

The problems that never go away

Working *with* the tensions that
shape your nonprofit

Sector Support Series – November 2025



**People
Centered
Change**



Hi, I'm **Julia**

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People Centered Change

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Today's purpose & intended outcomes

Why are we here, and what do we hope to accomplish?

Purpose

To offer a practical and compassionate way to **understand and navigate the persistent tensions** that shape organizational life.

Intended outcomes

In service of this purpose, together we will...

- Explore why some of the challenges we face in organizational life are not problems to be solved, but **tensions to be managed**.
- **Identify core, recurring tensions** that show up most often in nonprofit organizations.
- Learn about and work with a simple framework that helps us understand how to **manage these tensions more productively**.
- Reflect on how organizational leadership and structure can help teams navigate these dynamics through **shared understanding**.

We all experience “either / or” tensions in our organizations – situations where we feel like **we are pulled in two opposing directions where neither extreme feels quite right.**

What is an example of an either / or tension that you’ve grappled with in your organization?



What are tensions, and how do they show up in nonprofit life?

First, let's start by making a distinction between **problems** and **tensions**.



Problems typically have a clear root cause and have a known or knowable answer. Problems can be effectively solved with the right solution.



Tensions typically have (at least) two valid, competing perspectives, reflect the reality of multiple stakeholders or values, and keep showing up even after you've "fixed" them. Tensions require ongoing management – they never go away.

Four common sources of tension

Most of the tensions we experience in nonprofit organizations are rooted in one or more common sources.



Structure

Tensions rooted in how an organization is designed.

Functional mandates, competing priorities, board/staff roles



Values

Tension between what we believe and what we feel pressured to do.

Equity vs. efficiency, participation vs. urgency



People

Tensions that arise because people have different needs, identities, and realities.

Individual vs. collective needs, generational dynamics



Change

Tensions triggered by planned or emergent growth, evolution, or directional shifts.

Legacy vs. innovation, emerging needs vs. existing programs

What can chronic tensions look like?

- Persistent or entrenched **conflicts between individuals and/or teams** with different mandates.
- **Meta-conflicts** that seem to sit right under the surface of day-to-day challenges.
- The **formation of organizational factions** around critical issues or points of conflict.

Recognizing chronic tensions is critical, in part because of **how easily blame for an undiagnosed tension can be (unfairly) assigned to a person or team.**

- “Oh, she’s just hard to get along with.”
- “Those teams just can’t collaborate with each other.”
- “Those people are just resistant to new ideas”.

Framework for understanding and managing tensions

Using a Polarity Map to manage organizational tensions

Barry Johnson created the **Polarity Map** to help us more deeply understand, leverage, and manage the tensions or “polarities” that come up in organizational life. It focuses on helping **drive shared understanding of a tension, how it manifests, and how to manage it**, including:

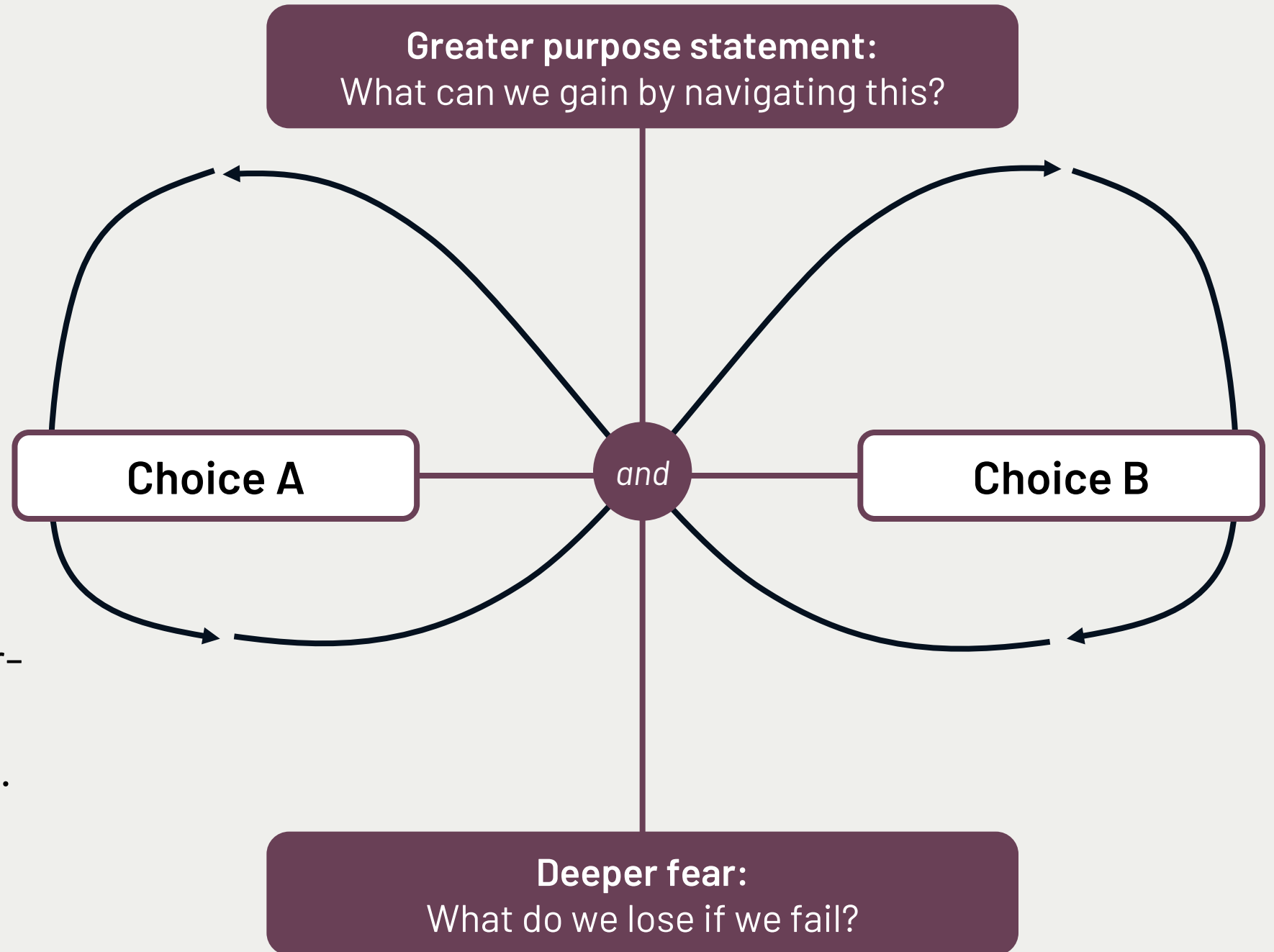
- The positive impact of each polar choice,
- The potential negative results of over-focusing on one choice or another, and
- What it looks like when you are managing the tension well.

Values

Positive results of focusing on either the left or right pole

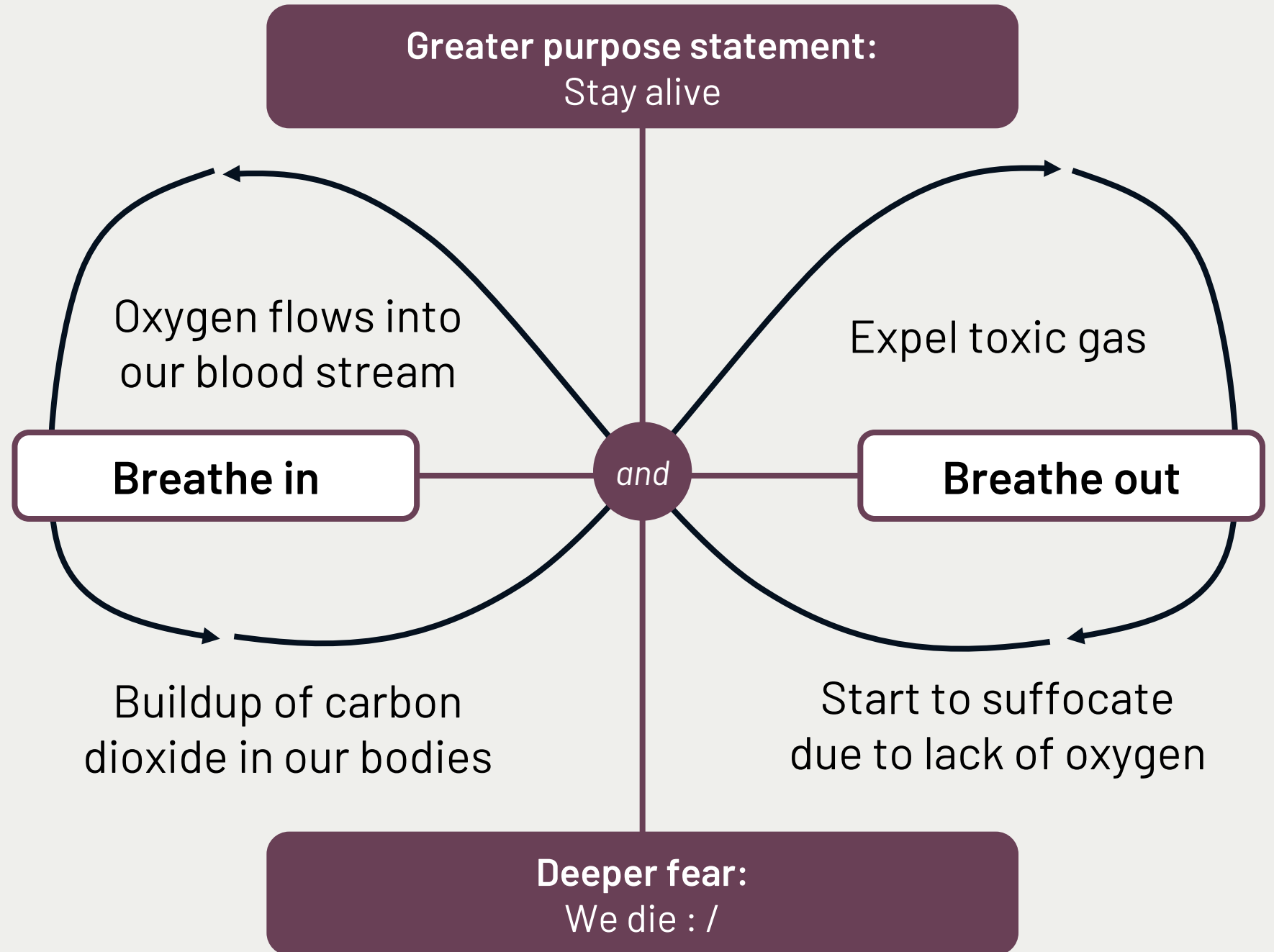
Fears

Negative results of over-focusing on one pole to the neglect of the other.



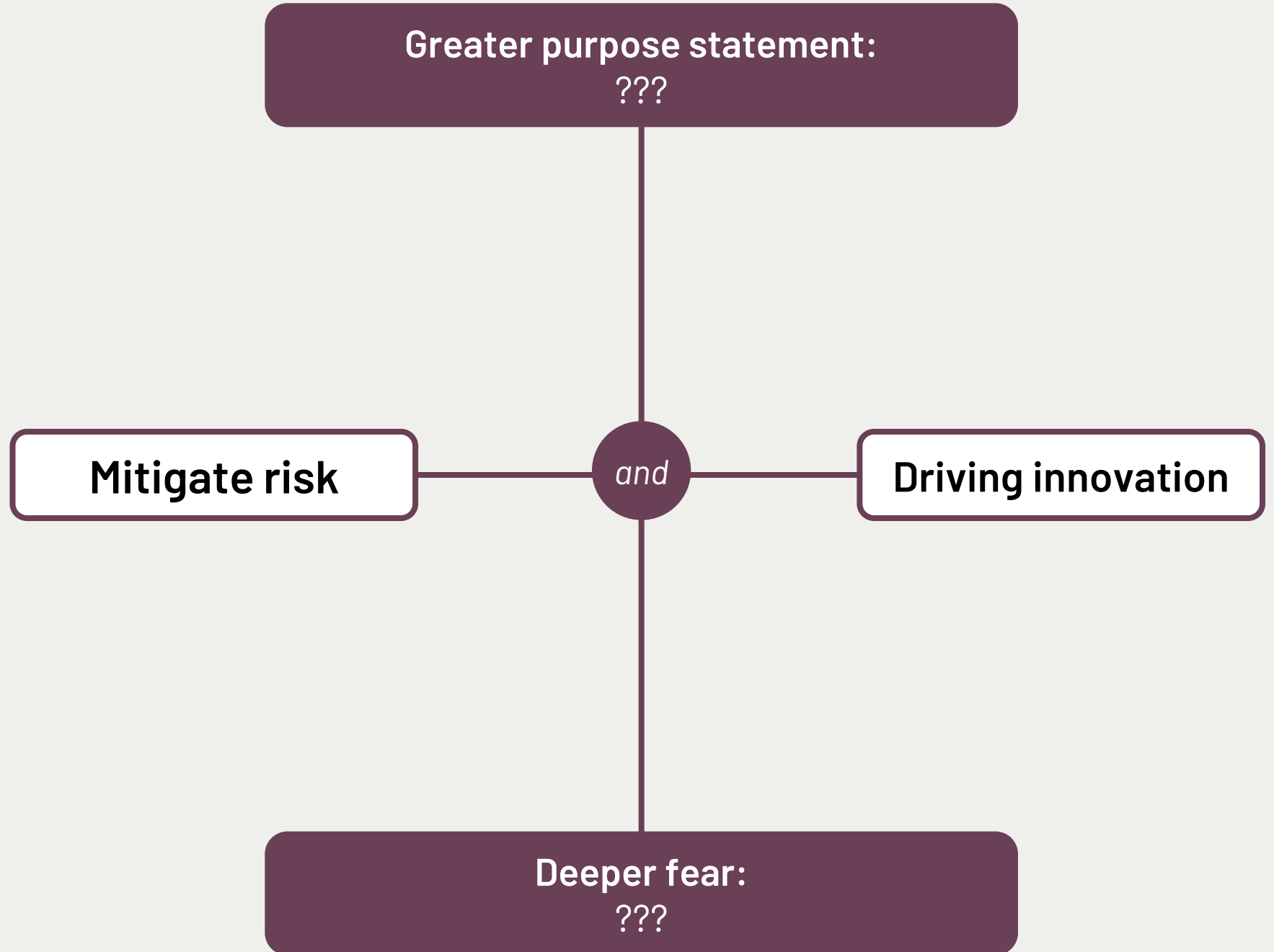
Example

Staying
alive
through
respiration



Example

Balancing
risk
mitigation &
innovation



Greater purpose:

Graceful improvement – improve and evolve

Values

- Good communication
- Streamlined processes
- No regulatory or compliance trouble
- Cost-saving
- Relieve some kinds of stress

Values

- Reach new audiences
- Deepen relationships with current audiences
- Trailblaze
- Staff energy and excitement
- First to market

Option A:

Mitigating risk

Option B:

Driving innovation

Fears

- The world leaves us behind
- Missed opportunities
- Internal frustration and potential turnover or loss of motivation

Fears


- BURNOUT
- We look scattered
- Forgetting purpose and mission
- Dry up annual reserves
- Regulatory trouble

Deeper fear:


Crazy and chaotic

Early warning signs


If tension management is all about finding balance near the middle, how do we know that we are over-investing in one choice to the detriment of the other?



Once you've mapped out the values and fears related to each choice, you have a clear sense of what you want to move toward and maximize, and what you want to avoid and mitigate.



Then, for each pole, you identify “early warning signs” – signals that you are starting to over-invest in one over the other.



Once you know what those early warning signs are, you can agree on how you want to respond when they show up.

<p>Early warning signs that we are over-focusing on Option A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start to hear people grumbling, “oh we can’t do that because of x policy” We see someone in the market putting something out that we thought about but didn’t pursue Complacency 	<p>Greater purpose: Graceful improvement – improve and evolve</p>		<p>Early warning signs that we are over-focusing on Option B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We incur costs we can’t cover Staff are spread too thin – more sick days, leveraging more PTO
	<p>Values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good communication Streamlined processes No regulatory or compliance trouble Cost-saving Relieve some kinds of stress 	<p>Values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reach new audiences Deepen relationships with current audiences Trailblaze Staff energy and excitement First to market 	
	<p>Option A: Mitigating risk</p>	<p>Option B: Driving innovation</p>	
	<p>Fears</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The world leaves us behind Missed opportunities Internal frustration and potential turnover or loss of motivation 	<p>Fears</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> BURNOUT We look scattered Forgetting purpose and mission Dry up annual reserves Regulatory trouble 	
	<p>Deeper fear: Crazy and chaotic</p>		

Testing it out on a real example

Let's give this a try

In groups, I'm inviting you to pick a real, live tension that you or one of your colleagues is facing and to explore how you might manage it using polarity mapping.



Identify a real tension one of you is facing



Ask clarifying questions to help the case owner flesh out their Polarity Map, including:

- Greater purpose statement
- Deeper fear
- Values and fears related to each choice
- Possible warning signs



Avoid problem solving – it's hard but give it a try!

What was that like?

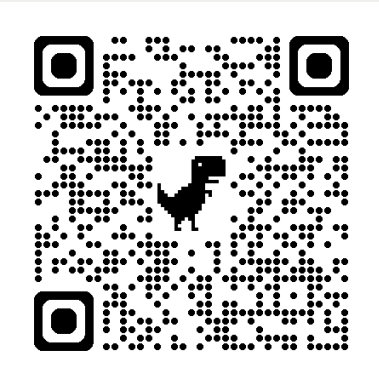
- › What did that experience **feel like**?
- › Did anything **surprise** you?
- › What did you **learn**?
- › What **questions** are you left with?

Continuing the conversation



Share feedback

I would love your feedback on this workshop and future topics you'd find valuable – use this QR code to get started!



Get pro bono support

If you want a thought partner to apply what you learned today at your own organization, use this link to sign up for pro-bono office hours!

Thank you!

It was such a pleasure to be here with you today!!



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