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## **Surprise, surprise!**

*A workbook for finding the keys to resilience in your strategic initiatives*

Stingl, Verena; Oehmen, Josef; Wied, Morten

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## **Surprise, Surprise! A workbook for finding the keys to resilience in your strategic initiatives**

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# Surprise, Surprise!

A workbook for finding the keys to resilience in your strategic initiatives

# ■ Why should you care?

*"No plan survives contact with the enemy."*

(Helmuth von Moltke, chief of staff of the Prussian Army)

The only sure thing in any strategy initiative is, that – sooner or later – you will end up surprised. Yet, not all surprises have to lead into veritable crises. How people in your organization manage your surprises makes all the difference: whether your strategy work becomes resilient – or brittle.

This workbook helps you to explore why your organization is surprised in the first place, and how you can handle your surprises more effectively. By providing you with a framework for discussion, you can identify the barriers and enablers in your organization when it comes to noticing your surprise, drawing meaningful conclusions, responding appropriately, and finally learning a thing or two.

The workbook is based on research carried out at the Technical University of Denmark (DTU), Engineering Systems Design Group and the DTU RiskLab, by Prof. Dr. Josef Oehmen, Dr. Verena Stingl, and Morten Wied.

Our thanks go to The Brightline Initiative for funding this project, to Brightline's Head of Research Dr. Edivandro Conforto for his support, and to the numerous strategy and project practitioners that participated in the piloting rounds of this workshop. For information, please visit [www.brightline.org](http://www.brightline.org), [www.risklab.dtu.dk](http://www.risklab.dtu.dk) and [www.es.man.dtu.dk](http://www.es.man.dtu.dk)

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# ■ What do you get?

In this workbook, you will get a conversation guide to explore surprise management in your strategic initiatives. The conversation is structured as a workshop that, within 2-3 hours, allows you to move from the question “What surprises us?” to the formulation of action points for improved management of surprises in the future.

The workbook is a guide for facilitators preparing the workshop, containing all the necessary background information, tips, and workshop materials.

## 01 **The Foundation**

Why are we surprised?  
Characteristics of surprises  
The life-cycle of any surprise  
Barriers and enablers for surprise management

## 02 **Workshop preparation**

Design principles  
Tips for facilitator

## 03 **Workshop guide**

Your journey through the workshop  
Exercise 01: Why are we surprised?  
Exercise 02: Understanding surprises  
Exercise 03: Identifying barriers & enablers  
Exercise 04: Taking action

## 04 **Workshop material**

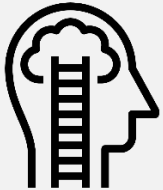
Templates 01-04

# ■ The Foundation

This section introduces you to a model for speaking about your strategic surprises, and how to uncover what creates particular challenges in managing surprises. This section covers 1) common and differentiating characteristics of surprises, 2) the life-cycle of any surprise and how misunderstandings regarding the surprises create frictions, 3) blockers and enablers in managing surprises.

# ■ Why are we surprised?

Our assumptions about the world



**Surprise!**



Reality

We are surprised, whenever what we had believed to be true, turns out to be false. In other words, when our beliefs about the world clash with reality. Being surprised is our emotional reaction to the unexpected manifesting, and our immanent need to make sense of this unexpected situation.

We can be surprised by a sudden change of behaviour in our customers, partners, bosses, or employees.

We can be surprised by an event that we never thought possible.

Or, we can be surprised by obstacles (or opportunities) that we had not expected to be there.

Moreover, we can be pleasantly surprised, shocked, or just mildly irritated.

No two surprises are alike. Otherwise they would no longer surprise us.

To understand what typically surprises your organization, you have to scrutinize the assumptions you make about your initiative, your organization, and the world in general. Moreover, you need to identify those assumptions that are so deeply engrained in your organization, that you do not question them anymore – up to the point where you are surprised to find out they were wrong.

The workshop will provide a basis to discuss the nature of surprises in your organization and the characteristics of the breached assumptions. For that, we use a series of surprise-dimensions, that serve as conversation starter to characterize the most impactful surprises in your organization.

# ■ Sudden, creeping, or lurking?

The most important characteristic for the management of the unexpected concerns the speed with which the surprise hits your organization. Conventionally, we distinguish between the sudden, and the creeping surprise. But beware of the lurking surprise!



The **sudden surprise** hits your organization like a meteor – one day you were fine, the next day you are not. There is no debate that something unexpected has happened. Even though there may still be some confusion about what had happened and why, there is no doubt that you need to act. Your organization jumps right into fire-fighting mode.



It becomes a bit more tricky, when the **surprise creeps** up on you, say a slow deterioration of employee motivation, or a gradual change of the preferences of your market. Some in your organization may spot the trend early – but are they heard? Many organizations tend to turn a blind eye to developments that do not fit their expectations. They spend their time discussing whether they should be surprised, rather than searching for appropriate responses to the surprise.








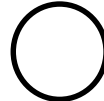




Where it becomes really hard, is when the **surprise has been lurking** around all the time, hiding in plain sight. Where the plan was seriously flawed from the beginning: the endeavour is much more complex and time consuming than assumed, your customers' *actual* need is not what you try to cater for, or your trusted partner has been betraying you all along. These lurking surprises need you to change your beliefs. Psychologically, this is a tough nut, and many organizations get stuck in blaming each other, or fixing details - instead of addressing the elephant in the room: we were wrong all along, now let's fix *that!*



# ■ Other characteristics of surprises

Besides the speed of the surprise, there are other characteristics of surprises can guide the search for the blind spots in the organization. What are the assumptions that you do not challenge early enough? What are the assumptions that you hold on to for too long?

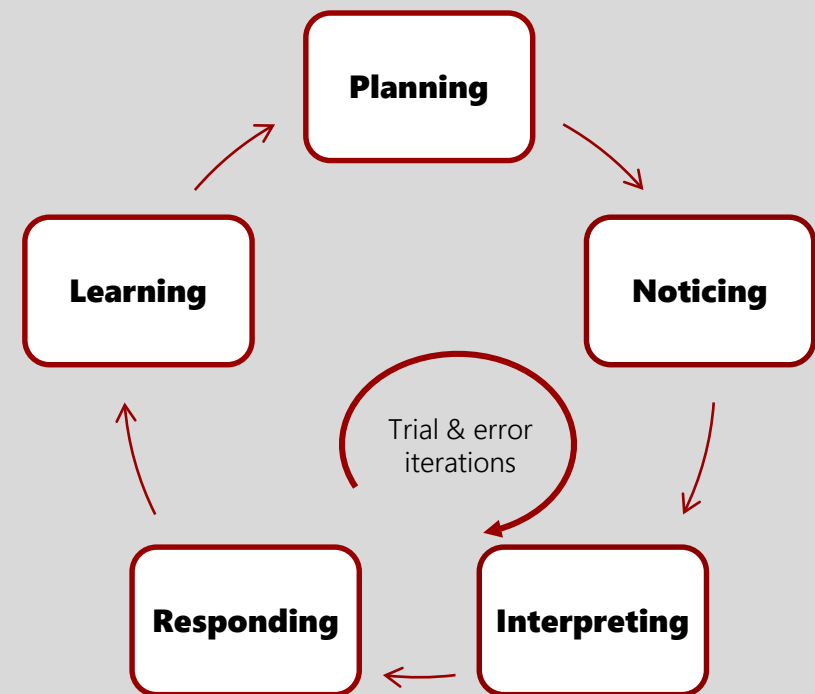
<p>A <b>good surprise</b> that exceeds expectation <i>f.ex. more available funds, staff, or resources.</i></p>	 	<p>A <b>bad surprise</b> that falls behind expectations <i>f.ex. underperformance of a partner or unit</i></p>	<p>Are you overly optimistic, or overly pessimistic?</p>
<p>A <b>local surprise</b> regarding a believe that only we shared in our organization <i>f.ex. Our customers are not excited about our product; we did not expect that regulation to come into force</i></p>	 	<p>A <b>global surprise</b> regarding a widely held belief in our industry, market, or society <i>f.ex. Brexit; the financial crisis; disruptive technologies</i></p>	<p>Could a critical look outside reduce your surprises? Or should you be more critical about what everyone thinks?</p>
<p>An <b>external surprise</b>, related to our assumptions about the outside world <i>f.ex. a spike in demand from the market</i></p>	 	<p>An <b>internal surprise</b> related to our assumptions about our own organization <i>f.ex. the in-house development of not-anticipated innovation; a key employee leaving the organization</i></p>	<p>Did you pay too little attention to what is happening in your organization? Or outside of it?</p>
<p>A <b>small surprise</b> that merely irritates us <i>f.ex. the default of a non-critical partner that had been struggling before</i></p>	 	<p>A <b>large surprise</b> that requires immediate course correction <i>f.ex. major financial struggles, severe regulatory changes</i></p>	<p>Do you ignore the small surprises for too long? Do you focus your energy on the big fires only?</p>
<p>A <b>simple surprise</b> caused by a single breached assumption <i>f.ex. a court ruling that did not go in our favour; a bid that we unexpectedly won</i></p>	 	<p>A <b>complex surprise</b> with many roots <i>f.ex. Multiple events leading to delays; a series of lucky events creating a positive news story</i></p>	<p>Do you struggle with making sense of complex surprises? Or do you overcomplicate simple matters?</p>

# ■ The life-cycle of any surprise

Any surprised person or organization wheels through the same steps of a surprise.

While the **planning step** is decisive for forming those assumptions that will turn into surprises later on, the most crucial steps in surprise management are **noticing** and **interpreting**. Many organizations stay idle in one of those steps for an unnecessary long time, before they form sufficient alignment to move on to the **response step**. This is particularly true for creeping and lurking surprises, that require a fundamental shift in mind-sets.

<b>Planning</b>	When we make assumptions regarding current status and the future, our objectives, and means to reach the objectives. Project decision-makers are typically aligned, plans fit with (our perception) of reality.
<b>Noticing</b>	Deviations from our expectations and plans start to manifest, or it becomes more obvious that some assumptions of the plan do not hold in reality. Some, or all in the team/organization start to sense that "something is off"
<b>Interpreting</b>	Individuals or the team start to figure out what the deviations or breached assumptions mean: Where do they come from? Where would they lead us to? What can we do about it? There might not be a simple answer.
<b>Responding</b>	Key decision-makers have aligned their interpretation of what is going on and take action to bring the initiative back on (either the old, or a new) course.
<b>Learning</b>	The team has stabilized around a new shared set of understanding of the world, and can reflect and integrate the learning from the surprise.



# ■ Working together in surprises

A surprise will always cause confusion. As our previous beliefs have been challenged, we need to make sense of what is going on. This attempt to make sense of the world comes at different speeds, and happens often not synchronized throughout our organization. Moreover, different people in the organization are surprised by different things. To identify where your organization is struggling when aligning their understanding of surprises, you can ask yourself the following questions:

## Assumptions & objectives

Did we expect the same things?  
Were we all heading towards the same goal?



## Implications for the future

Did we all draw the same implications from the surprise? Did we learn the same thing? Or do we retrospectively blame each other and learn nothing?



## Workable & allowable solution

Could we agree on a response to the surprise, or were we fighting about what would be 'best' to do now? Or did we have very different understanding of what is 'best'? (And if so: why?)



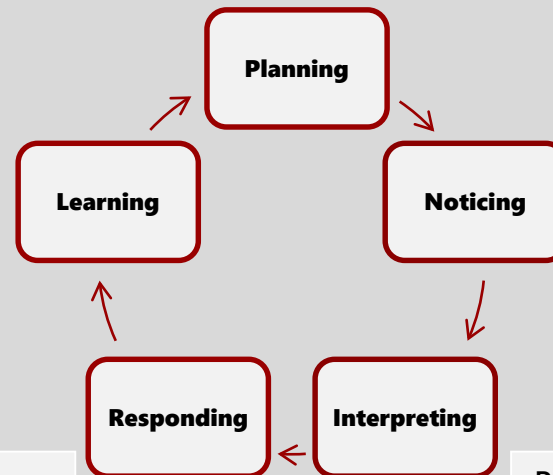
## Deviations & early signs

Did some in our organization spot deviations earlier than others? Did they communicate their observations? Did everybody agree that the situation was actually a deviation from the plan?



## Roots, meaning & implication of the surprise

Did we agree on where the deviation/the unexpected development came from and what it meant for our initiative or project? Or did we keep fighting about what it *really* meant?



# ■ The route to understanding

Different elements in the organizational environment can become enablers or barriers on the route to creating an aligned understanding.

Organizations tend to focus on the tangible elements when a surprise hits them: the objective realities and the formal processes. These are easier to manage and give a sense of control in the chaotic situation of the surprise.

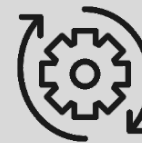
However, the magic (and the really dreadful) happens all too often in the less tangible domain: where beliefs and assumptions clash (or align), or where relations and routines work for or against us.



Objective Realities



Routines & Relationships



Formal Processes



Values & Beliefs

# ■ Barriers & enablers



## Objective Realities

Absence or existence of enabling or constraining realities, such as..

- Physical realities: people, objects, location, temperature,..
- Intangible elements: data, cash/equity, rights, permits,...

*"We had no money for a proper response!"*

*"We realized what was going on, because we had all the current data!"*



## Routines & Relationships

Absence or existence of informal ways of "doing things", such as..

- Informal communication networks
- Day-to-day work routines & ad hoc decision-making Leadership behaviour & qualities

*"I learned about the issue from my golf buddy."*

*"I felt like my boss would get angry, so I hesitated to act."*



## Formal Processes

Absence or existence of formalized ways of "doing things", such as..

- Organizational processes (accounting, forecasting,...)
- Processes in production or quality management
- Communication processes (reporting, escalation, steering committees,..)

*"We focused so much on the KPIs that we missed the bigger picture."*

*"The process made sure that the info reached the right people."*



## Values & Beliefs

Beliefs about how things are, how they will be, or how they should be, such as..

- Unchecked/uncheckable assumptions about the present or future
- Hopes and wishes that become the foundation of planning
- Self-perception (Who do we want to be?)

*"I felt like I had no stake in the project and thus didn't speak up."*

*"For me, it was really important that we achieve also X, and not only Y with the project. That's maybe why I noticed something was going wrong."*

# ■ **Workshop preparation**

To support you in facilitating a workshop on managing surprises, we have collected inspiration for how to run a workshop. First you will be introduced to three design principles that are relevant to remember when preparing and running workshops in general. Next, we have collected specific recommendations for facilitating this workshop..

# ■ Design principles



**Facilitate for discovery.** To become better at managing surprises we need to increase our ability to be reflective and critical of our own assumptions. The workshop can enable the participants to discover for themselves the misunderstandings, barriers and enablers. As a facilitator, try to merely guide them to these discoveries, don't teach!

Consider

Let participants do the talking.  
Ask participants to spot communalities and differences. ("Do you see anything interesting?")  
Encourage discussions about differences in perception.



**Co-create.** The outcome of the workshop will be action points for changing the way how people in your organization communicate and manage hick-ups. Changing behaviour is one of the hardest things to do in an organization. By co-creating these action points with everybody in the room, you generate ownership and motivation to transform these suggestions into lived reality.

Consider

Are the action points concrete?  
Does everyone consider them helpful?  
Who outside the workshop needs to take ownership? How to get them on board?



**Provide take-aways.** The workshop is designed to provide the participants with a framework for future conversations. Observe which insights resonate most with the participants and create take-aways that visualize these insights. Maybe a print out of the surprise cycle? Or a drawing of their diverging understanding of the situation?

Consider

What were the insights that sparked most discussion?  
Where are the key struggles that should stay on the radar?  
What visualization would be most helpful to guide future projects?

# ■ Workshop recommendations



## Target audience of the surprise workshop

The workshop is suitable for all levels of the organization, targeting in particular teams and employees that work closely together on the same initiative.



## Participants

Gather 4-6 participants from different roles in the initiative – core team, senior management, internal customers etc. You can also have groups from different initiatives work in parallel.



## Duration of the workshop

The workshop usually takes 2-3 hours. If you have several parallel groups account for a little more time for report out.



## Material

Print outs (A2 or bigger) of the four templates  
post-its // pens  
A4 paper // tape



# ■ **Workshop guide**

The next part walks you through the three elements of the workshop. First, you engage your participants in a discussion about surprises in strategic initiatives in general. Then, you help them explore in which step of the surprise cycle they struggle the most. Finally, you will look for organizational elements that lead to these struggles (barriers) and elements that help overcome them (enablers) and translate these insights into action points. You will also find an example of the workshop exercises in use.

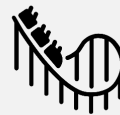
# ■ Your journey

The workshop will guide the participants through three discoveries. First, you guide them to reflect why they are surprised in their strategic initiatives, uncovering the importance of explicit or hidden assumptions. Second, you will help them identify where they struggle to manage their surprises – is it the difficulty of spotting or understanding the surprise? Or is it difficult to find an appropriate response? Third, you will steer their discovery of elements that challenge them in surprise management, leading to the formulation of action points in the fourth step.



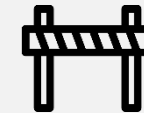
## 01 Why are we surprised?

Discover and discuss surprise events, and identify what surprised you. This step helps to understand surprises, and realize that it boils down to (differing) assumptions and views on the world.



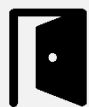
## 02 Understanding surprises

Discover how individual understanding of a surprise differs across the phases of planning, noticing, interpreting and responding. Uncover when you struggle in managing your surprises effectively.



## 03 Identify barriers

Discover what elements, behaviours, or beliefs in your organization or initiative made it difficult – or easy – to manage your surprises.



## 04 Removing barriers

Reflecting on the insights from step 01-03, define three to five action points that strengthen your capability to manage surprises.

# ■ Why are we surprised?

## STEP 01

### Understand why you are surprised in your organization

This part of the workshop starts the discussion about surprises in strategic initiatives. Participants will reflect first individually about surprise instances that they encountered in the initiative, and discuss them thereafter to identify particularly critical assumptions in the organization or initiative, that repeatedly lead to unpleasant surprises. The key realization participants should take from this exercise is, that we are surprised whenever prior assumptions are breached and that therefore, we need to reflect more about the assumptions we make and take for granted.

#### Steps

We recommend that you give the participants 5 minutes for individual reflection, followed by discussion in the group (team) for 10-15 minutes.

1. The facilitator introduces the concept of surprises
2. The participants write down surprises they encountered during the initiative
3. Everyone in turn presents their surprises uninterrupted
4. Discuss differences and similarities of the surprises, using the dimensions in template 01
5. Are there communalities in your surprises?

#### Time

This exercise takes maximum 30 minutes including introduction.

#### Materials

Post-its // Pens

Template 01 - A3 (table) or A1 (wall)

This is a representation of Exercise 01: **What surprises us?** The coloured squares indicate a few surprises identified during individual reflection, the symbols on the canvas represent the discussed characterization of the individual surprises.

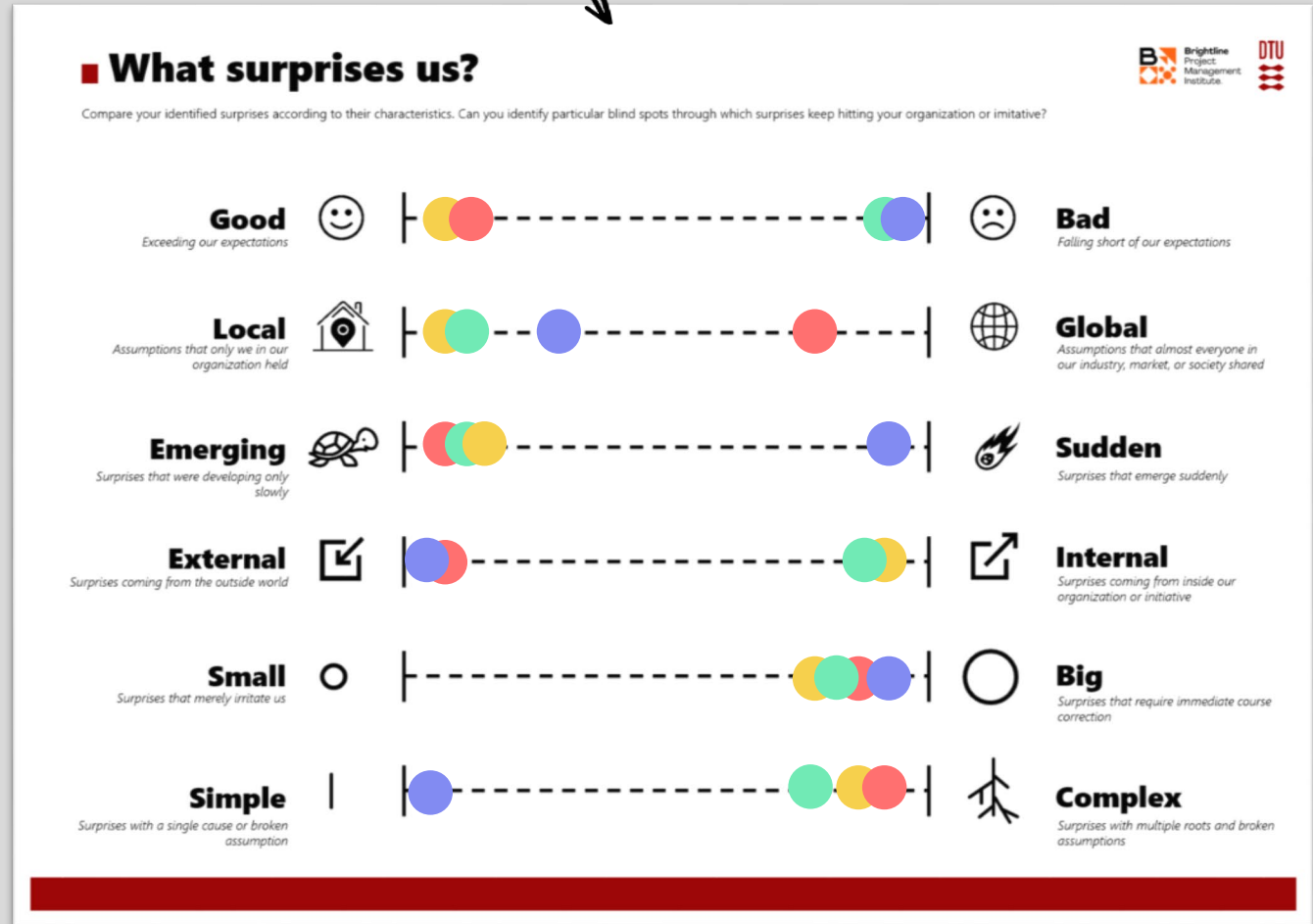


Employees were much more excited than expected

Price erosions for X

Development took twice as long

Unexpected launch of similar services by competition



You will find a printable template of this canvas in the annex

# ■ Understanding surprises

## STEP 02

### Discover what makes managing surprises so difficult

In this exercise participants will explore the life-cycle of any surprise and realize that misunderstandings during the steps (planning – noticing – understanding – responding – learning) can lead to frictions that suppress an effective management of the surprise. The visualization as a curve helps them to realize that other stakeholders or participants of the initiative held different beliefs and perceptions throughout the initiative. Before starting the exercise, introduce the life-cycle of surprises (template 02)

#### Steps

Choose one surprise that the participants responded most to (usually there will be one that is some type of “meta-surprise” setting the theme for many others).

1. Introduce the two axes of the graph
2. Participants draw their personal curve individually on a piece of A4, marking events or developments that created changes in understanding of the surprise
3. Everyone in turn presents their curve, drawing it on the canvas (template 03)
4. Discuss differences in understanding, and when and where curves started to converge
5. Where were the biggest misunderstandings? What were the biggest Aha!-moments?

#### Time

This exercise ca. 30-40 minutes including introduction.

#### Materials

Blank A4 paper // Pens

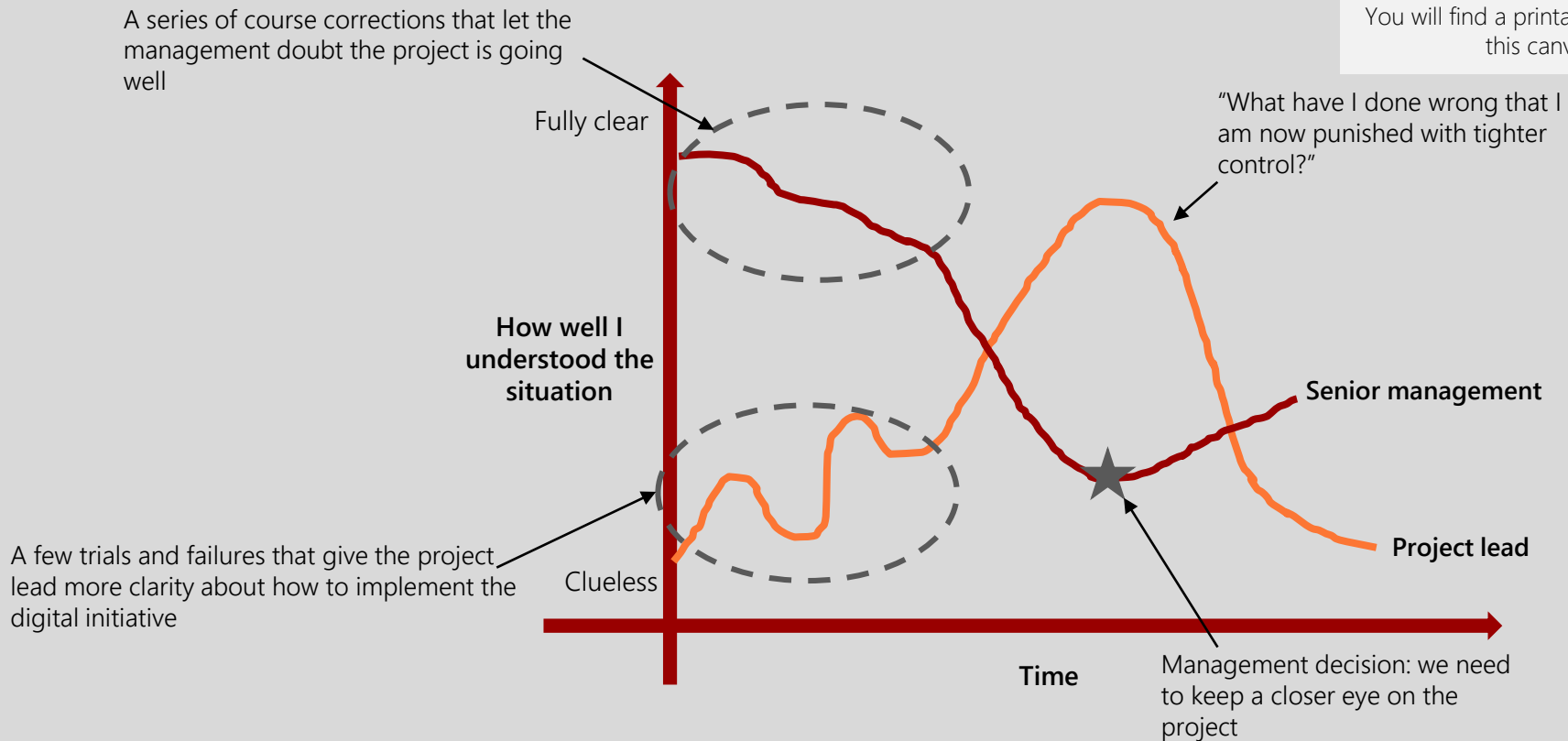
Template 02 (A3 or A2 for wall)

Template 03 (A3 table/A1 for wall)

## Example

Example Corp. has launched a digital initiative to modernize their data handling. They have hired a project lead with excellent reputation, and given her considerable freedom in executing the project. After a few months, senior management hears repeatedly about various hick-ups in the project, and starts wondering why the project lead keeps shifting resources around. They start to think that the project lead might not be as capable as they thought, and increase their control on the initiative, restricting the project lead's freedom.

The project lead, on the other hand, has been aware from the outset that the project has a lot of unknowns. Thus, the early stages relied on exploring possibilities, which eventually lead into a few dead ends. However, these trial & error instances became learning opportunities, creating clarity regarding what to do and by whom. When suddenly management increased pressure on the project lead, she does not understand where this is coming from – was not all going well?



# ■ Identify barriers & enablers

## STEP 03

### Identify the barriers and enablers of creating alignment in surprise situation

In this exercise, participants will identify what made it hard and what made it easy to create an understanding of the surprise situation. A typical outcome of this discussion is that many enablers and barriers pertain to the 'soft' side of managing, i.e. the relationships, routines, beliefs or values across the people of the organization. Understanding the barriers and enablers then allows to formulate action points for the future in the following last step.

#### Steps

Refer back to the curve and invite to reflect on the turning points and instances where curves were converging or diverging.

1. Participants write down what made it hard to handle the surprise (red post-its) and what made it easy to handle the surprise (green post-its)
2. Introduce the four categories of barriers and enablers (template 04) and let participants in turn place their notes on the template, explaining their thoughts
3. Discuss the emerging picture – where are the red, where are the green post-its? Do the topical clusters represent the focus you had in handling the surprise?

#### Time

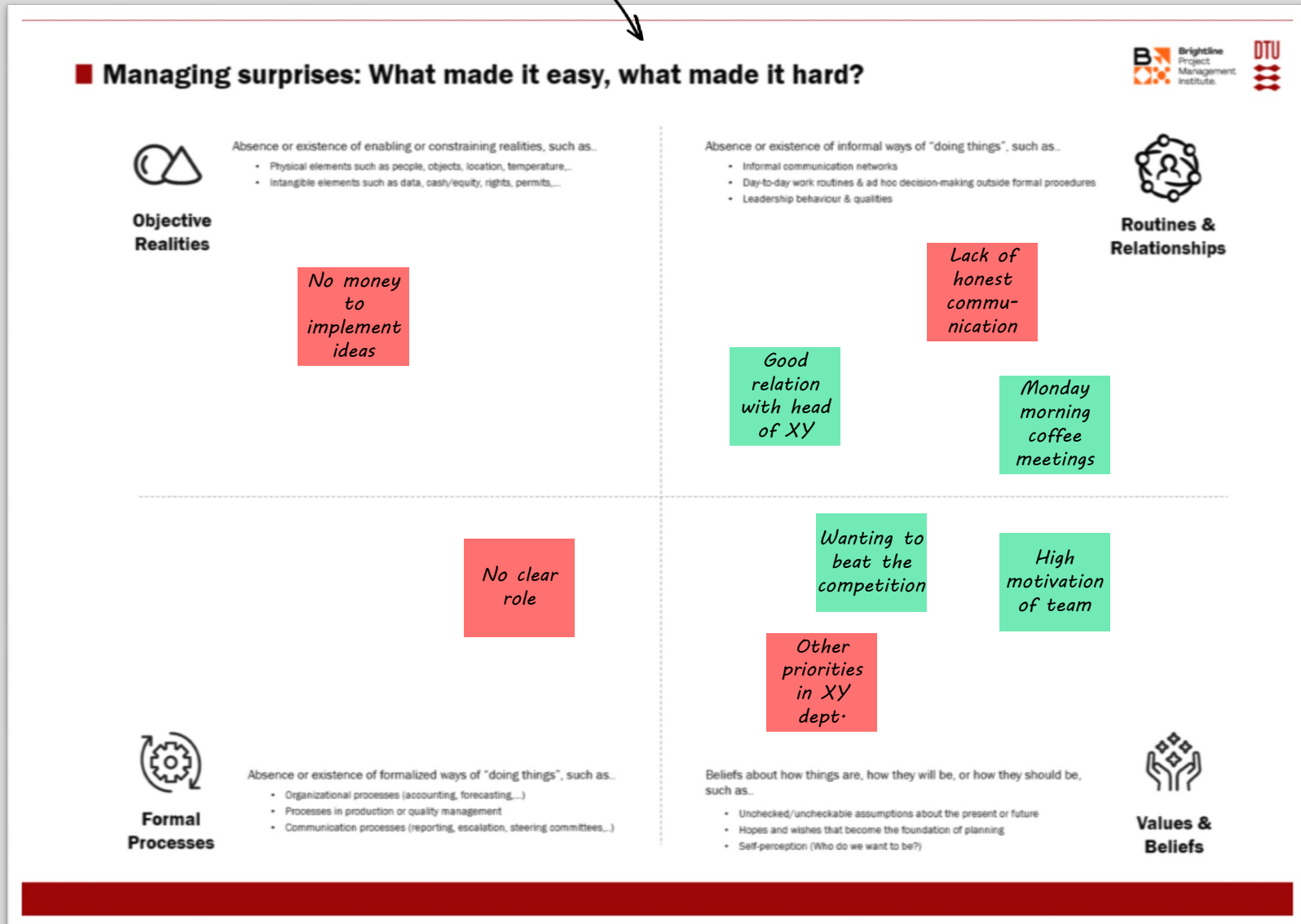
This exercise ca. 30-40 minutes including introduction.

#### Materials

Small green & red post-its // Pens

Template 04 (A3 for table or A2 for wall)

This is a representation of Exercise 03: Identifying barriers and enablers? The red and green squares indicate elements that made it hard or easy (respectively) to manage the surprise.



You will find a printable template of this canvas in the annex



# ■ Taking action

## STEP 04

### Removing barriers and leveraging enablers through concrete actions

In the final step the team will identify concrete actions that can reduce barriers of aligning surprise management, or increase existing strengths and enablers. The session should end with three to five concrete ideas of “what we are going to do differently/more of in the future!”

#### Steps

Now it's time to take action. Reflecting on step 01-03 the group should come up with specific action points for the future.

1. Participants write down what they want “more of” (green) or “less of” (red) in the future to enhance their ability to manage their surprises.
2. In turn, the participants present their ideas.
3. Discuss and agree on 3-5 action points how the “more of/less of” wishes can be realized in practice – Document them on the flip-chart!

#### Time

This exercise ca. 30 minutes including introduction.

#### Materials

Large green/red post its // pens

Flip-Chart or whiteboard

# ■ Further readings

## If you are interested in further reading, please visit

- [www.brightline.org](http://www.brightline.org)
- [www.risklab.dtu.dk](http://www.risklab.dtu.dk)
- [www.es.man.dtu.dk](http://www.es.man.dtu.dk)
- Thinkers50 / Brightline “Resilient transformation” on page 180: <https://www.brightline.org/resources/thinkers50-transformation-playbook/> (free download)
- London School of Economics Blog:
  - <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2019/04/26/surprise-leveraging-the-unexpected-in-strategy-implementation/>
  - <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2019/11/08/creating-momentum-for-digital-transformation-without-a-burning-platform/>

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# **■ Workshop material**

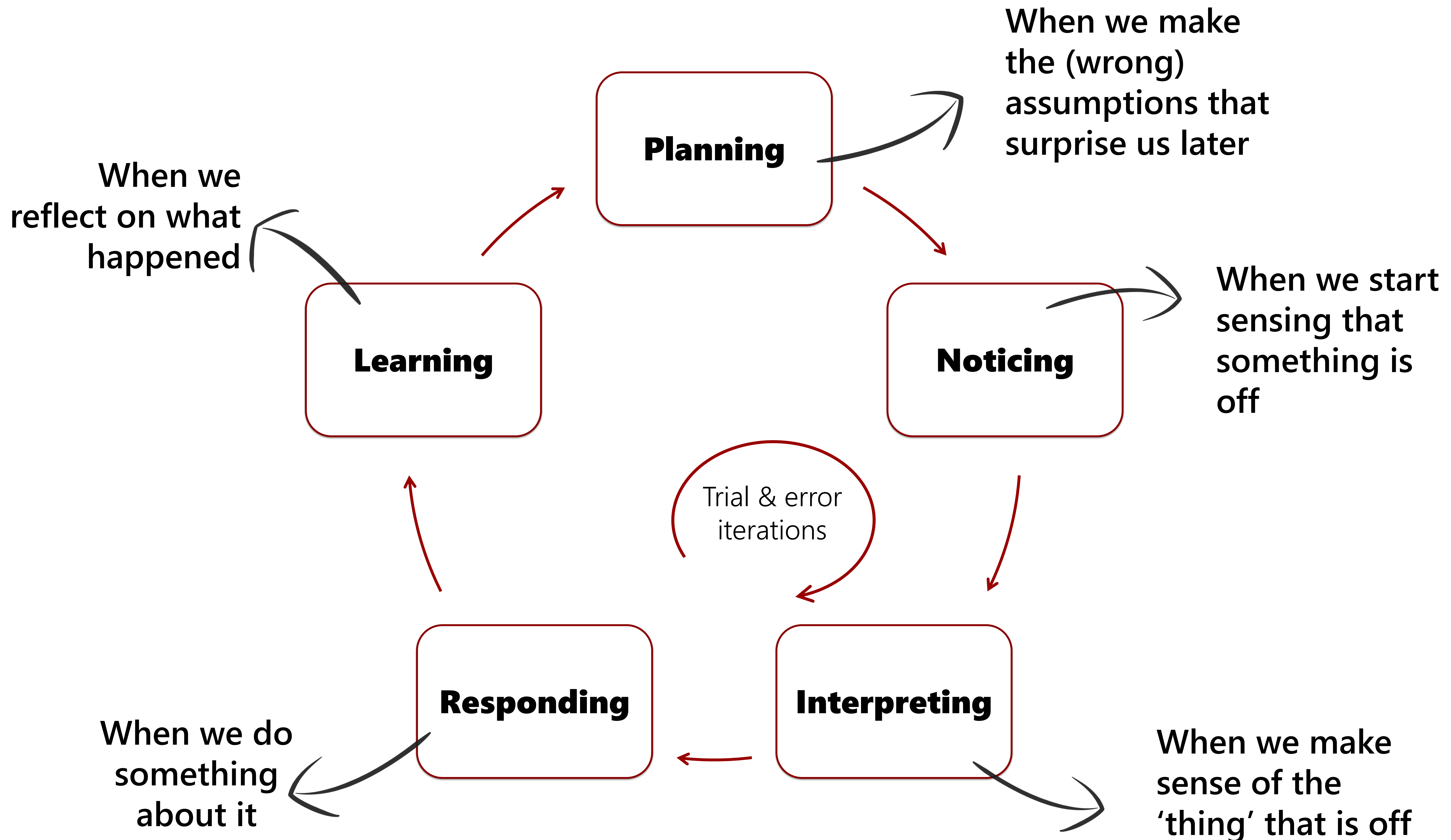
Here you will find the four templates for the workshop ready to print in A1 size.

# ■ What surprised us?

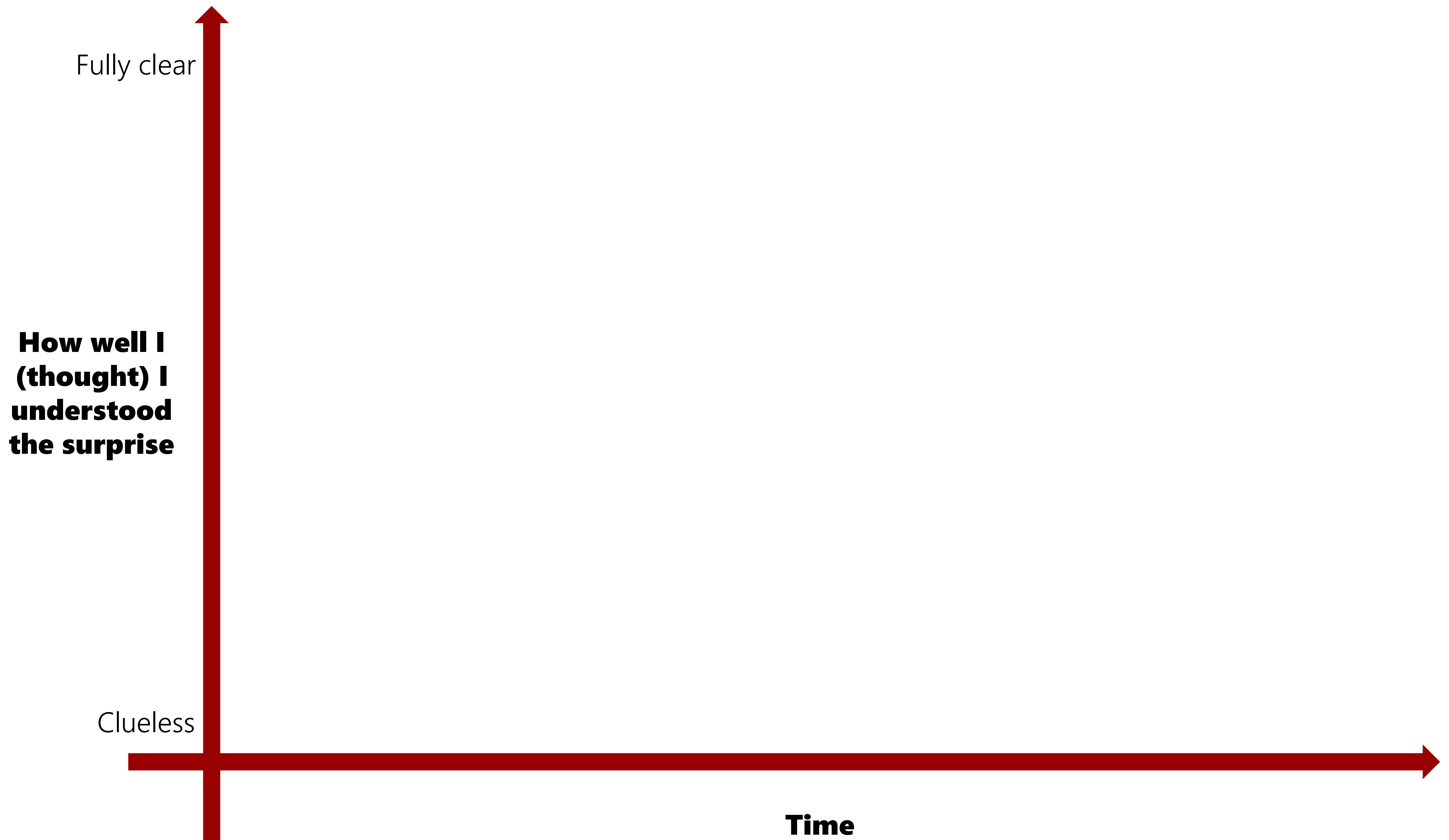
Compare your identified surprises according to their characteristics. Can you identify particular blind spots through which surprises keep hitting your organization or initiative?

<b>Good</b> <i>Exceeding our expectations</i>		-----		<b>Bad</b> <i>Falling short of our expectations</i>
<b>Local</b> <i>Assumptions that only we in our organization held</i>		-----		<b>Global</b> <i>Assumptions that almost everyone in our industry, market, or society shared</i>
<b>Emerging</b> <i>Surprises that were developing only slowly</i>		-----		<b>Sudden</b> <i>Surprises that emerge suddenly</i>
<b>External</b> <i>Surprises coming from the outside world</i>		-----		<b>Internal</b> <i>Surprises coming from inside our organization or initiative</i>
<b>Small</b> <i>Surprises that merely irritate us</i>		-----		<b>Big</b> <i>Surprises that require immediate course correction</i>
<b>Simple</b> <i>Surprises with a single cause or broken assumption</i>		-----		<b>Complex</b> <i>Surprises with multiple roots and broken assumptions</i>

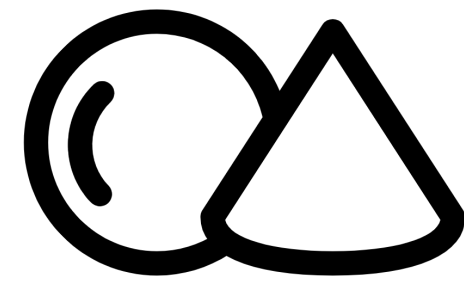
# ■ The lifecycle of any surprise



# ■ The surprise roller coaster



# ■ Managing surprises: What made it easy, what made it hard?



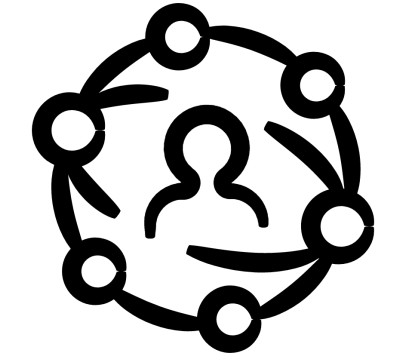
## Objective Realities

Absence or existence of enabling or constraining realities, such as..

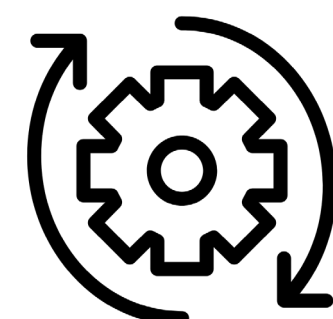
- Physical elements such as people, objects, location, temperature,..
- Intangible elements such as data, cash/equity, rights, permits,..

Absence or existence of informal ways of “doing things”, such as..

- Informal communication networks
- Day-to-day work routines & ad hoc decision-making outside formal procedures
- Leadership behaviour & qualities



## Routines & Relationships



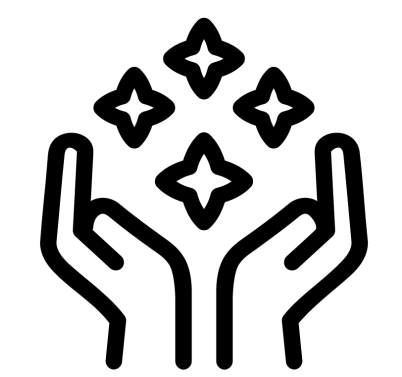
## Formal Processes

Absence or existence of formalized ways of “doing things”, such as..

- Organizational processes (accounting, forecasting,..)
- Processes in production or quality management
- Communication processes (reporting, escalation, steering committees,..)

Beliefs about how things are, how they will be, or how they should be, such as..

- Unchecked/uncheckable assumptions about the present or future
- Hopes and wishes that become the foundation of planning
- Self-perception (Who do we want to be?)



## Values & Beliefs