issues	Alliances form predictably as “sides” or teams; people may be reluctant to hold beliefs different from the team “slate”
Relationship of ideas to our identity	Our ideas can be separated from our identities	Our ideas have become tightly coupled to our identities
Doubt & discipline (in relation to the orthodox view)	Doubts may be expressed; we do not feel a need to suppress them to protect our belonging in the group	Doubts may be suppressed; we do not feel safe to express them as our belonging in the group may be jeopardized

What is the difference?

“In healthy conflict curiosity exists. It leads somewhere. In high conflict [aka polarization] the conflict is the destination. There is nowhere else to go.”
(Ripley, 2022)



Ripley, A. (2022). *High conflict: Why we get trapped and how we get out*. Simon & Schuster.

Five Promising Practices to Change the Dance of Polarization



...and there are many, many more!

#5

Support brave spaces

- Hold both safe & brave spaces
- Name and frame how difficult topics will be managed
- Encourage and support pluralism – diversity of perspectives
- Call in, rather than call out



#4

Stop seeing it as a contest/battle

- Move out of “Us versus Them”
- It's not about winning - aim to understand
- Shift from debate to dialogue
- Find common ground
- Practice humility



#3

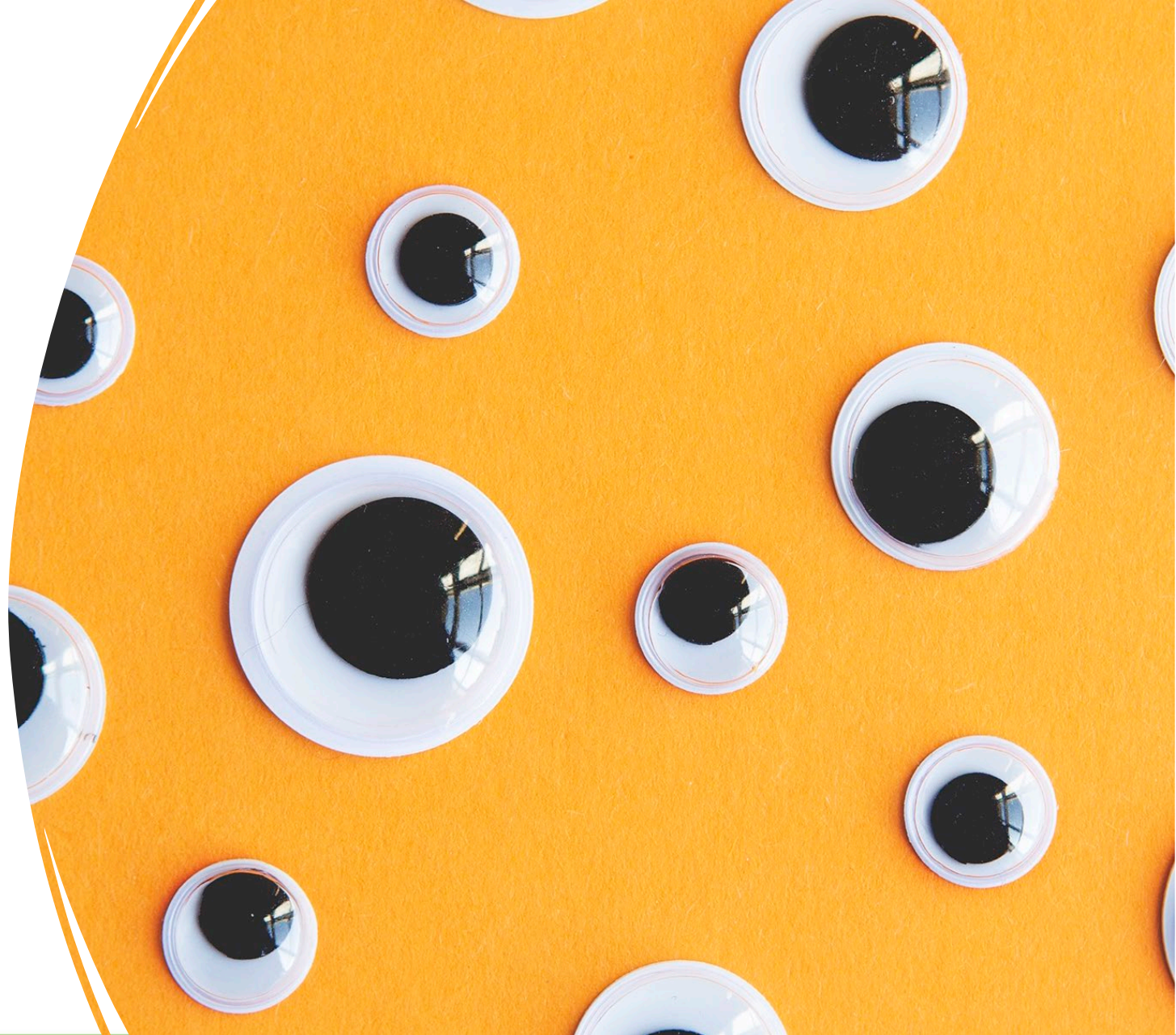
Create a pause. . .

- Ask yourself
 - Does it need to be said?
 - Does it need to be said now?
 - Does it need to be said by me?
- Understand the pitfalls of online conversations
- Connect!

#2

Develop a critical eye – on yourself!

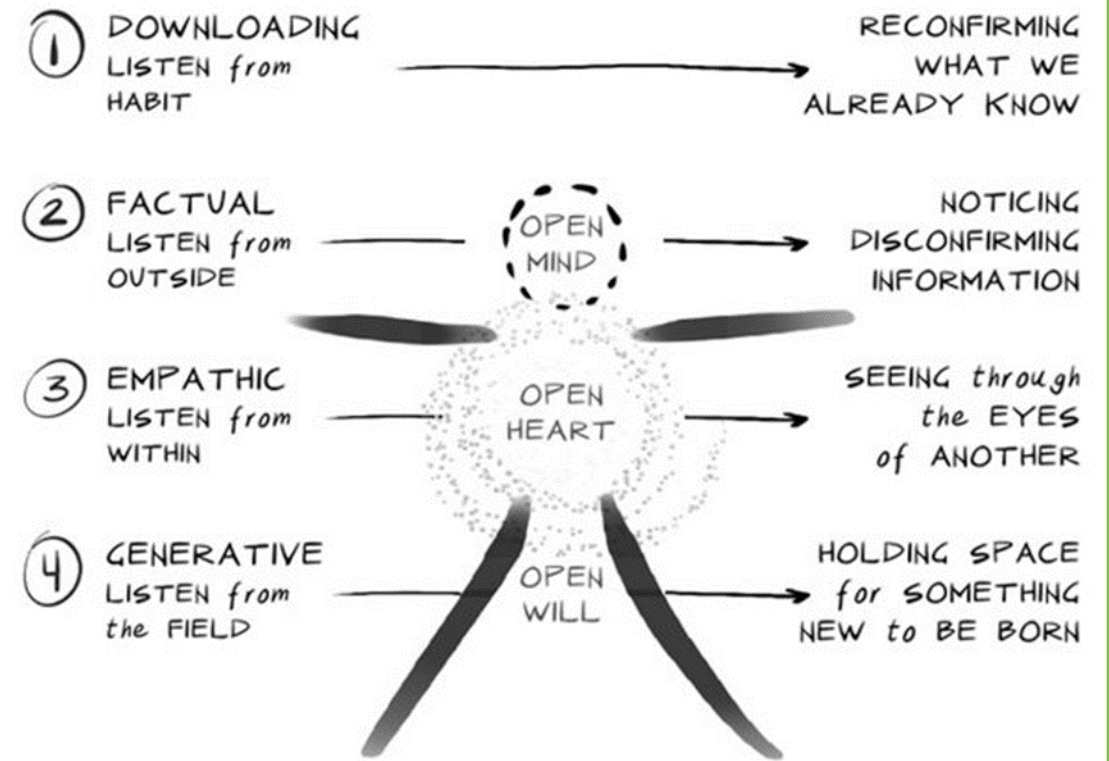
- Be aware of your biases
- Be aware of your sorting, othering, siloing
- Be aware of your assumptions and interpretations of others' motives



#1

Aim to understand – truly, deeply

- Stay curious, look at the whole story
 - Create INTOIT moments
 - “I never thought of it that way”*
- Empathic listening
- Ask questions, try looping



Four Fields of Listening
The Essentials of Theory U - www.ottoscharmer.com

Activity: Practice Looping

Three steps of looping:

1

- Listen to what the person is really saying.
- What is important to them?

2

- Summarize what they said in your words.
- Repeat it back to them.

3

- Check that you got it right. *“Did I get that right?”* Do so with genuine curiosity.
- If not exactly correct, keep going. *“What did I miss?”*

What is a silly topic you have argued about lately?

- Person 1: Share your perspective on this topic and why it is important to you
- Person 2: Listen, then practice looping
- Switch roles
- Discuss how this process was for you

As leaders, you have the power to
change the dance of polarization





Questions?