WANBEL RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM 2026

*Transforming Learning, Leadership and Wellbeing Across the Pacific*

STRAND A **Educational Leadership and Institutional Change**



# Building bridges and aligning stars: *Show me things I've never seen before (Covenant Singers)*


**Darren Bryant**

Professor and Deputy Head, School of Education
Curtin University


**23 to 25 November 2026**

Koiari Park Campus · Pacific Adventist University

Pacific Adventist University
EDUCATE TO SERVE

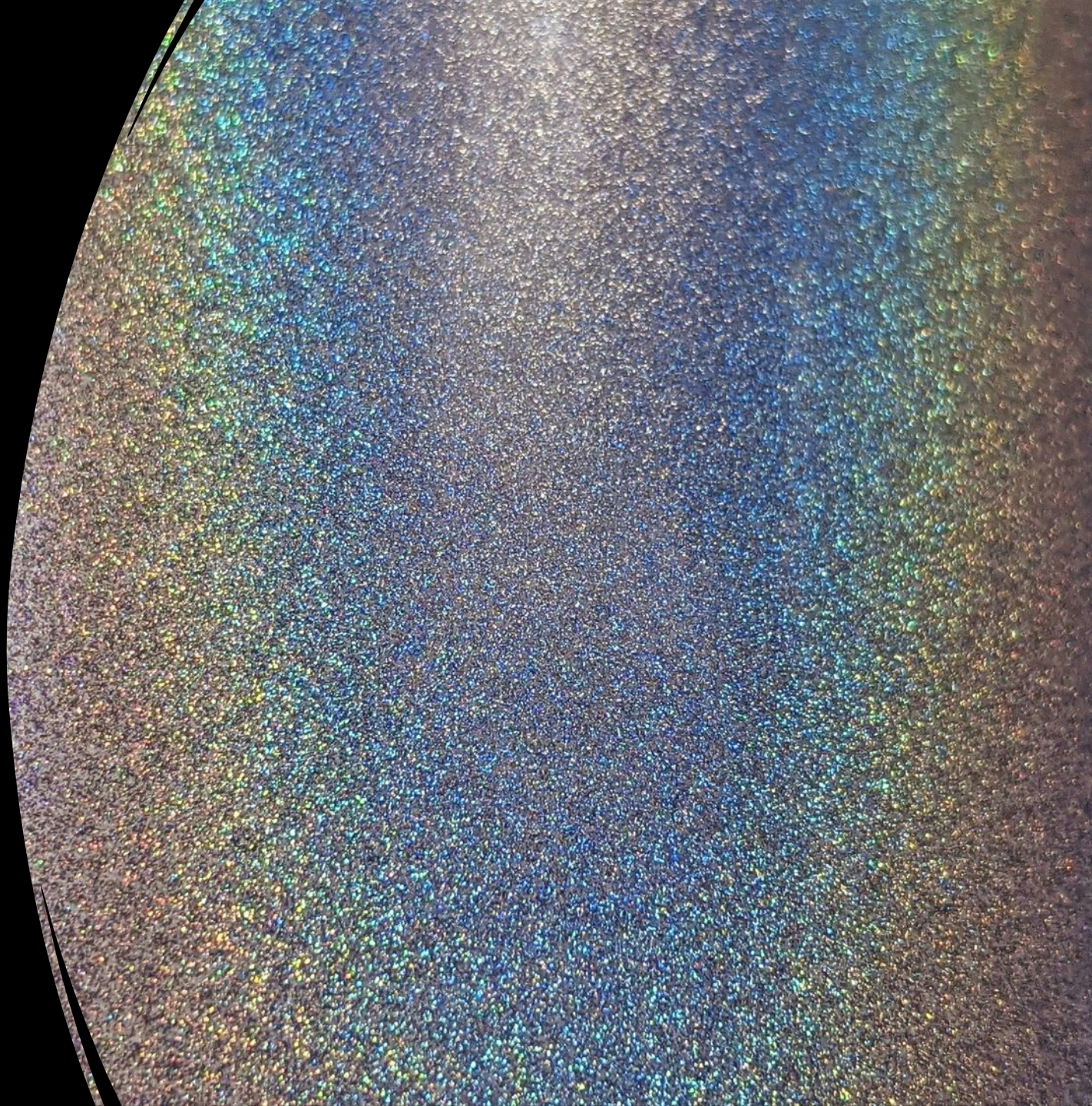
Curtin University

Curtin ACADEMY

Australia Awards

# My perspective

- Mid-level leader
- Educational leadership
- From teaching to research-intensive
- Leading through disruptions
- Outsider to insider

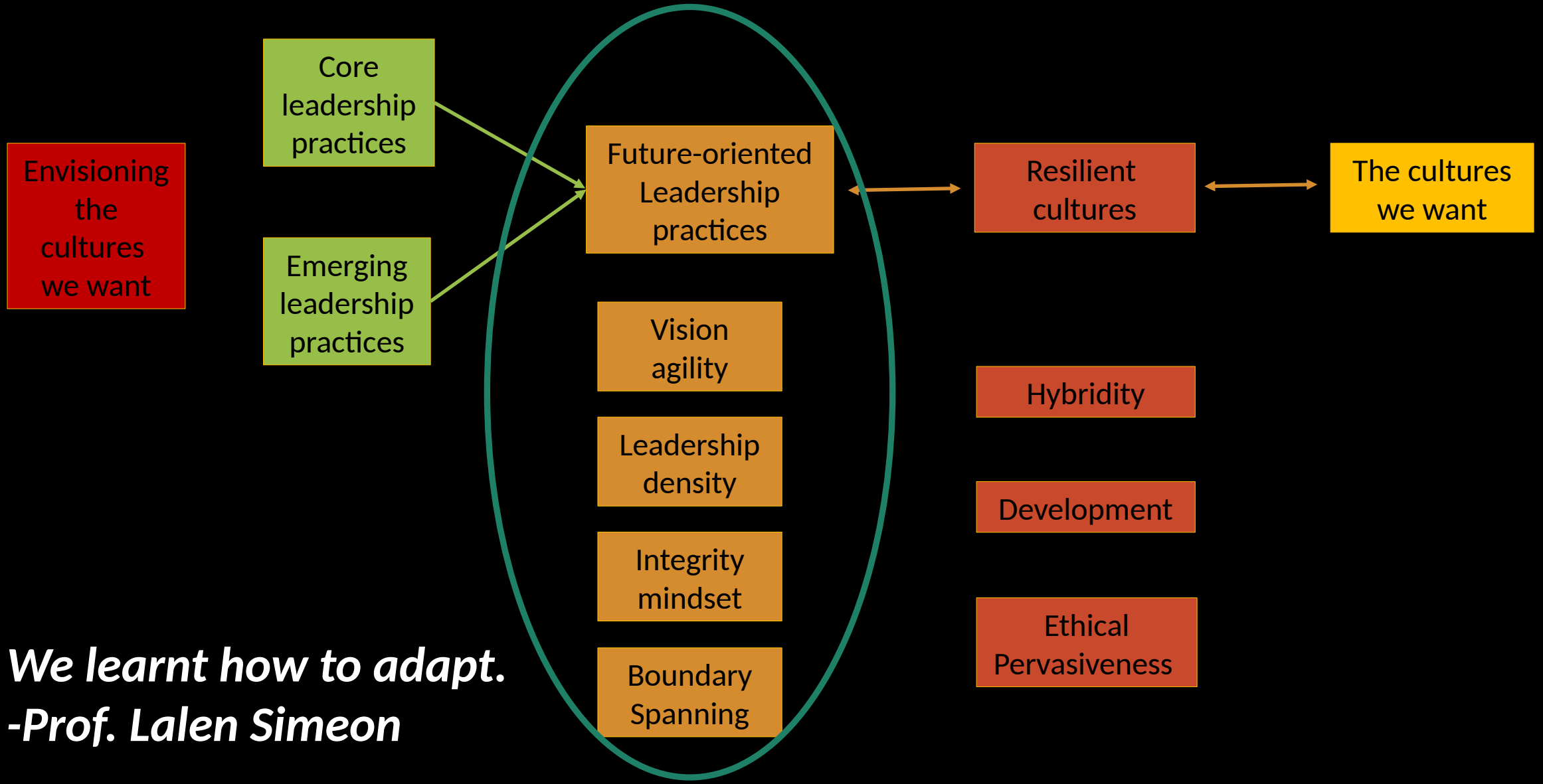




- Change is **improvement**
- Change is **cultural**
- Increasingly **complex** contexts
- Organisations are **lived** systems
- Cultures are **cultivated** not engineered
- **Leaders** can **influence** conditions
- **Everyone** is responsible
- **PNG** relevance?

We need to invest in knowledge creation that is contextually relevant
-- Dr Kepha Pondi

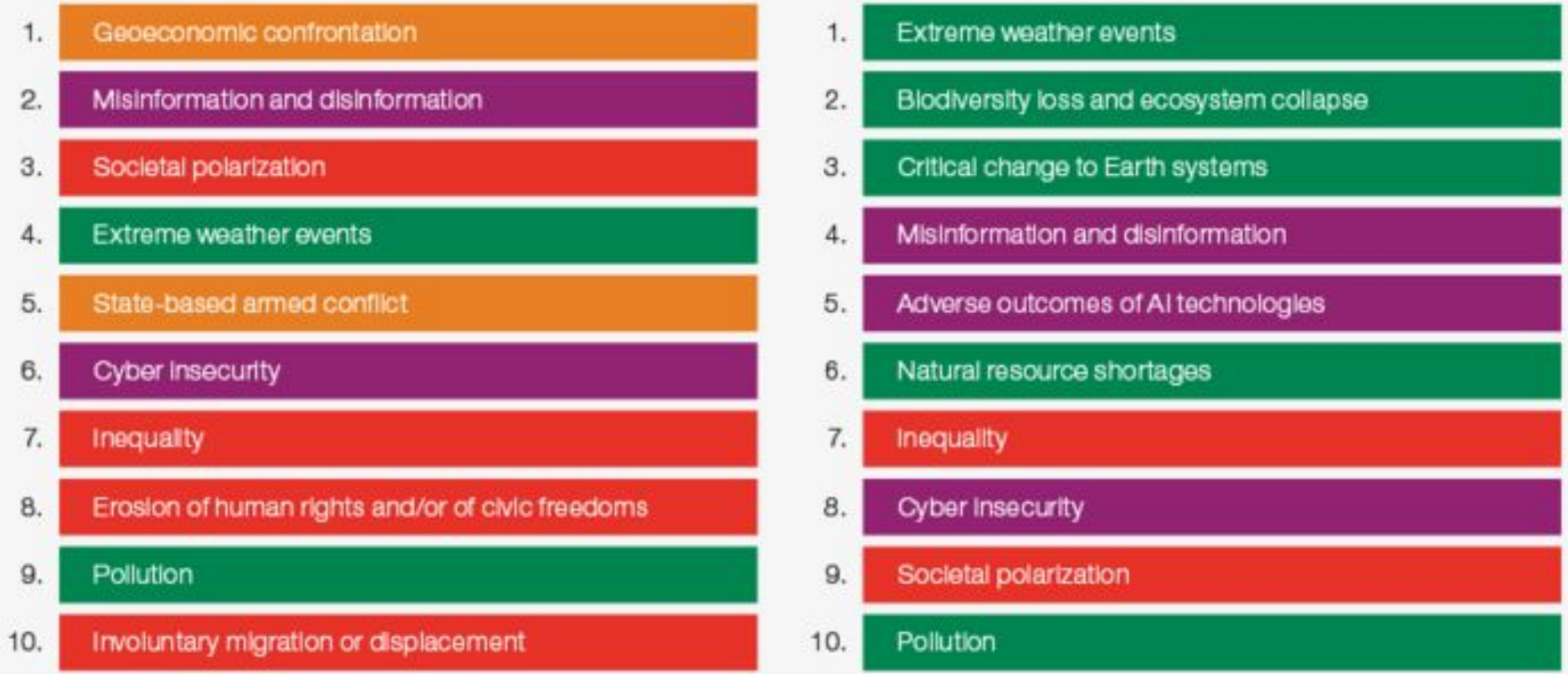
# Leadership for resilient HE cultures




***We learnt how to adapt.***
***-Prof. Lalen Simeon***

## Global risks ranked by severity, short term (2 years) and long term (10 years)

*"Please estimate the likely impact (severity) of the following risks over a 2-year and 10-year period."*




Source

World Economic Forum Global Risks Perception Survey 2025-2026

Risk categories

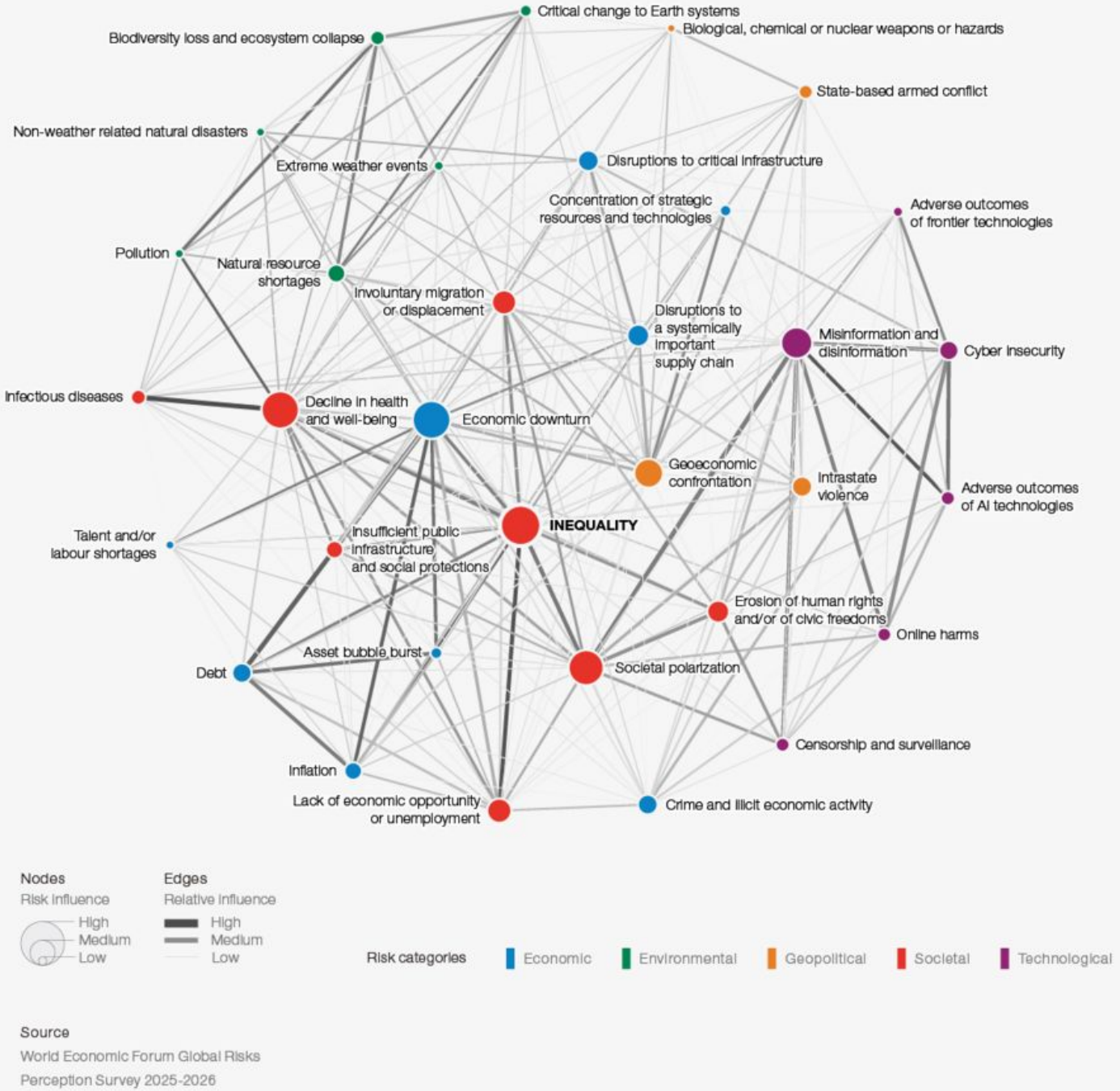
Economic | Environmental | Geopolitical | Societal | Technological

*The Global Risk Landscape*

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[The Global Risks Report 2026 | World Economic Forum]





# 6 messy *shifts*

**01**

## The values shift

Misaligned values and fragmenting expectations

**02**

## The technology shift

Strategic necessities with no clear direction

**03**

## The accountability shift

Accountability becomes multidirectional and multidimensional

**04**

## The energy shift

The new infrastructure of the digital economy

**05**

## The trust shift

Eroding foundations and shrinking circles of trust

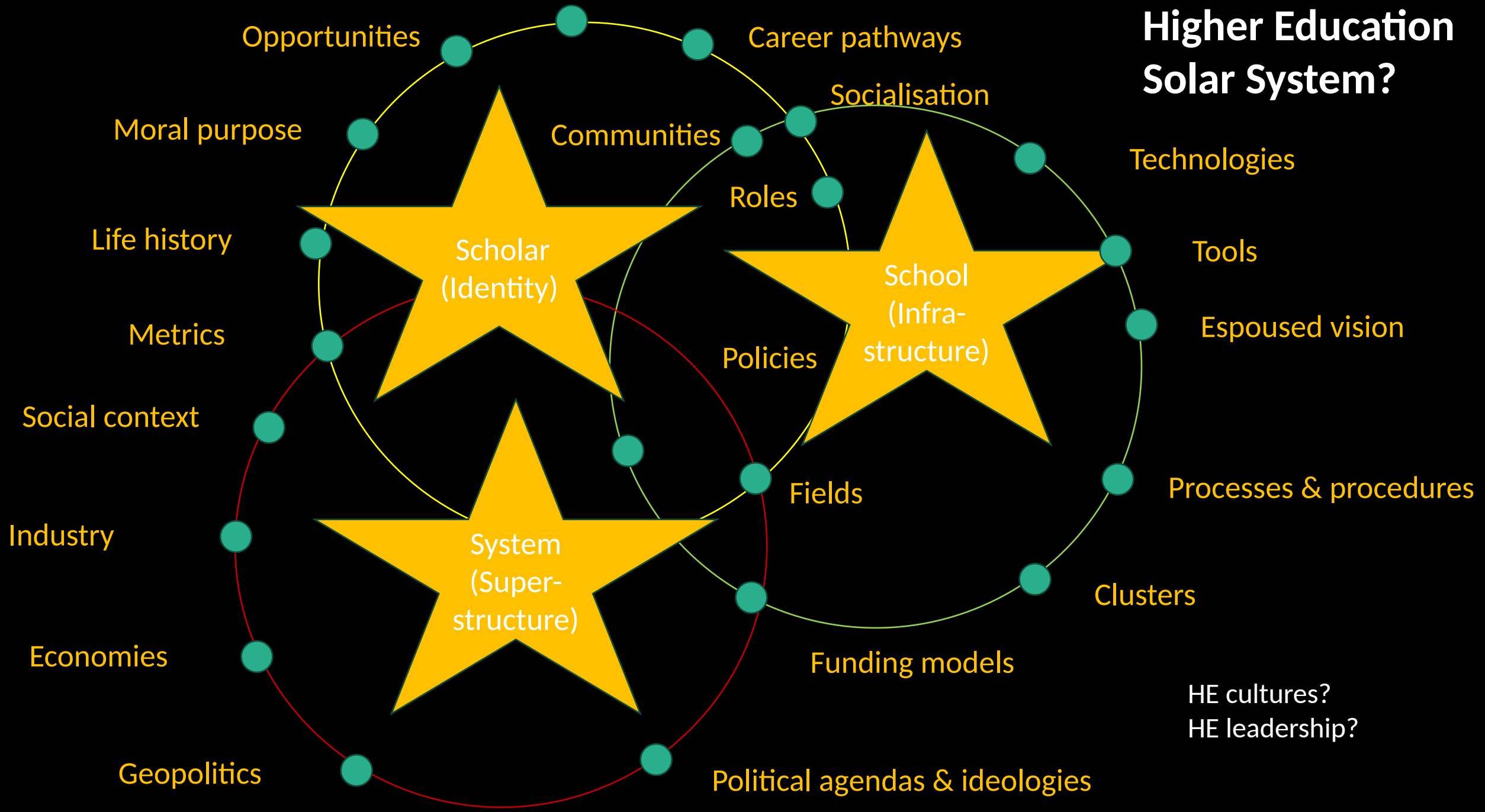
**06**

## The information shift

Lost in a synthetic sea

Steal this slide | Sydney Executive Plus

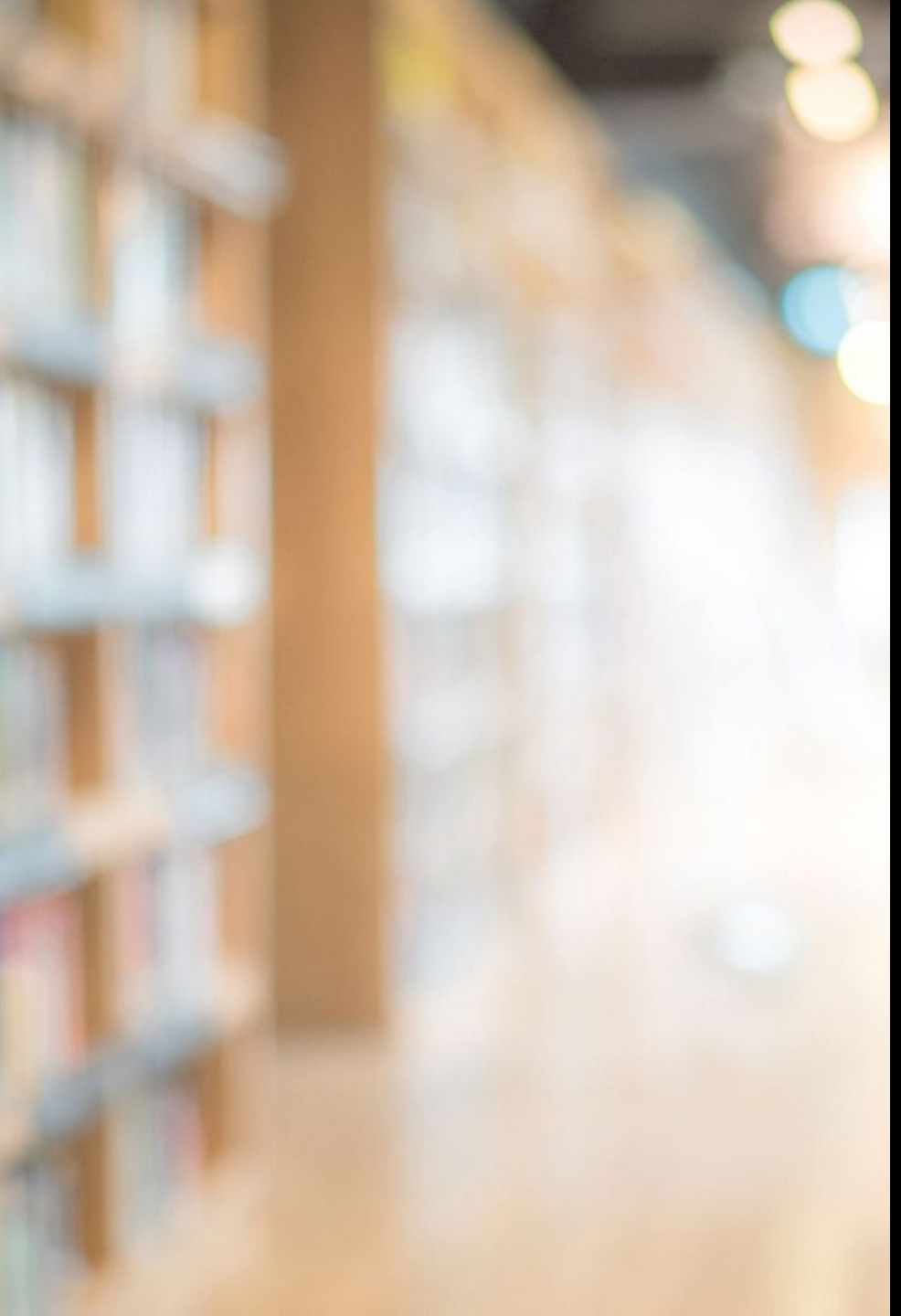
# Higher Education Solar System?



# Perturbations, protostars, supernovas, black holes

- Student intake targets
- Curriculum mandates
- Research funding
- Workload models
- Stakeholder needs
- Purpose
- Gen AI
- Social responsibility
- International mobility
- Global risks
- Ideological shift

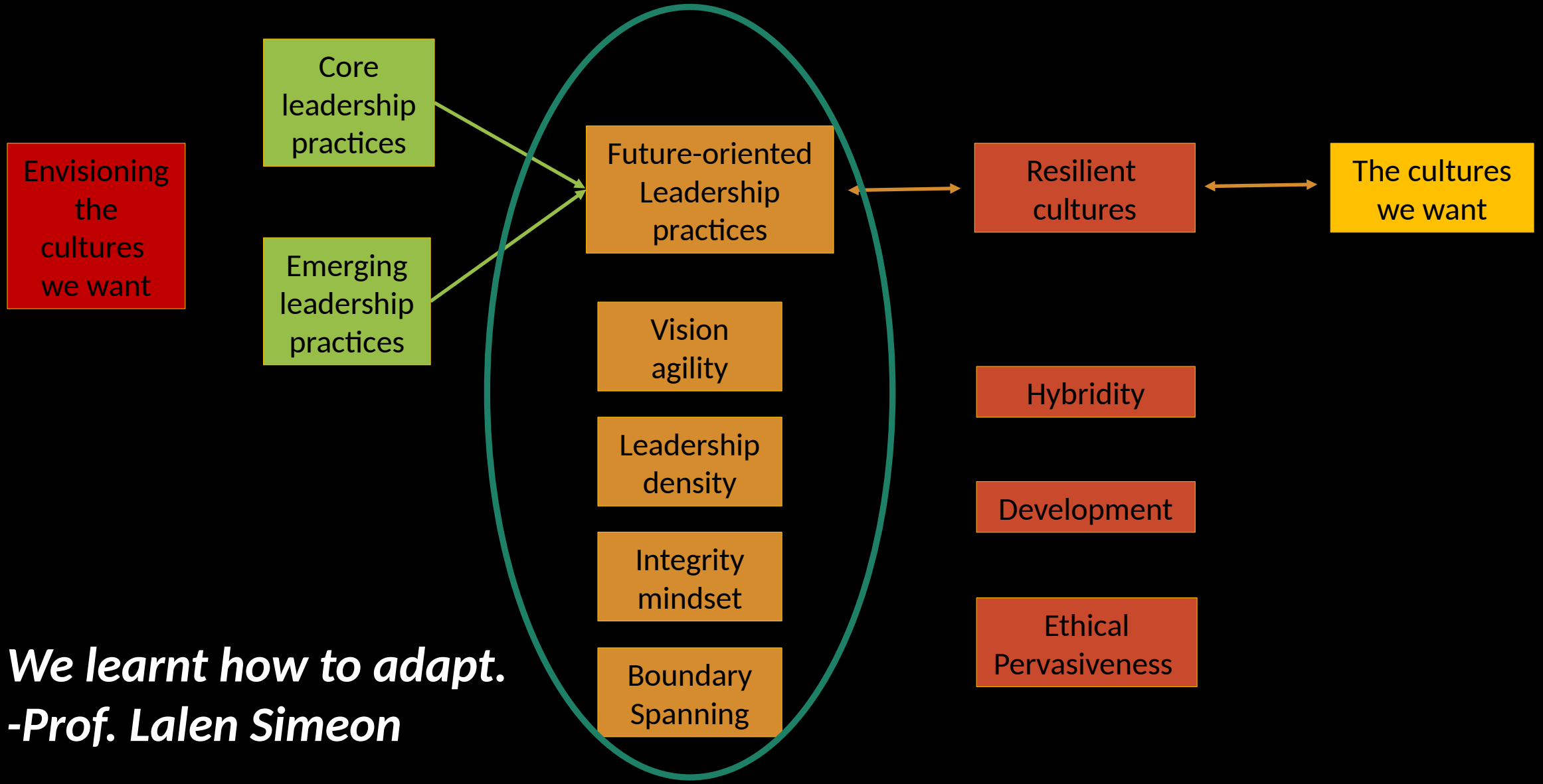
*It’s never going to stay fixed*
*- Dr Craig Sims*



# Looking forward: What HE cultures do we want?

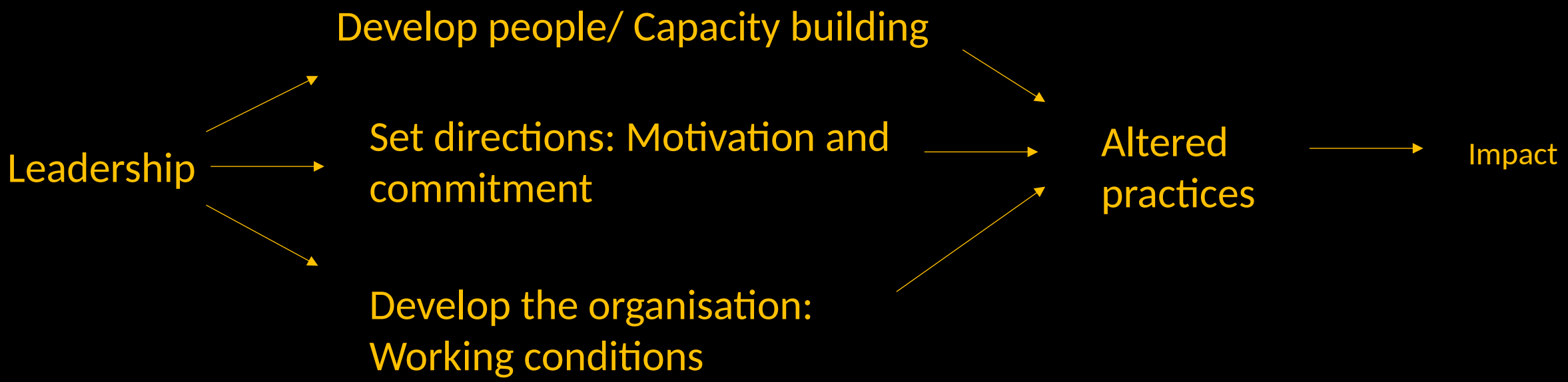
- Growth- and development-oriented
- Nurturing creativity, curiosity and risk-taking
- Agile, responsive and resilient
- No-one is disadvantaged by their circumstances
- Engaged and interactive membership
  - Everyone is “heard, respected and supported” (Edna Worn)
- What else???

# Leadership for resilient HE cultures

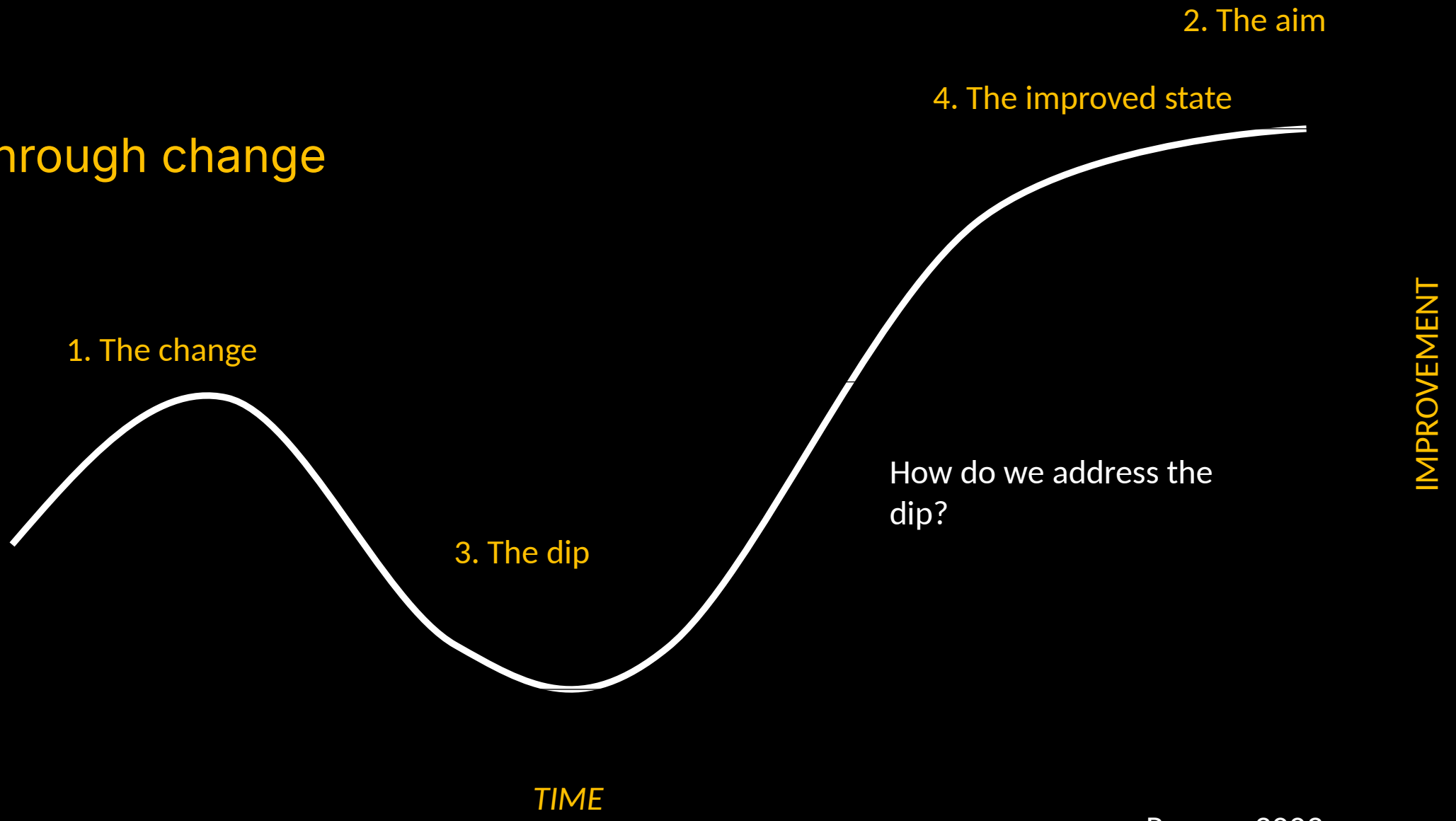



***We learnt how to adapt.***
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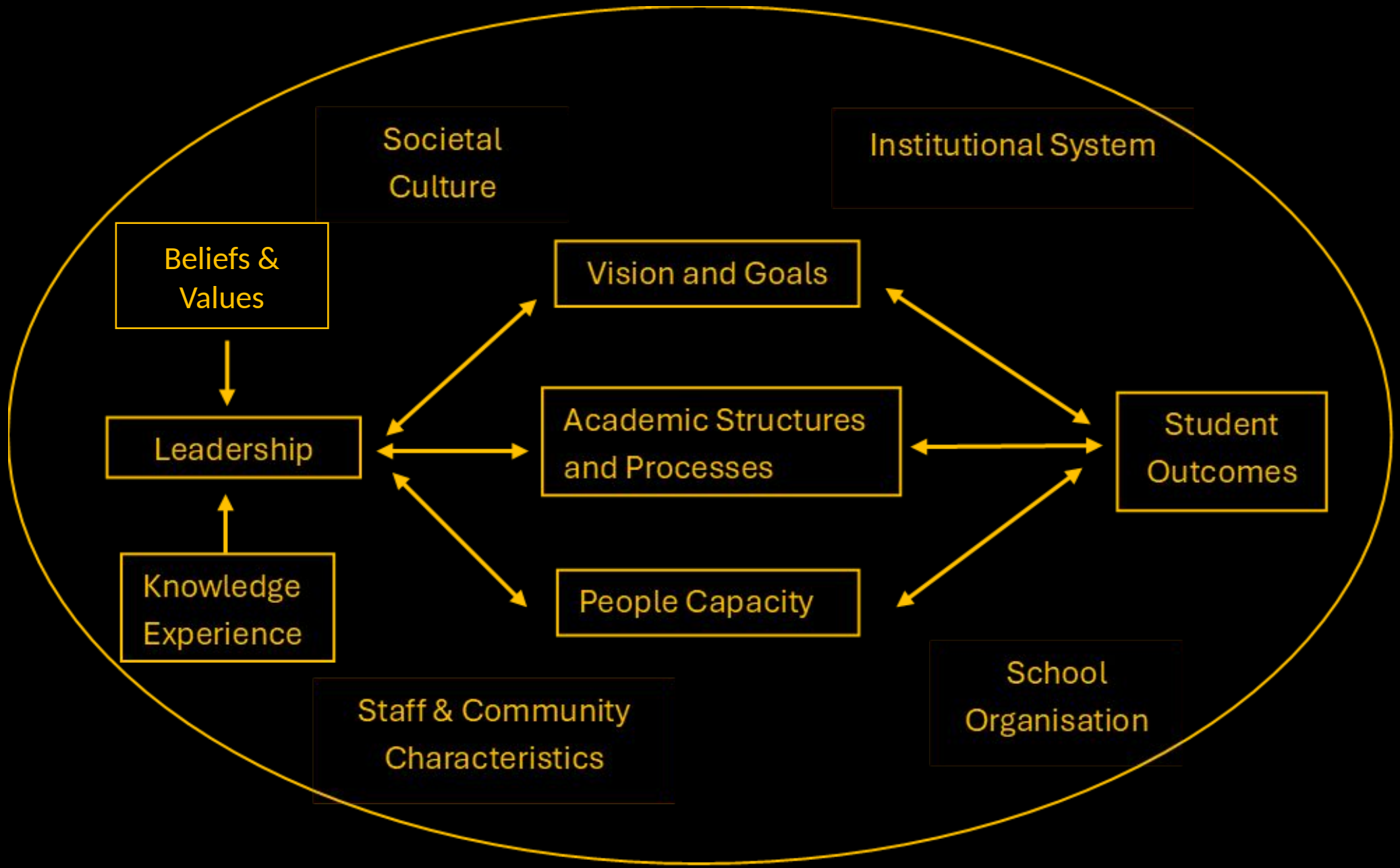
Mostly leaders contribute … indirectly, through **their influence** on other people or features of their organizations. (Leithwood et al, 2004; 2020)



# Leading through change




Rogers, 2003


Societal Culture
Institutional System
Beliefs & Values
Vision and Goals
Leadership
Academic Structures and Processes
Student Outcomes
Knowledge Experience
People Capacity
Staff & Community Characteristics
School Organisation

# Leading through turbulence: Emerging leadership practices

Managing normality --- Managing disruption

Looking for speed --- Looking for sense

Promoting innovation --- Seeking consistency

Caring for staff --- Caring for learning

Caring for people --- Maintaining standards

Caring for self --- Caring for others

Spreading decisions --- Making decisions

Learning --- Unlearning

Making decisions for “us” --- Watching for “others”

Walker & Bryant, 2020

# Vision Agility:  What is it?



## Focus:

Leaders articulate and communicate a shared vision in aspirational terms—ideally these were in place before crises

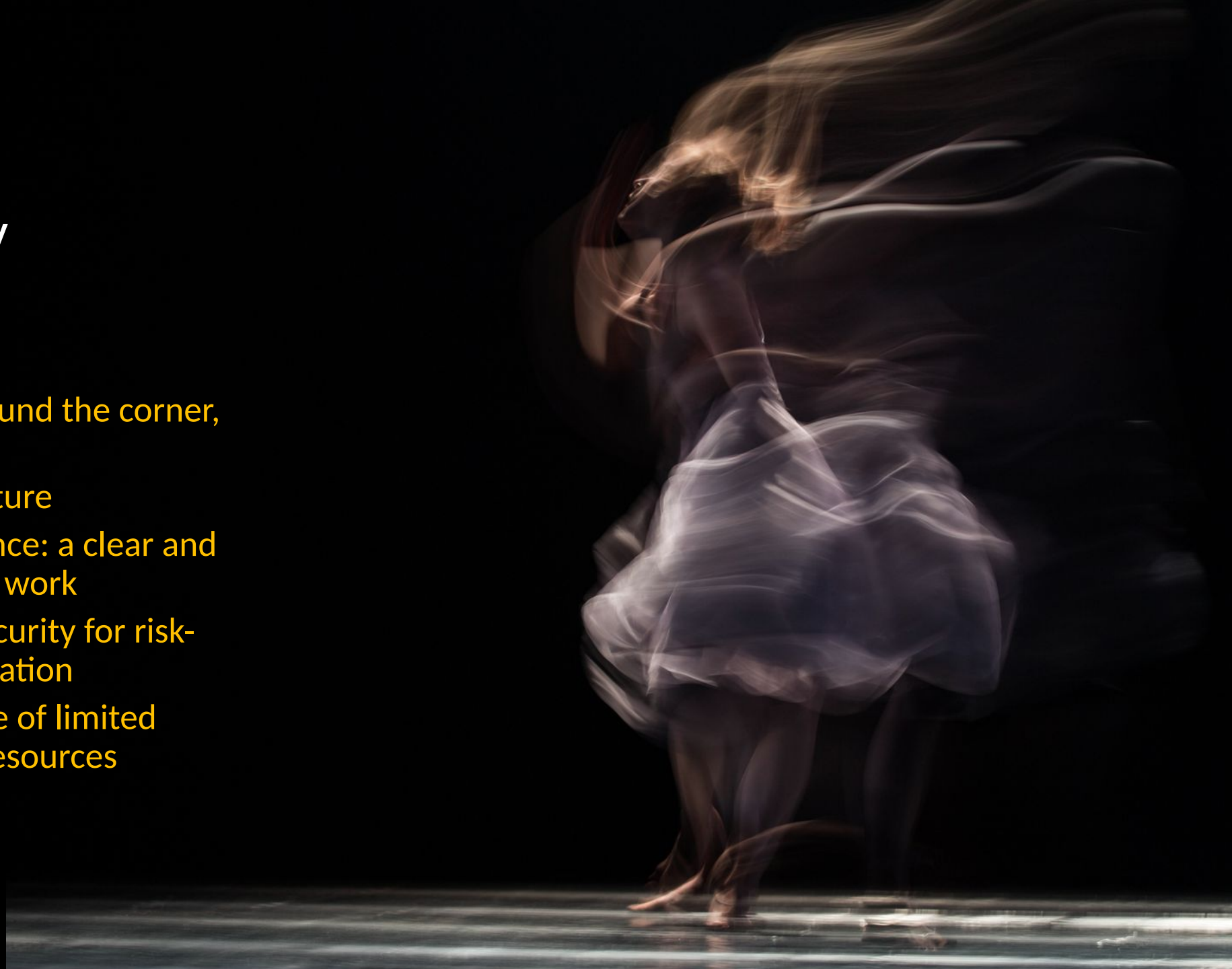


## Shift and shake:

Leaders look for ways to adopt new strategies or tactics move towards the vision in the face of changing circumstances

# Vision agility: Why is it important?

- We don’t know what is around the corner, but we need
  - a vision for a better future
  - purpose amid turbulence: a clear and coherent focus for our work
  - support, safety and security for risk-taking and experimentation
  - a North Star in the face of limited energies and limited resources



# Vision agility: What does it look like?



- Top priorities are understood and discussed
- Changes are discussed and understood
- Collaborative cultures are fostered
- Creativity is valued
- Bottom-up potential is recognised and supported
- Threats as opportunities for renewal
- Differentiated measures
- Robust discussion and transparency about priorities



# Leadership density: What is it?

- Recognising leadership as interaction
- Valuing formal and informal leadership
- Spreading capacity

# Leadership density: Why is it important?

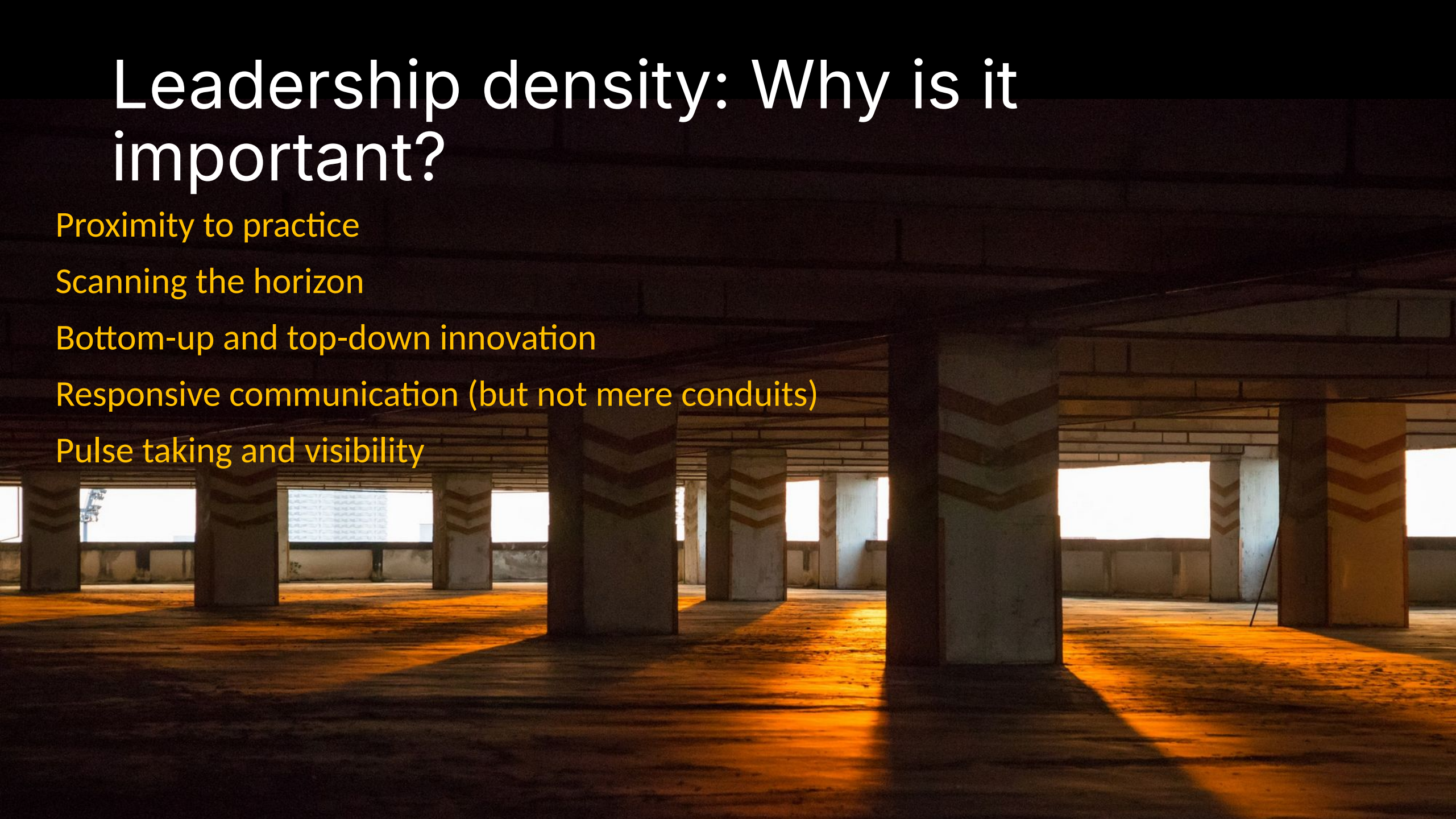
Proximity to practice

Scanning the horizon

Bottom-up and top-down innovation

Responsive communication (but not mere conduits)

Pulse taking and visibility



# Leadership density: What does it look like?

- Pervasive opportunity to lead
- Organisational designs that support capacity development and interactions
- Resourcing for capacity-building, knowledge, networks, advocacy
- Making opportunity for peer learning and collaborative inquiry across layers
- Being visible



Bryant & Walker, 2024



# Integrity mindset: What is it?

Authenticity, self-awareness, moral clarity, presence, ethical reciprocity

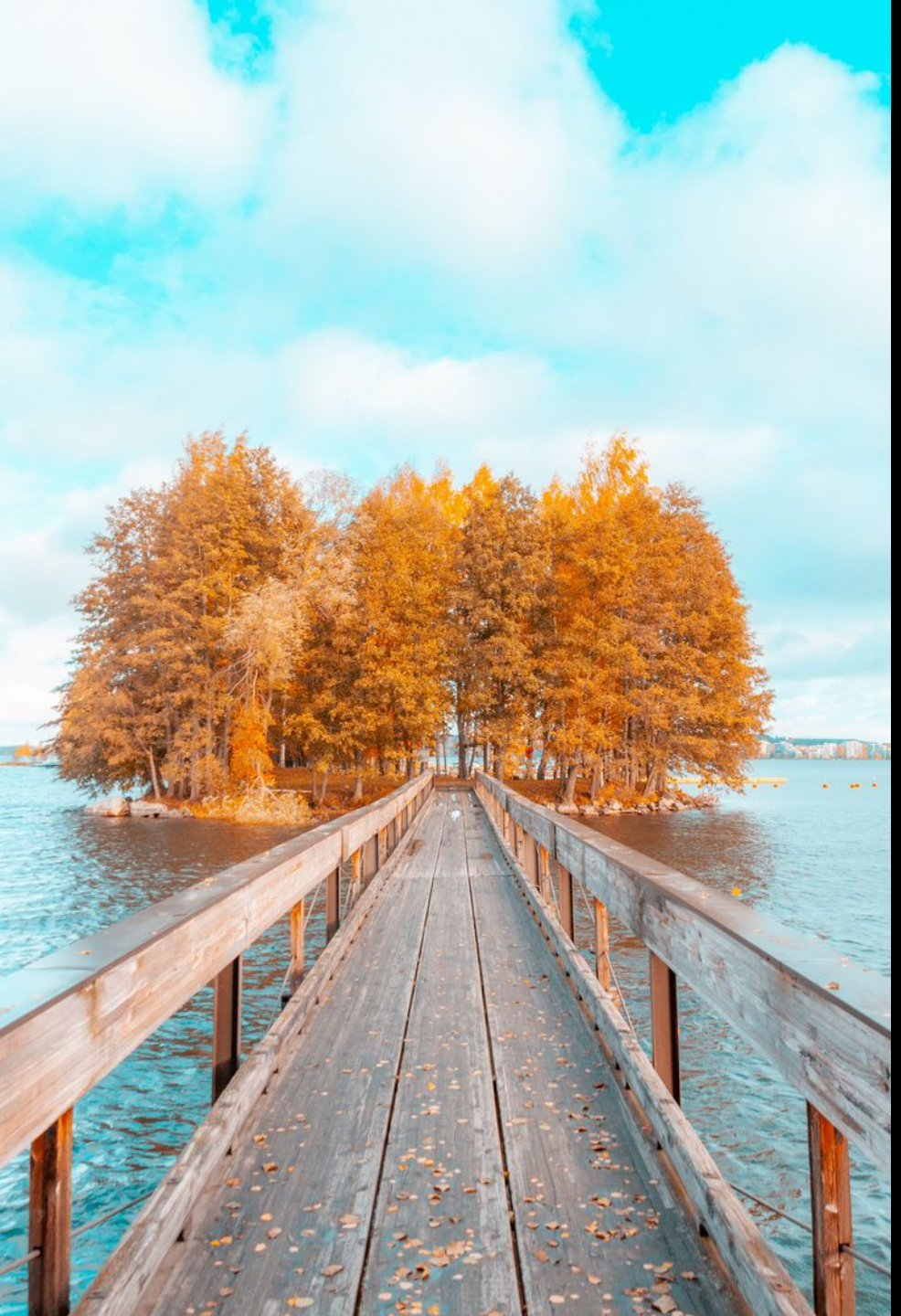
Recognise inequity of opportunity and proactively take steps to remedy it.

Diversity and inclusion as value addedness.



# Integrity mindset: Why is it important?

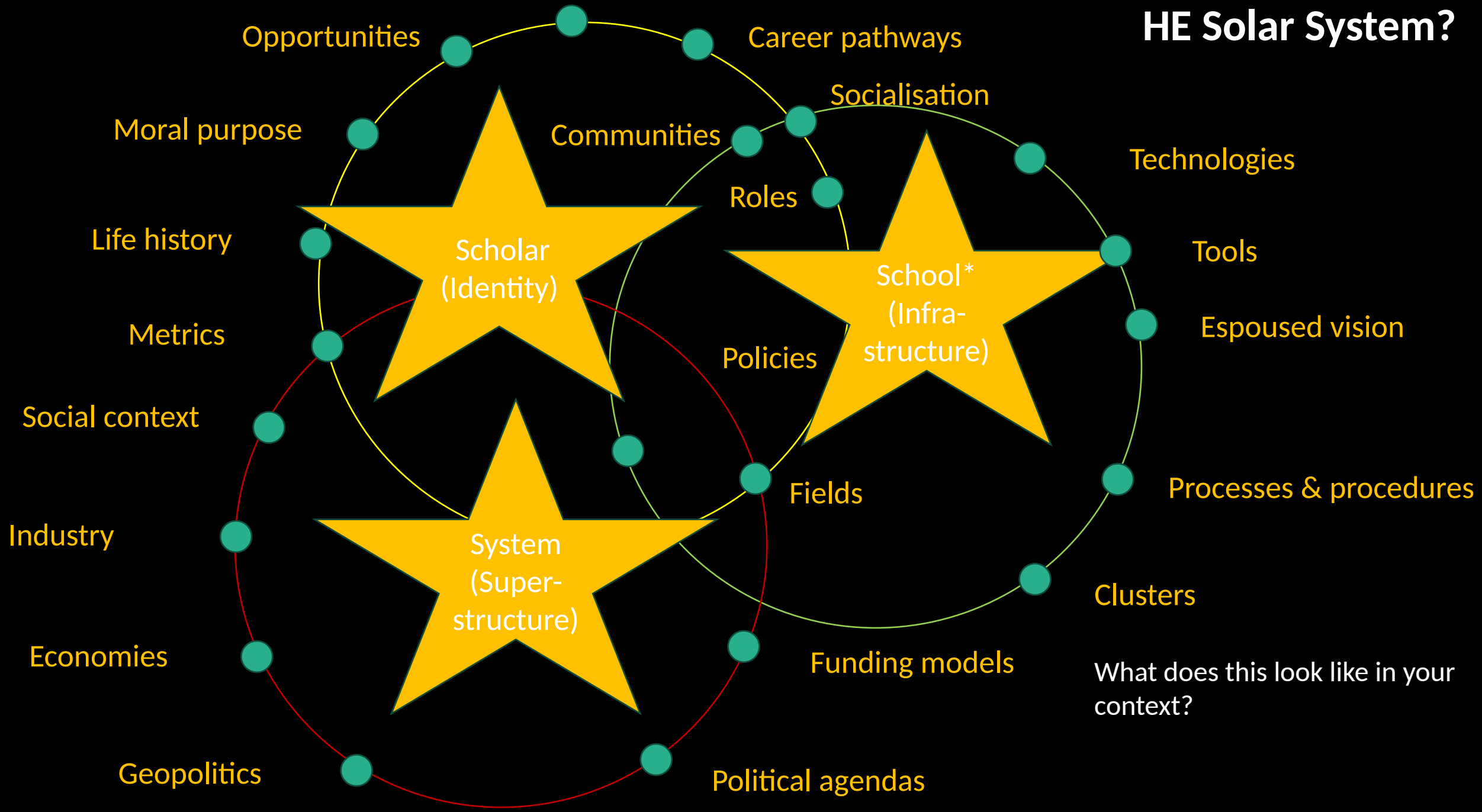
- Understanding diverse expectations and needs that need to be addressed for individual and collective health
- Enriching organisational potential—diversity prevents groupthink and lock-in
- Community connectivity—understanding and meeting stakeholder needs
- Demonstrating and modelling the aspired state by action not mere compliance and management



# Integrity mindset: What does it look like?

- Uncovering root causes of inequity and what they mean for individuals and the organisation
- Considering whose knowledge counts; inviting critique
- Valuing multiple epistemologies and methods
- Supporting differentiated support and diverse pathways for research
- Community-based inquiry
  - Local networks
  - Community resources
- Being intentional about resources, technologies, and personnel distributions

# HE Solar System?



# Research culture boundary spanning



Boundaries

1. Identity
2. Infrastructure
3. Superstructure

## Boundary Practices

- **Buffering**, defining boundaries to create safety and opportunity
- **Reflecting**, creating an understanding of boundaries to foster respect and joint-enterprise
- **Connecting**, to suspend boundaries and build trust
- **Mobilising**, reframing boundaries to develop community
- **Weaving**, interlacing boundaries to advance interdependence
- **Transforming**, cross-cutting boundaries to enable reinvention

(Center for Creative Leadership, 2010)



# Bridging teachers and leaders

- Others are clear about my actual work (not only the job title) regarding initiatives.
- I have pathways for dialogue with teaching teams, other leaders and stakeholders.
- I advocate for X across the school and with relevant stakeholders.

Image: https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article272035052.htm



# Bridging vision and outcomes

- The vision, mission, and / or improvement priorities inform or suggest a shared direction.
- I work with others to build a shared vision.
- Members of my team can articulate this vision.  Senior leadership supports it.
- My team works on bottom-up innovation.

Image:https://www.reddit.com/r/CitiesSkylines/comments/5tvx9e/cars_and_trains_on_the_bridge/.

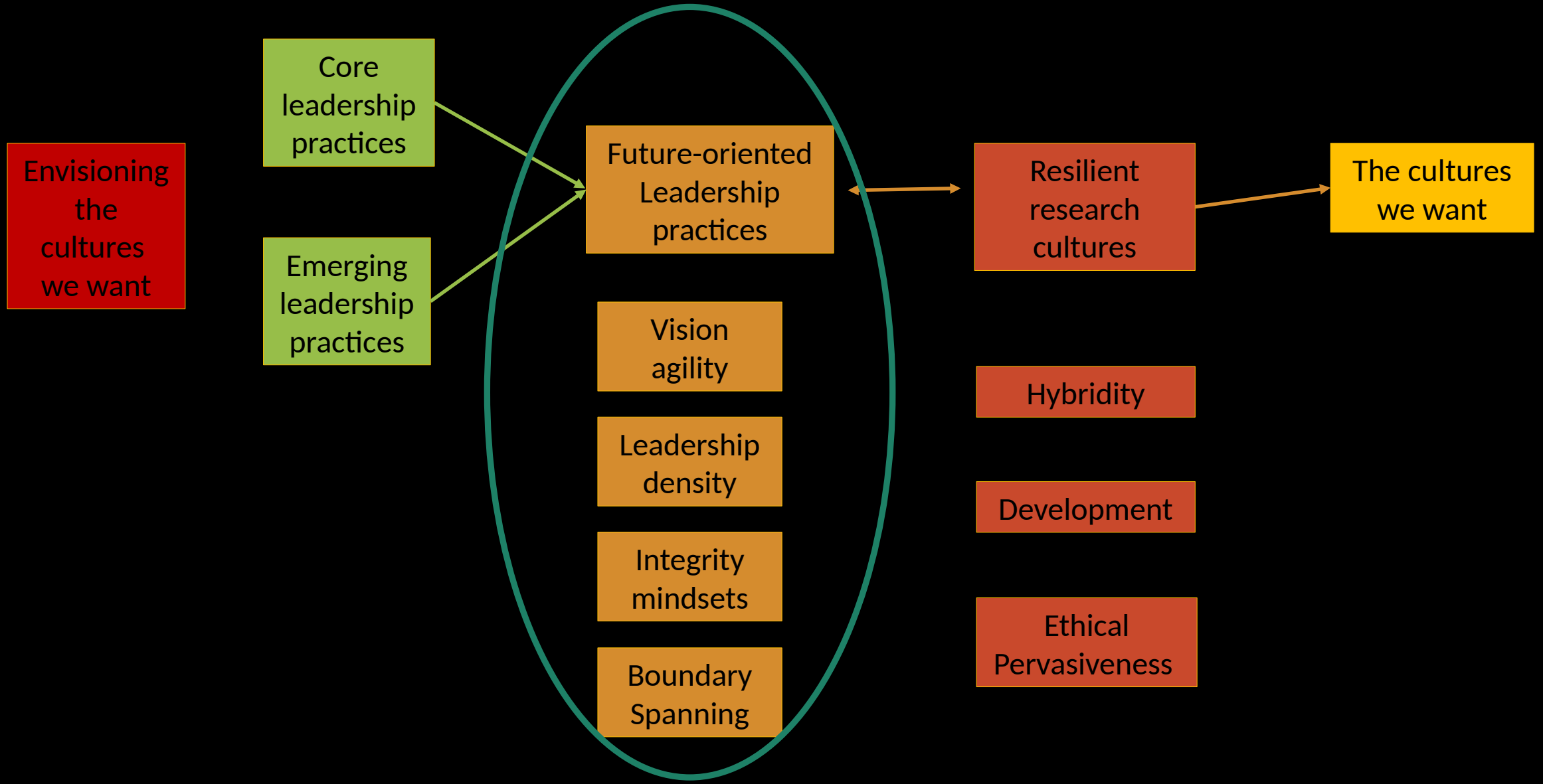


Image: https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/confederation-bridge

# Bridging capacity and professional learning

- I have the opportunity to develop as a leader.
- I have a mentor.
- I prioritise relational approaches to improvement over strict innovation targets.
- I engage team members in problem-solving.
- I encourage professional reflection.

# Leadership we need for HE cultures



What do we throw away, rework, or reframe?



# What are resilient cultures?

- The ability to maintain adaptability in a manner that builds the capacity of all
- It is enacted through leadership around building vision agility, leadership density, equity mindsets and boundary spanning.
- A filter to assess what to keep, adapt, or discard.

# What might a resilient HE culture look like?

| | |
|---|---|
| Hybridity<br>(Through vision agility) | Recombining old and new strengths<br>Removing what harms<br>Conserving what benefits |
| Development<br>(Through leadership density) | Enhances capacity of all<br>Creating supportive networks |
| Ethics<br>(Through an integrity mindset) | Protecting diversity<br>Renewing energy |

# Some final thoughts

**We need to invest in knowledge creation that is contextually relevant. – Dr Kepha Pondi**

1. I used the metaphor of a solar system to describe the higher education culture of system, school and scholar. Does this work in your context? What parts of your solar system dominate?
2. Is there a better metaphor for the PNG context?
3. How are we supporting scholars' career development for work in complex, unpredictable and dynamic spaces?
4. How do we cultivate creative and agile responses to a dynamic HE environment?
5. What are we doing to create coherence within an HE culture?
6. How can leaders at different levels influence the HE solar system? Where can we have agency? Where can we find synergies?

# Your turn: from the world picture to shared questions

## 1 Talk

In small groups, pick one idea or finding from today. What could we do with it in PNG and the Pacific?

Adopt · Adapt · Contextualise · Leverage · Avoid · Remediate

## 2 Choose

Agree on the idea that matters most to you, and the response that fits.

## 3 Shape

Write one research question together, using a question starter.

## 4 Share

Hand in your question. It will be shared and built on through the rest of the Symposium.

### CHOOSE A QUESTION STARTER

**Explore** How do **[who]** across **[institutions or countries]** experience or use **[the idea]**?

**Compare** How does **[outcome]** differ for **[who]** across **[institutions or countries]**, and why?

**Test** To what extent does **[an adapted practice]** change **[a measurable outcome]** for **[who]** across **[institutions or countries]**?

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**How would we know?** What would each site measure or collect?

**Who would work on this?** Names, institution, country.

A good question is **Focused · Shared · Answerable with evidence · Open**