

# Culturally Responsive Problem Solving for Increased Equity



Heidi Erstad  
Technical Assistance Coordinator  
Wisconsin RtI Center  
[erstadh@wisconsinrticenter.org](mailto:erstadh@wisconsinrticenter.org)

Heidi Laabs  
Statewide Leadership and Coaching Coordinator  
Wisconsin RtI Center  
[laabsh@wisconsinrticenter.org](mailto:laabsh@wisconsinrticenter.org)

# Session Description

This session will help participants understand **how biases commonly emerge in problem-solving** and the strategies to interrupt them in order to achieve more equitable outcomes for students.

Participants will receive access to DPI's **Culturally Responsive Problem Solving Guide (draft)**.



# Session Take-aways

- Understand the **role of mindsets and bias** in shaping decision-making
- Identify **strategies to set the stage for and stay engaged with culturally responsive problem-solving processes** to achieve equitable outcomes
- Identify **decision points in team problem-solving processes** that are vulnerable to bias and strategies to navigate through



# **Culturally Responsive Problem- Solving**

- ◎ Brings team members' cultural attitudes and beliefs into the discussion
- ◎ Is an evidence-based practice for *all* students
- ◎ Has the greatest impact on groups of students historically underserved by schools.

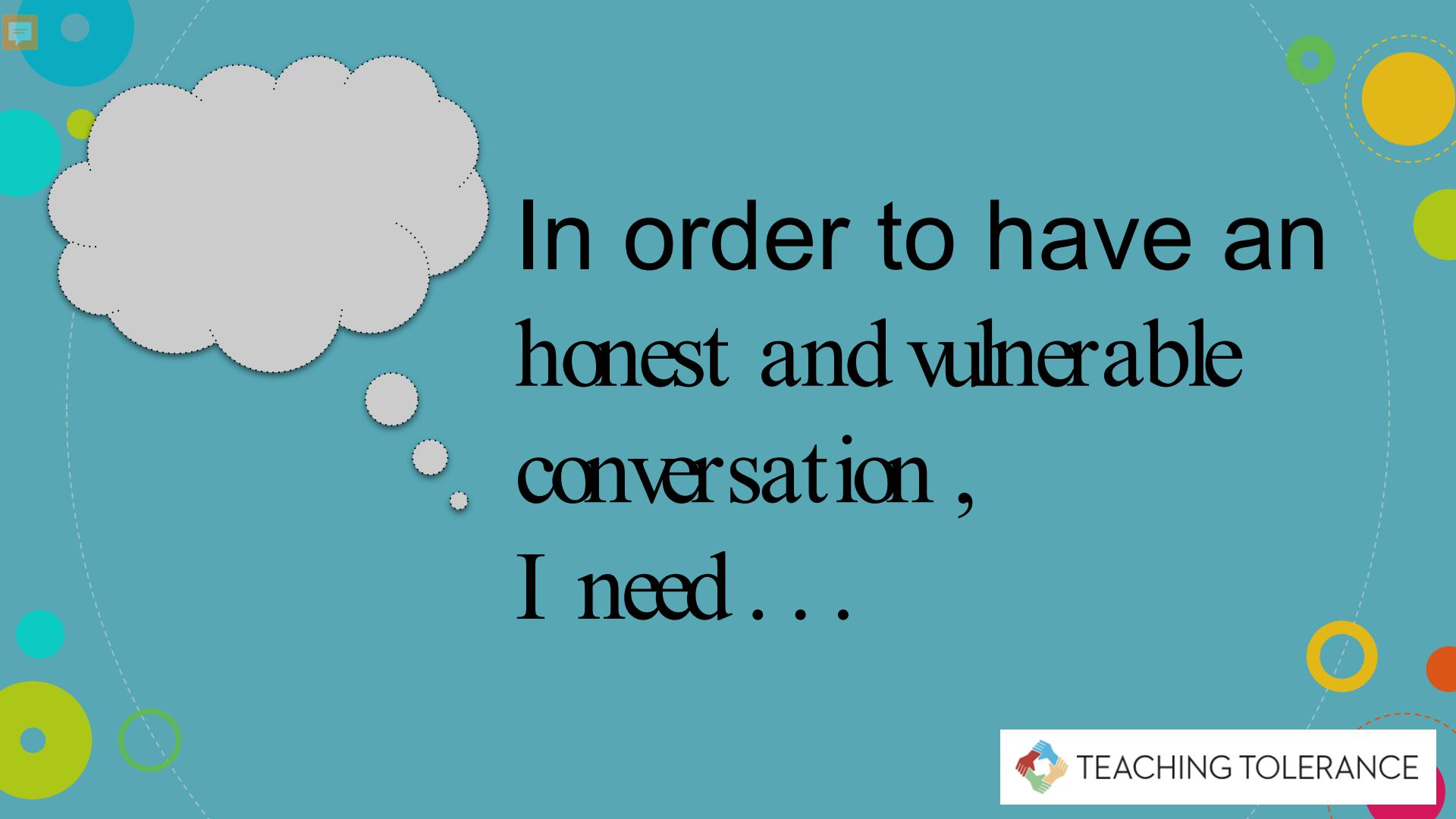




# Community Agreements

“[Community agreements] are important for a group that intends to work together on difficult issues or who will be working together over time. Starting with [community agreements] builds trust, clarifies group expectations of one another, and establishes points of reflection to see how the group is doing regarding process.”

- Marilyn Wentworth, School Reform Initiative



In order to have an  
honest and vulnerable  
conversation ,  
I need . . .



# Community Agreements

1. Use & receive “I” statements with respect
2. Respect confidentiality
3. Embrace messiness & kindness
4. Practice accountability (*intent vs. impact*)
5. Be aware of equity of voice (*move up, move back*)



TEACHING TOLERANCE

Our stories shape, limit, and define our way of being, the way we think, and the way we interact with others.



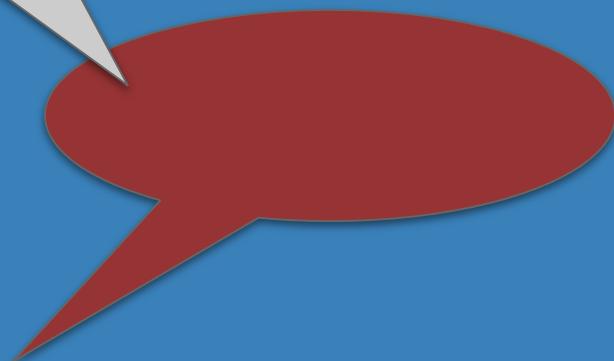
*Which stories do we tell?*

*Robert Hargrove, Masterful Coaching*

Think of a  
team you're  
on...

What is a common “rut”  
story this team tells about  
students, families, staff..?

Turn and talk ...





# Mental Models

- ◎ Values, beliefs and assumptions about how the world works
- ◎ Make sense of the world
- ◎ Protect ourselves
- ◎ Drive our behavior
- ◎ Operate unconsciously
- ◎ All flawed to some extent

*“Like a pane of glass framing and subtly distorting our vision, mental models determine what we see.” - Peter Senge*

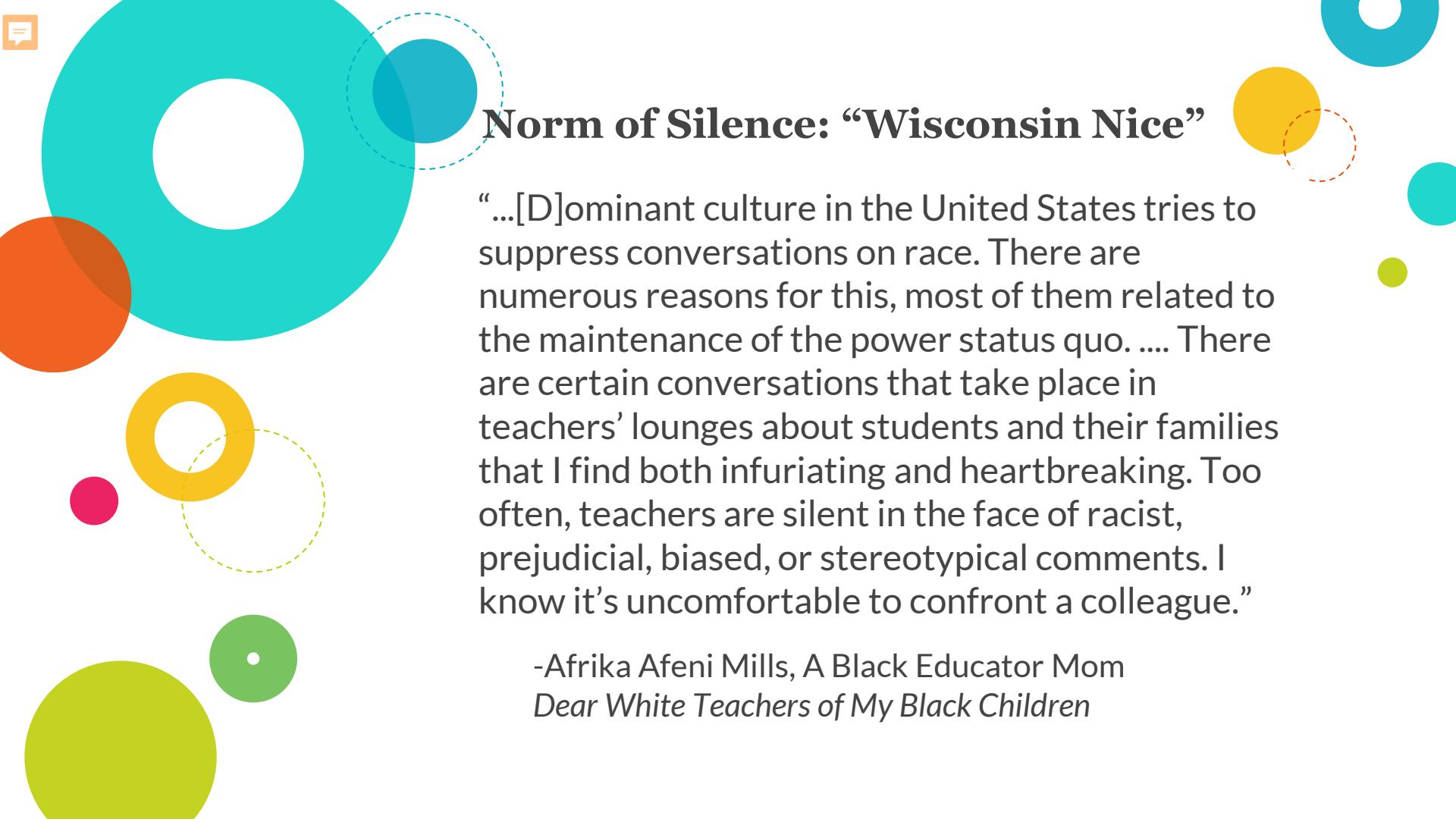
# Apprenticeship of Observation

- ◎ Educators have been socialized in their field since childhood (13K hours) and adopt the norms of the field
- ◎ The average educator was a good student
- ◎ Educators subconsciously protect a system that was of personal benefit
- ◎ Educators implement practices that protect the system (academic obstacle course)

(Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*, 1975)

“Functional hypocrisy”

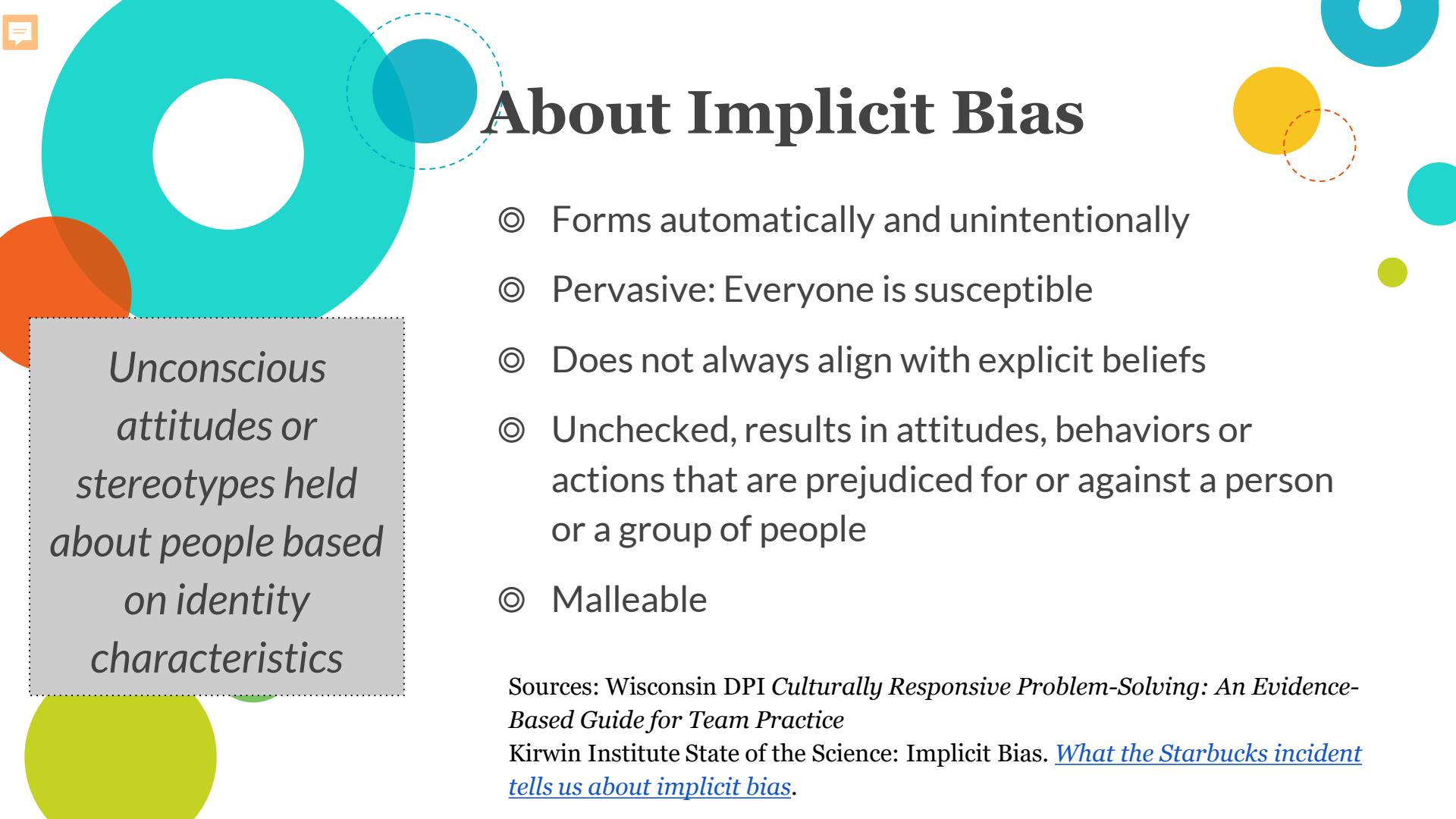
- Anthony Muhammad



## Norm of Silence: “Wisconsin Nice”

“...[D]ominant culture in the United States tries to suppress conversations on race. There are numerous reasons for this, most of them related to the maintenance of the power status quo. .... There are certain conversations that take place in teachers’ lounges about students and their families that I find both infuriating and heartbreaking. Too often, teachers are silent in the face of racist, prejudicial, biased, or stereotypical comments. I know it’s uncomfortable to confront a colleague.”

-Afrika Afeni Mills, A Black Educator Mom  
*Dear White Teachers of My Black Children*

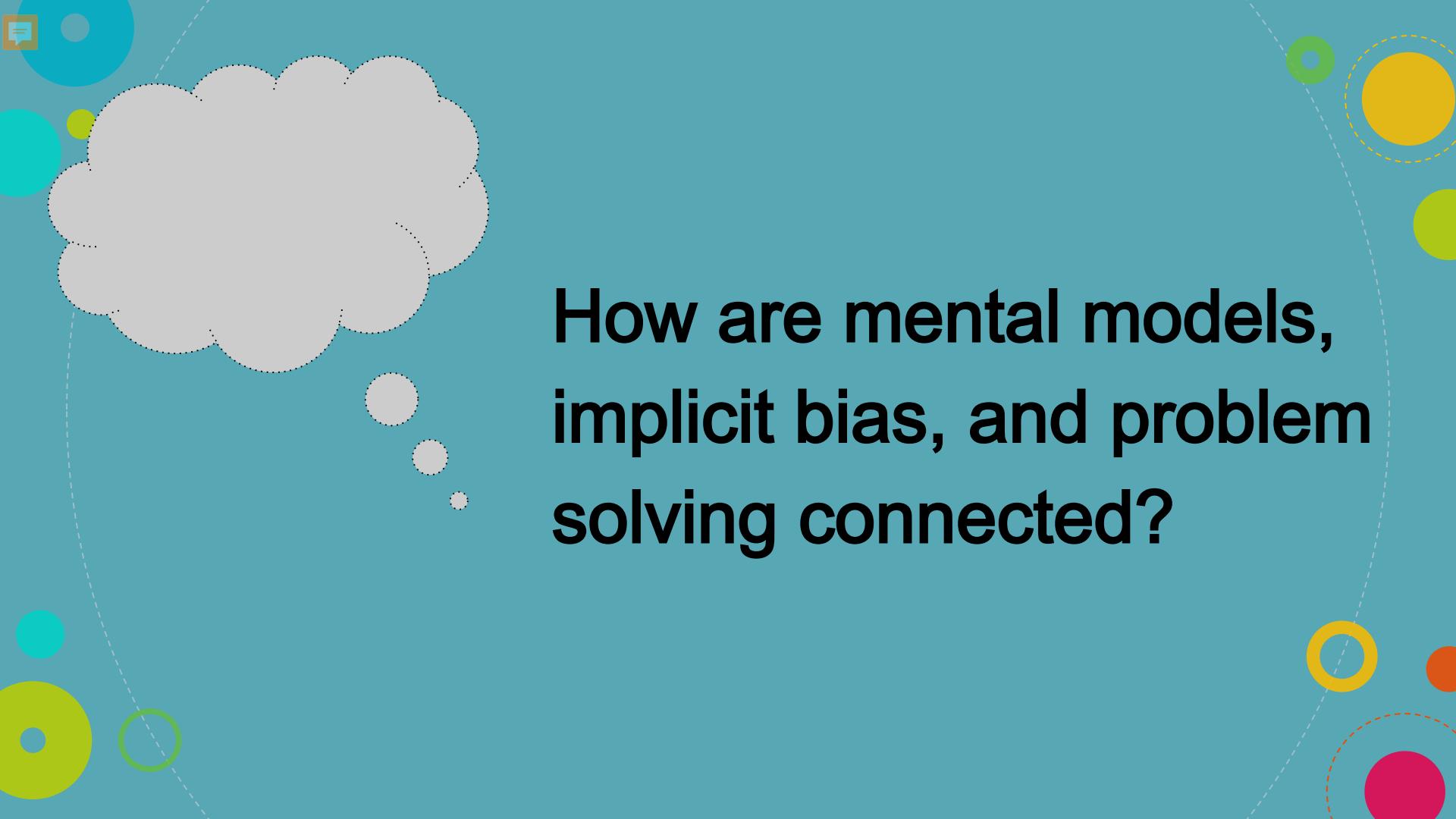


Unconscious attitudes or stereotypes held about people based on identity characteristics

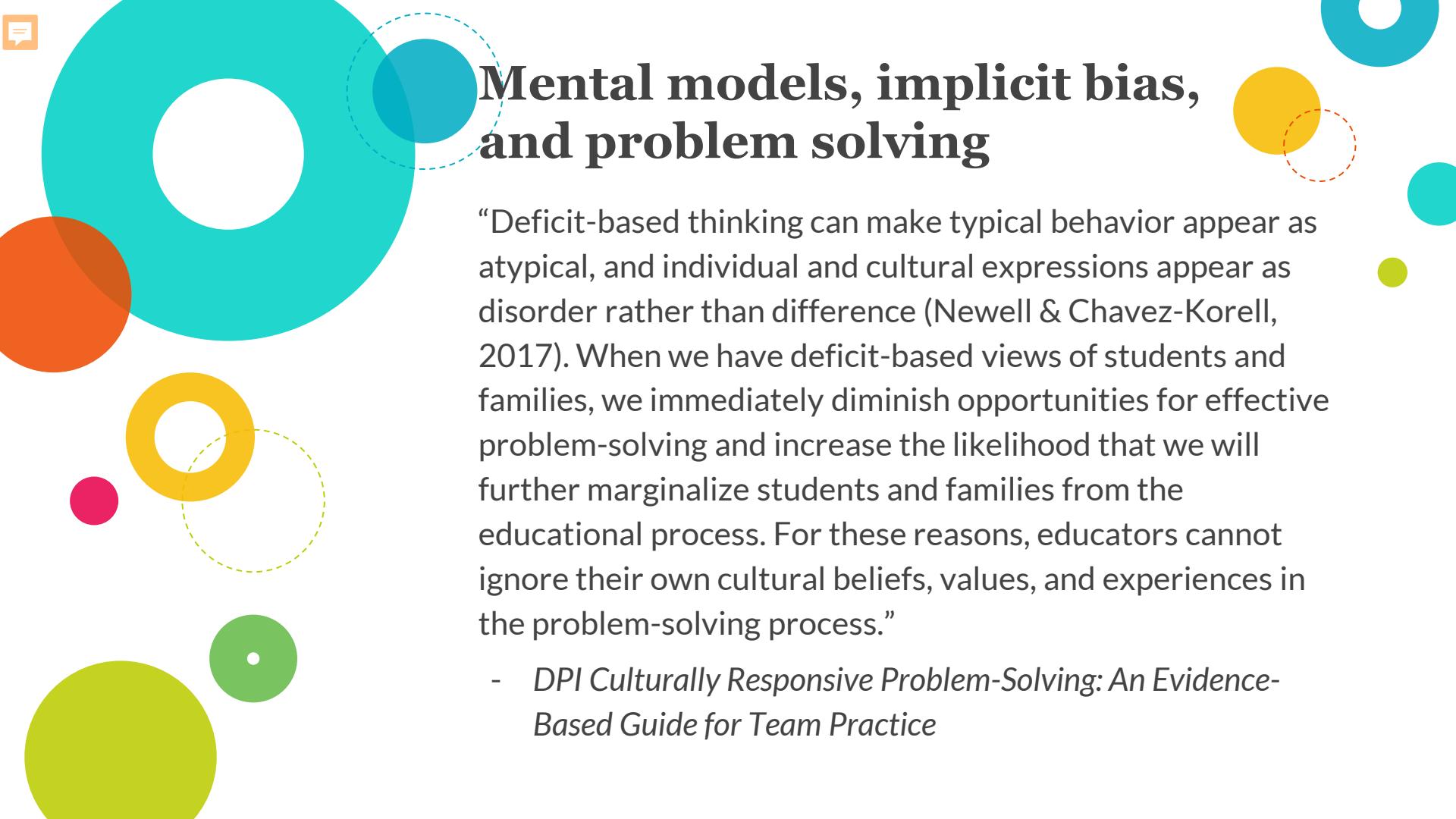
# About Implicit Bias

- ◎ Forms automatically and unintentionally
- ◎ Pervasive: Everyone is susceptible
- ◎ Does not always align with explicit beliefs
- ◎ Unchecked, results in attitudes, behaviors or actions that are prejudiced for or against a person or a group of people
- ◎ Malleable

Sources: Wisconsin DPI *Culturally Responsive Problem-Solving: An Evidence-Based Guide for Team Practice*  
Kirwin Institute State of the Science: Implicit Bias. [What the Starbucks incident tells us about implicit bias.](#)



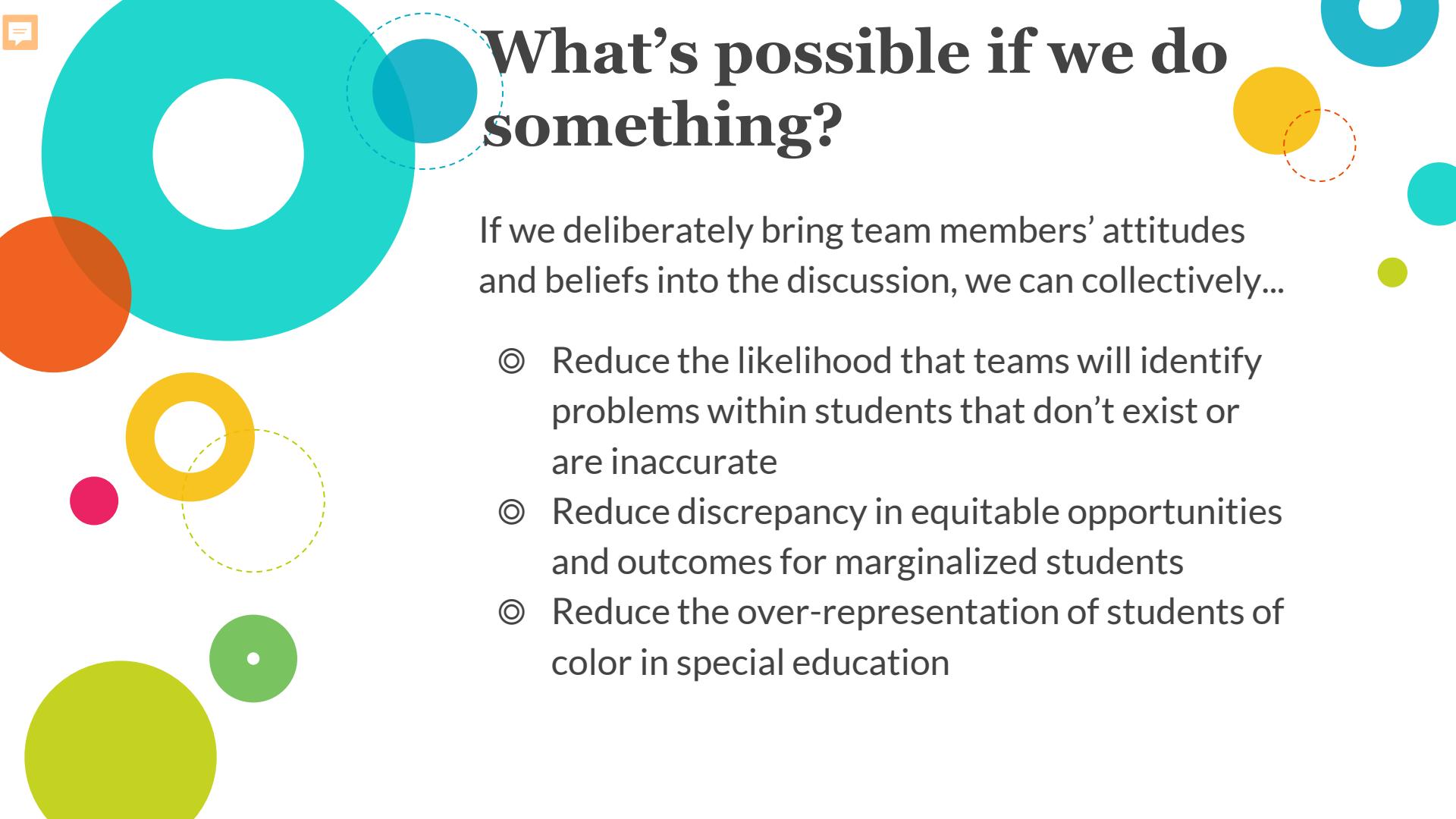
How are mental models,  
implicit bias, and problem  
solving connected?



# Mental models, implicit bias, and problem solving

“Deficit-based thinking can make typical behavior appear as atypical, and individual and cultural expressions appear as disorder rather than difference (Newell & Chavez-Korell, 2017). When we have deficit-based views of students and families, we immediately diminish opportunities for effective problem-solving and increase the likelihood that we will further marginalize students and families from the educational process. For these reasons, educators cannot ignore their own cultural beliefs, values, and experiences in the problem-solving process.”

- *DPI Culturally Responsive Problem-Solving: An Evidence-Based Guide for Team Practice*



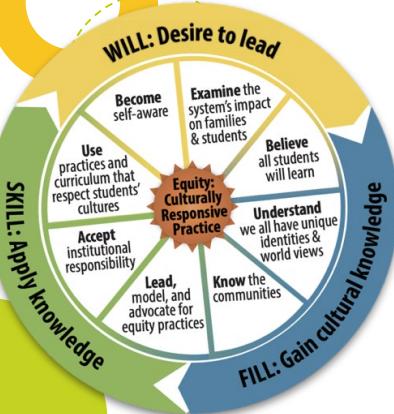
# What's possible if we do something?

If we deliberately bring team members' attitudes and beliefs into the discussion, we can collectively...

- ◎ Reduce the likelihood that teams will identify problems within students that don't exist or are inaccurate
- ◎ Reduce discrepancy in equitable opportunities and outcomes for marginalized students
- ◎ Reduce the over-representation of students of color in special education

# *Setting the Stage Strategies*

- Establish and use community agreements
- Model use of person-first language
- Model vulnerability
- Commit to continually learning about yourself and others
- Collectively learn about and examine beliefs and assumptions
- Practice “calling-in” accountability





# Practice “calling in” accountability

## Calling out



A direct challenge to something said or done, usually in public, with the intent of exposing the person's wrongdoing to others

## Calling in



Checking your peers and getting them to change problematic behavior by explaining their misstep with compassion and patience.

Think about  
your team's rut  
story...

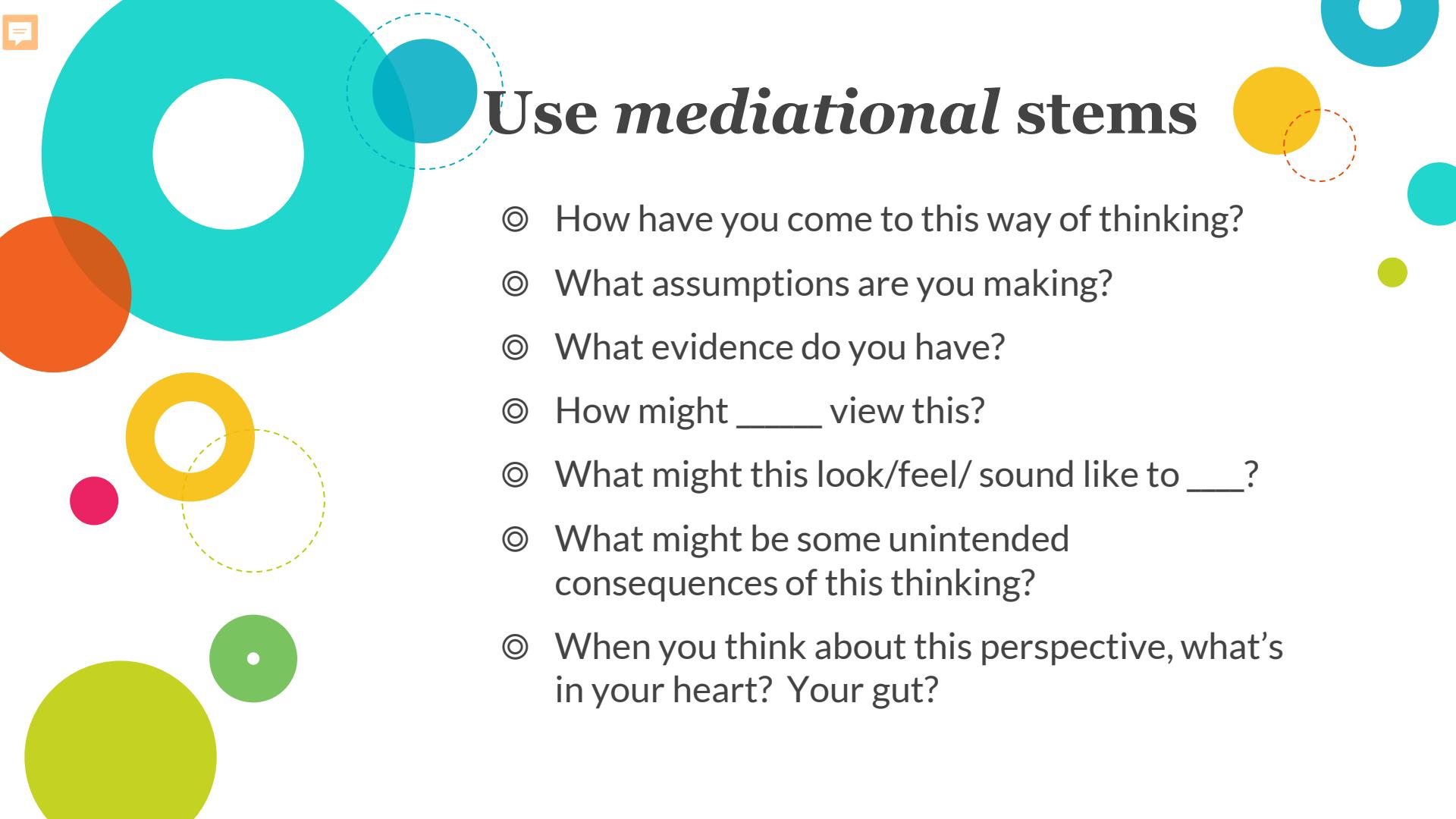
What gets you way of disrupting this pattern?

What are the social consequences of disrupting?

What are the consequences of staying silent?

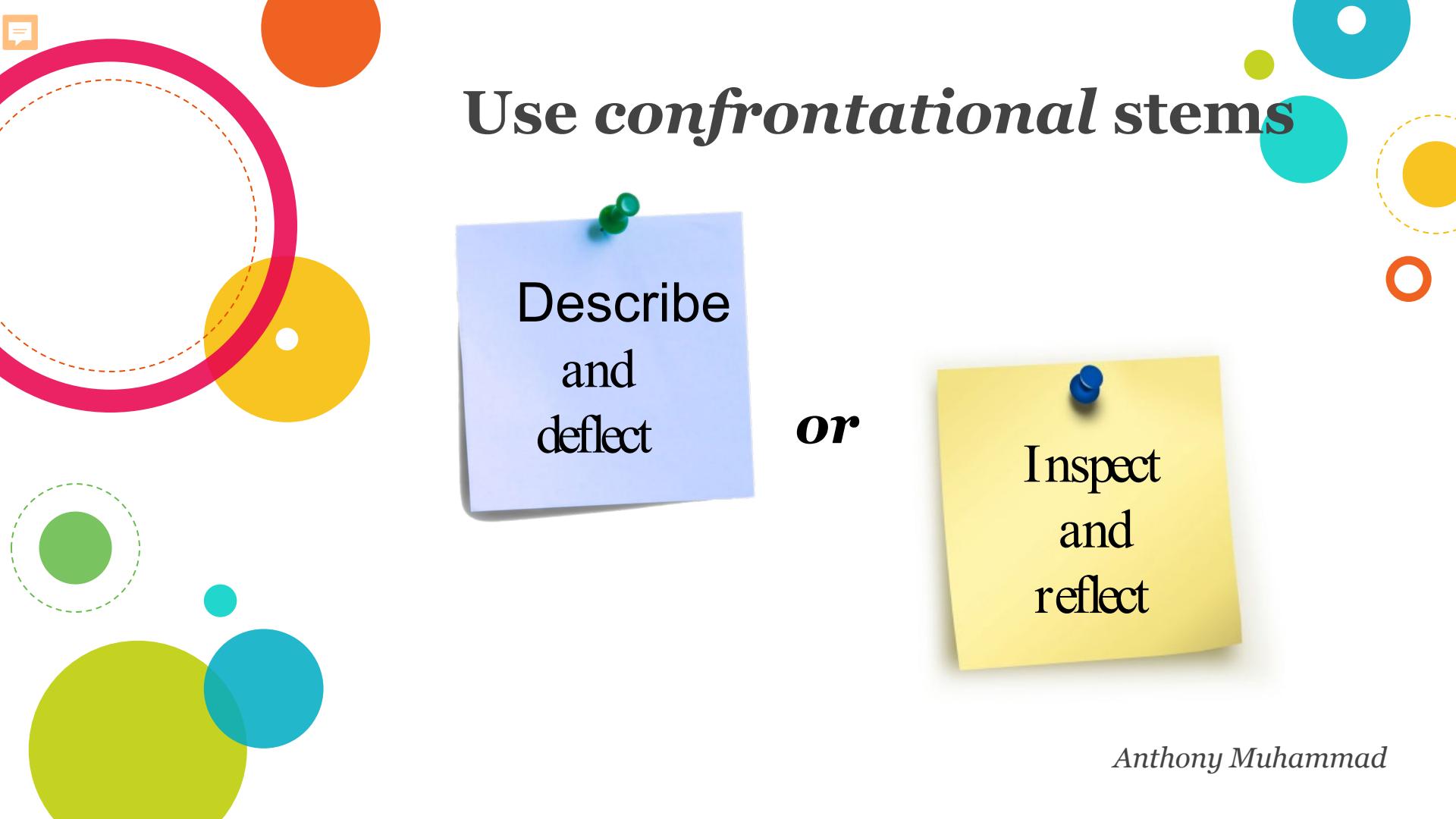
What unspoken team norms allow ~~defiant~~ thinking and language to continue uninterrupted?

What norms allow for interrupting bias and holding each other accountable?



# ***Use mediational stems***

- ◎ How have you come to this way of thinking?
- ◎ What assumptions are you making?
- ◎ What evidence do you have?
- ◎ How might \_\_\_\_ view this?
- ◎ What might this look/feel/ sound like to \_\_\_\_?
- ◎ What might be some unintended consequences of this thinking?
- ◎ When you think about this perspective, what's in your heart? Your gut?



# ***Use confrontational stems***

Describe  
and  
deflect

*or*

Inspect  
and  
reflect

*Anthony Muhammad*

# *Use confrontational stems*

- ◎ Would you be willing to explore your thinking about that?
- ◎ Could we examine your assumptions about that?
- ◎ I'm having a reaction to something you said. Is it okay if I ask you about....?
- ◎ I'm hearing what sounds like a rut story. Could we look at that?
- ◎ We have a norm about...

Turn and talk ...

What have you heard so far that might be helpful?

**Culturally Responsive Problem-Solving**  
An Evidence-Based Guide for Team Practice

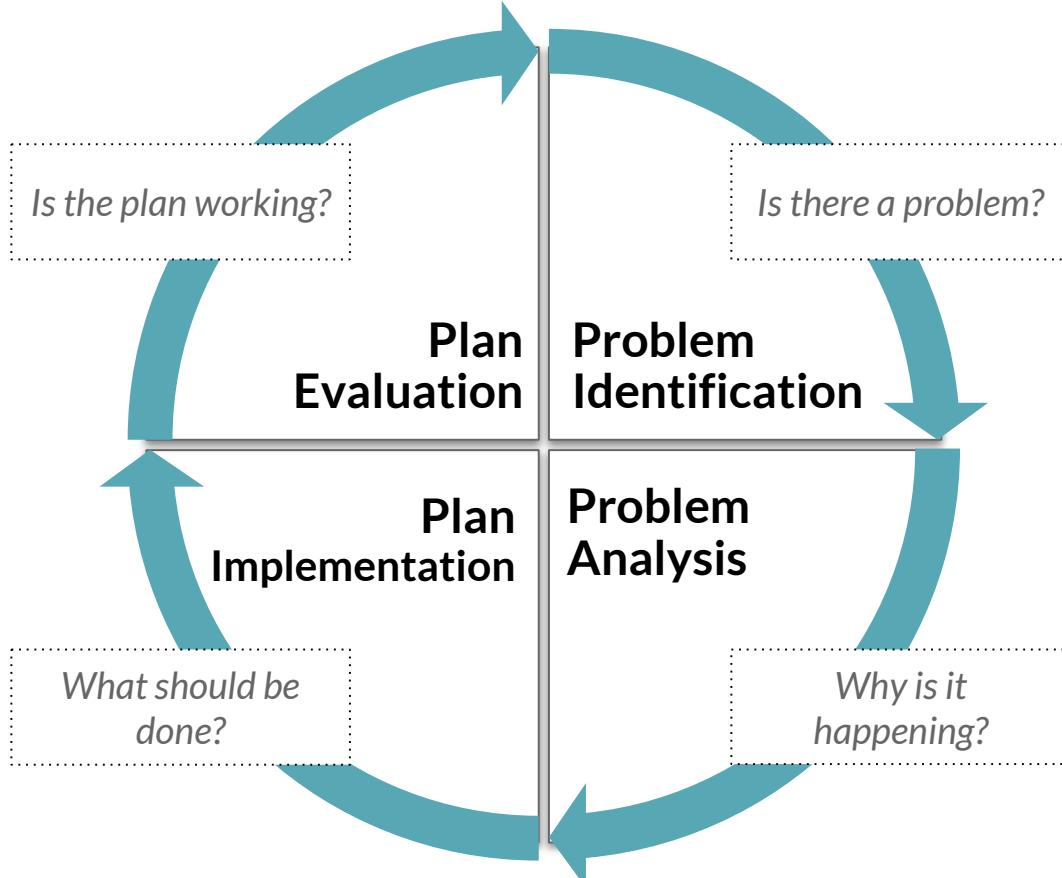


Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction  
Carolyn Stanford Taylor, State Superintendent

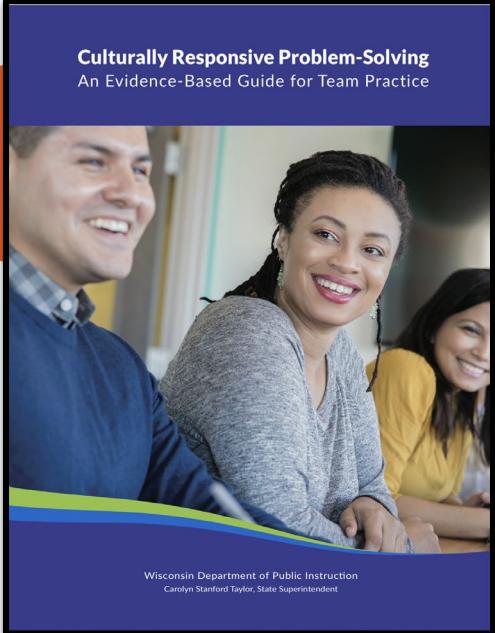
# Culturally Responsive Problem-Solving: An Evidence-Based Guide for Team Practice (*draft*)

Developed by Markeda Newell PhD  
Associate Professor, School Psychology  
Loyola University - Chicago.

# Problem-Solving Process



# Key Concepts in Guide



The Guide assists teams in identifying **vulnerable decision points (VDP)** where bias is most likely to influence the problem-solving process.

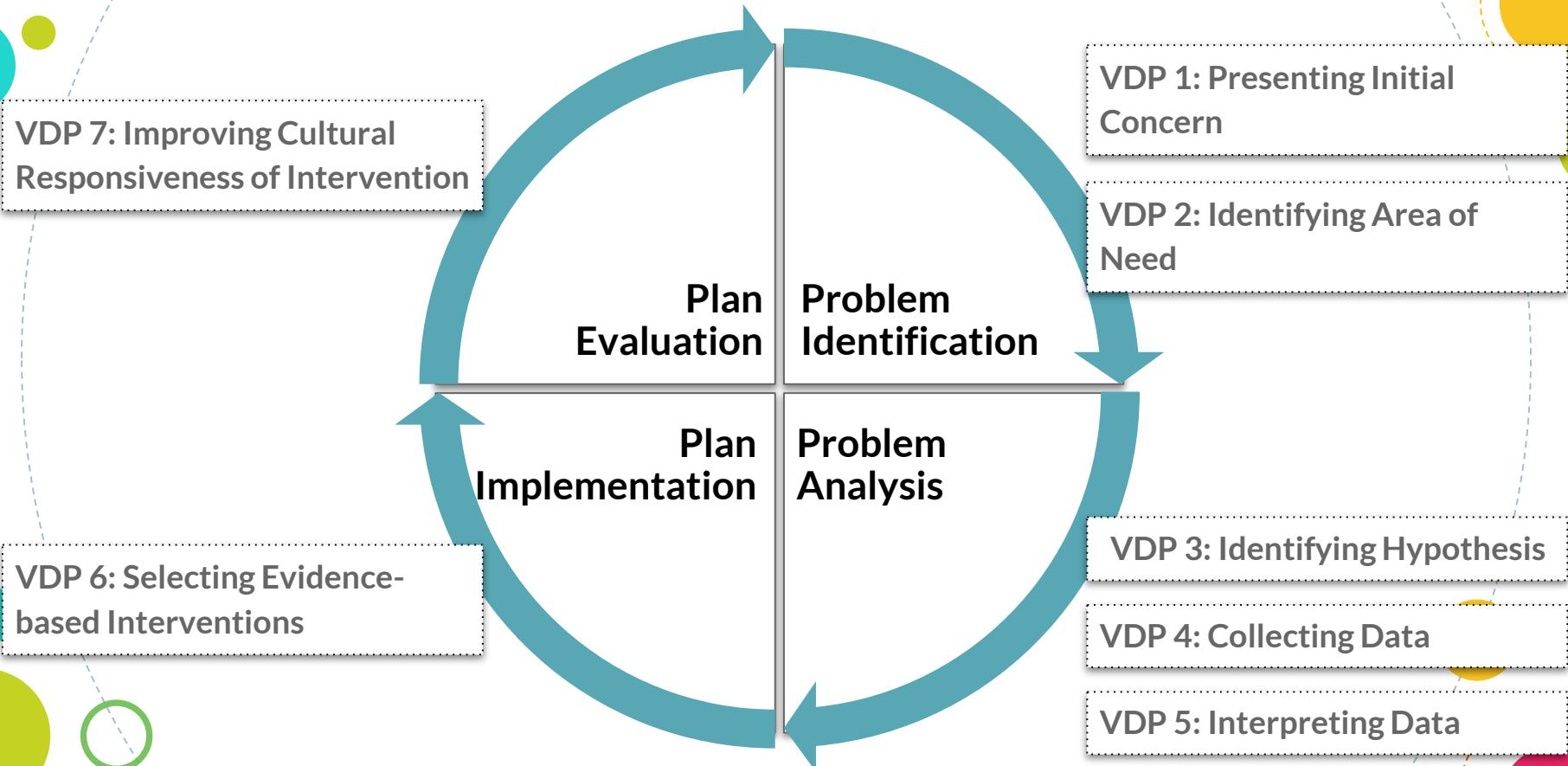
# Vulnerable Decision Points

Elements of a situation that increase the likelihood of bias affecting decision making. These *vulnerable decision points* momentarily increase the likelihood of making a biased decision.

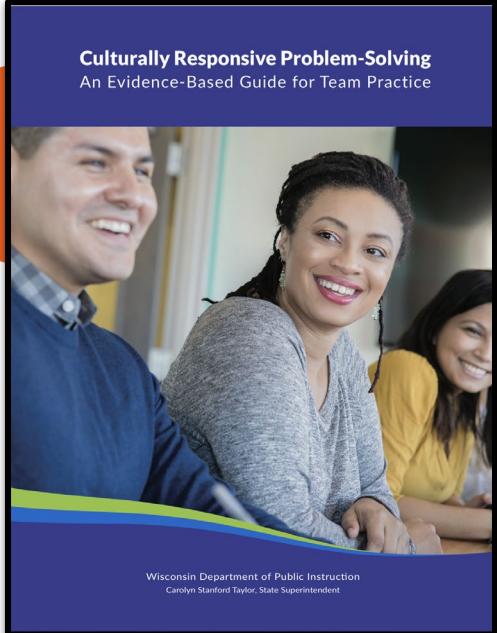
Some decision points may be more vulnerable to bias than others. The literature identifies some decision points that are most vulnerable to implicit bias and may be consistent across a range of schools.

In general, implicit biases tend to affect decisions that involve more *uncertainty, ambiguity, or discretion*.

# Known Vulnerable Decision Points (VDP) in Problem-Solving

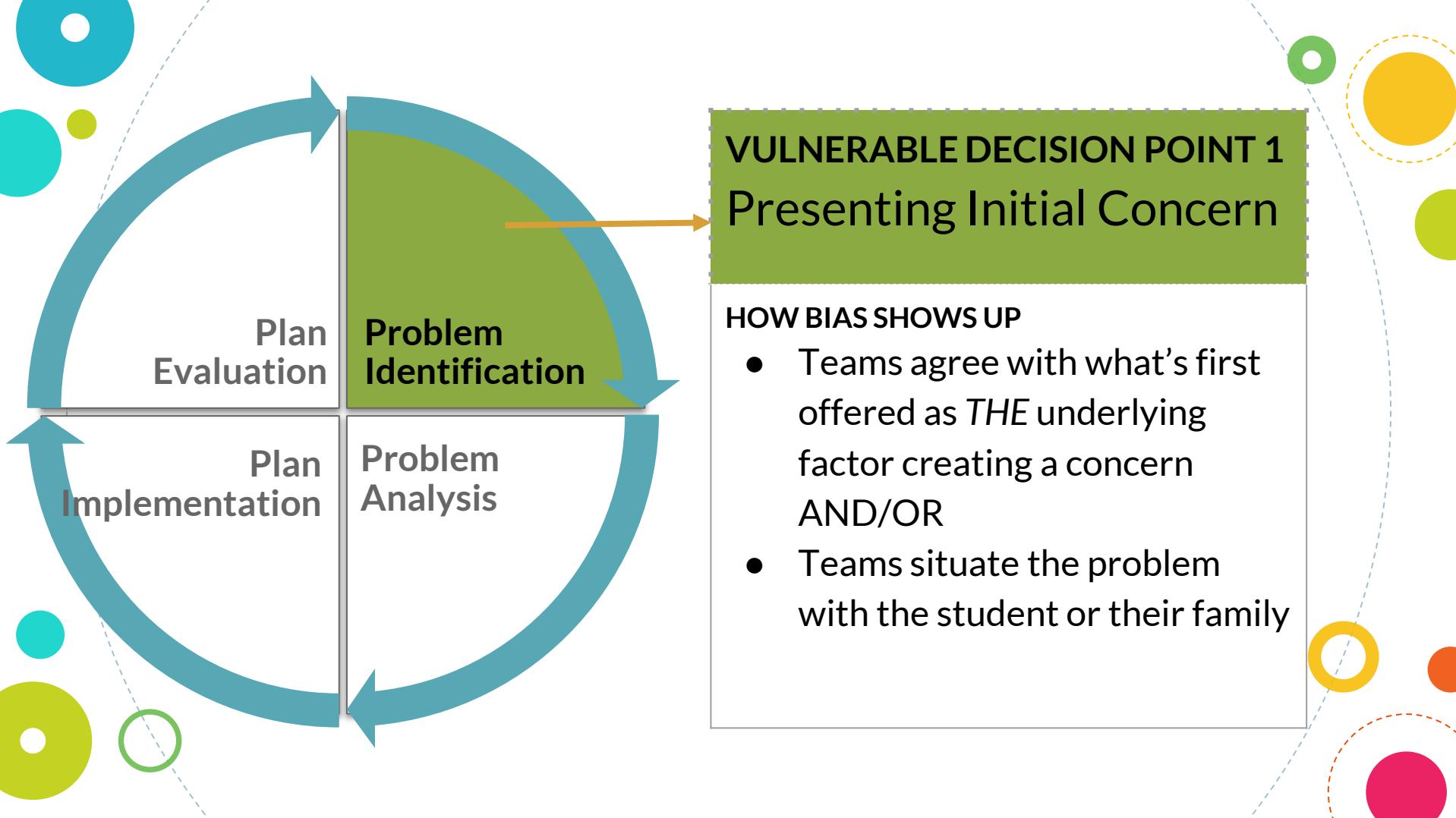


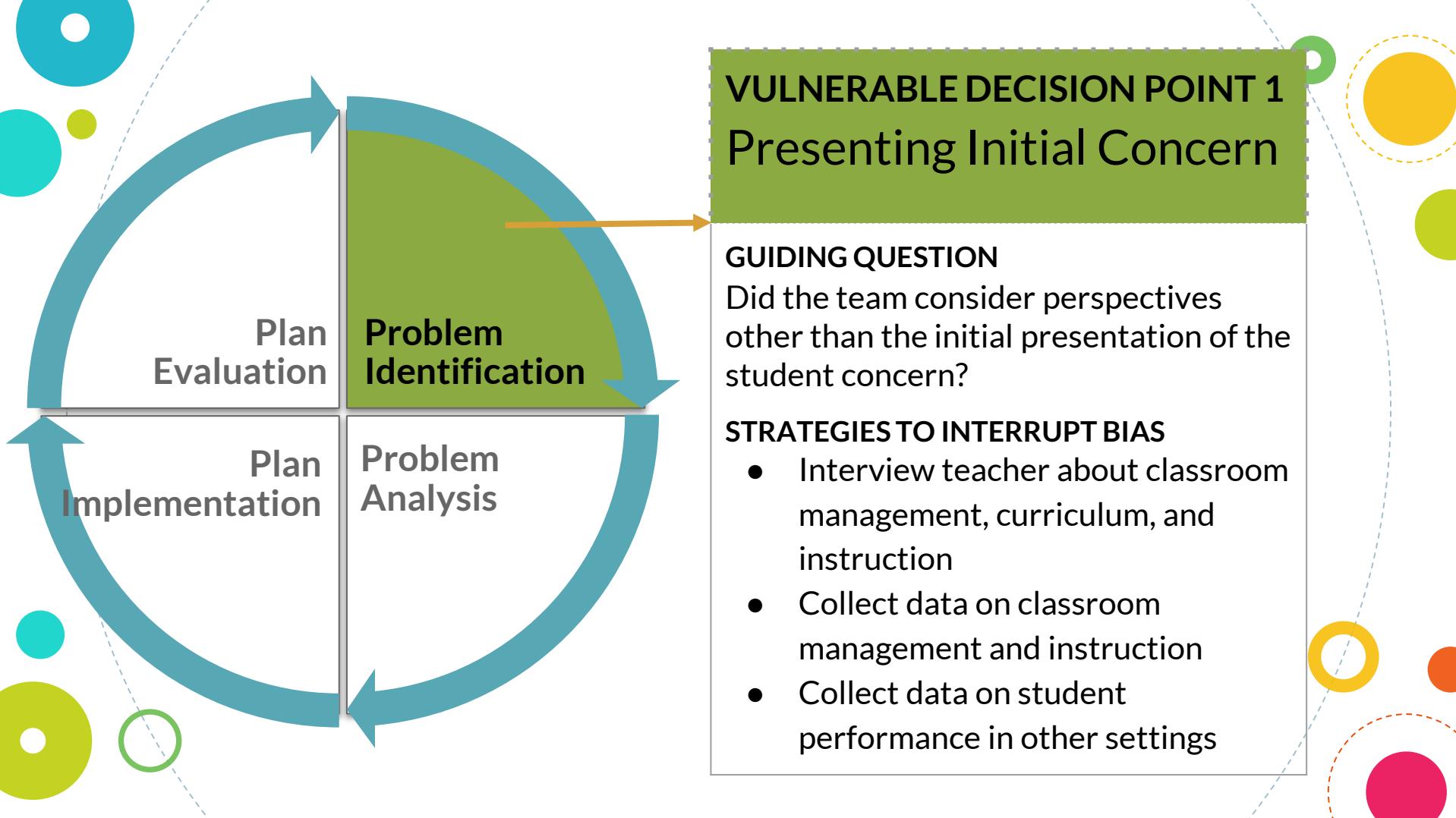
# How the Guide Helps



For each vulnerable decision point, the guide includes:

- How bias shows up
- A guiding question
- Strategies to reduce the likelihood of bias influencing the decision point
- Indicators of success





# Use in Problem-Solving

Culturally Responsive Problem-Solving  
An Evidence-Based Guide for Team Practice



Teams responsible for problem-solving may use the Guide to **reflect on and remedy possible cultural mismatches at all levels of support** and to plan for culturally responsive interventions.

By using this Guide, teams can move closer to accurately identifying target areas of need and developing solutions that will improve outcomes for every student served.



# Take-aways

- Understand the **role of mindsets and bias** in shaping decision-making
- Identify **strategies to set the stage for and stay engaged with culturally responsive problem-solving processes** to achieve equitable outcomes
- Identify **decision points in team problem-solving processes** that are vulnerable to bias and strategies to navigate through

## Turn and talk ...

When you think about what brought you to this session, what's in your heart? What's in your gut?

What opportunities and obstacles do you see now?

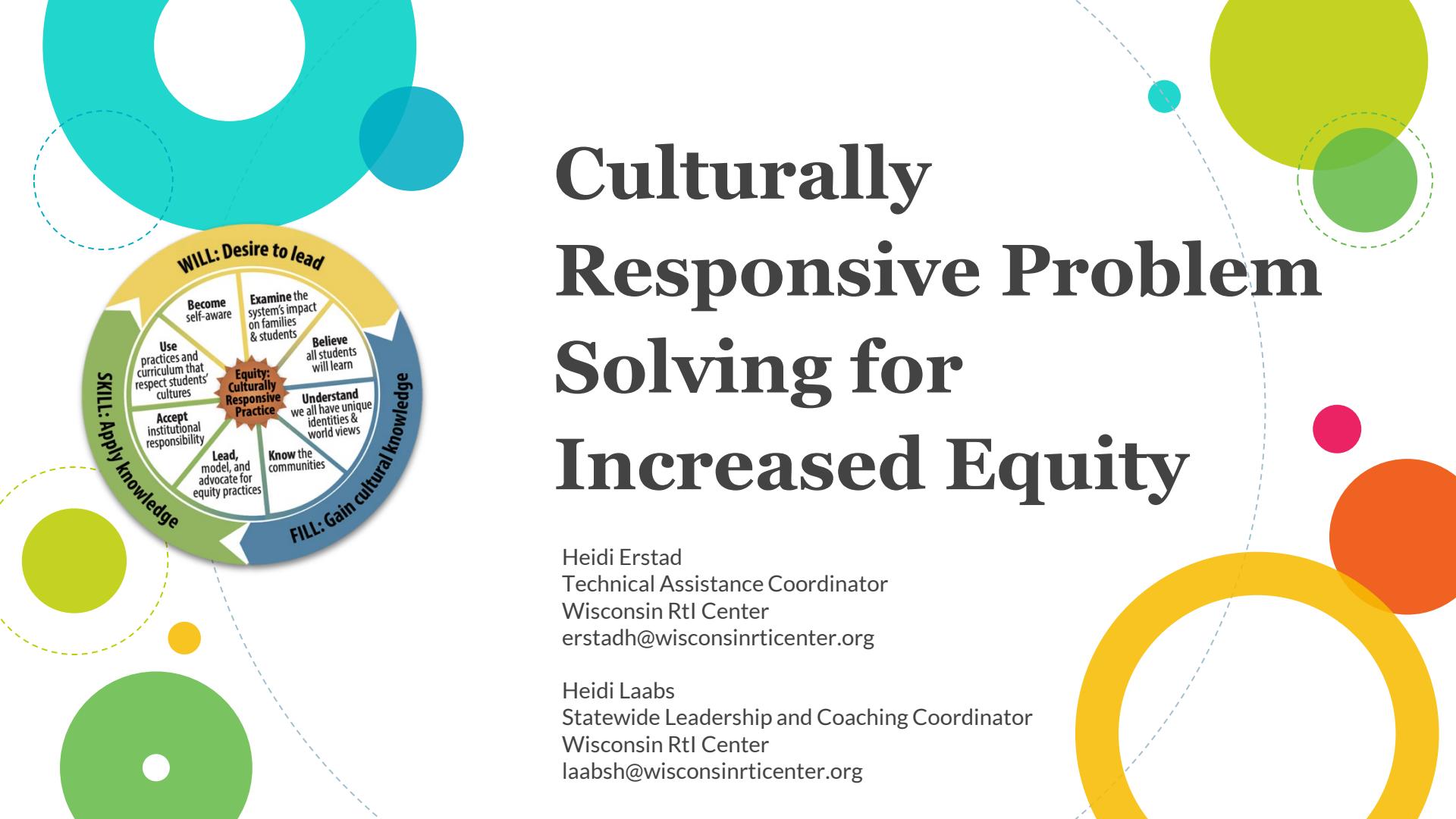
Where will you get support?

# Commit to Changing the Norm

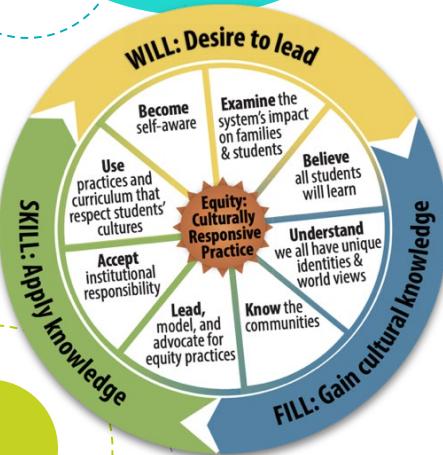
“...[D]ominant culture in the United States tries to suppress conversations on race. There are numerous reasons for this, most of them related to the maintenance of the power status quo. I’m asking you to help break this damaging practice – especially among adults in your school. There are certain conversations that take place in teachers’ lounges about students and their families that I find both infuriating and heartbreakingly common. Too often, teachers are silent in the face of racist, prejudicial, biased, or stereotypical comments.

*I know it’s uncomfortable to confront a colleague. I want you to consider, however, how uncomfortable it makes my family and all other families of color to know that there are people who we’ve entrusted with the care and teaching of our children who think of them as less than – less important, less worthy of our love and attention. When that moment arises next time – and it will arise – I want you to think of how uncomfortable the students are in that teacher’s classroom, and I want you to speak up on their behalf. If a colleague says something derogatory about a child and/or that child’s family, you must speak up. As Desmond Tutu said, ‘If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.’”*

Afrika Afeni Mills, A Black Educator Mom  
*Dear White Teachers of My Black Children*



# Culturally Responsive Problem Solving for Increased Equity



Heidi Erstad  
Technical Assistance Coordinator  
Wisconsin RtI Center  
[erstadh@wisconsinrticenter.org](mailto:erstadh@wisconsinrticenter.org)

Heidi Laabs  
Statewide Leadership and Coaching Coordinator  
Wisconsin RtI Center  
[laabsh@wisconsinrticenter.org](mailto:laabsh@wisconsinrticenter.org)