

SCPA

Sauk County Personnel Association

Surviving a *Difficult* Conversation



Telling the Truth to People Who May
Not Want to Hear it!

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What Makes a Conversation Difficult?

A Definition . . .


A difficult conversation is a situation in which at least two parties are engaged where (a) there are differing opinions, perceptions, and needs/wants, (b) feelings and emotions run strong, and (c) the consequences or stakes for us are significant.

A Difficult Conversation

- No **safety** (no one able or willing to tell the truth).
- **Emotions** define the conversation.
- **No listening**, no dialogue.
- Both going for a “**win**” (forcing the other to “lose”).
- Each side **playing a role**: victim, villain, helpless martyr, etc.

Why Do We Self-Destruct?

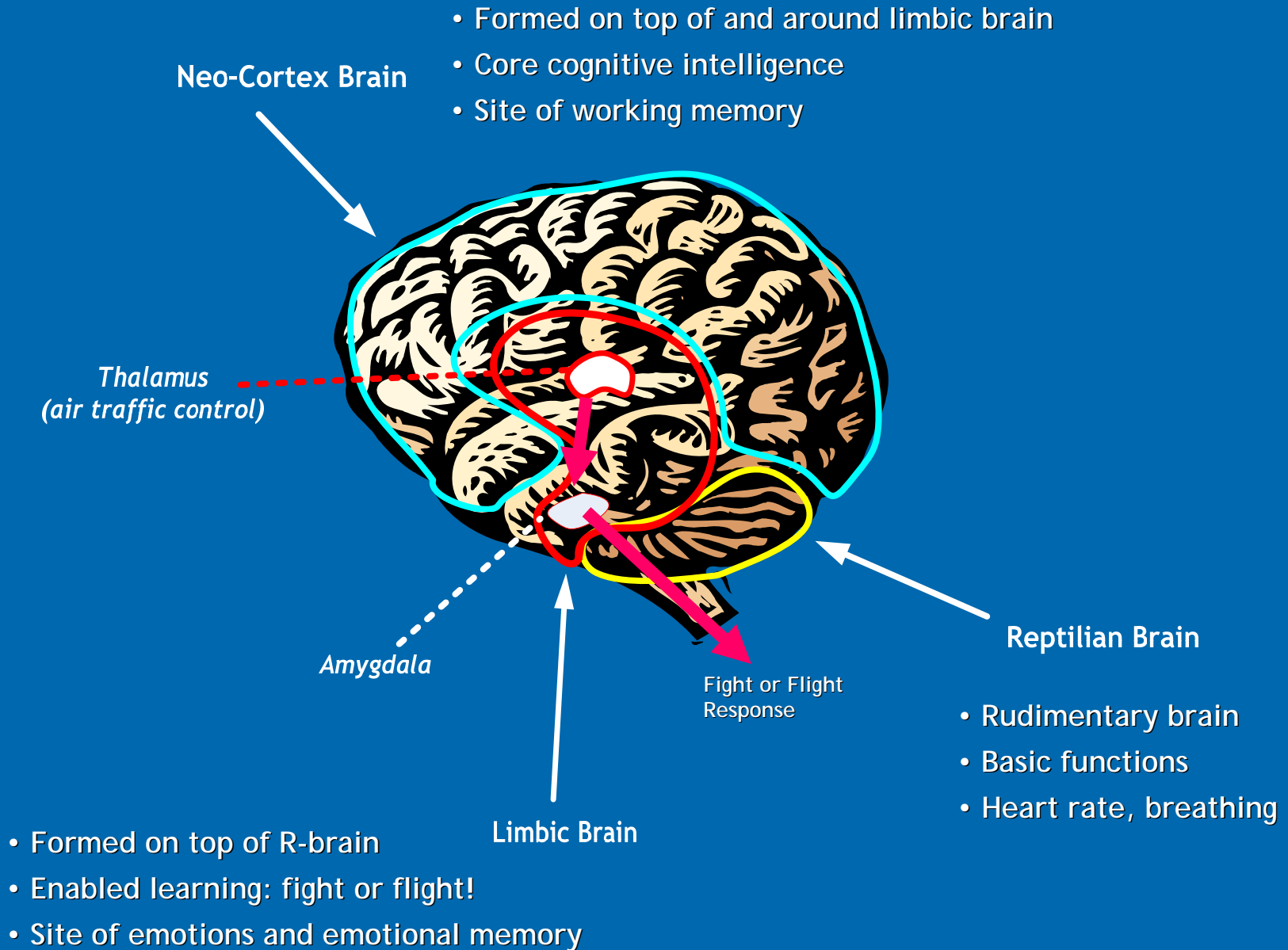
1. Our fight or flight response.
2. We're not prepared (*Where did THAT come from?*).
3. We don't know what we want.
4. We don't have the skills.
5. We fear a loss of control (*and control is everything!*).
6. We're embarrassed or feel vulnerable.

A scenic landscape photograph of a lake surrounded by mountains and a forested island. The water is calm and reflects the surrounding mountains and sky. The sky is a mix of blue and light green, suggesting a clear day. The mountains are rugged and brownish, with some greenery on the slopes. A small island with a dense forest of evergreen trees is in the middle of the lake. The overall scene is peaceful and majestic.

**Before seeking revenge,
first dig two graves.**

— Chinese proverb

Our Three Brains . . .



An Amygdala Hijack!!

When your “fight or flight” response kicks in . . . Your heart races and blood pressure increases, you sweat profusely, have an uneasy feeling in the “gut,” clench your jaw, twitching, tapping foot, cold hands and feet extremities as the brain rushes blood *away* from your cerebral cortex and *toward* the muscles needed for fighting or fleeing . . .

This robs your brain of vital oxygen . . . which, in turn leads to:

- Emotions overwhelming your thinking and actions
- You are thinking and acting *against your own will!*
- You are unable to accurately read others’ emotions
- You are unable to find the right words . . . (stumbling, stuttering when you try to speak)
- You are unable to focus your thinking or actions

Calming Your Amygdala!

- What actions can we take to *calm our own* Amygdala?
- What actions can we take to help *calm others'* Amygdala?

Why We/Others Don't Feel Safe

- **Feeling Threatened** — We may feel unsafe if we think that the other person's intentions and goals are aimed at frustrating or preventing us from achieving what we want in a given situation.
- **Feeling a Loss of Control** — We may feel unsafe if another person is taking control of our situation, circumstances, fate or future.

Why We/Others Don't Feel Safe

- **Feeling Exposed or Vulnerable** – We may feel unsafe if we believe that some perceived personal weakness, vulnerability, mistake, or failing will be revealed or exposed by the other person.
- **Feeling Disrespected** – We may feel unsafe if we think that the other person is dismissive and disrespectful of our ideas, opinions, performance, contributions, effort, and so forth.

Steps to Finding Safety

1. Recognize the signs.
2. Stop the Amygdala Hijack!
3. Step out of the of the conversation.
Ask yourself:

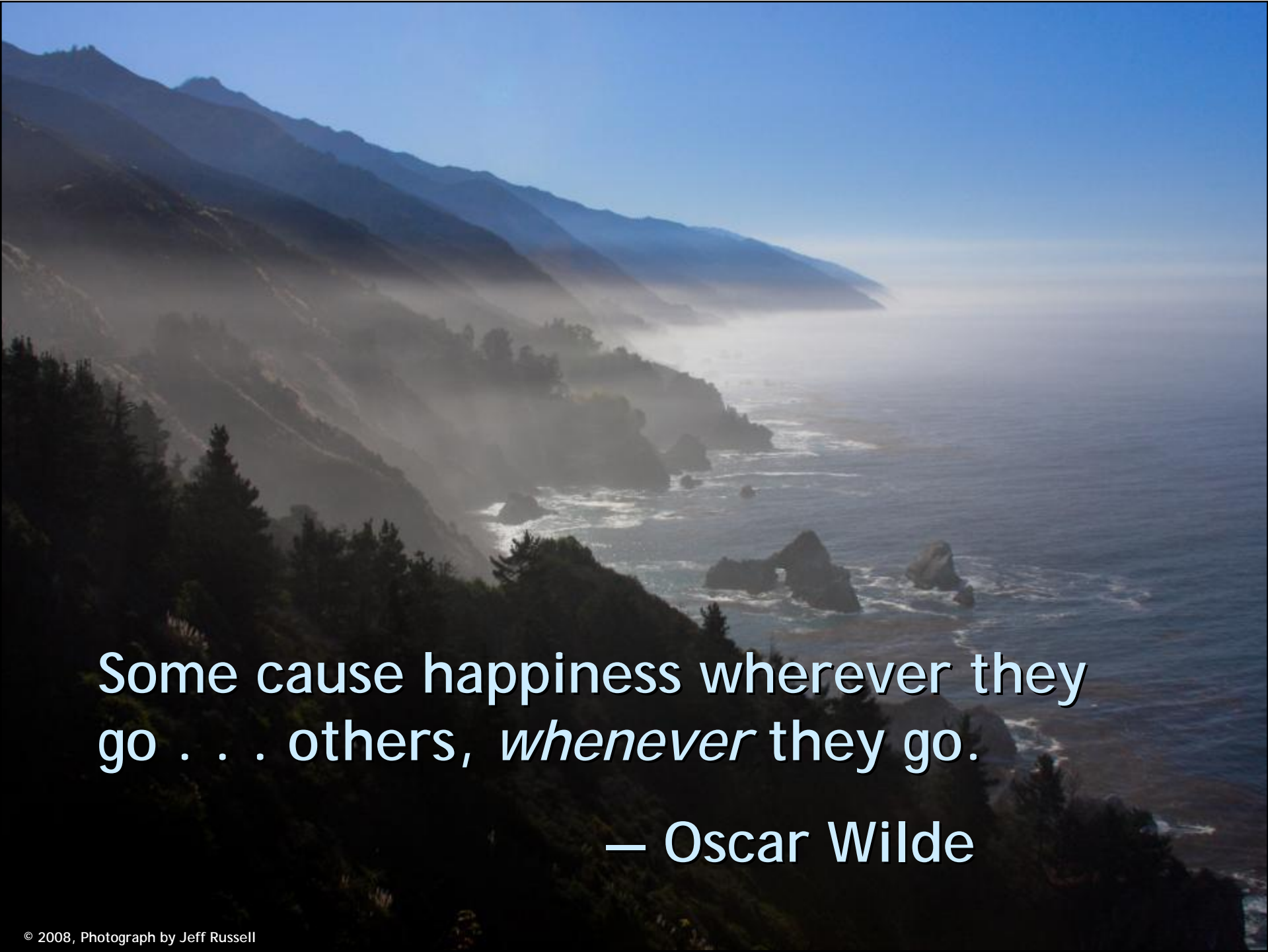
- Identify *what you really want/need* and what you *don't want/need* in this situation. Think of the wants/don't wants for yourself, for the other person, and for the relationship.
- Identify what you *need to do right now* to achieve your wants/needs, communicate your don't wants/needs, and create safety for the other person.
- **What can I learn** from the other person right now?

Steps to Safety

4. Step back into the conversation.

- a) **Offer a genuine apology** – Identify what you may be doing that has contributed to the problem and then apologize. Demonstrate a real change of heart.
- b) **Tell the person what you don't want to see happen**: to feel as though you are not respecting their opinions/ideas or to mistrust your intentions and purposes
- c) **Tell the person what you do want to see happen** – for yourself, the other person, for your relationship

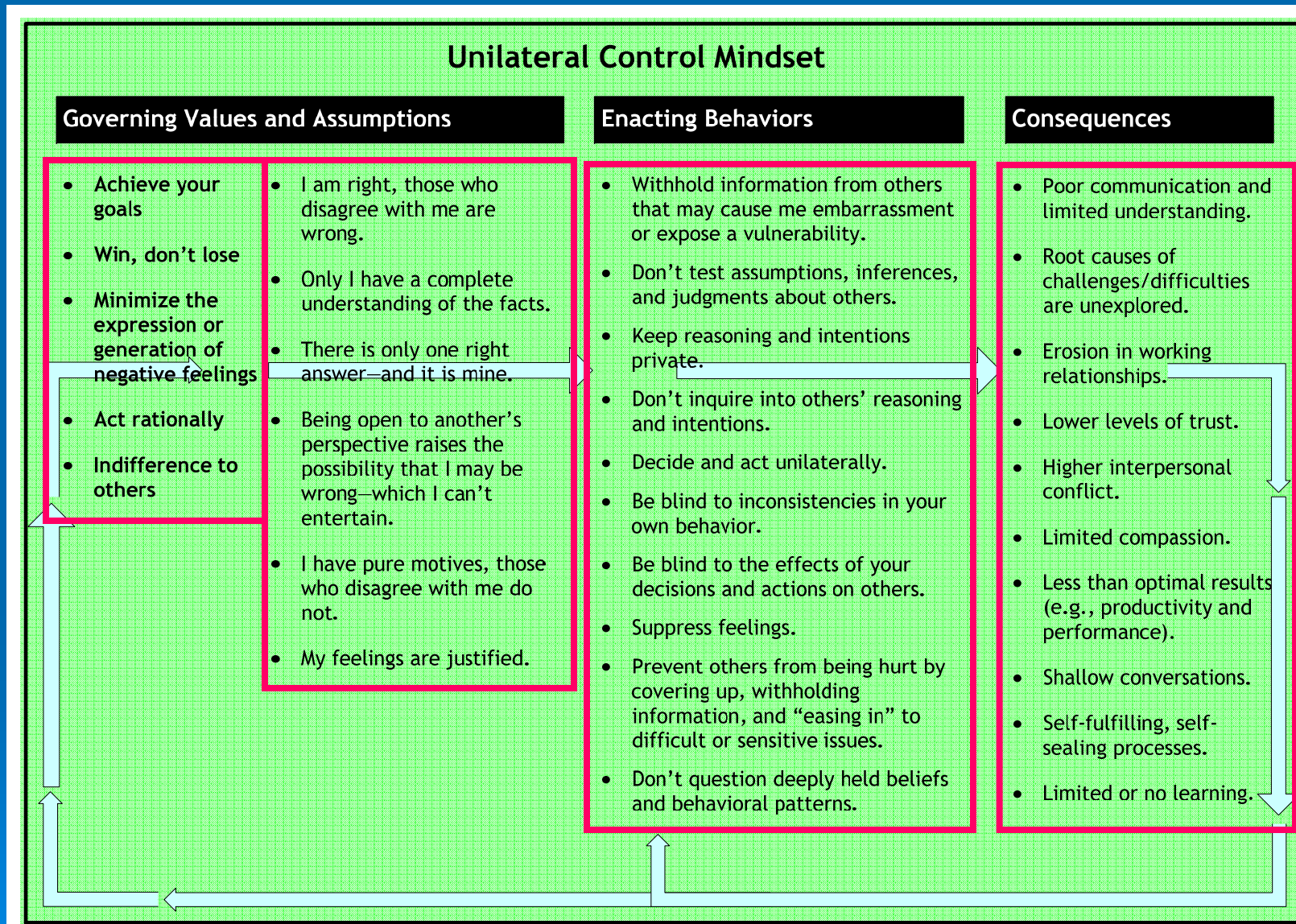
5. Verify that safety has been restored.

A scenic photograph of a coastline. In the foreground, there are dark, silhouetted evergreen trees on a hillside. The middle ground shows a rugged coastline with rocky outcrops and waves crashing against them. In the background, a range of mountains stretches across the horizon under a clear blue sky. The overall atmosphere is serene and majestic.

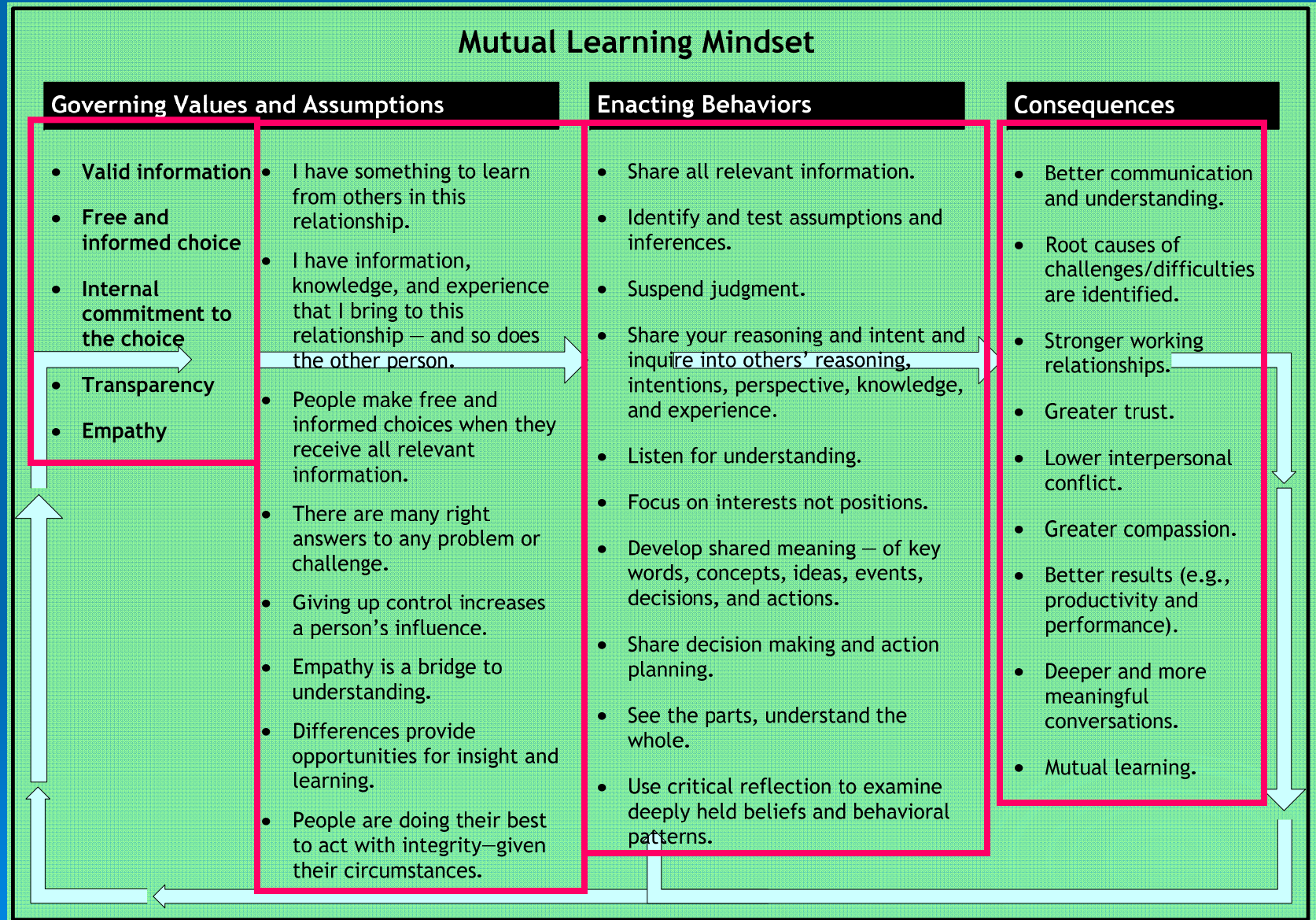
Some cause happiness wherever they
go . . . others, *whenever* they go.

— Oscar Wilde

Unilateral Control Mindset – A Losing Proposition



Mutual Learning Mindset – A Winning Approach



Governing Values . . .

- **Valid Information** – All relevant information is shared so that everyone understands what they need to know.
- **Free and Informed Choice** – People make their independent decisions based upon valid information, not pressure.
- **Internal Commitment to Decisions** – Individuals take responsibility for the decisions that they participate in.
- **Transparency** – Individuals feel comfortable with open, honest, and direct communication with no “hidden agendas” or undiscussables.
- **Empathy** – Individuals have compassion for others and differing viewpoints and a genuine interest in understanding another’s perspective.

The Enacting Behaviors

1. Share all relevant information.
2. Identify and test assumptions and inferences.
3. Suspend judgment.
4. Share your reasoning and intent and inquire into others' reasoning, intentions, perspective, knowledge, and experience.
5. Listen for understanding.

The Enacting Behaviors

6. Focus on interests, not positions.
7. Develop shared meaning of key words, concepts, ideas, etc.
8. Share decision making and action planning.
9. See the parts, understand the whole.
10. Use critical reflection to examine deeply held beliefs, and behavioral patterns.

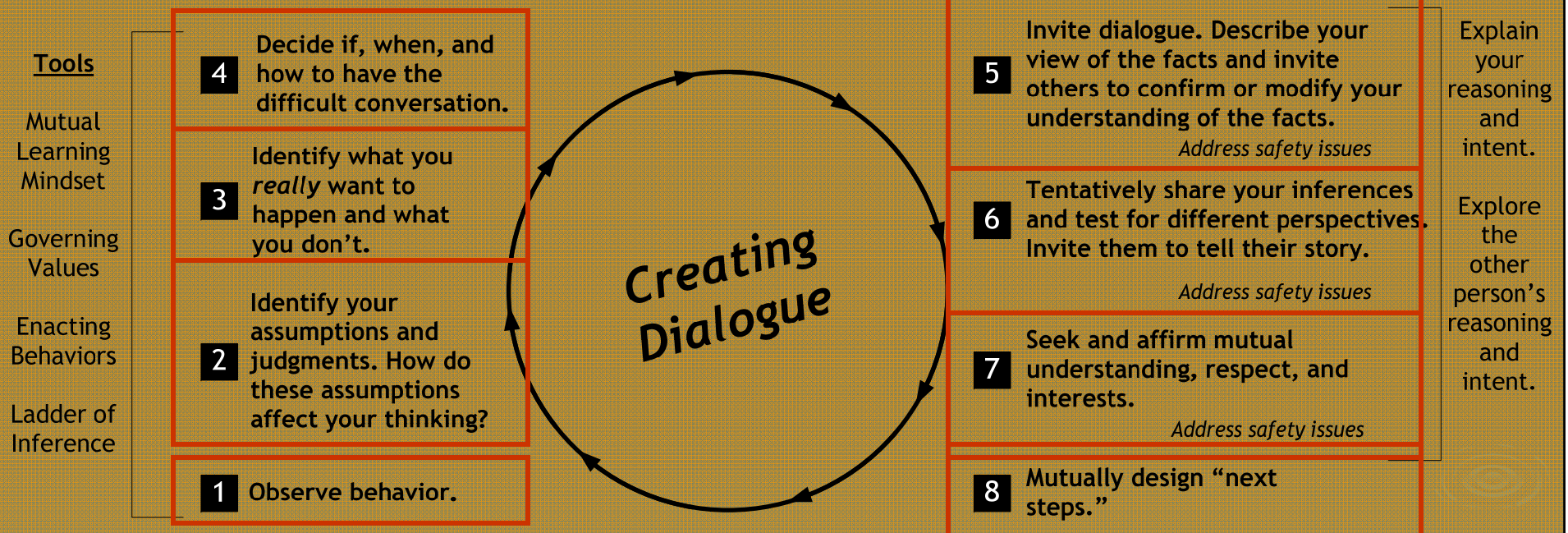
Why Do We Use the Unilateral Control Mindset?

1. Our fight or flight response.
2. It's what we learned from our parents, siblings (for survival), school yard encounters . . .
3. We don't have good role models.
4. We don't have the skills.
5. We didn't know that there *was* an alternative!

Creating/Sustaining Dialogue

Diagnosis and Planning Steps

Creating/Sustaining Dialogue Steps



A photograph of a sunrise over the Santa Lucia Range. The sun is low on the horizon, partially obscured by a mountain peak, creating a lens flare effect. The sky is a clear, deep blue. In the foreground, several tall, feathery grasses are silhouetted against the bright light of the sun. The background shows a range of mountains and a body of water, possibly the ocean, under a hazy sky.

Sunrise over the Santa Lucia Range

Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.

— Carl Jung

Samish Bay Sunrise, Washington

Sometimes I lie awake at night, and I ask, "Where have I gone wrong?" Then a voice says to me . . .

. . . "This is going to take more than one night!"

— **Charles M. Schulz**
Charlie Brown in "Peanuts"
American Cartoonist
b. 1922, d. 2000

California Headlands, South of San Francisco

Thank you!

Thanks for attending this SCPA session!

Good luck with your *difficult conversation!*

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