

# Systems vs. Conventional Thinking

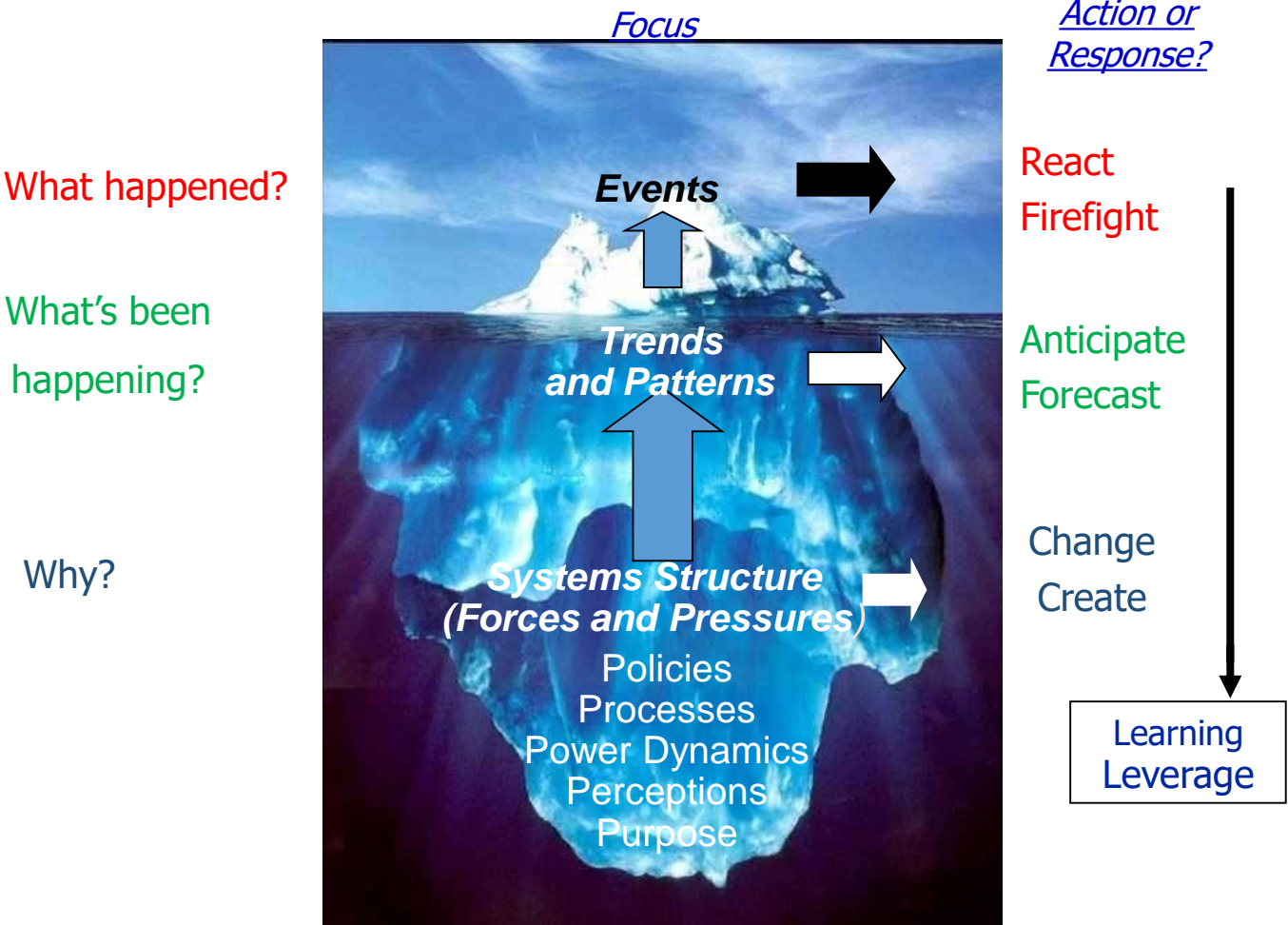
## Conventional Thinking

- The connection between problems and their causes is obvious and easy to trace.
- Others, either within or outside our organization, are to blame for our problems and must be the ones to change.
- A policy designed to achieve short term success will also assure long term success.
- In order to optimize the whole, we must optimize the parts.
- Aggressively tackle many independent initiatives simultaneously.

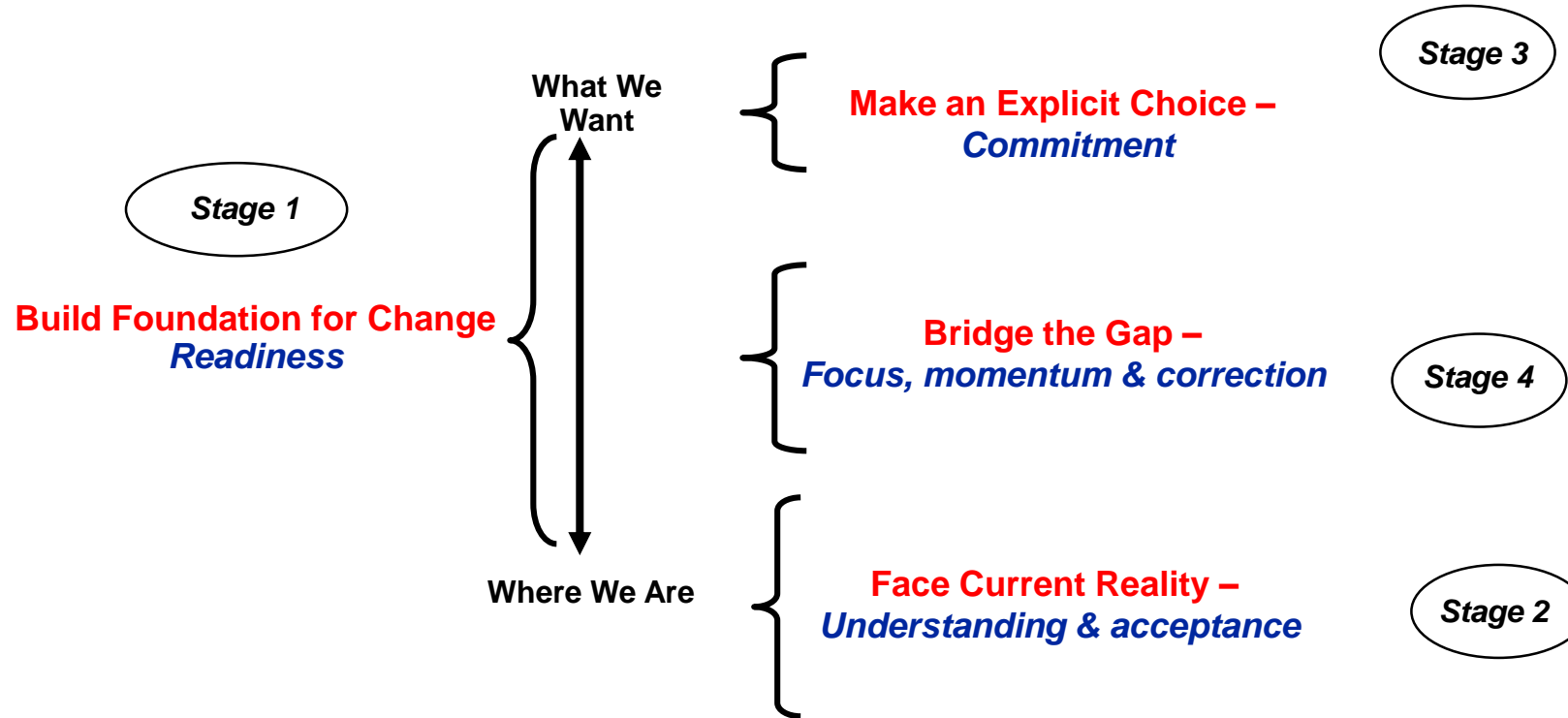
## Systems Thinking

- The relationship between problems and their causes is indirect and not obvious.
- We unwittingly create our own problems and have significant control or influence in solving them through changing our own behavior.
- 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 improve relationships among the parts.
- Only a few key coordinated changes sustained over time will produce large systems change.

# Distinguish Different Levels of Reality: The Iceberg



# Four Stages of Leading Systemic Change



# Where to Begin: Ask Systemic Questions

Pick a chronic, complex problem and ask diverse stakeholders the following questions:

- Why have we been unable to solve this problem despite our best efforts?
- If we know the solution, why haven't we implemented it?
- 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?

## Key Take-Aways

- To change systems we need to first develop a shared understanding of why they behave as they do
- This includes appreciating our responsibility for the problem – not just the solution
- Thinking – not just convening – systemically motivates people to optimize the whole vs. just their part of the system
- You can use a four-stage change process to identify high leverage interventions and focus limited resources

# Additional Resources

- David Peter Stroh, [\*Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide for Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results\*](#) (Chelsea Green, 2015)
- [\*Systems Grantmaking: A Resource Guide\*](#) (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2016)
- [The Systems Thinker](#): 800+ free articles on systems thinking and organizational learning
- [www.bridgewaypartners.com](http://www.bridgewaypartners.com) and [www.appliedsystemsthinking.com](http://www.appliedsystemsthinking.com)
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