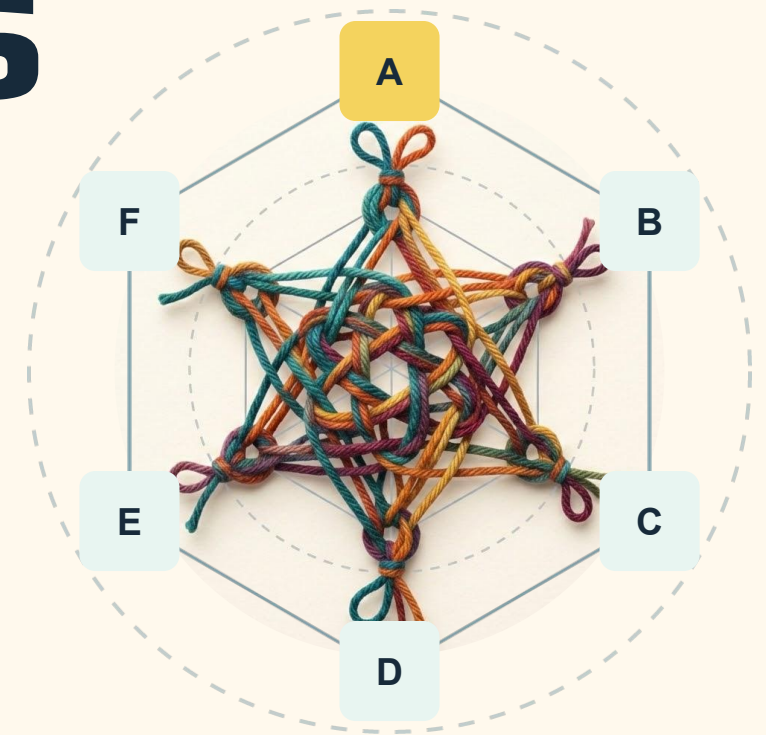


Joyful Systems

Making the invisible forces shaping work visible

Emilia Breton • Operating Model Lead • Creator of AgileToybox.com



Today: story + play + sensemaking + one small next step

About Emilia

- Operating Model Transformation Practice Director at HCLTech
- Creator of AgileToybox.com
- 25 years helping teams, leaders, and organizations improve systems

Worked across technology, finance, healthcare, retail, nonprofits, startups, and global enterprises.

Uses play, systems thinking, and facilitation to make invisible dynamics visible.

Co-leads Launching New Voices with Women in Agile.

Author of *The Joyful System*.



I help people stop fixing symptoms and start seeing systems.

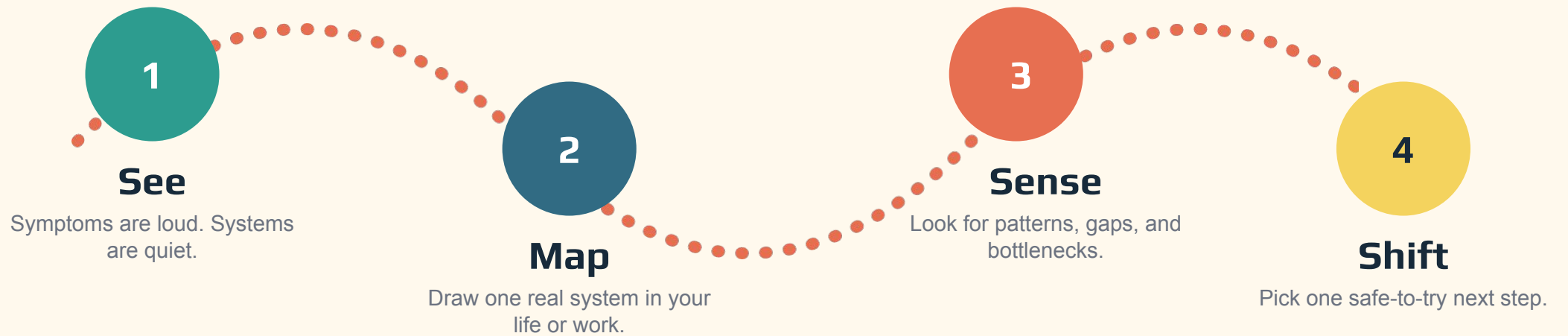
Most teams don't struggle because people aren't trying hard enough.

They struggle because the system is quietly shaping behavior, decisions, and outcomes.

And when we can't see the system, we fix symptoms.

Today's journey

Notice the symptom → reveal the system → make meaning → choose one small action



Bring curiosity. Leave blame at the door. The yarn is here to help.

Symptoms are loud. Systems are quiet.

The visible pain is often only the signal.

Loud symptoms

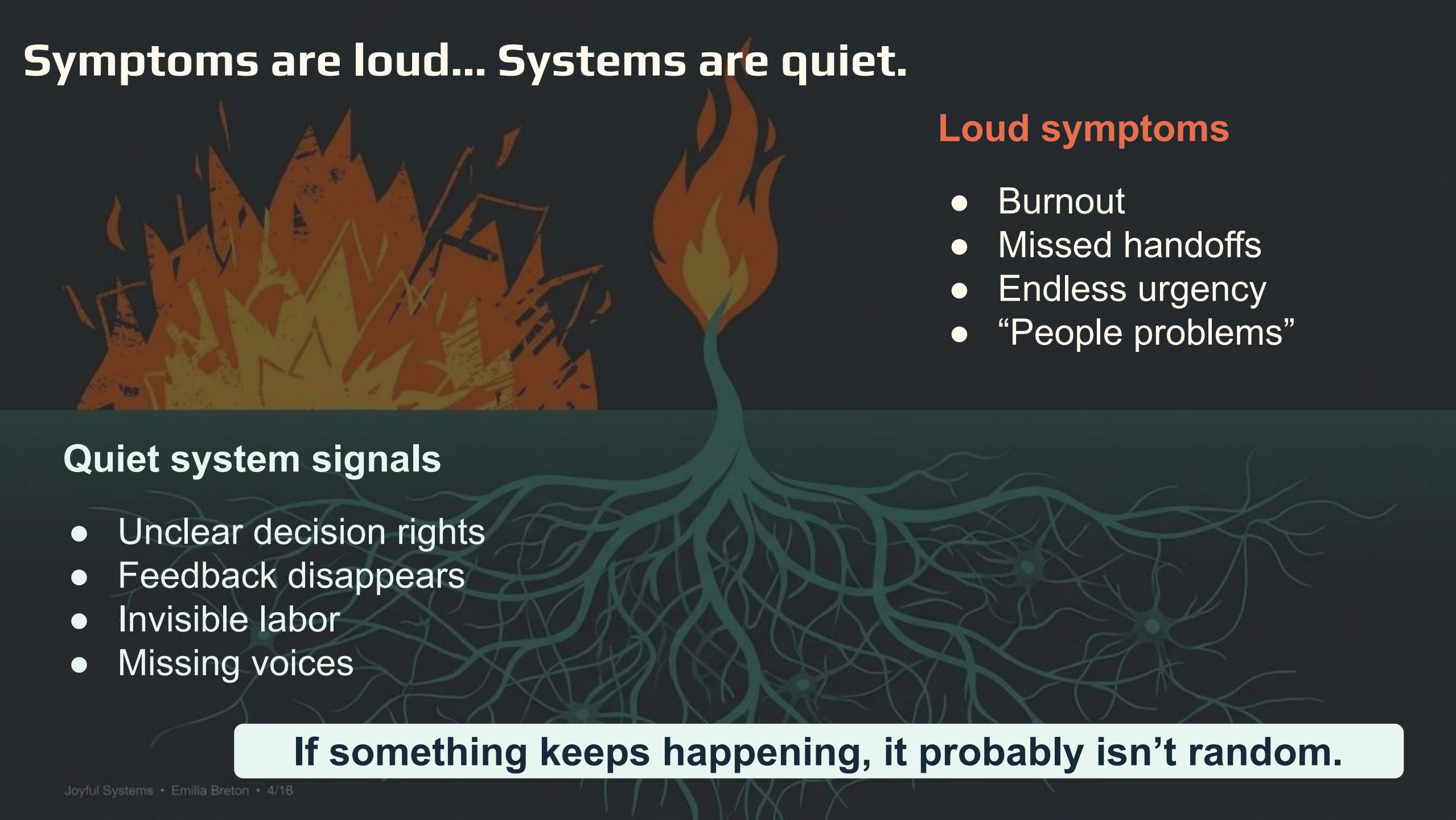
- Burnout
- Missed handoffs
- Endless urgency
- “People problems”

Quiet system signals

- Unclear decision rights
- Feedback disappears
- Invisible labor
- Missing voices

If something keeps happening, it probably isn't random.

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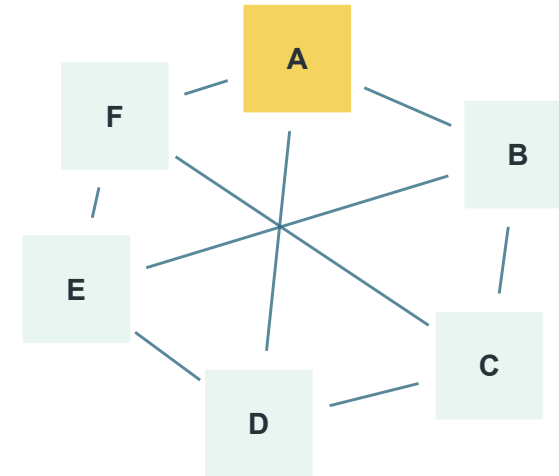
The system between us is real

Relationship systems are the “third entity” shaping how work feels and flows.

Not just the people.

Not just the process.

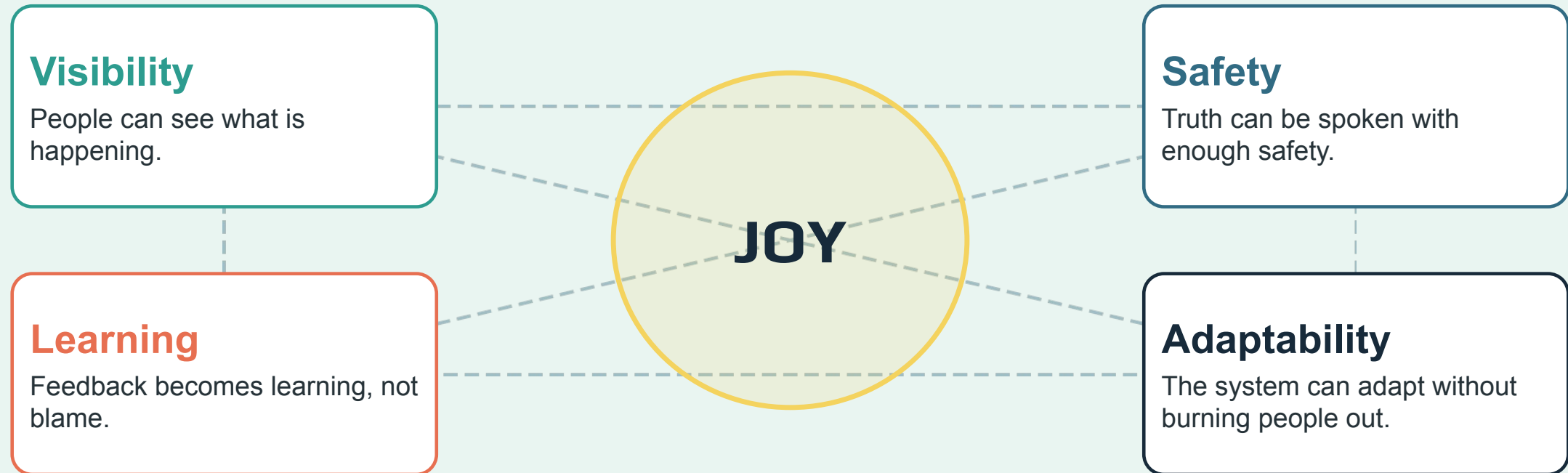
**The thing that lives
between them.**



Patterns • Trust • Avoidance • Influence • Missing voices • Momentum

What makes a system joyful?

Not perfect. Not conflict-free. Not “everyone smiling in the all-hands.”



Joy is a **signal that the system is working.**

It is a byproduct of clarity, connection, and purpose.

Why play?

Because play helps us see hard truths without blame arriving first.

Safe lower stakes for trying and noticing

Embodied people feel the system, not just hear about it

Revealing patterns become visible without a lecture

Memorable shared metaphors stick after the session ends



“That laugh? That’s often the sound of a system becoming visible.”

What do you notice?



A ball of string changed the room

A healthcare executive team saw its relationship system in minutes.

**“Why is the person
closest to the customers
holding no string?”**



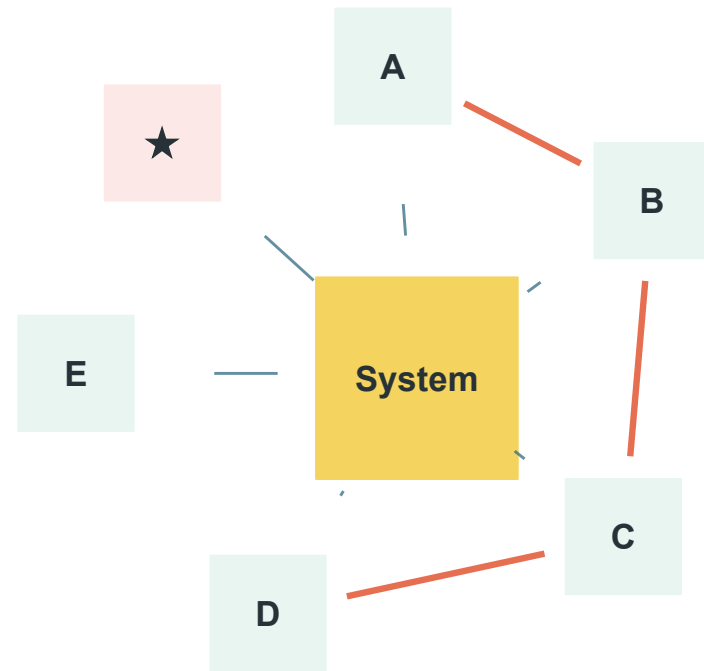
The system had been there all along. The string made it visible.

Your turn: Personal String Map

Online version: draw the system instead of holding the string.

Pick one real system

- Your team
- A project
- Your family
- A volunteer group
- A community system



Choose something real enough to matter, but small enough to map.

Build your map in layers

Do not overthink it. We are looking for pattern, not perfection.

1 Center

Draw the system in the middle.

Build your map in layers

Do not overthink it. We are looking for pattern, not perfection.

1 Center

Draw the system in the middle.

2 People

Add names or roles around it.

Build your map in layers

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1 Center

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2 People

Add names or roles around it.

3 Communication

Draw who talks to whom most often.

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Draw who talks to whom most often.

4 Stress reliance

Darken lines when things get messy.

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5 Decisions

Circle who makes decisions.

Build your map in layers

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Draw the system in the middle.

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Add names or roles around it.

3 Communication

Draw who talks to whom most often.

4 Stress reliance

Darken lines when things get messy.

5 Decisions

Circle who makes decisions.

6 Missing voices

Star who is affected but not included.

Pause. Look. Listen.

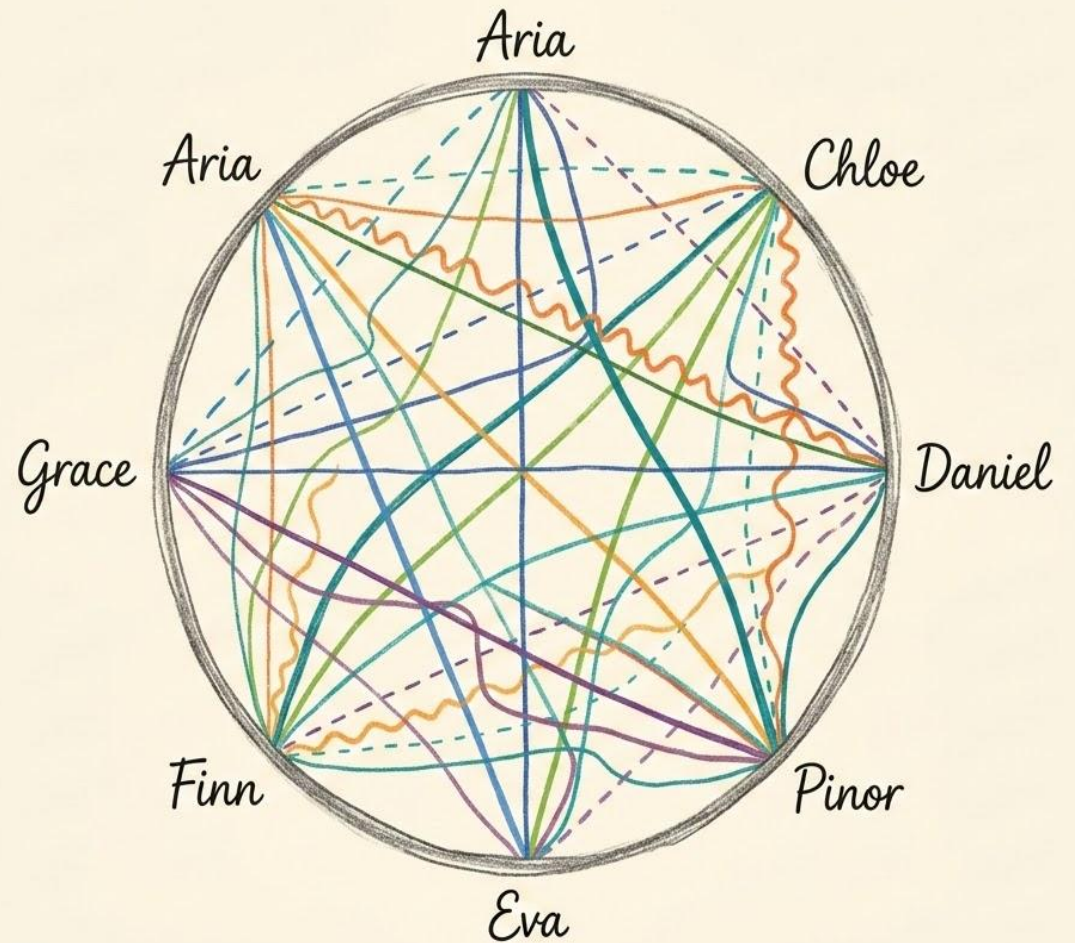
Before analysis, let the map speak.

What do you notice first?

What surprised you?

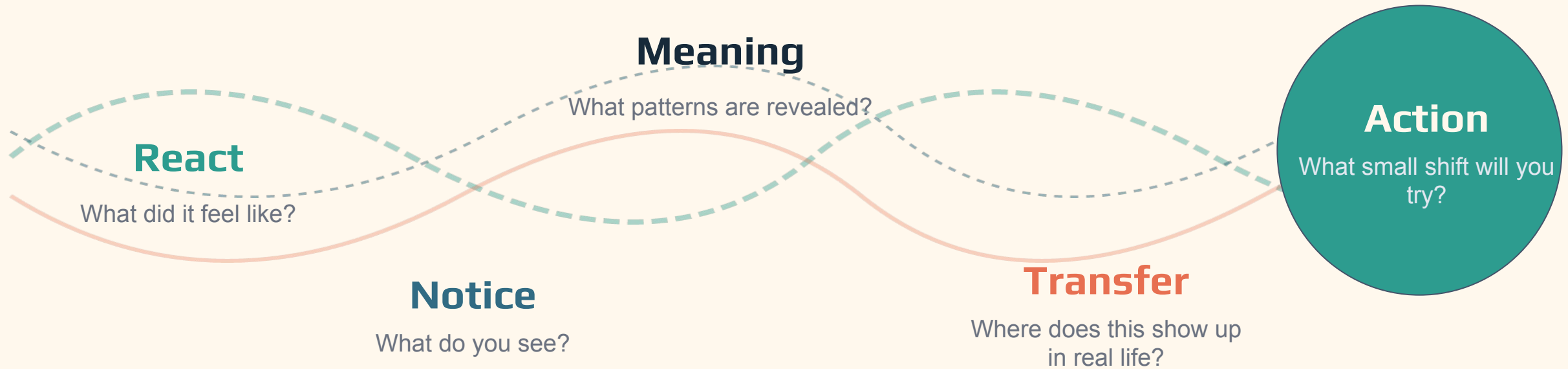
What feels familiar?

What feels uncomfortable?



Debrief: from reaction to action

A simple Thiagi-style sensemaking flow.



Do not fix the map. Learn from it.

Pattern language

Once you can name the pattern, you can work with it.

Bottlenecks

one person connected to almost everything

Invisible labor

someone carries work the system does not recognize

Missing voices

people affected but not included

Decision disconnects

authority sits far from the work

Clusters / silos

strong internal ties, weak cross-system ties

Questions that reveal systems

Better questions create better seeing.

Who has to say yes before something can move?

Where does feedback go to die?

Who gets asked first? Who never gets asked?

What keeps repeating?

What gets rewarded here?

What conversation happens after the meeting instead of in it?

One small shift

Insight gets useful when it becomes an experiment.

What is one conversation this map suggests you need?

What is one missing voice you could include?

What is one bottleneck you could reduce?

What is one safe-to-try experiment for the next 1–2 weeks?

Complete: “One small thing I will try is...”

We don't fix systems.
We help them evolve.

Make them visible. Ask better questions. Create enough safety for truth.
Take one small step together.

Symptoms are loud. Systems are quiet. Joy helps us hear them.



Supercharge Your Career with Us

At HCLTech, we leverage technology to shape the future of business.
Join us if you want to grow, innovate and make an impact.



Find Your Spark at HCLTech

[Explore careers](#) 

Connect with me

Online Presence

Agile Toybox

AgileToybox.com

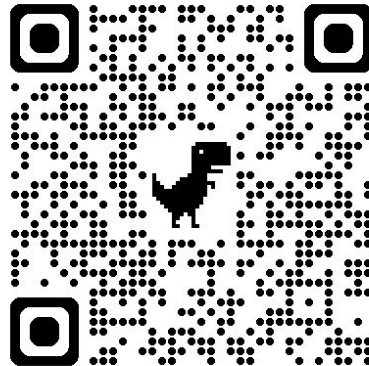
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LinkedIn

Emilia Breton

Get the materials



Next Steps

If this session sparked something for you:

- Map a system with your team
- Try one small experiment
- Keep noticing patterns

And keep playing.

"Play helps us see hard truths without blame arriving first."