

The top-left portion of the slide features a series of thin, light-brown lines that intersect to form several overlapping, irregular polygons. These lines create a complex, abstract pattern that suggests movement and interconnectedness.

# STORY SHARING AS MEDIATION AND MANIPULATION

Cynthia F. Kurtz

19 May 2023

Stories without Borders conference

A series of thin, light brown lines on the left side of the page, forming several overlapping, irregular polygons and shapes. The lines are thin and create a sense of depth and complexity.

## THREE ESSENTIAL TRUTHS ABOUT STORY WORK

These are a few things I have learned  
in over two decades of  
helping people work with their stories.

# STORIES ARE POWERFUL AND DANGEROUS



Stories are like fire, which warms and burns.

People have been working with both fire and stories for thousands of years.

Working with stories, like working with fire, requires that we pay attention to **both sides** of the picture.

Stories can tell the **truth**

Stories can **help**

Stories can **connect** **and**

Stories can **teach**

Stories can **reveal**

Stories can **lie**

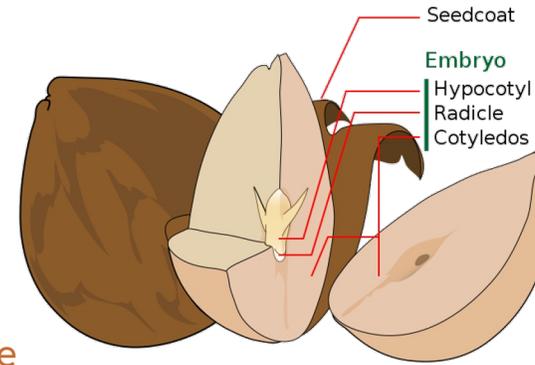
Stories can **harm**

Stories can **divide**

Stories can **confuse**

Stories can **conceal**

# A STORY TOLD IN TWO DIFFERENT CONTEXTS IS TWO DIFFERENT STORIES



Embryo = experience

Seedcoat = storytelling event

Stories are like **seeds**.

The inner, living, vulnerable layer of the story (the **embryo**) is the child of lived experience.

The outer, dead, invulnerable layer of the story (the **seedcoat**) protects the embryo and propels it into the world, searching for a new place to grow and thrive.

To harness the power of story sharing while minimizing its dangers, **pay attention to every part** of the seed.

What has happened to me

How I feel about what has happened to me

What I think it means

What I wish had happened

What I think should and should not happen

and

What is happening to me right now: to whom I am speaking, and where and when

What I can safely say, right here and right now, about how I feel

Whether and how I can and should express what I think it means in this context

Whether and how I can and should express my feelings and values in this context

Whether and how I can and should express my opinions and beliefs in this context

# PEOPLE WHO DON'T FEEL SAFE DON'T STOP TELLING STORIES

Looking back over the past few years, can you recall an experience, good or bad, that was important to you?

Tell us your success story!

They just tell **different** stories, and they protect those stories inside a hard shell.

When people feel safe, heard, and respected, they **reflect** on their experiences, and they reveal their feelings.

When people don't feel safe, heard, and respected, they **defend** their experiences, and they tell surface-level stories that hide their feelings.



Yes I can. At first I wasn't sure if I would make it as a welder. It was daunting. But I've been getting better at it, slow and steady. Last week my boss said I had a talent for welding. That was a great moment, for sure.

Is there anything else you would like to tell us about that experience?

I love it. I love making useful things. It makes me feel like a useful person.



and

I've been working here five years. I'm certified. I work hard. I'm good at my job. What else do you want to know?

Thank you for your story!

Uh-huh.

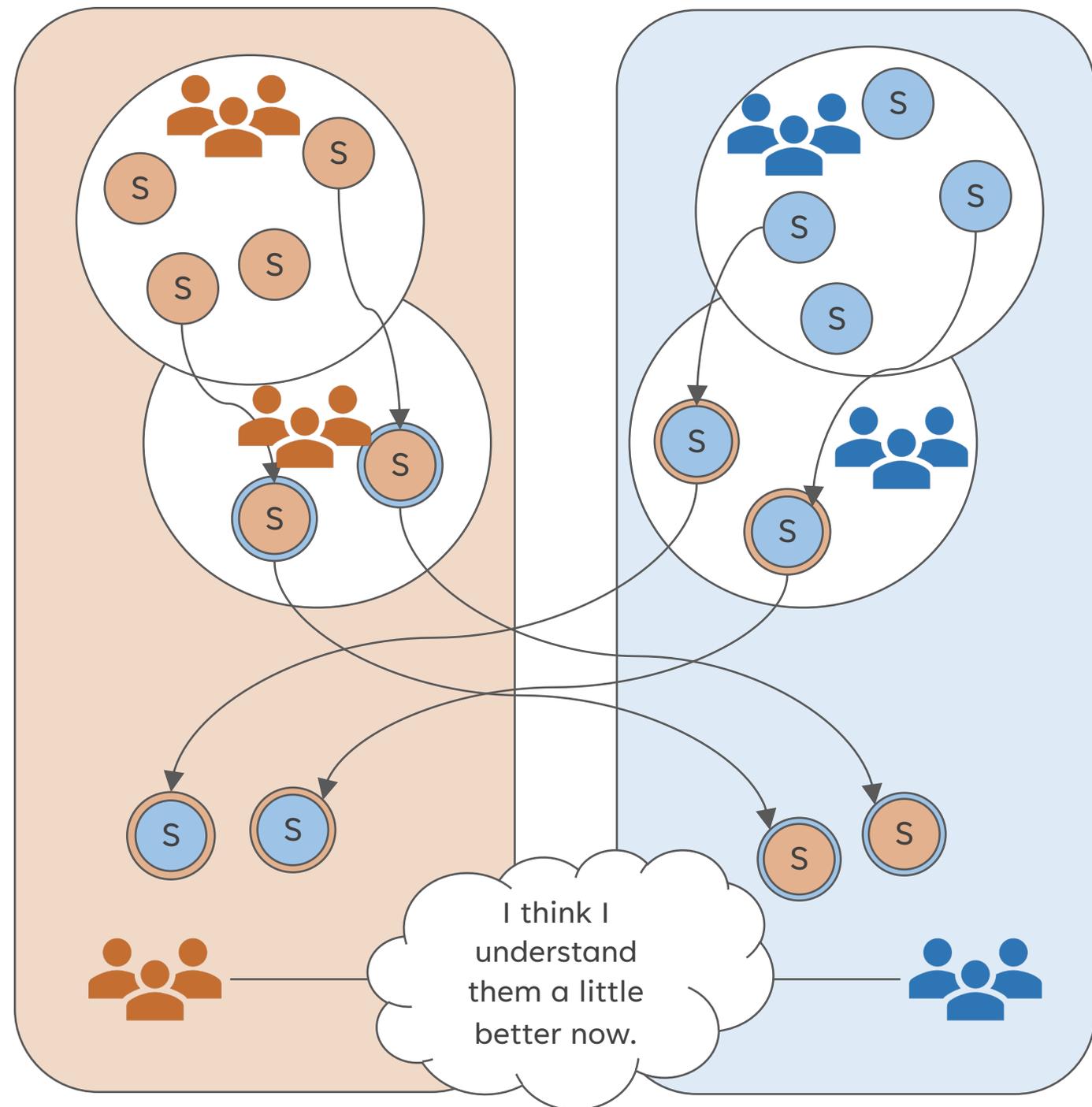
A series of thin, light brown lines forming an abstract, overlapping geometric pattern in the top left corner of the slide. The lines create various polygons and intersecting paths.

## A SELECTION OF INSPIRATIONAL AND CAUTIONARY TALES

With these essential truths in mind,  
I would like to tell you a few stories  
about ways in which story work can help – or  
unintentionally hurt – those it seeks to help.

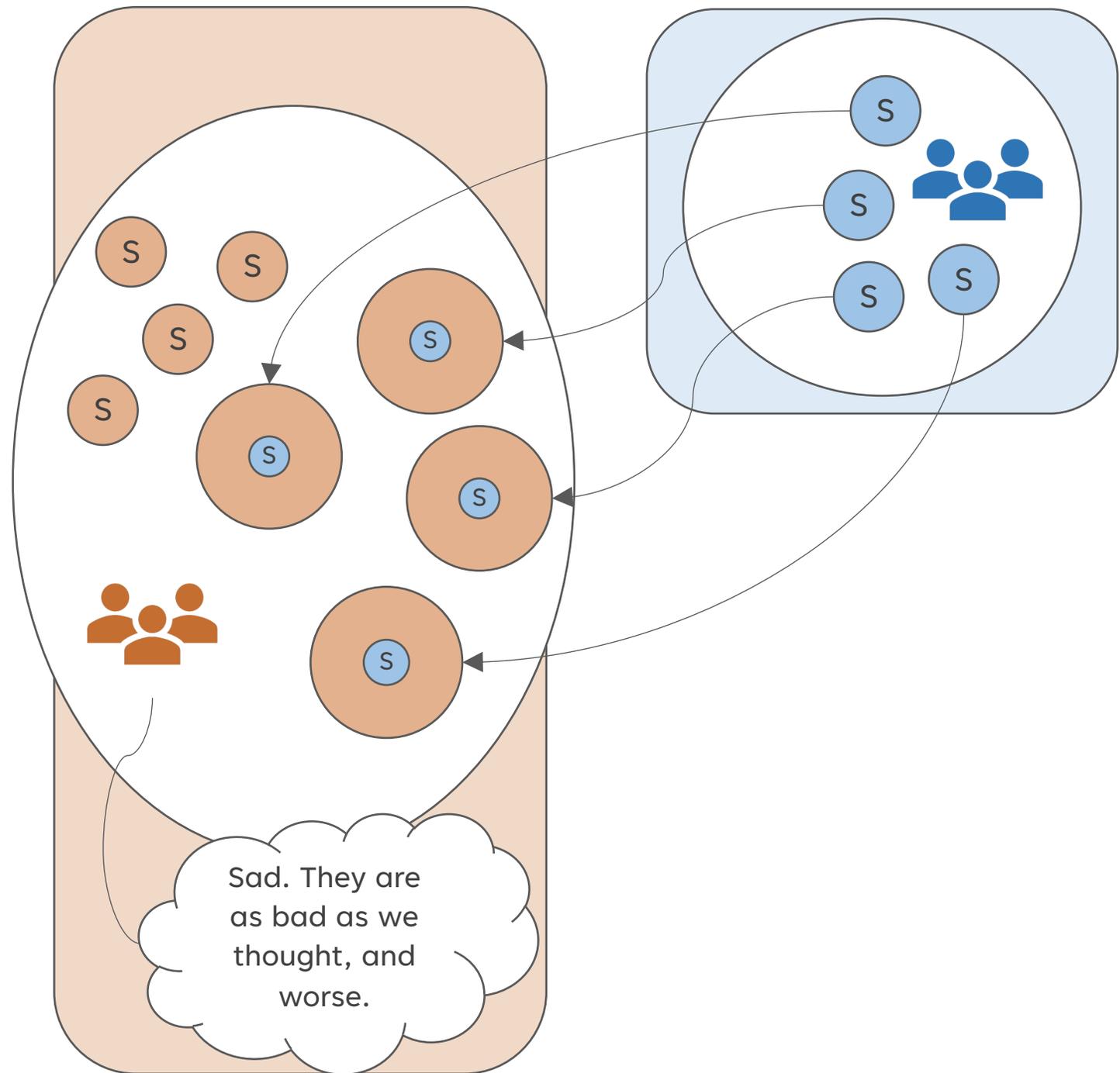
## A SUCCESSFUL MEDIATION USING STORY EXCHANGE

1. Two groups of people were asked, separately, to share stories within their groups.
2. Each group was asked to:
  - choose some stories that would help the other group understand their experiences
  - tell the stories in whatever way they wanted the other group to hear them
  - explain why they chose those stories and what the stories meant to them
3. Only those stories were shown – in only those tellings, and with only those explanations – to the other group.
4. Each group talked about what they learned about the other group.



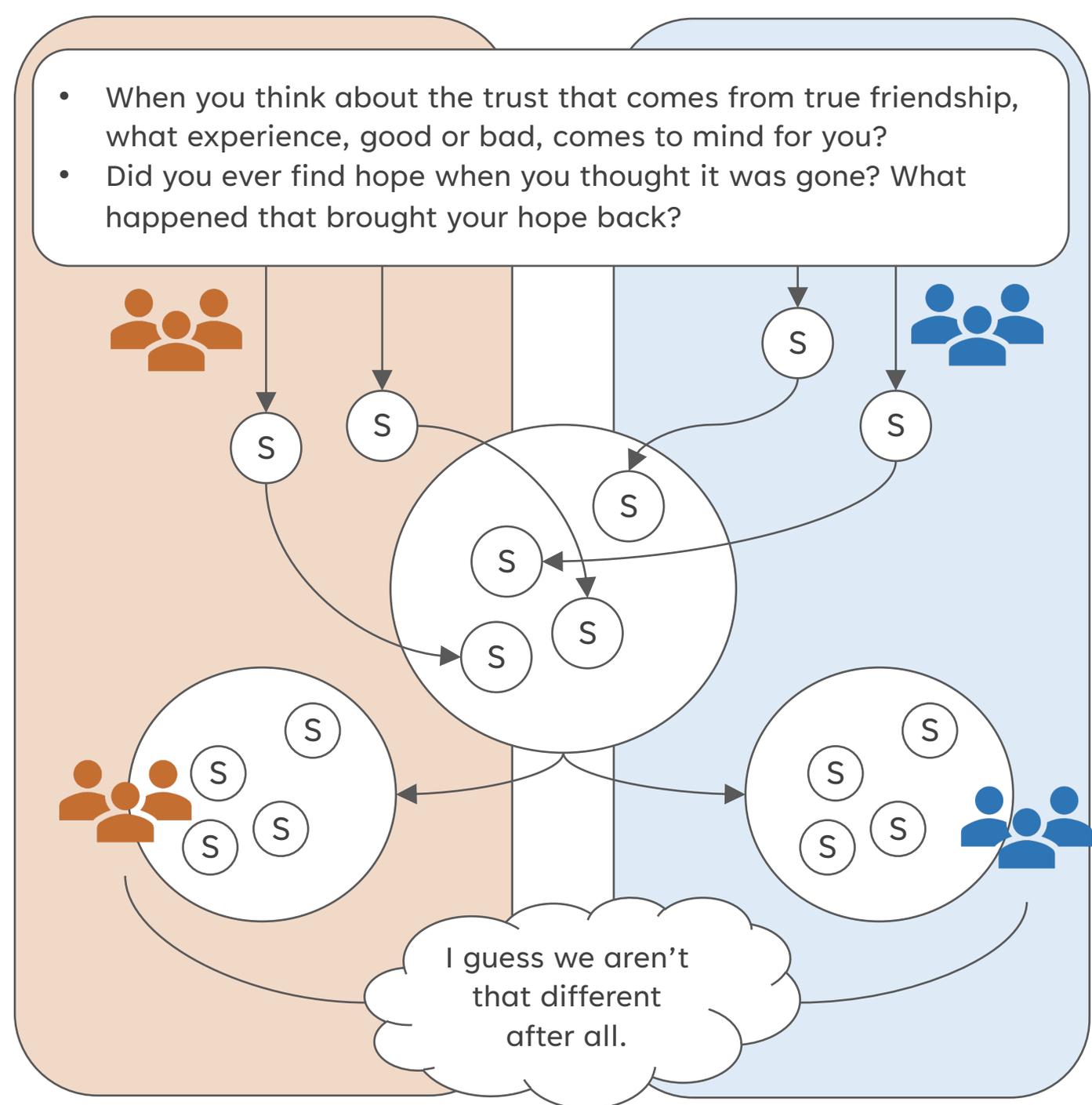
# AN UNINTENTIONAL MANIPULATION USING STORY EXCHANGE

1. Two groups of people were asked, separately, to share stories within their groups.
2. One group's stories were kept intact. The other group's stories were taken
  - out of the context in which they were collected
  - without giving the group the opportunity to choose, retell, or explain the stories
  - without attempting to understand the culturally contextual meanings embedded in the stories
3. The first group talked about what they learned about the other group.
4. The other group was told how much they had benefited from the fact that they had been better understood.



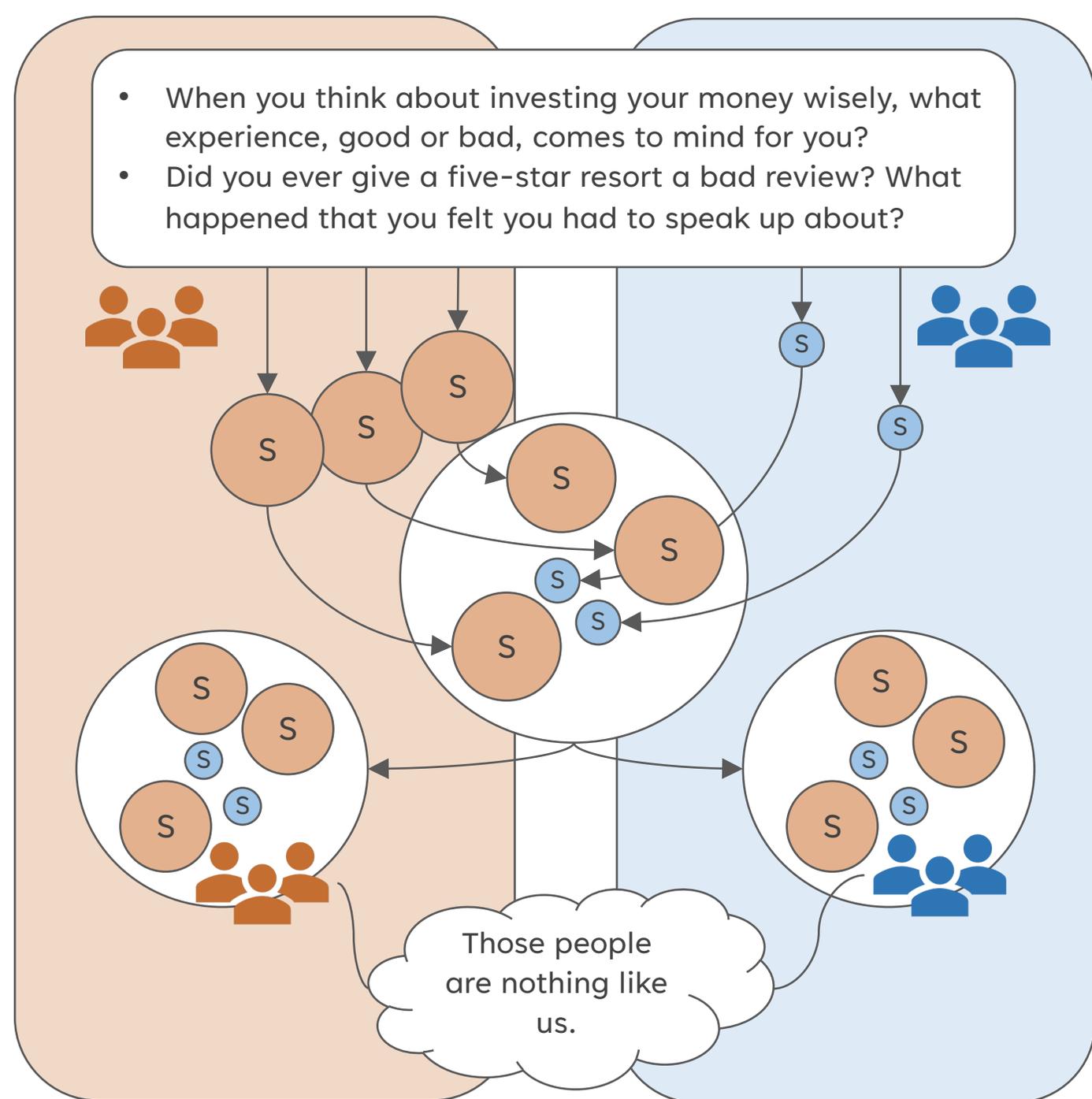
# A SUCCESSFUL MEDIATION USING STORY INTERMINGLING

1. Two groups of people were asked to share stories using broad, open questions that applied to everyone.
2. The stories were brought together into one collection.
3. The combined stories were shown to both groups. *The source of each story was not revealed.*
4. The people in each group read the stories together and talked about what they had learned by thinking about what the people in both groups had in common.



# AN UNINTENTIONAL MANIPULATION USING STORY INTERMINGLING

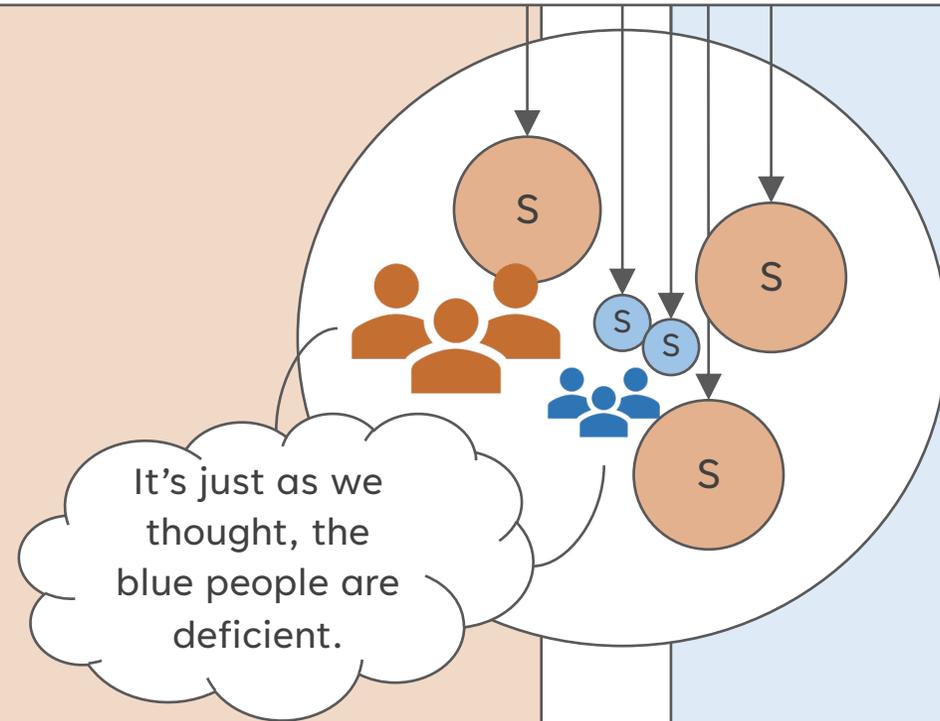
1. Two groups of people were asked questions that *seemed* broad and open (to those who wrote them), but were actually coded with culturally-specific cues.
2. The stories were brought into one collection.
3. The stories were shown to both groups. *It was not necessary to reveal the source of each story. It was obvious.*
4. Everyone was told that the exercise had shown people in both groups what they had in common.



# ANOTHER UNINTENTIONAL MANIPULATION USING STORY INTERMINGLING

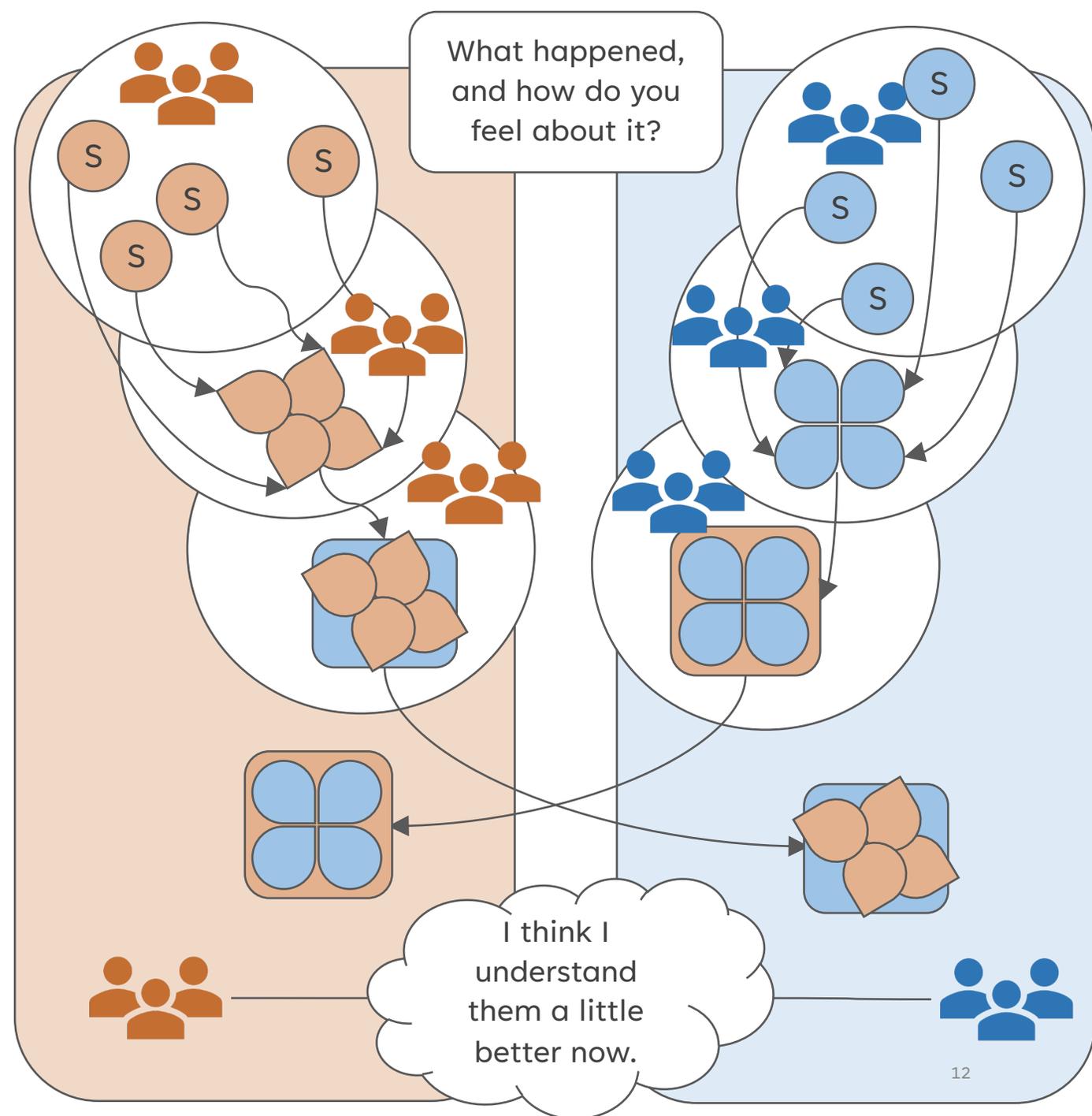
1. Two groups of people with different amounts of power were brought into the same space. They were asked to share stories with each other.
2. It didn't matter that the questions were not culturally coded, because:
  - The people with more power said what they wanted to say.
  - The people with less power said what they thought the people with more power wanted them to say.
3. Everyone was told that the exercise had shown people in both groups what they had in common.

- When you think about the trust that comes from true friendship, what experience, good or bad, comes to mind for you?
- Did you ever find hope when you thought it was gone? What happened that brought your hope back?



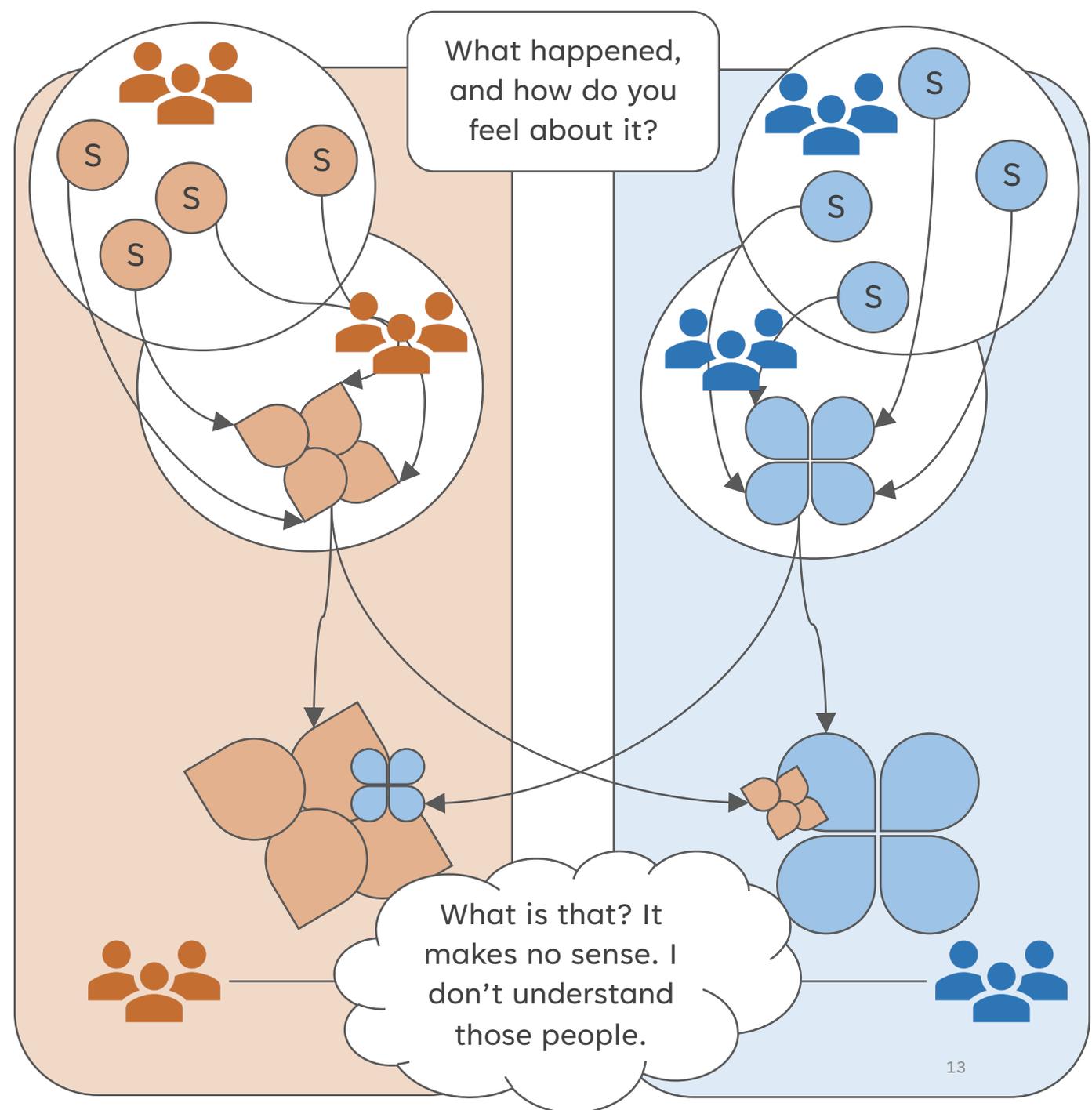
# A SUCCESSFUL MEDIATION WORKING WITH STORIES

1. Two groups of people were asked to share stories – within their group only – using questions that applied to everyone.
2. Each group was asked to go through a facilitated exercise in which they worked with their stories to build a larger story that had meaning to them.
3. Each group was asked to describe to the other group, in whatever way they liked:
  - the stories they told
  - the process they went through
  - the larger story they built
  - the insights they discovered
  - what those insights meant to them
4. The two groups were brought together. Each group showed what they had prepared. They talked about what they had learned about each other.



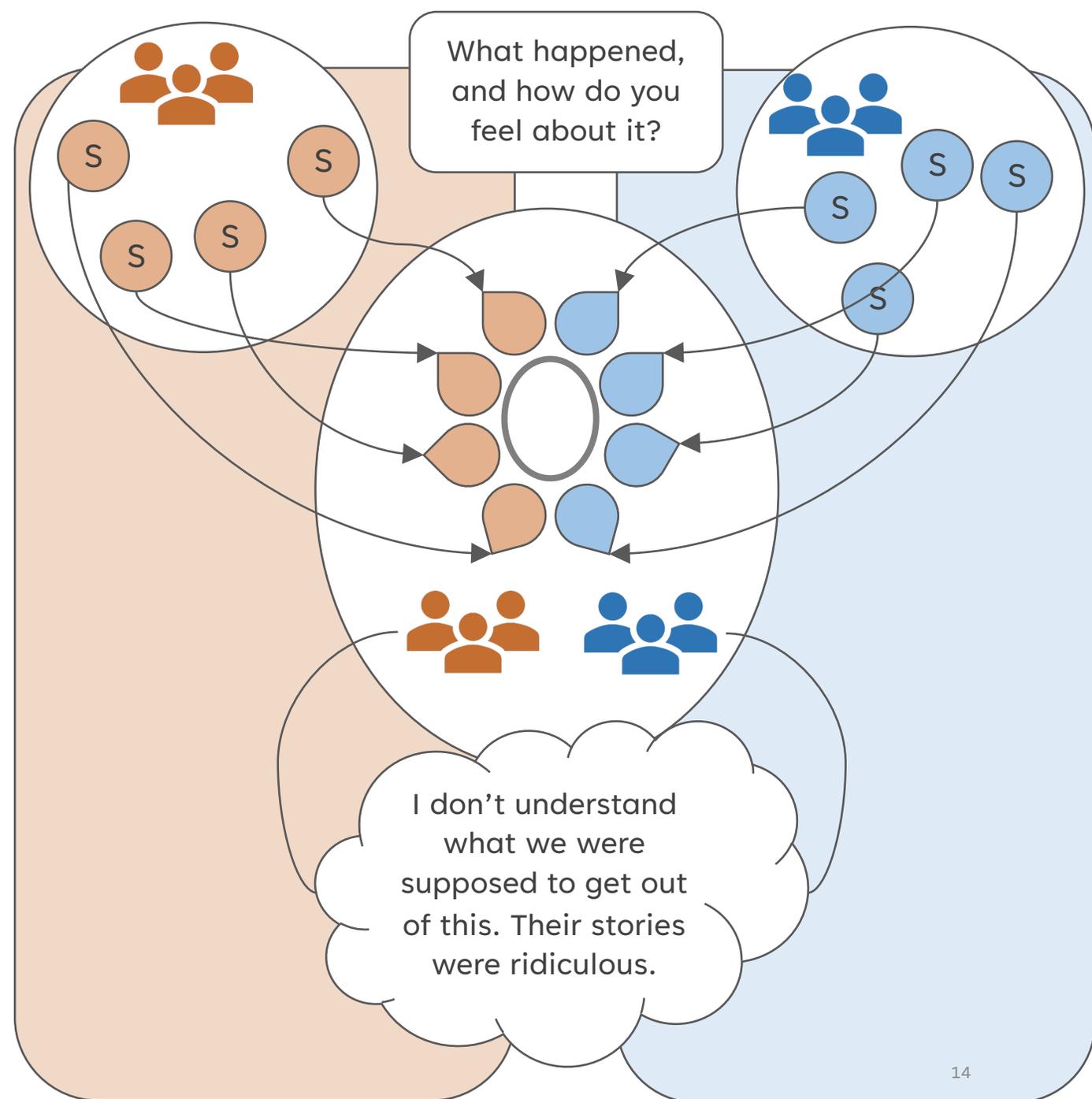
# AN UNINTENTIONAL MANIPULATION WORKING WITH STORIES

1. Two groups of people were asked to share stories – within their group only – using questions that applied to everyone.
2. Each group was asked to go through a facilitated exercise in which they worked with their stories to build a larger story that had meaning to them.
3. Each group was given the larger story the other group built. Neither group was given any control over what was shown to the other group or how it was explained.
4. Everyone was told that the exercise had helped the people in both groups to learn about each other.



# ANOTHER UNINTENTIONAL MANIPULATION WORKING WITH STORIES

1. Two groups of people were asked to share stories – within their group only – using questions that applied to everyone.
2. The two groups were brought together. They were asked to go through a facilitated exercise in which they worked with the combined stories to build a larger story that had meaning to them.
3. They couldn't actually do this because
  - the two groups shared too little context or comfort to work together
  - neither group understood the other group's stories
  - what was meaningful to one group was meaningless to anotherbut they pretended to do it because they didn't see any other way to get out of it.
4. Everyone was told that the exercise had helped the people in both groups to learn about each other.





## SOME RULES OF THUMB

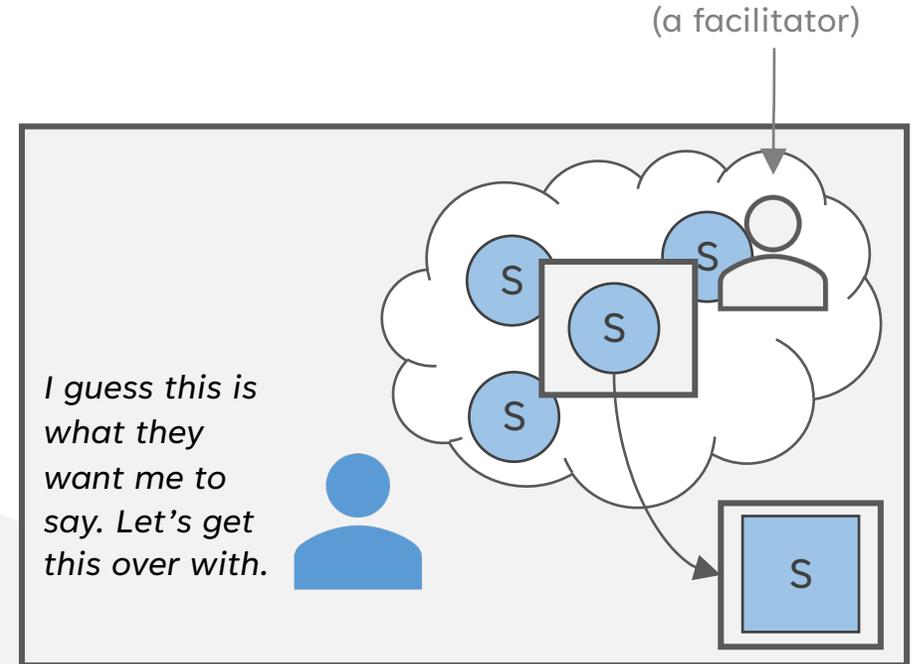
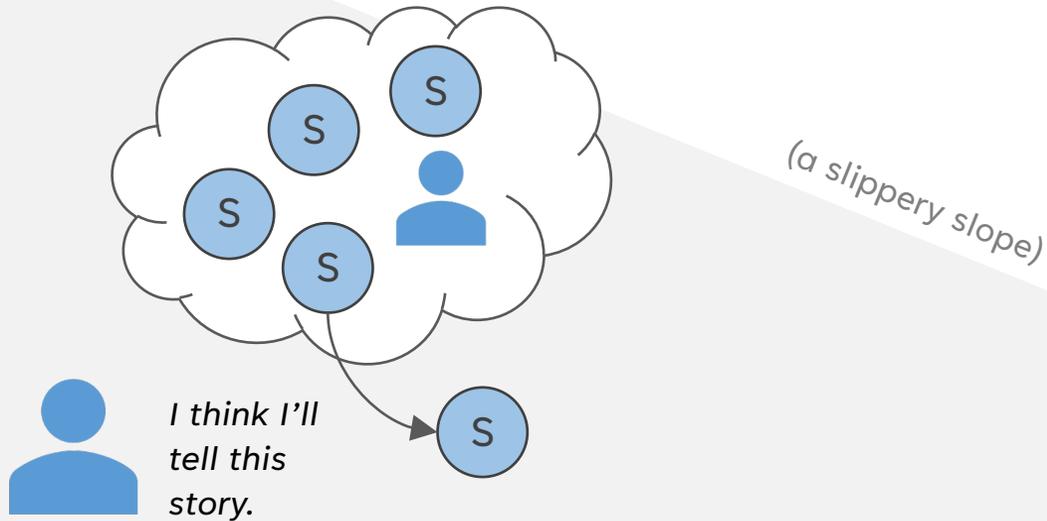
I will now describe five general rules  
anyone can use  
to avoid slipping into unintentional  
manipulation in story work.

In each of the stories I told,  
at least one of these rules was broken.

# PROVIDE FREEDOM, REMOVE CONSTRAINT

## Freedom

Allow participants to choose **whether** they will tell a story, **which** story they will tell, and **how** they will tell it



## Constraint

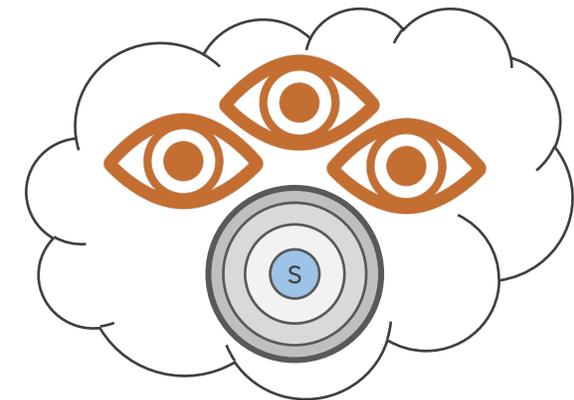
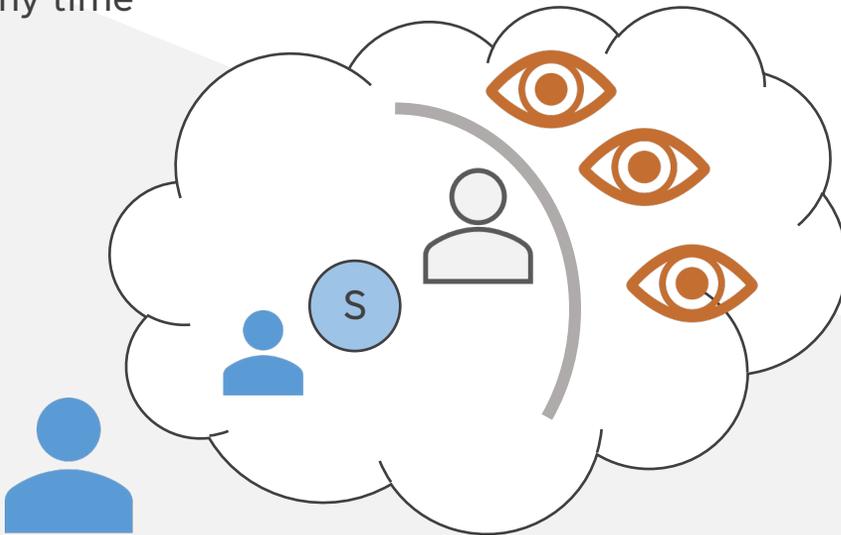
**Force** participants to tell stories; only allow them to tell **certain** stories in certain ways

# PRIORITIZE SAFETY, MINIMIZE DANGER

## Safety

Guard participant **anonymity**; allow **opt-out** answers to every question; allow participants to **change** or **retract** their stories at any time

*Hey, I could actually have a voice for once.*



*I had better be careful.*



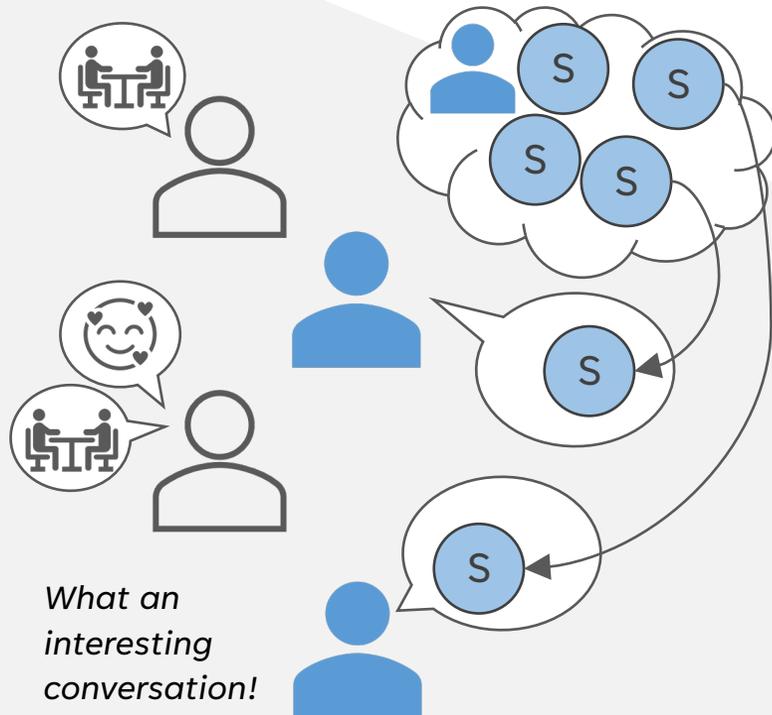
**Danger**

**Identify** participants (or give lip service to anonymity); **require** answers to every question; make amendment or retraction **impossible**

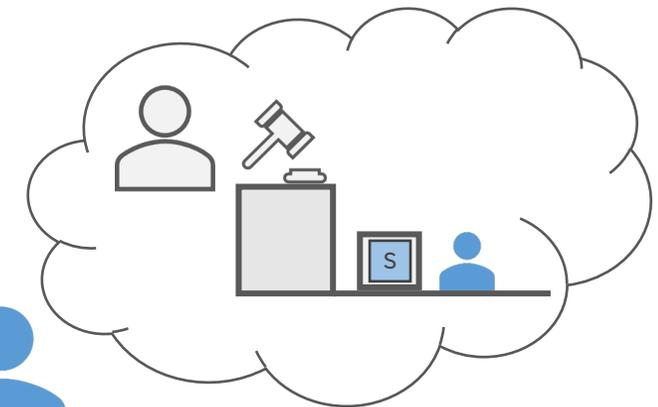
# SHOW RESPECT, AVOID DISRESPECT

## Respect

Invite participants to **reflect** on their experiences in simple **conversation**, with a tone of **respectful curiosity**



*I hope this is good enough. I don't want to get in trouble.*



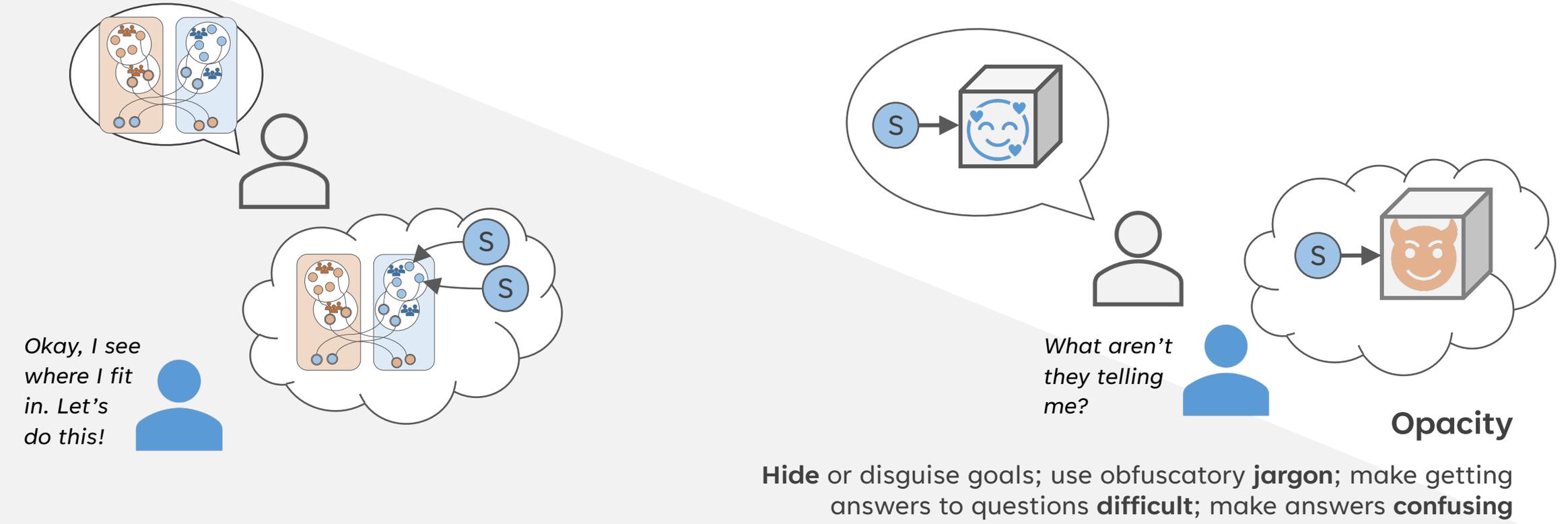
## Disrespect

Command participants (with a tone of **judgmental interrogation**) to **disclose** their experiences through tedious and confusing **tasks**

# CREATE TRANSPARENCY, SHUN OPACITY

## Transparency

Explain **why** stories are being collected, what will be **done** with them, and how participants can **control** what happens

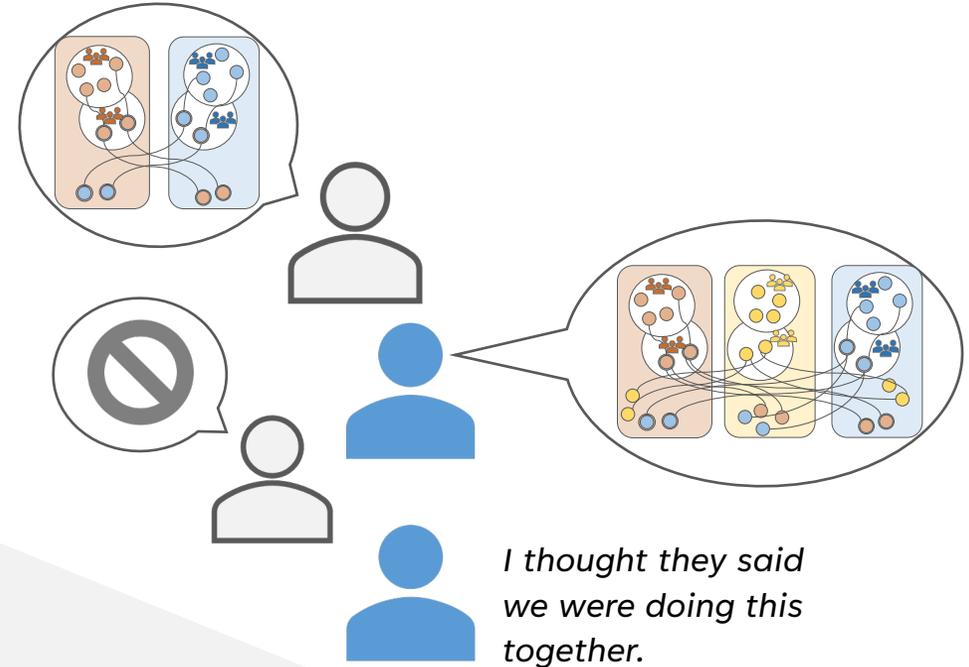


**Hide** or disguise goals; use obfuscatory **jargon**; make getting answers to questions **difficult**; make answers **confusing**

# SHARE POWER, DON'T HOARD IT

## Power sharing

**Invite** your participants to share the project by **challenging** and **improving** upon your plans



## Power hoarding

**Present** the work as participatory, but actually **limit** participation to the lowest possible level; **defend** against challenges



## YOU ONLY NEED ONE RULE

Treat other people's stories  
as you would like them  
to treat yours.



# THANK YOU

Cynthia F. Kurtz

cfkurtz.com

workingwithstories.org

## Photo credits

Hearth <https://www.flickr.com/photos/comedynose/4212985327>

Fire <https://www.flickr.com/photos/srahn/5063113702>

Seed [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Avocado\\_seed\\_diagram.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Avocado_seed_diagram.svg)

Welder [https://www.flickr.com/photos/library\\_of\\_congress/51133577083](https://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/51133577083)

Worker [https://www.flickr.com/photos/library\\_of\\_congress/51132692057](https://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/51132692057)