

Making Conflict Constructive

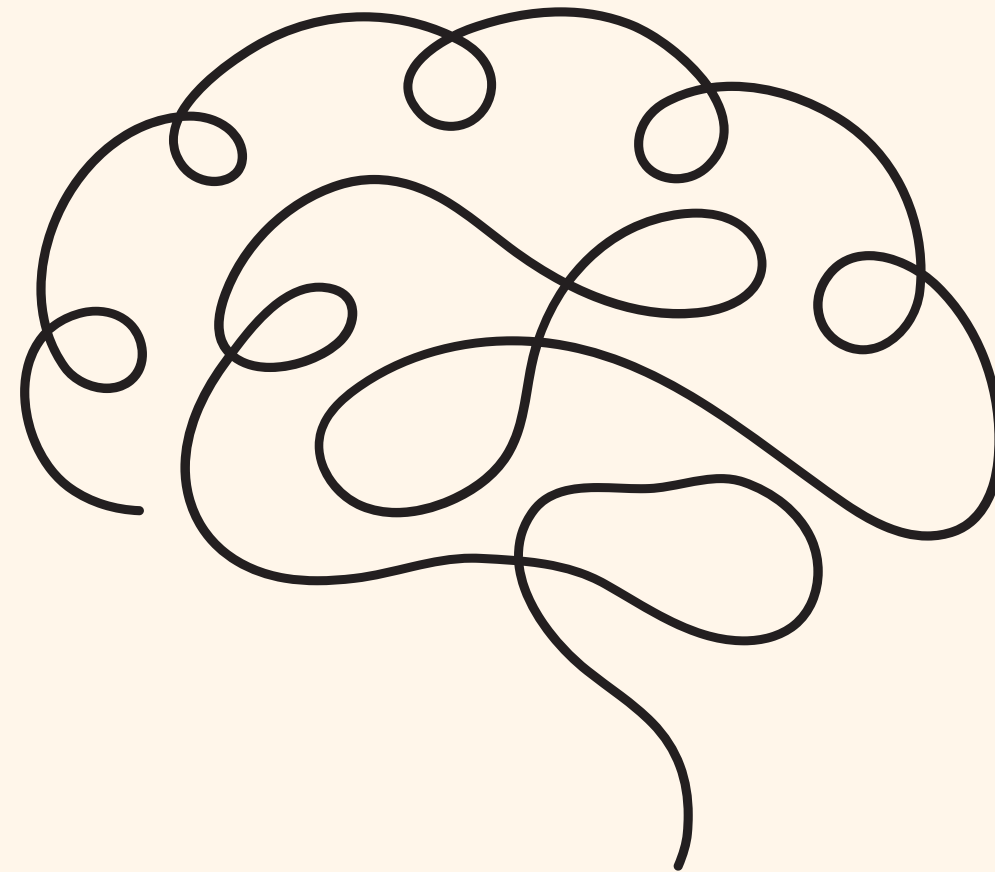
HOW UNIVERSITIES CAN PROMOTE
PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE

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July 13, 2025



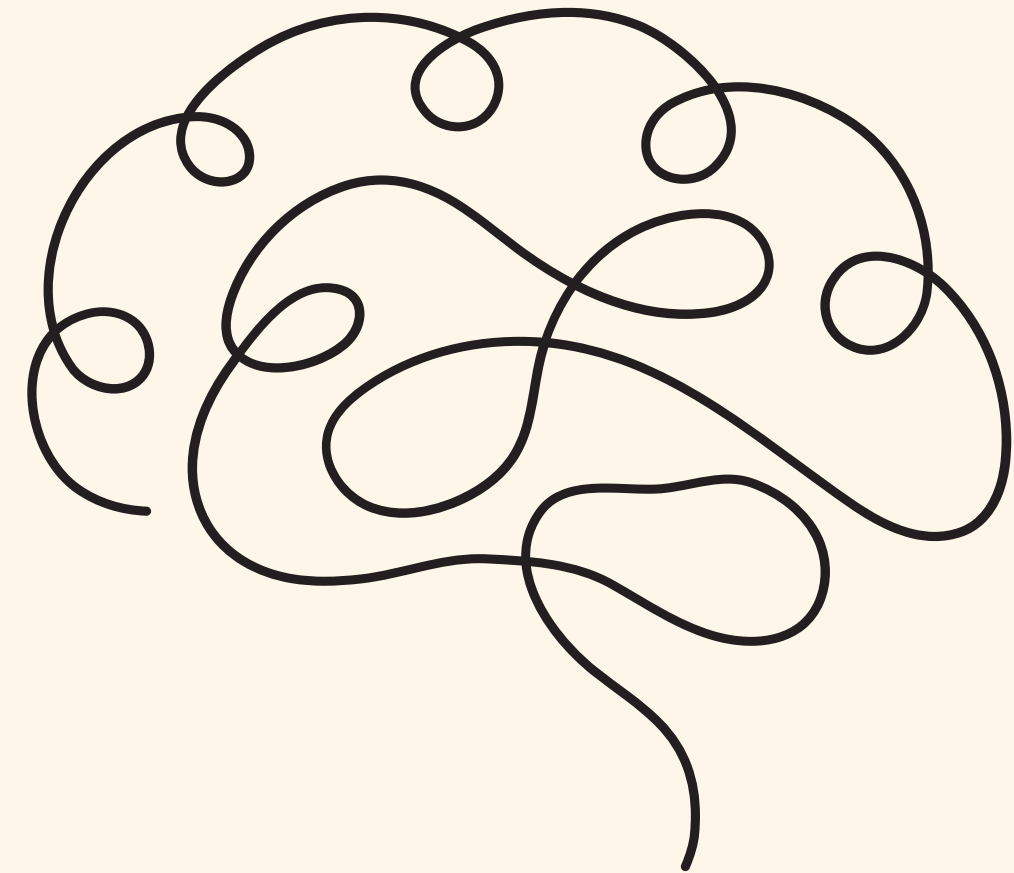
KNOW YOUR MIND
— COMMUNICATIONS —
USING NEUROSCIENCE TO CREATE CONNECTION

Creating cultures and systems of **intentional** communication for resilience and conflict transformation



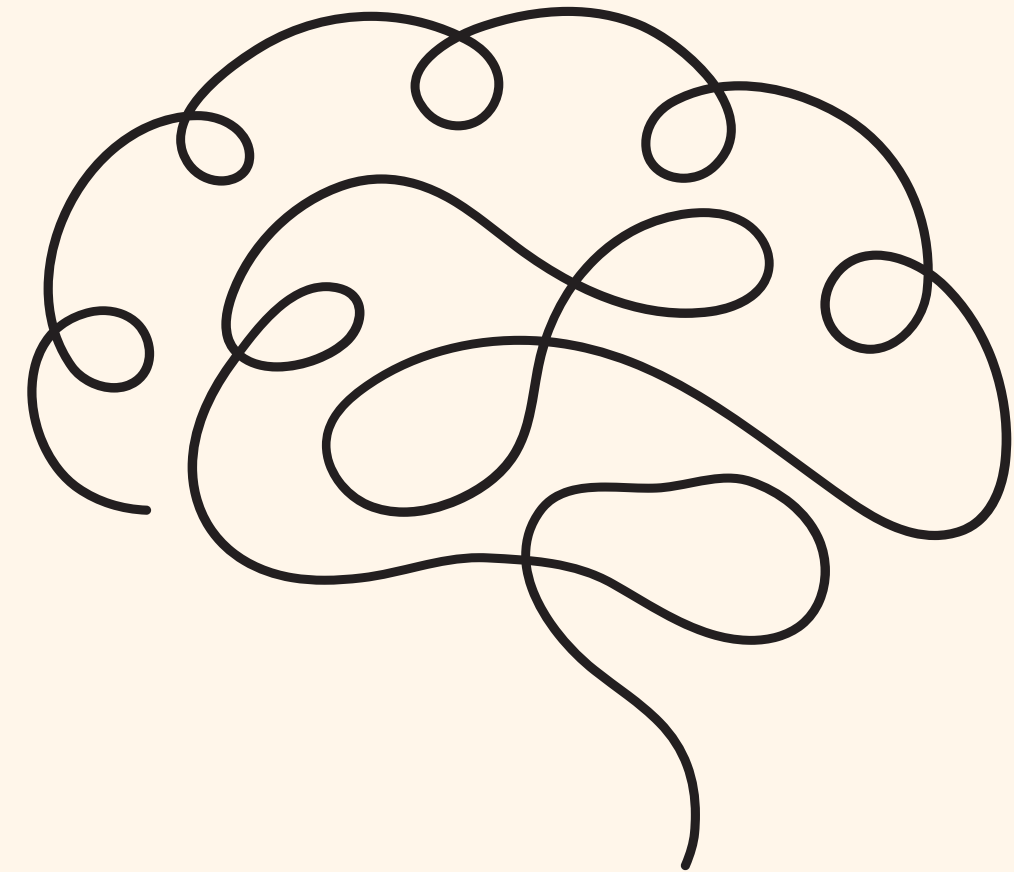
WHAT WILL WE COVER?

- Brain basics
- Tools for leaders
- Tips for leaders
- Resources for leaders



PART ONE: BRAIN BASICS

Our brains are designed for survival,
but have limited capacity.

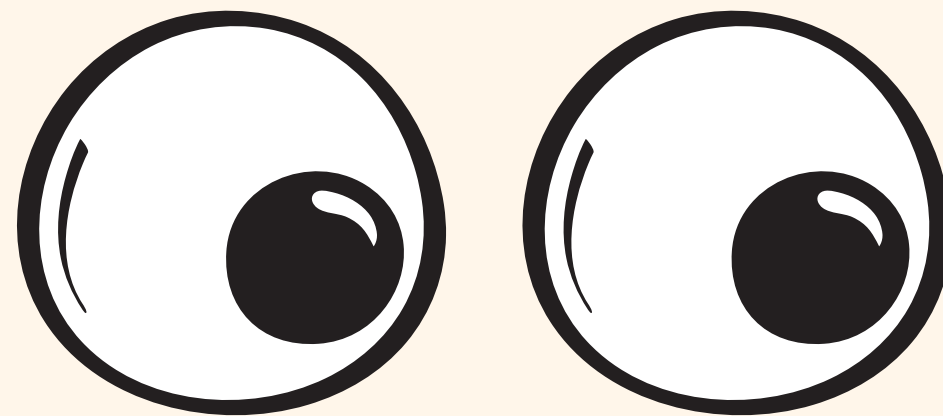


SURVIVAL DESIGN: FEATURES...OR BUGS?

**We focus on the
negative**



**We are social beings,
tracking others'
perceptions of us**

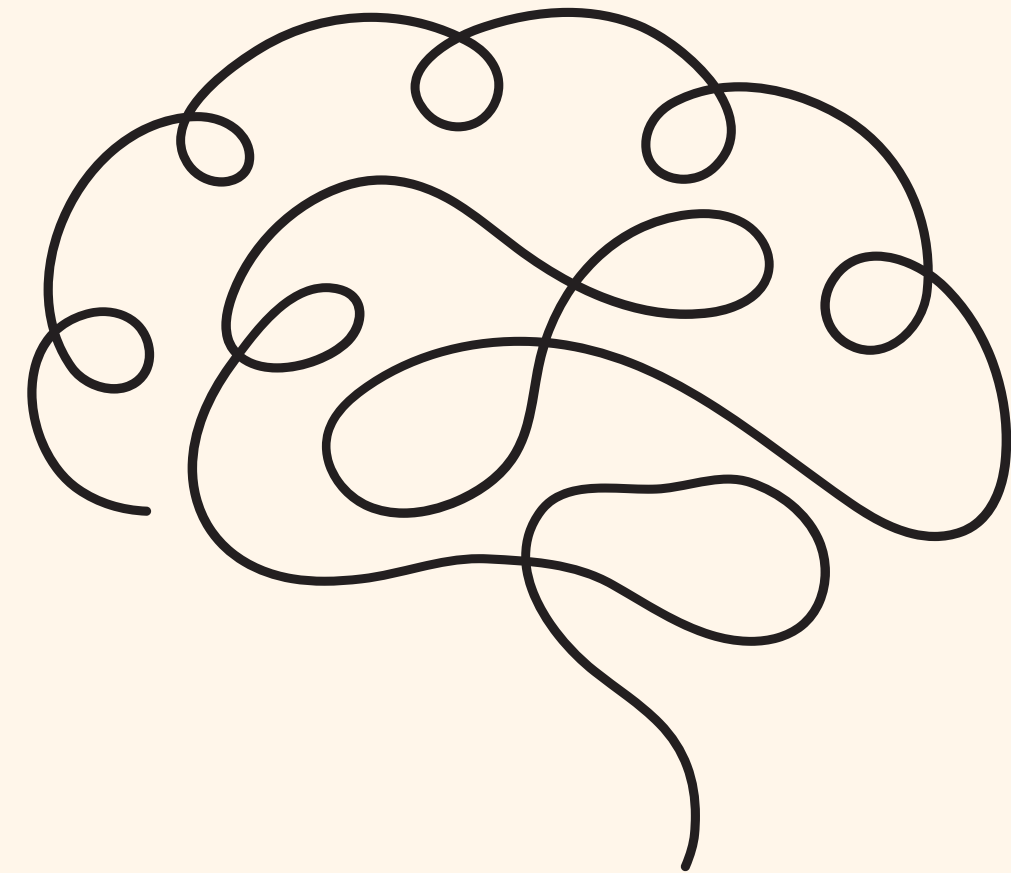


**We are only
rational when
feeling safe and
validated**

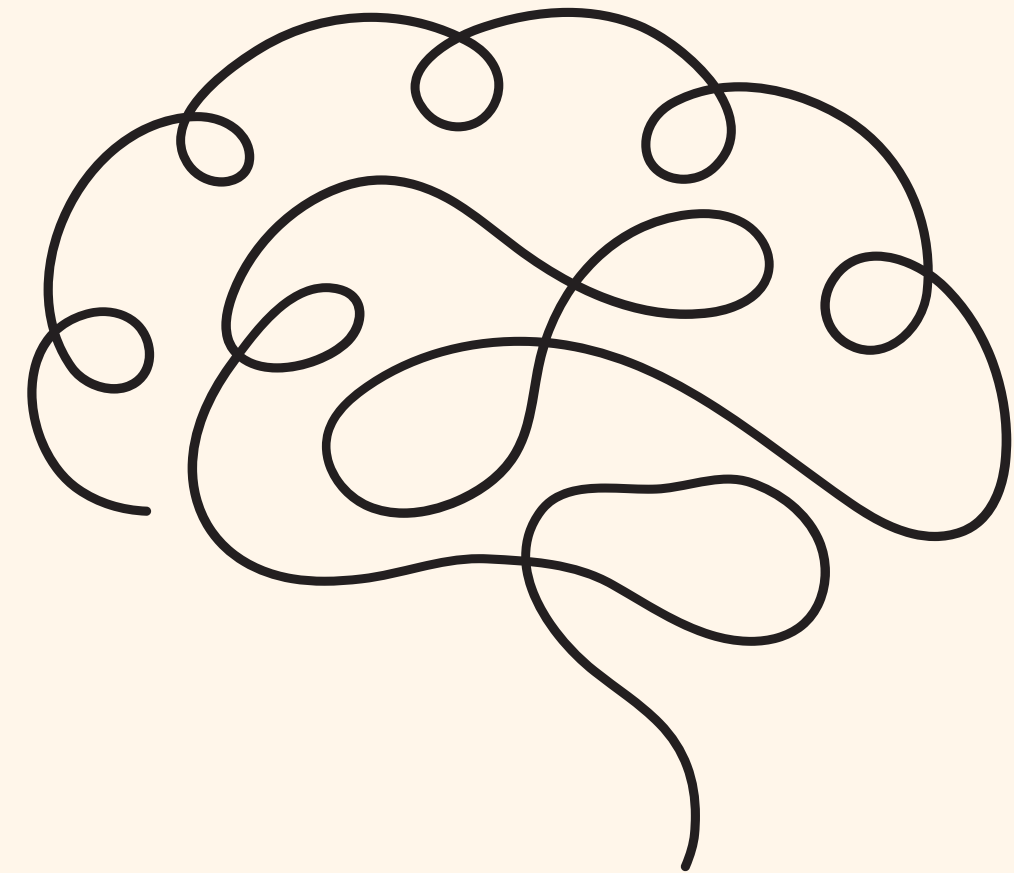


SURVIVAL DESIGN: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

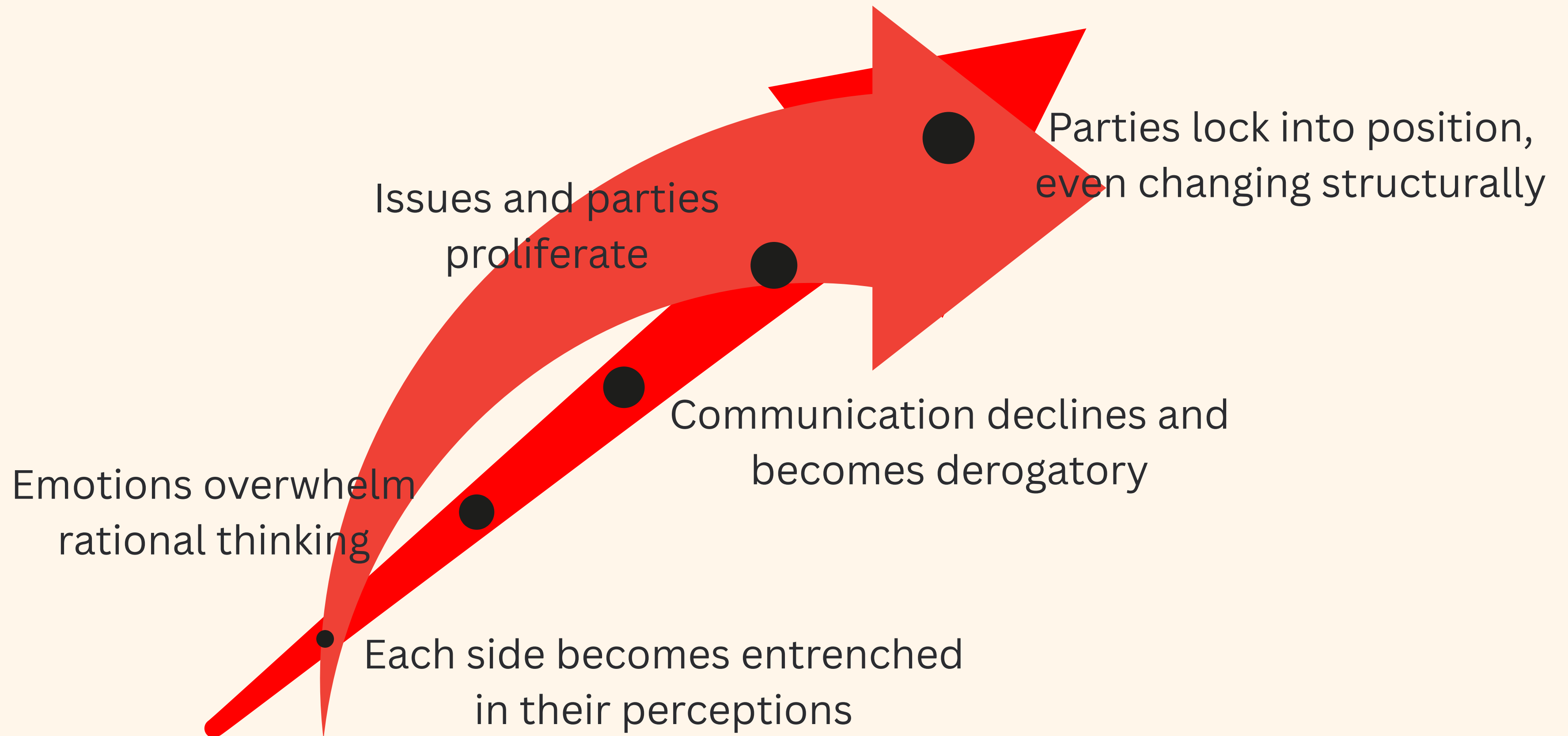
Communication can deteriorate easily,
causing conflict to expand.



PART TWO: TOOLS FOR LEADERS



ANALYTICAL TOOL: HOW CONFLICTS ESCALATE



ESCALATION SCENARIO ONE

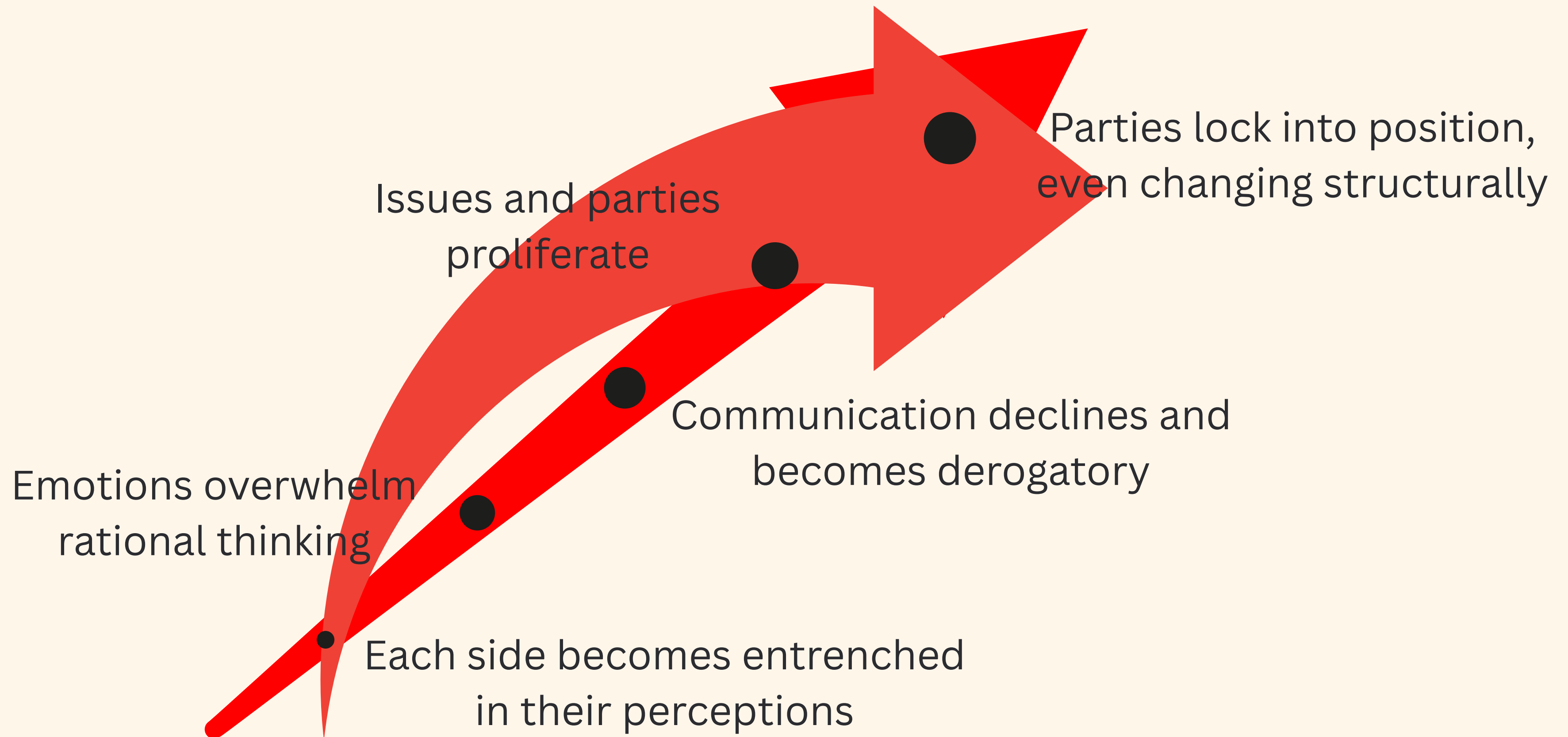
Alex is late meeting Sam for coffee. Sam texts Alex: “Where are you? I have to leave soon.” No response. Finally, Alex arrives and launches into a story about last night, with no apology for tardiness.

Sam fumes quietly. Alex is often late, and hasn’t picked up a check in a while. Alex is downright disrespectful, Sam concludes, and decides to tell their mutual friend Mary that it is time to stop seeing “Slacker Alex” so much.

ESCALATION SCENARIO TWO

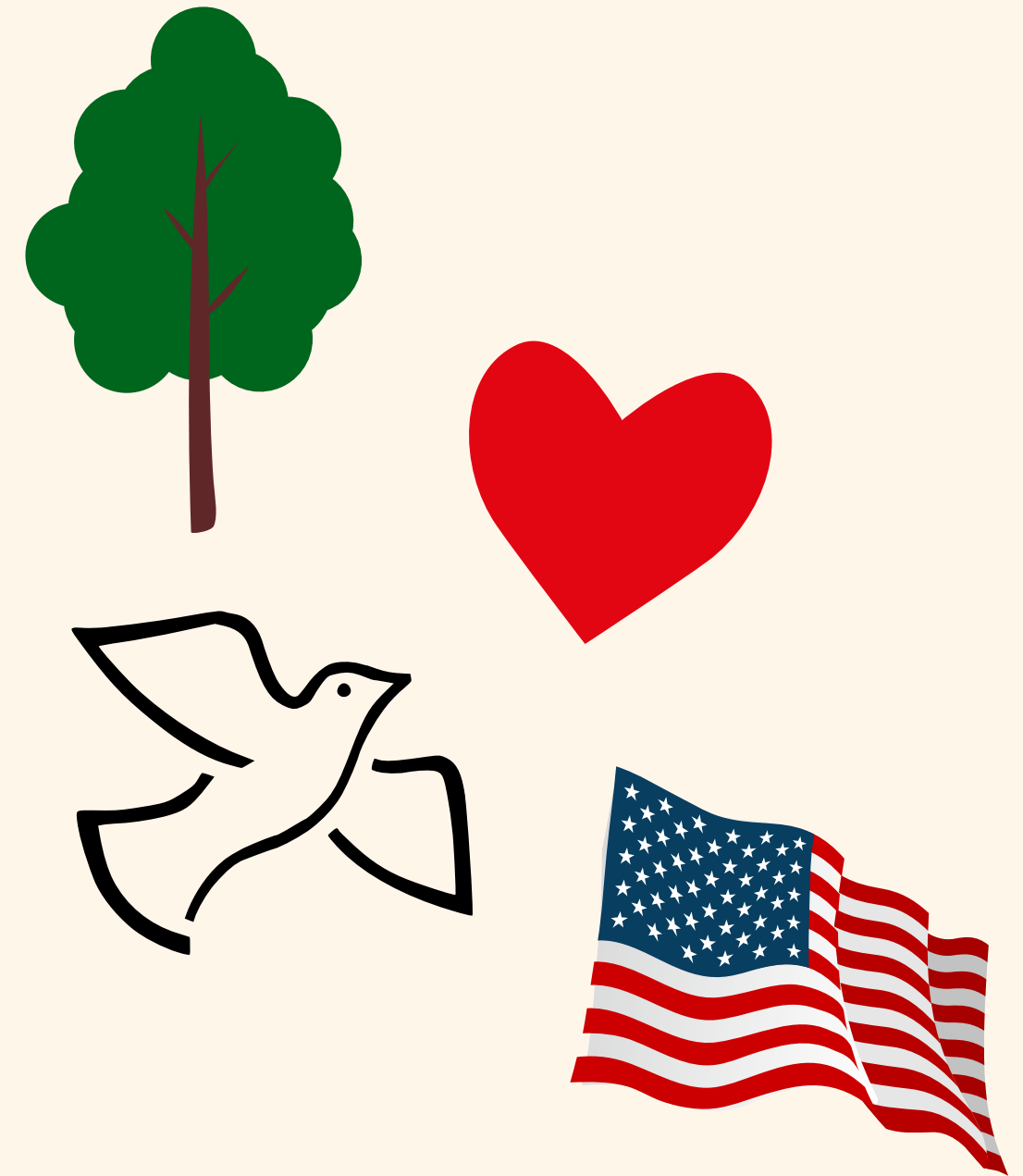
Protesters gather in a city square the day after a local police officer shot an unarmed man. They're angry, carrying signs and shouting slogans – even some very anti-police slogans – but remain nonviolent. The crowd grows. Police form a tight line across the street. Protesters feel the police are constricting their space. “Pigs!” they yell. The police call for backup.

ANALYTICAL TOOL: HOW CONFLICTS ESCALATE



RESILIENCY TIP

Conflict shows us what people think is important,
which creates an opportunity to connect.



ANALYTICAL TOOL: WE FOCUS ON THE NEGATIVE

- It takes 5 positive interactions to outweigh 1 negative interaction.
- Interactions can be a smile, an eye roll, a compliment, a derogatory comment.



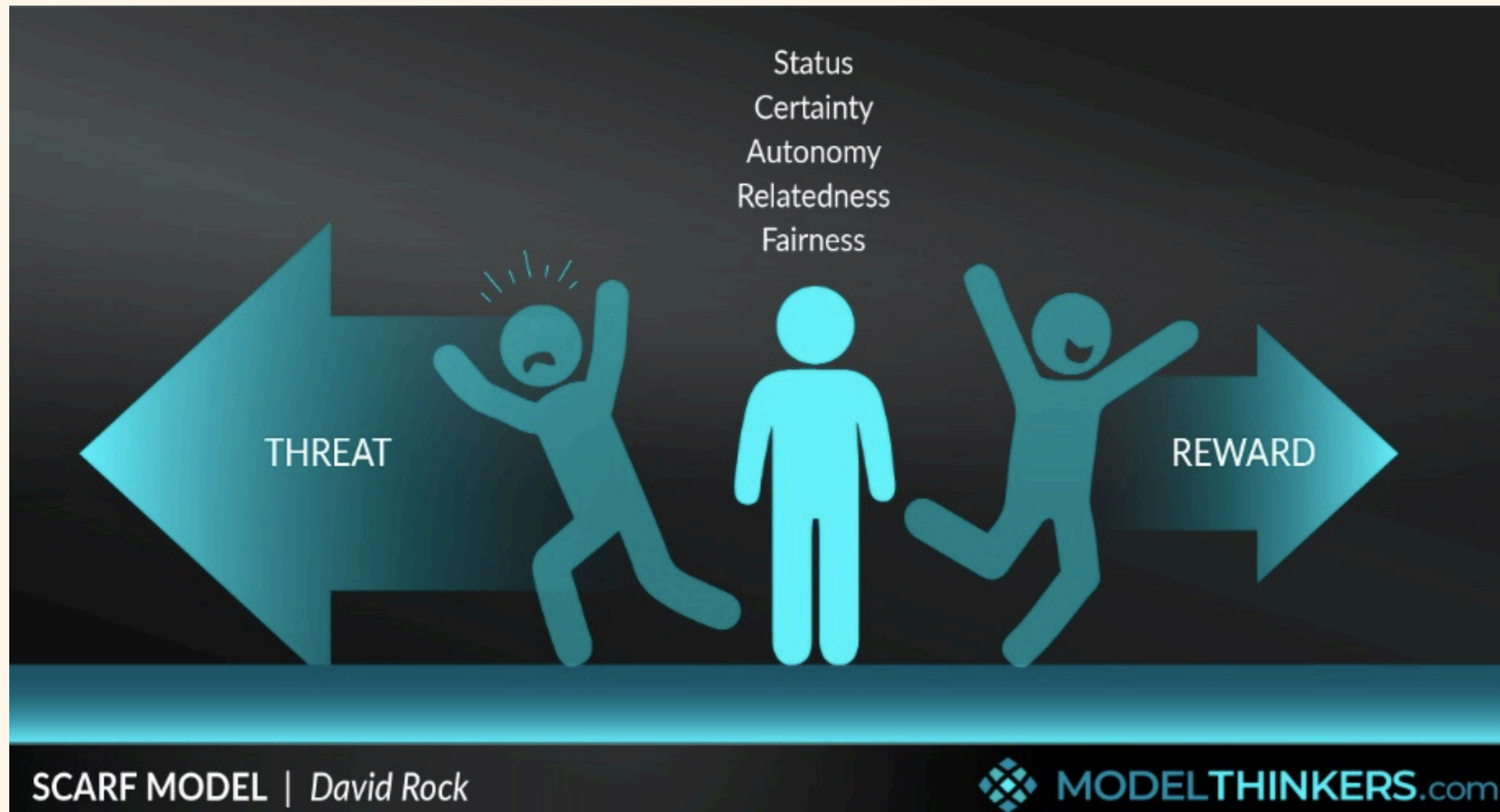
RESILIENCY TIP

A web of trusting relationships is key to resilience.

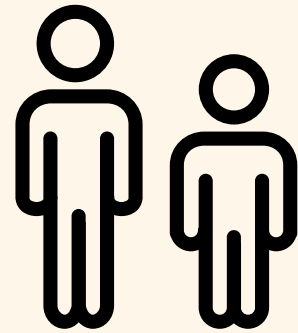


ACTION TOOL: SCARF MODEL

Certain social situations trigger the same threat and reward circuits in our brains as do physical situations.



WE TRACK OTHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF US



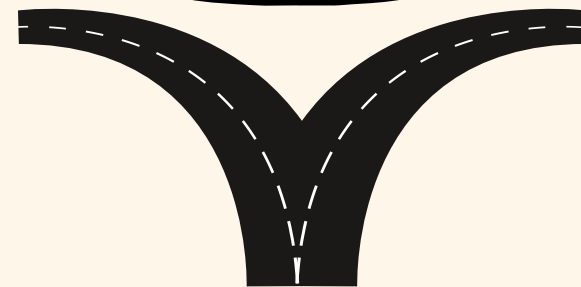
Status

Our relative importance to others



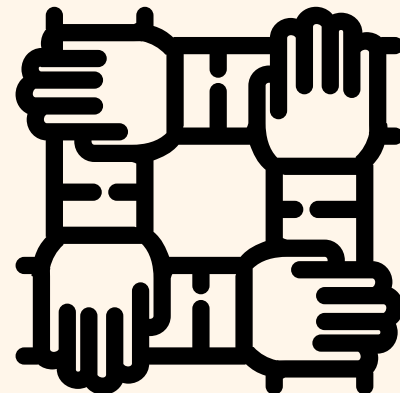
Certainty

Our ability to predict the future



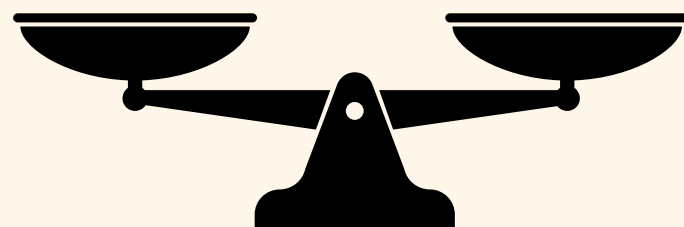
Autonomy

Our sense of control over events



Relatedness

Our sense of connectedness to others



Fairness

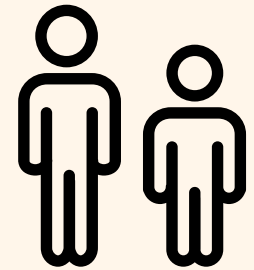
How reasonable we feel decisions involving us are

WE TRACK OTHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF US

What can you do to create socially-rewarding SCARF conditions at a meeting?

What should you avoid doing that creates SCARF threats?

APPLYING SCARF TO GROUP SITUATIONS



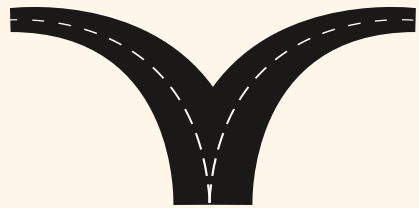
Status

Acknowledge and appreciate others' contributions



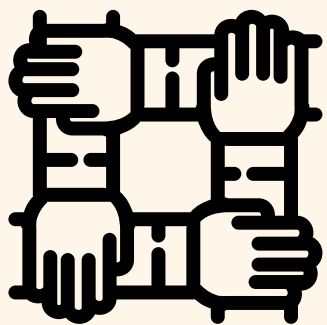
Certainty

Send agenda in advance; explain goals and process



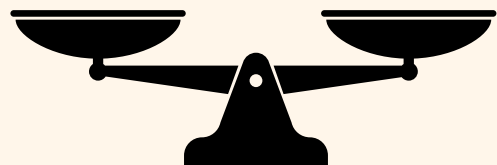
Autonomy

Let them choose place, time, agenda items for the talk



Relatedness

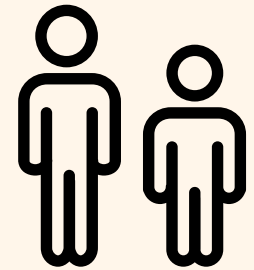
Close with round robin of takeaways or celebrations



Fairness

Ensure all are offered a safe chance to contribute

APPLYING SCARF TO INSTITUTIONS



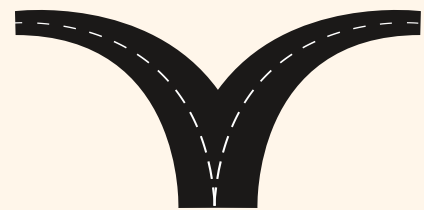
Status

Create genuine opportunities for people to contribute; acknowledge achievements; create advancement opportunities



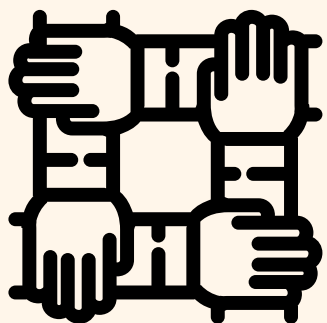
Certainty

Provide regular updates; establish clear expectations for roles; have regular communication channels



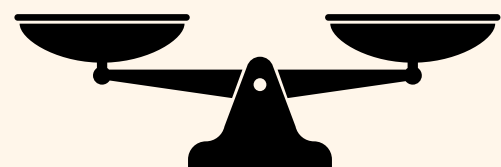
Autonomy

Delegate decision making authority; encourage initiative; offer flexibility



Relatedness

Build community and sense of shared purpose/identity; foster collaboration; promote social interaction



Fairness

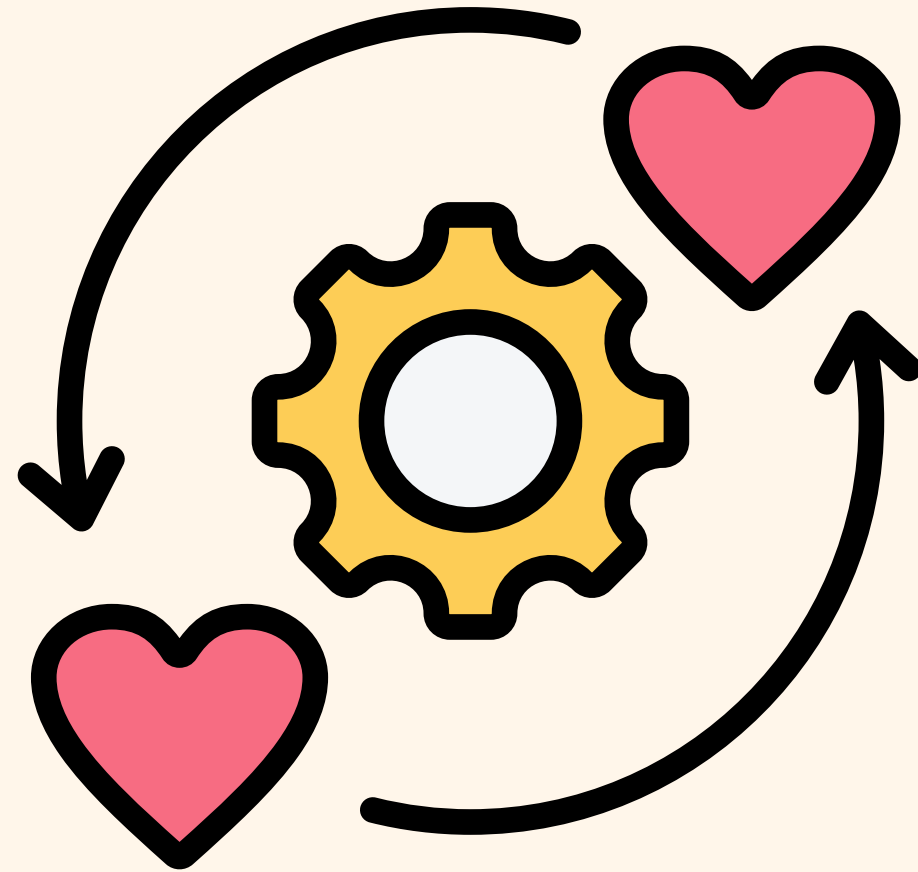
Ensure fair, consistently-applied fair policies, equal access to resources and opportunities, transparent decision making,

RESILIENCY TIP

Resilience requires creativity and trust, which are fostered by positive SCARF conditions.



ACTION TOOL: PRIMING



We're hardwired to reciprocate behavior,
and we're easily influenced by our
environment.

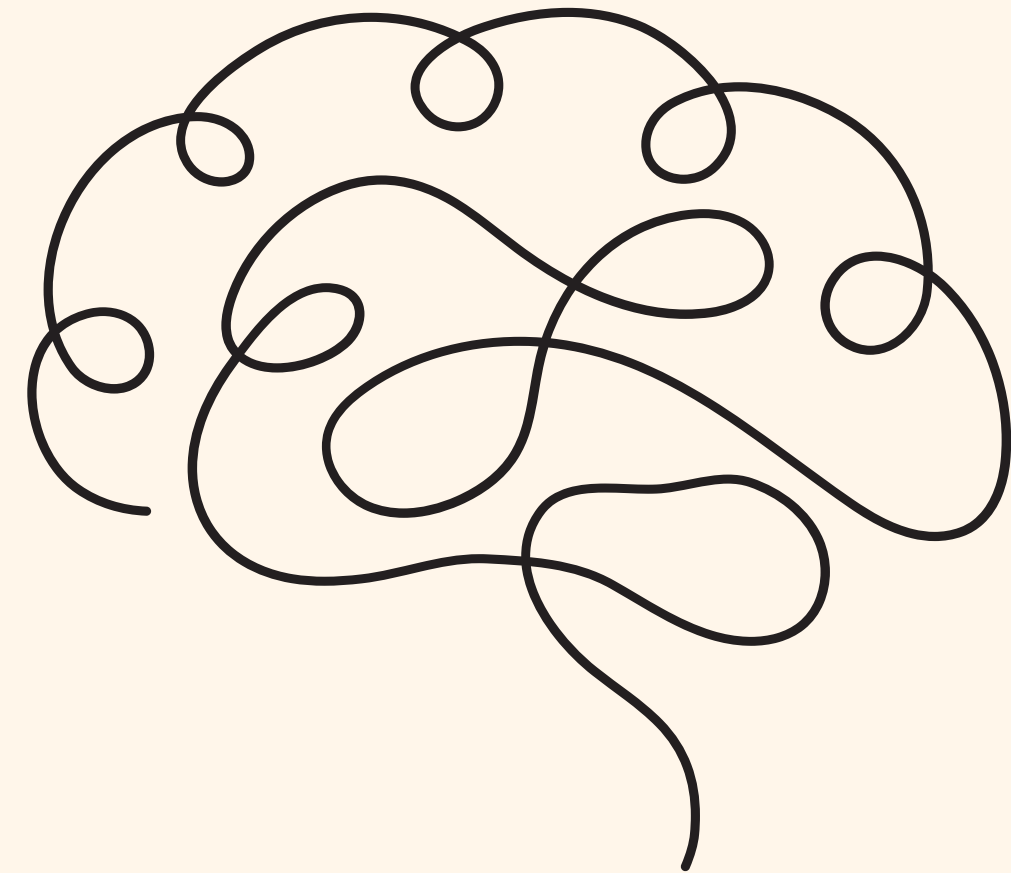
RESILIENCY TIP

You can prime for optimism and openness, which build resilience.

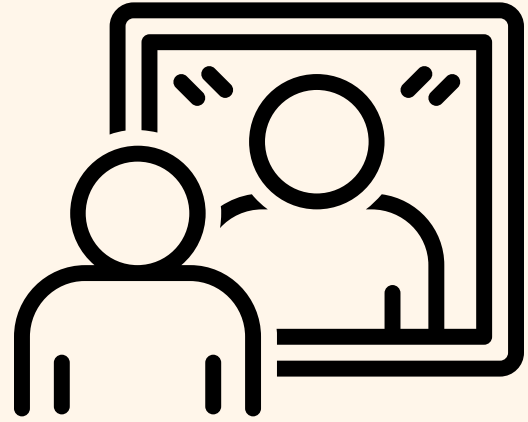


PART THREE: TIPS FOR LEADERS

Creating cultures and systems of **intentional** communication for resilience and conflict transformation



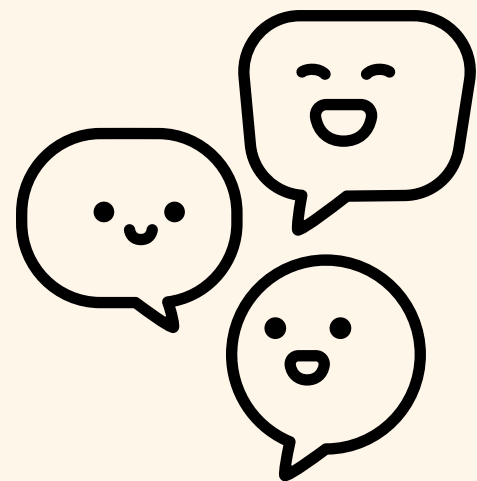
INTENTIONAL COMMUNICATION IN SYSTEMS



Reflect: know yourself and your institution



Model: exemplify good communication and conflict transformation



Create: build channels for communication, venues for connection, and opportunities for growth

INTENTIONAL COMMUNICATION IN UNIVERSITIES

Communication channels

- Social media posts to promote transparency about policies and events

Connection venues

- Campus dialogues or civil discourse workshops
- Peer mediation programs
- “Conflict and peace specialists” to mediate disputes and facilitate conversations
- Listening sessions for administration with faculty and/ or students

Growth/skills building and practicing

- De-escalation or conflict capacity building training for hall advisers
- Conflict resolution skills programs integrated into orientation
- University-created conversation guidelines for classes and public fora
- Working with mediation or dispute resolution centers to advise on crises



PART FOUR: RESOURCES FOR LEADERS



**Bridging
Divides
Initiative**



Thank you!