

Powerful questions

Nurturing mutual understanding

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PART OF

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 REFLECT
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Mutual respect is essential for a lively, innovative and productive university community.

Together we are shaping a positive and inspiring culture of collaboration at ETH Zurich.

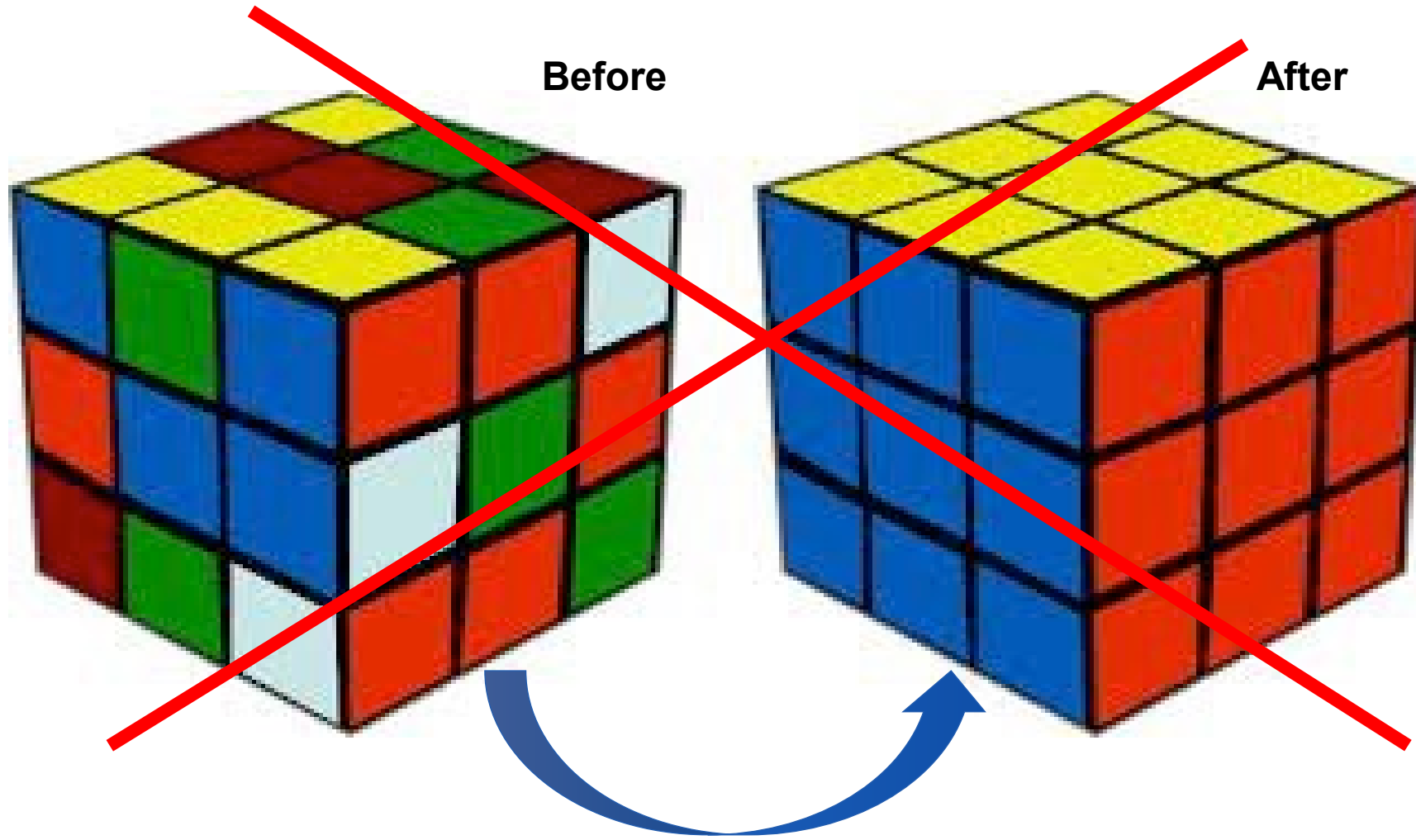
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Agenda

1. Purpose of Powerful Questions
2. Underlying theory
3. Concept of Powerful Questions
4. Powerful Questions

Powerful questions do **not** resolve it all



The impact of stress, fear and tension on making use of our full potential - findings from brain research (Hüther 2018)

Empathy = N/A

Reflection = N/A

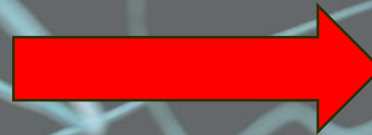
Co-creation = N/A

Problem solving = N/A

Conflict resolution = N/A

Access to competencies = N/A

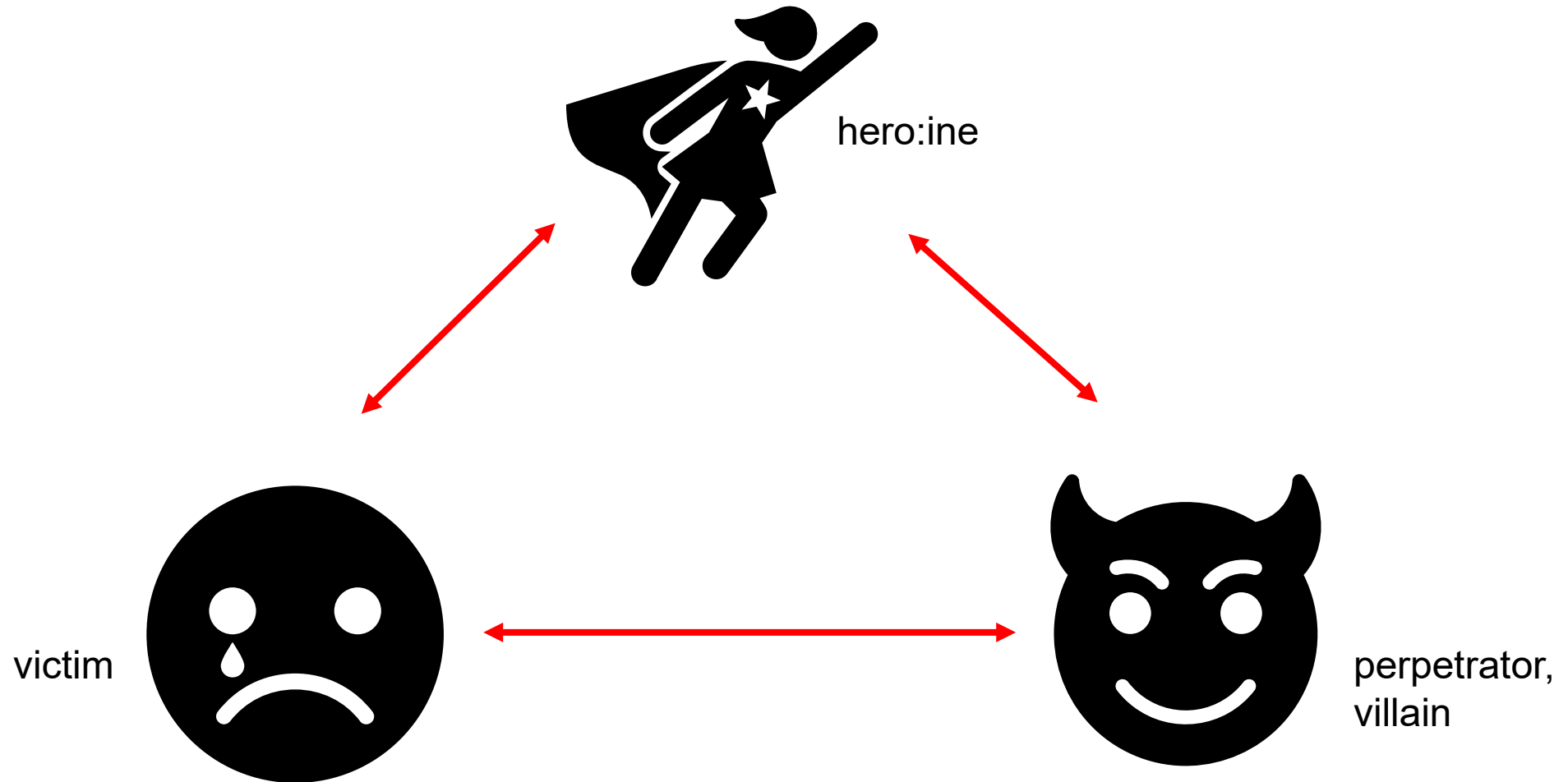
Assess consequences = N/A



fight, flight, freeze, faint

Avoid the drama triangle (Karpman 1968)

Blame, accusations, demands, justification

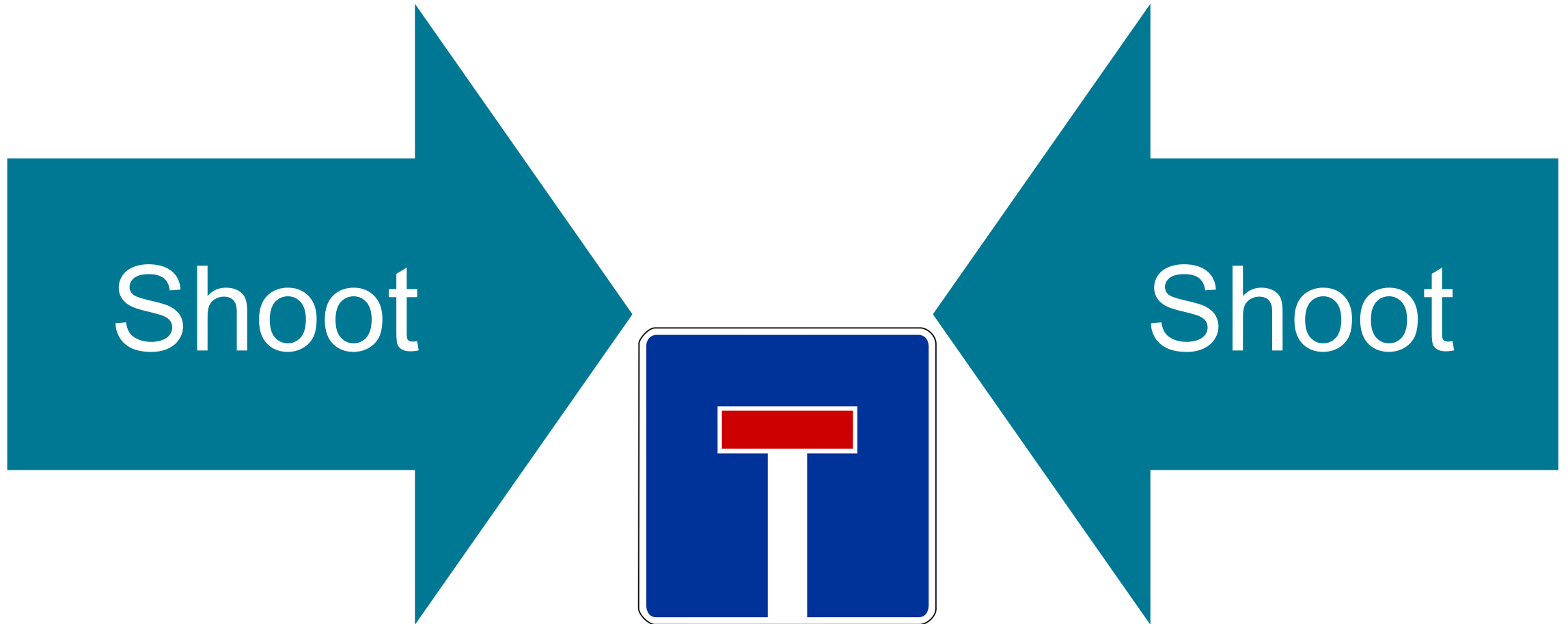


In the stranglehold of the drama triangle

- Prisoner of conflict
rather than creator of options / solutions
- Being driven
rather than driving
- Externally determined
rather than choosing the path
- Problem-focused
rather than solution-focused
- Powerlessness
rather than choice and self-efficacy
- Discomfort and stress
rather than well-being
- Stuckness or escalation
rather than conflict resolution



A powerful question is more than an assembly of correct words,
it is about targeting an entry point into constructive conversation.



Powerful questions require genuine interest in creating clarity and making informed decisions. Powerful questions may:

- invite reflection
- encourage deeper thinking
- unveil assumptions
- uncover barriers
- explore alternatives and implications of different choices
- open avenues for constructive conversations
- prevent escalation
- support mutual understanding
- stimulate collaboration
- strengthen work relationships

=> nurture the likelihood for clarity – the prerequisite to resolving tension and conflict

Seeking understanding does **not** equal agreement, tolerance or giving in



Leadership decisions



Rules and regulations



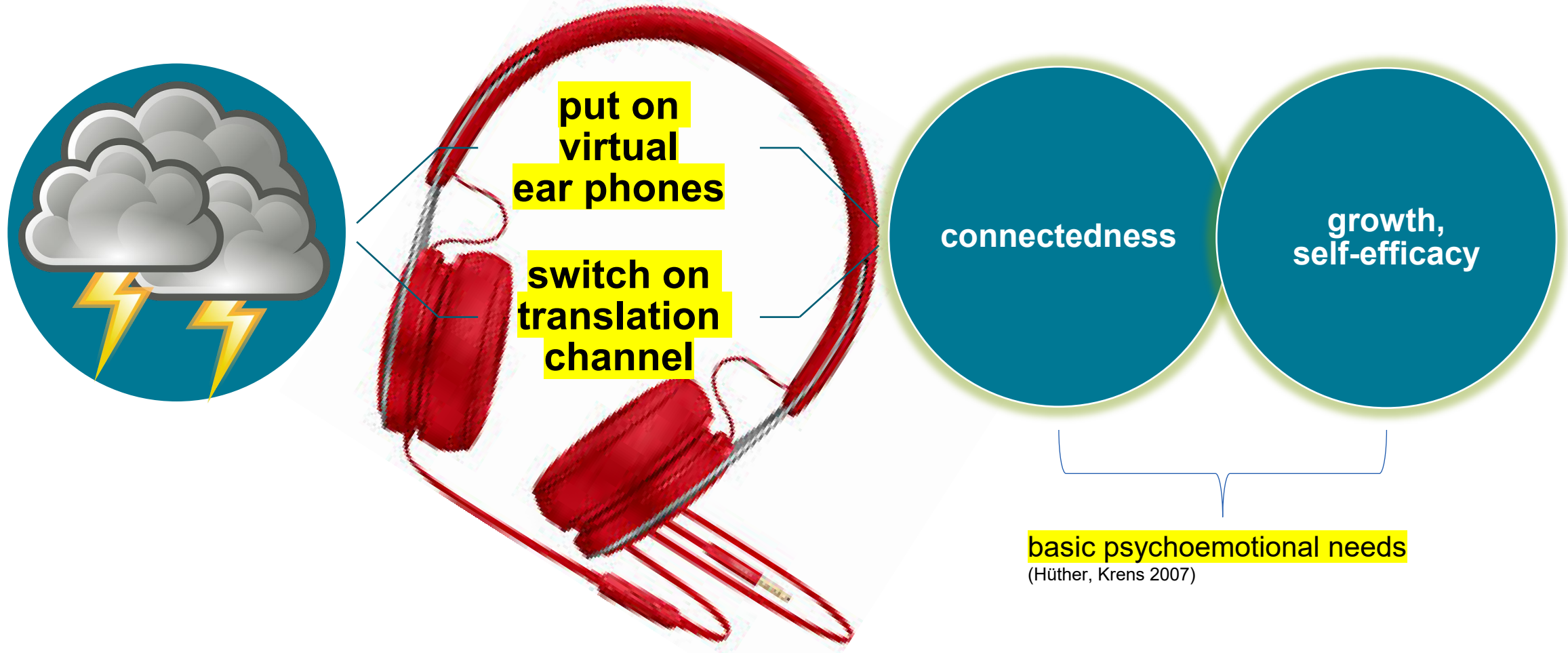
Negotiable Issues

Preparation: The power of powerful questions starts with you

As an indispensable starting point, powerful questions address yourself => gaining clarity on your objectives and your context helps you to keep the thread

- What exactly is important to me?
- What is at stake?
- What is my circle of influence?
- What is negotiable, what is not?
- What approach do I choose for decisions that I have to accept / for issues that are non-negotiable – how do I live with it? => what is my role, what is my task?
- What is my best alternative to resolving this situation? => when do I get out?
- What is my worst alternative to resolving this situation? => how much do I try?
- What do I not want to happen, what is my back up plan?

A powerful question is more than an assembly of correct words – it is an attempt of «connecting the disconnected»



Powerful Questions aim at our basic psychoemotional needs

Connectedness

- Sense of belonging, feeling included, being seen, getting response
- Clarity of roles and tasks
- Transparency and orientation
- Stable (work) relationships, receiving appreciation and empathy
- Understanding changes and decisions
- Aware of one's concerns and needs

Growth, self-efficacy

- Having options, choices, scope for creativity, being heard
- Feeling of sense and meaningfulness re. one's contribution
- Making a difference, having positive impact
- Personal development

Powerful questions could sound like:

- What exactly is important to you?
- What is your important concern?
- What does your claim regarding ... stand for?
- What are the important concerns / good reasons behind these statements / this behaviour?
- What do we need to understand about each other's views so that we can advance in this matter?
- What is the concern that needs to be heard?
- What exactly needs to be explored / clarified further in order to move towards clarity of the situation / next steps / in this matter?
- What is it that you are engaged in and fighting for?
- What are you committed to?

Powerful questions should include drivers instead of barriers

and,
at the same time

- but, yet, however

until now

- always

not... so far

- never

under which
circumstances

- if

behaviour, actions

- character, personality

Prior 2009

Managing collaboration
and conflict in academic
groups



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We
appreciate
your
feedback!

German



English



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Resources

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- Prior, Manfred (2009). Minimax-Interventionen. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer.
- Schulz von Thun, Friedemann (2003). Kommunikationspsychologie für Führungskräfte. Hamburg: Rowohlt.
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Interested in-depth training in navigating through difficult conversations? Let us know!

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