Safety culture and its impact

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Imperial College Safety Seminar: Tragedies and opportunities: Safety failures in Universities
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Scope

- In many organisations improving the safety culture is nowadays seen as the ‘holy grail’ of safety
- Safety culture is at best an ‘enabler’ of taking actions, it is not a miracle cure
- Improving a culture in daily practice is more related to changing a ‘mindset’ than to achieve a certain score on a ‘culture test’

Risk management: The miracle on the Hudson

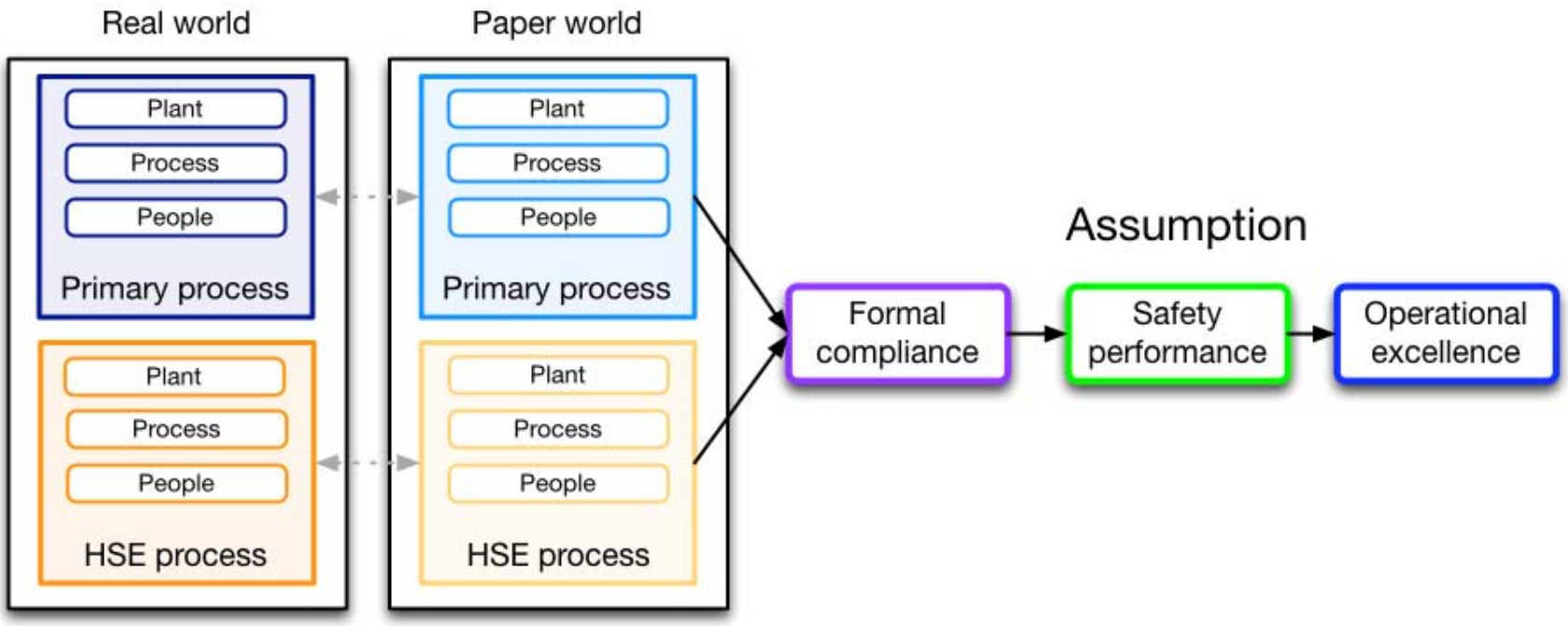
Procedures and a demonstration

However....

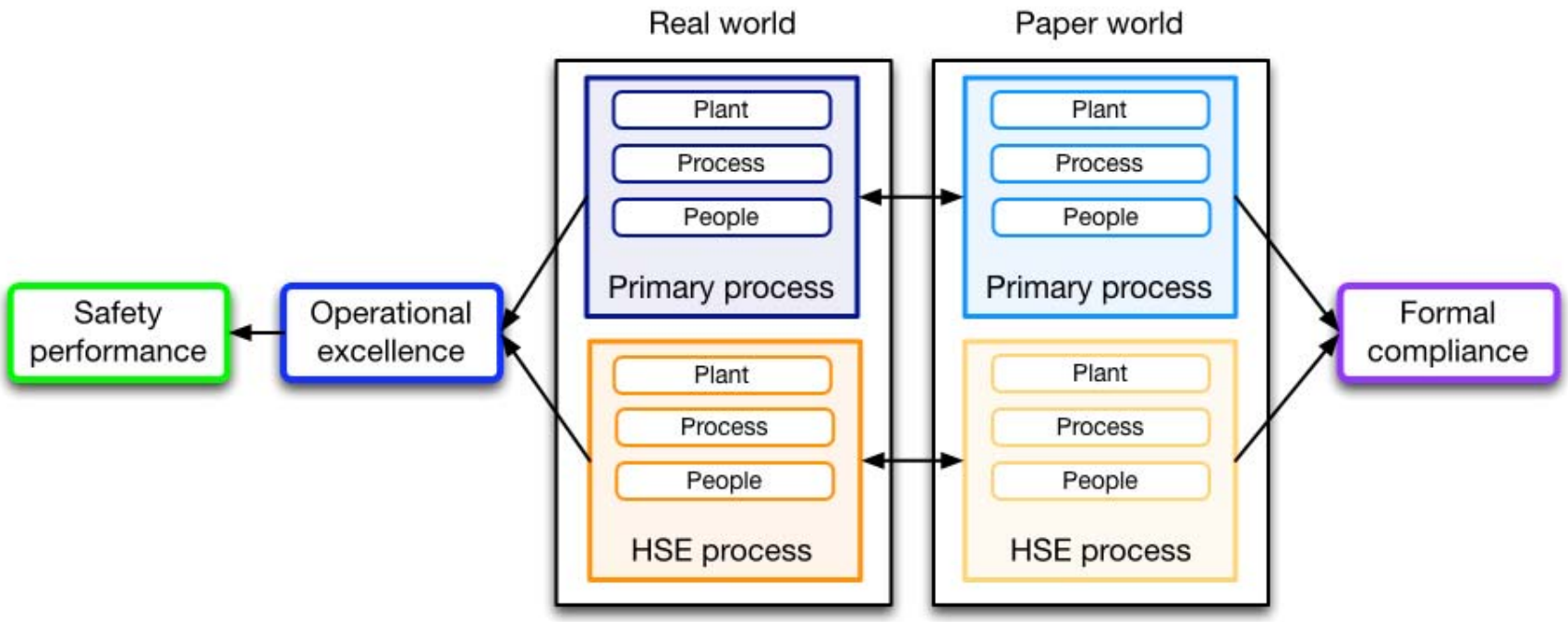
Except a few

- At least 27 million flights per year
- 3.3 billion passengers have been exposed to the safety talk about the life vests per year
- Millions of gallons of fuel have been wasted transported them
- And in the one and only case people could use them they didn't
- Would your dare to recommend to take them away?

The 'bureaucratic fallacy': moving from compliance



…to operational excellence



Back to some cultural basics

- What is organisational (safety) culture?
- What does it do?
- How does it develop?
- How can it be influenced?

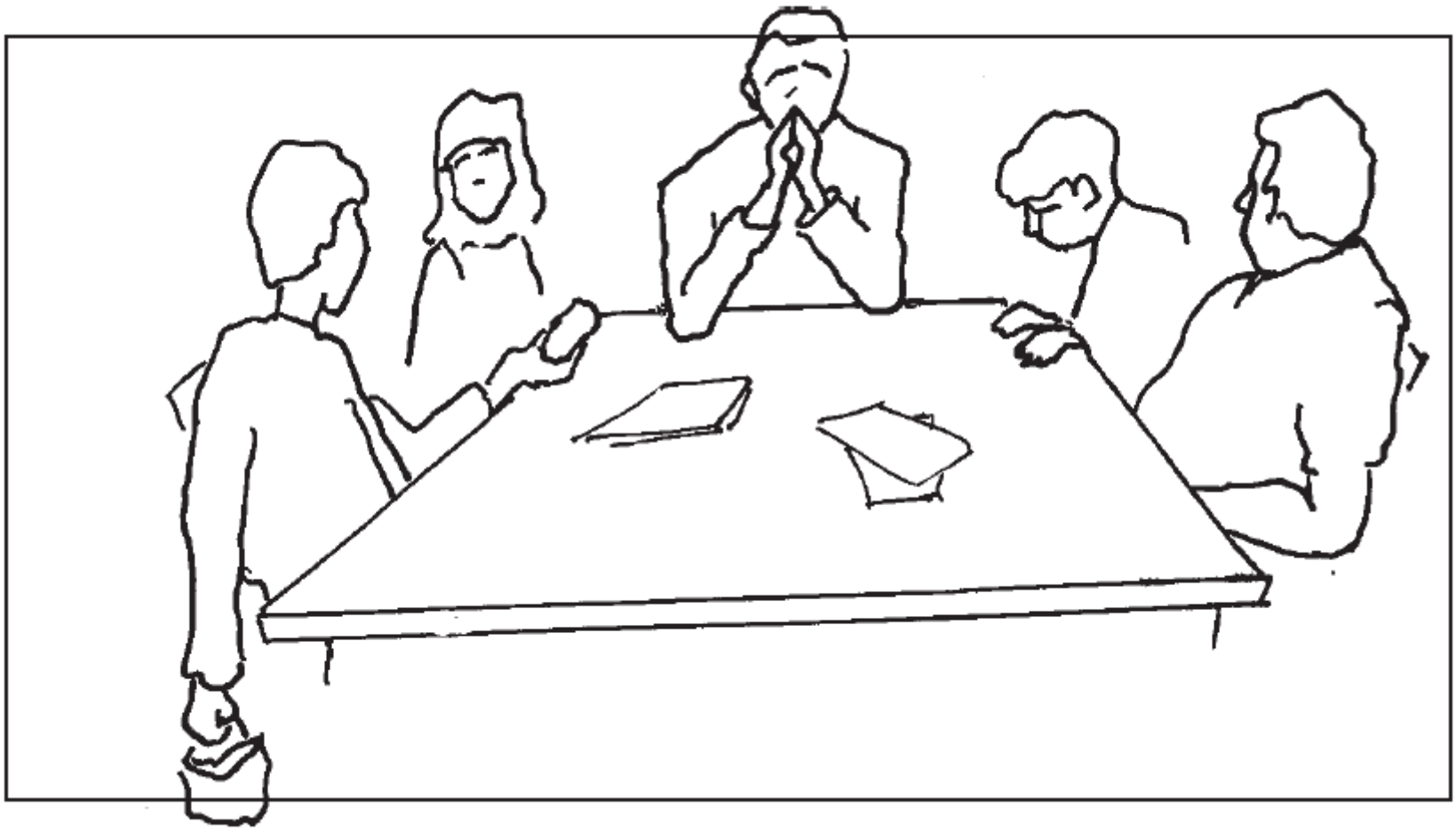
Organisational culture defined

‘Organisational culture is the set of common norms, values and world views that develop in an organisation when its members interact with each other and its context’

Put in other words: culture is about a shared understanding of your (working) environment, which you observe through your ‘cultural glasses’

(Bang, 1999)

An example…



Some typical answers

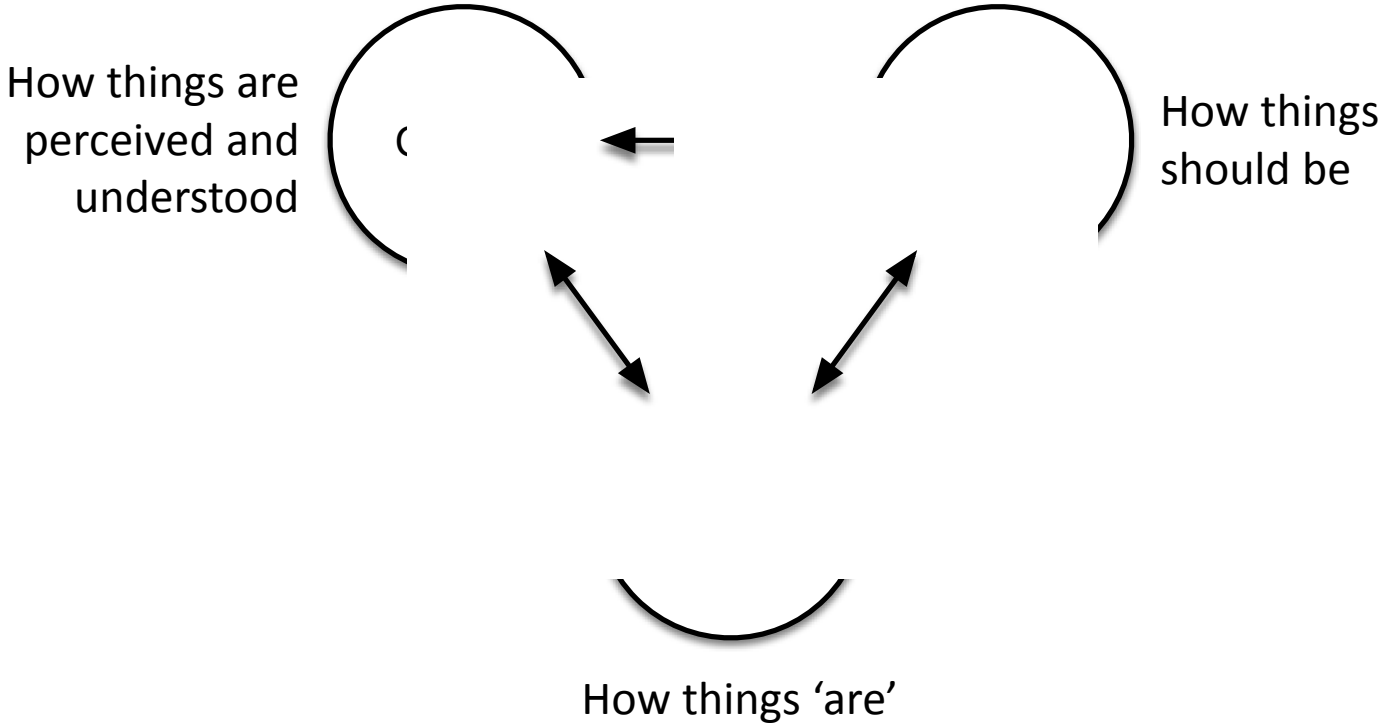
- Difficult conversation
- A meeting about to begin. The man in the middle presides and one guy is not involved
- A family that has just received a sad letter
- People looking for a solution to some problem. The guy on the left is hiding the important evidence and showing something unimportant to the others
- A religious ritual

In short…

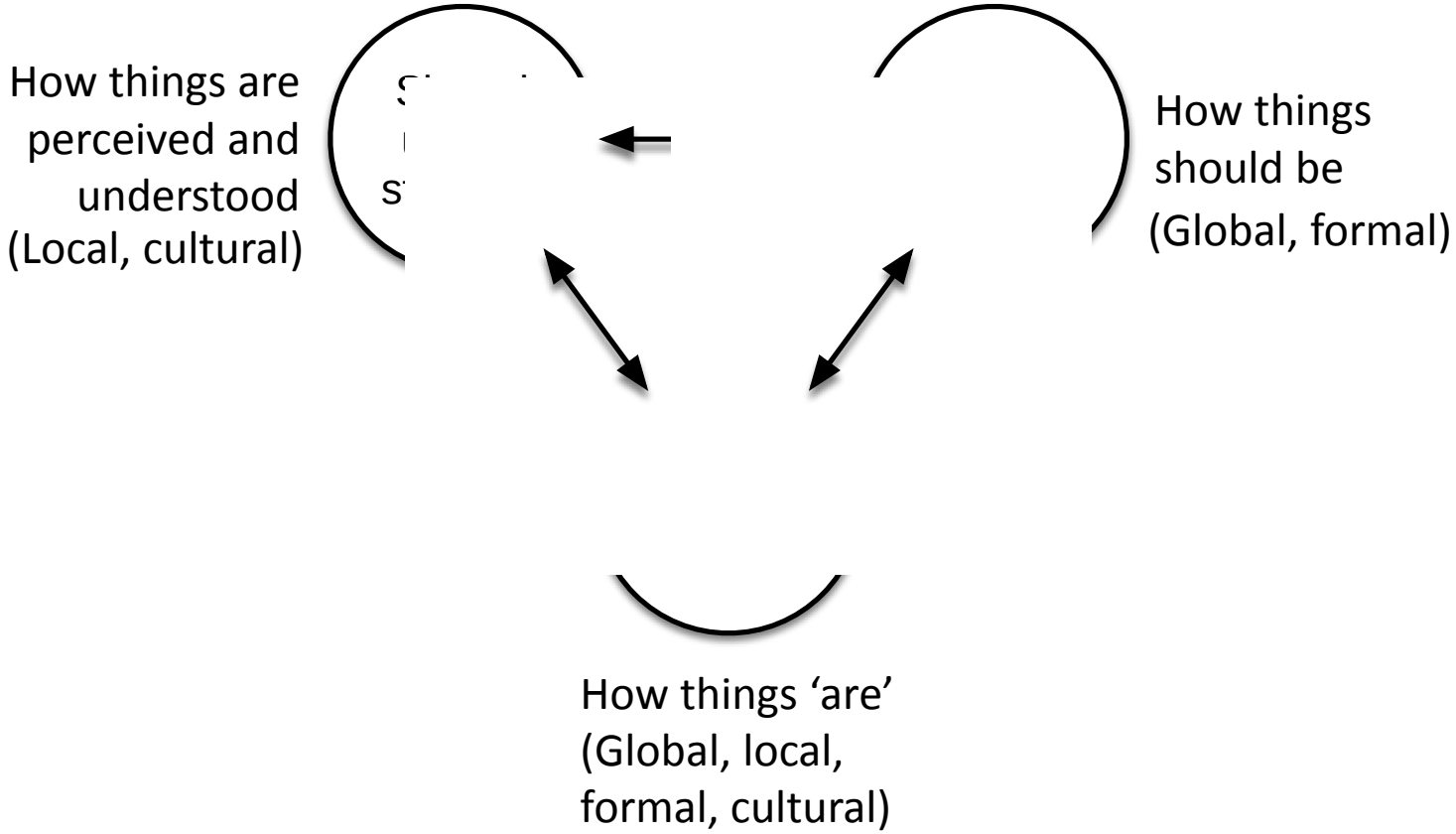
Observation
Interpretation
Attribution
Reality part
Culture part

Perception and ‘reality’

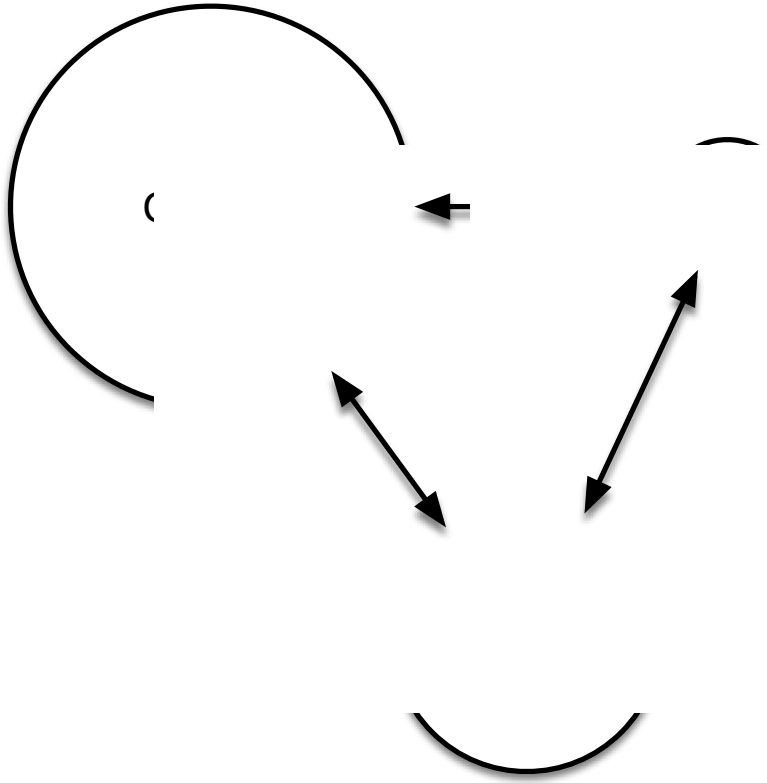
The organisational triangle I



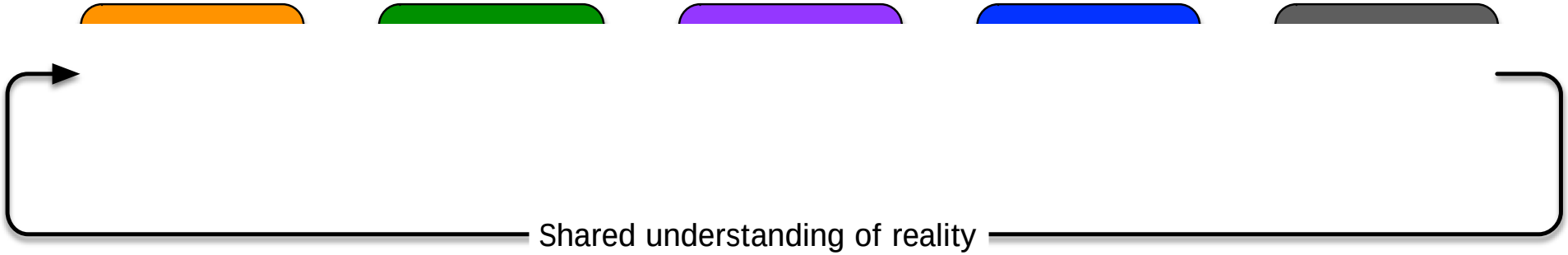
The organisational triangle II



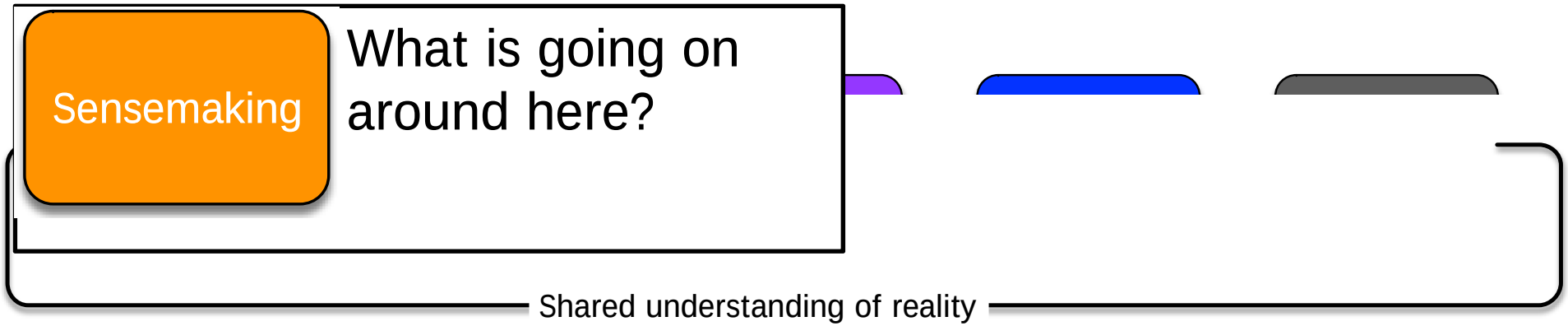
The organisational triangle III



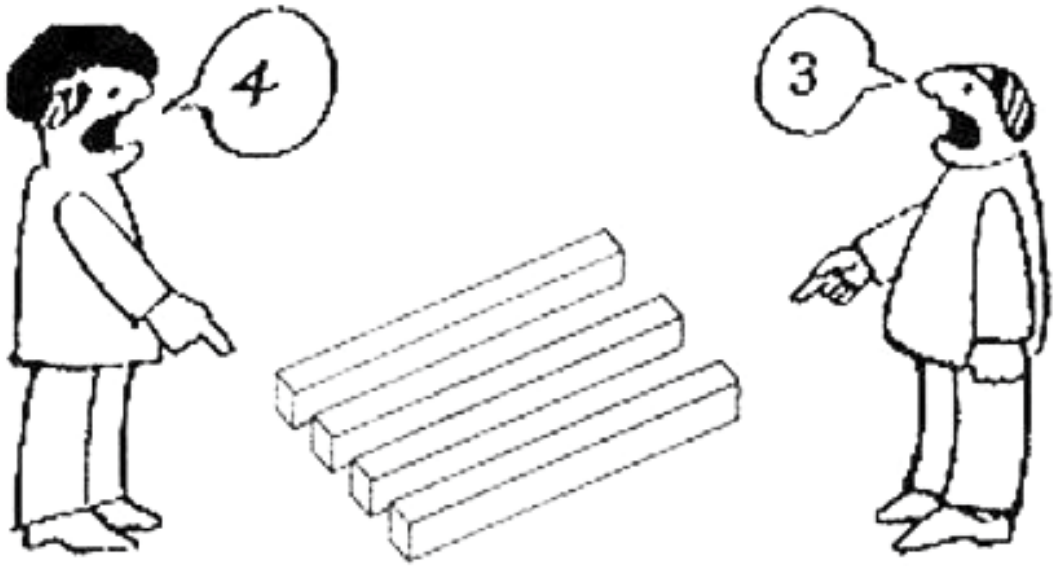
The culture development model



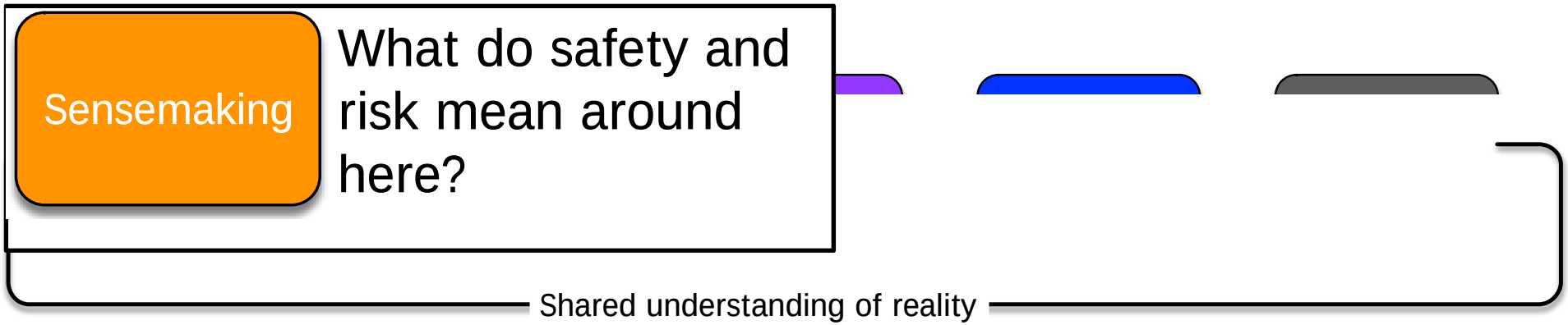
Sensemaking



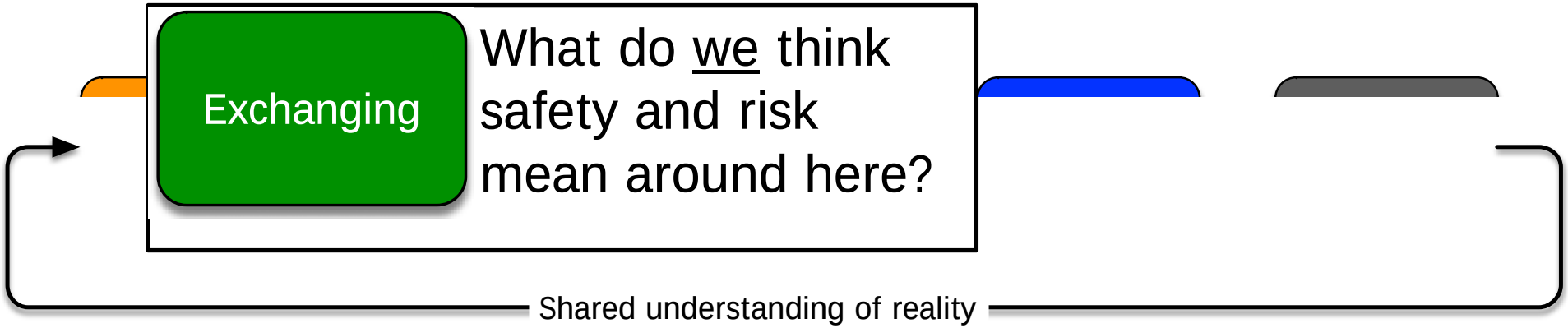
Observation and sensemaking



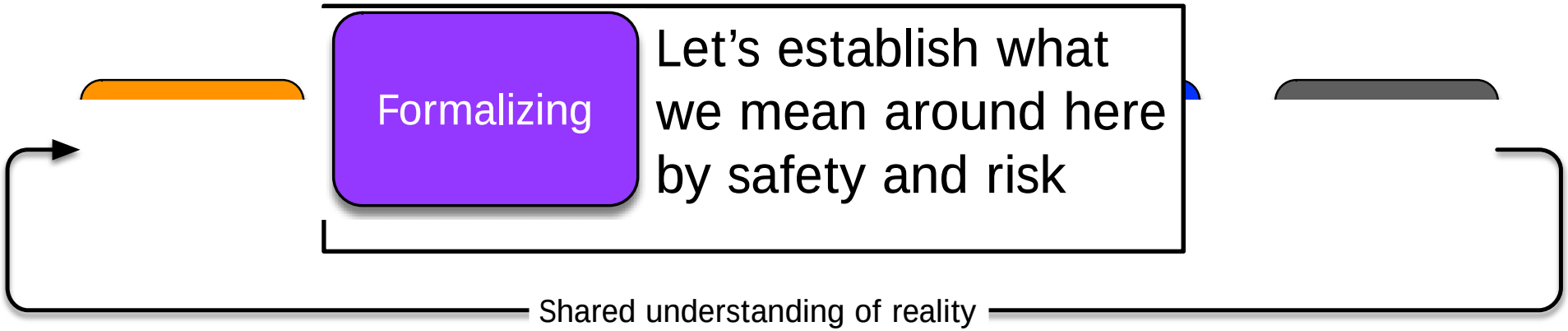
Making sense of safety and risk



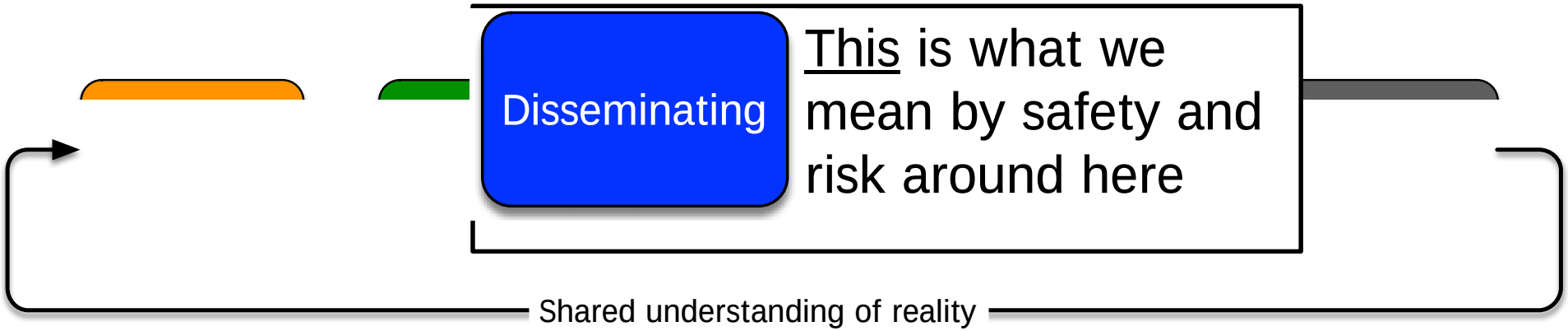
Exchanging


Exchanging
What do we think safety and risk mean around here?
Shared understanding of reality

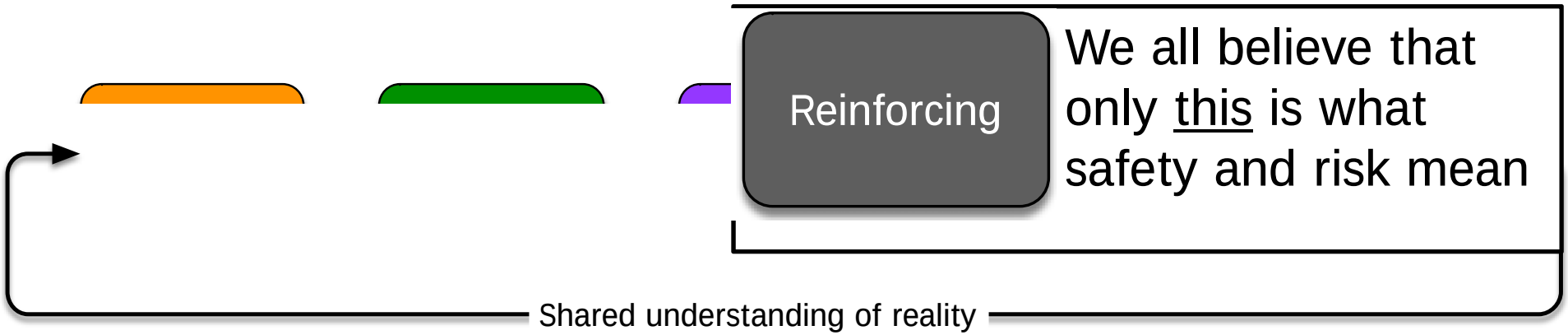
Formalizing



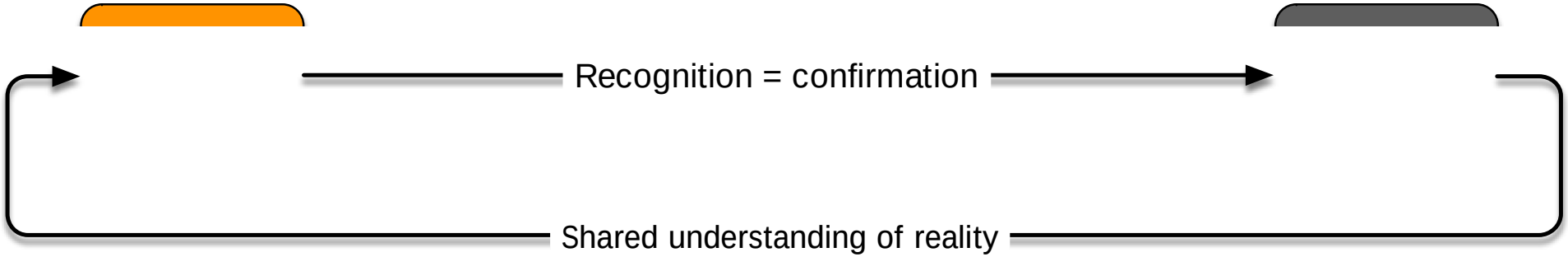
Disseminating



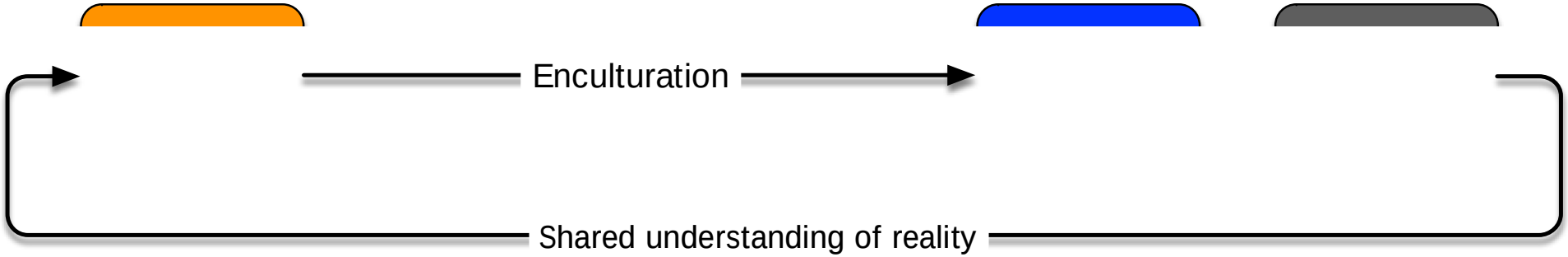
Reinforcing



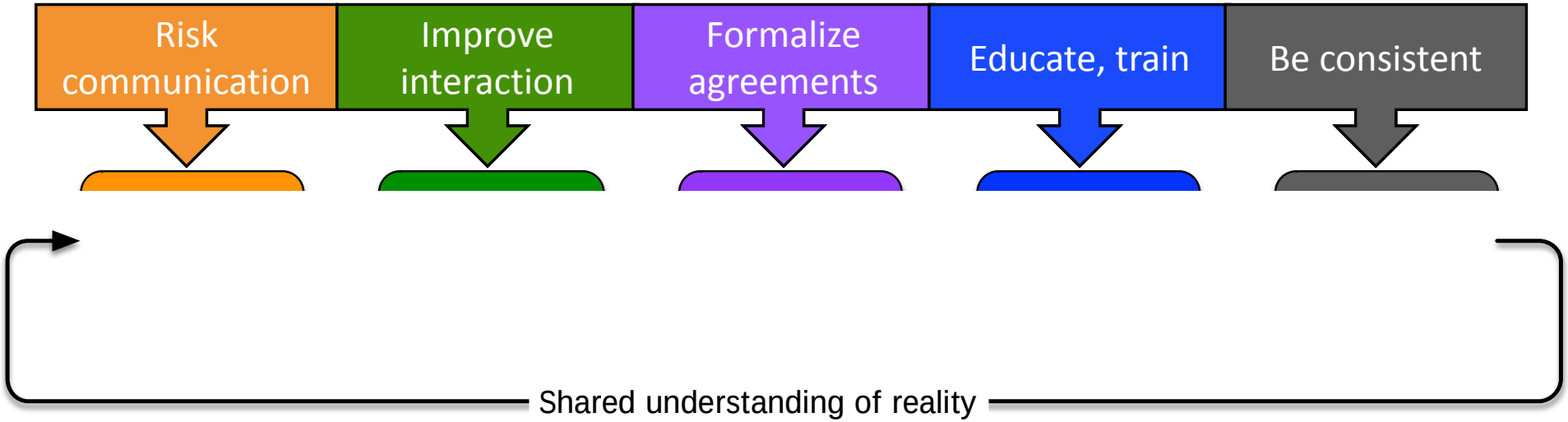
Business as usual



Newcomers



Influencing culture



Conclusions

- In an ideal world, structure, culture and daily reality are well-balanced and not conflicting (too much)
- Culture can overshadow structure (but probably not vice versa)
- Influencing culture means influencing common sensemaking (or a common ‘mindset’) and be consistent about it
- Simply telling people what to do is often quite useless

Questions?

Imperial College London

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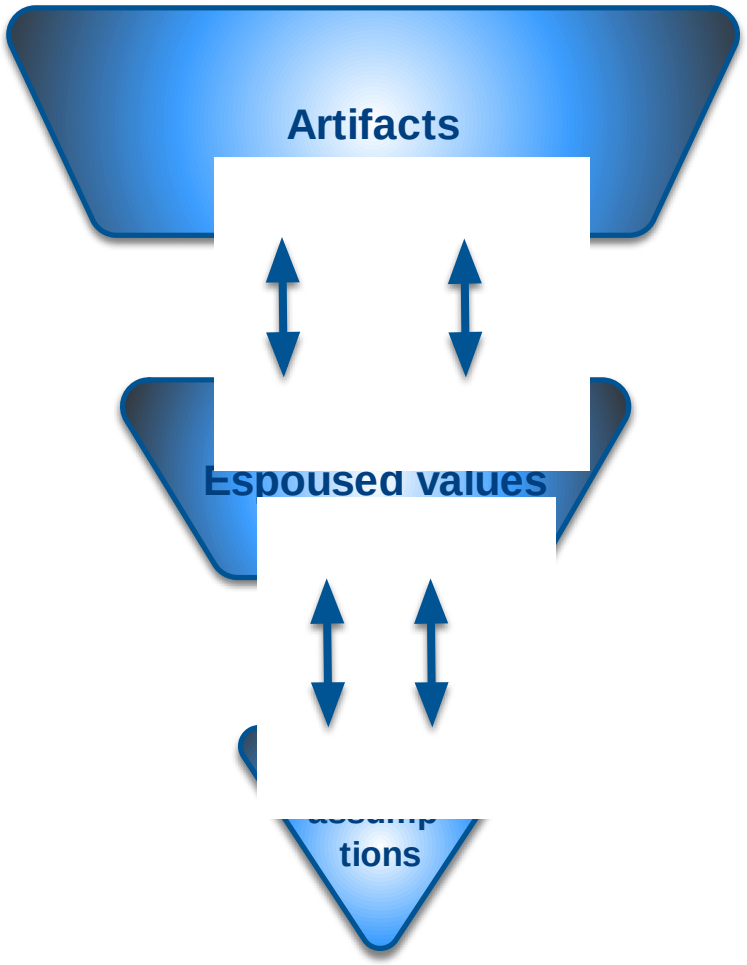
‘Measuring’ culture: the challenge



What you see, hear, smell, …

What people tell you they do, think, feel

What people really moves but is self-evident (subconscious), or hidden to them

Various other psychological influences

- Social desirability (what you are supposed to say)
- ‘Political’ correctness (what you should say; esp. with safety an issue)
- Herd-instinct, conformity (the Asch experiment)
- False consensus (people incorrectly think their opinions are ‘normal’ and shared by most others): denial
- Pluralistic ignorance (people act openly according to a norm they think is shared, but in fact isn’t): self-supporting