Pacing Changes:

Seeing Living Systems as Rhythms



Zaid Khan, David Ing| SCiO Finland | October 29, 2025



Year 7 of 10 of Rethinking Systems Thinking

The single-minded prompt to consider:

How do we account for rhythms in our system(s) change(s) work?

1. **Background Context**

2. **Living Systems as Threads**

3. **Conceptual Model & Method**

4. **Pacing Changes**

1. **Background Context**

2. Living Systems as Threads

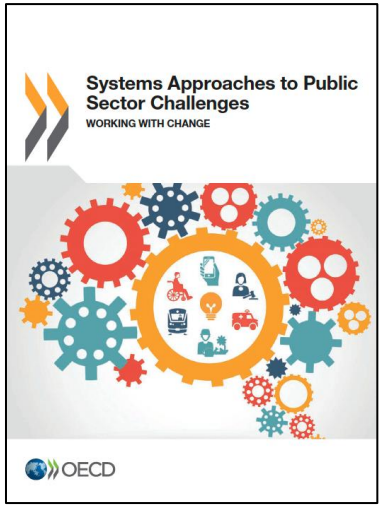
3. Conceptual Model & Method

4. Pacing Changes

Background & Context

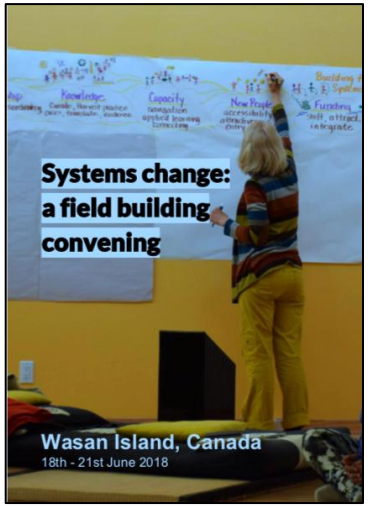
Rising interest in systems change

Organization for Economic Development & Cooperation (OECD)



2017

Forum for the Future + McConnell Foundation



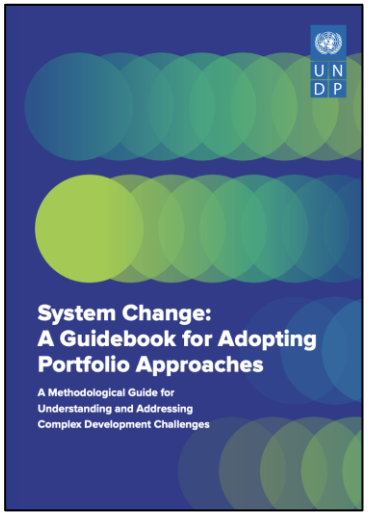
2018

Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR)



2018

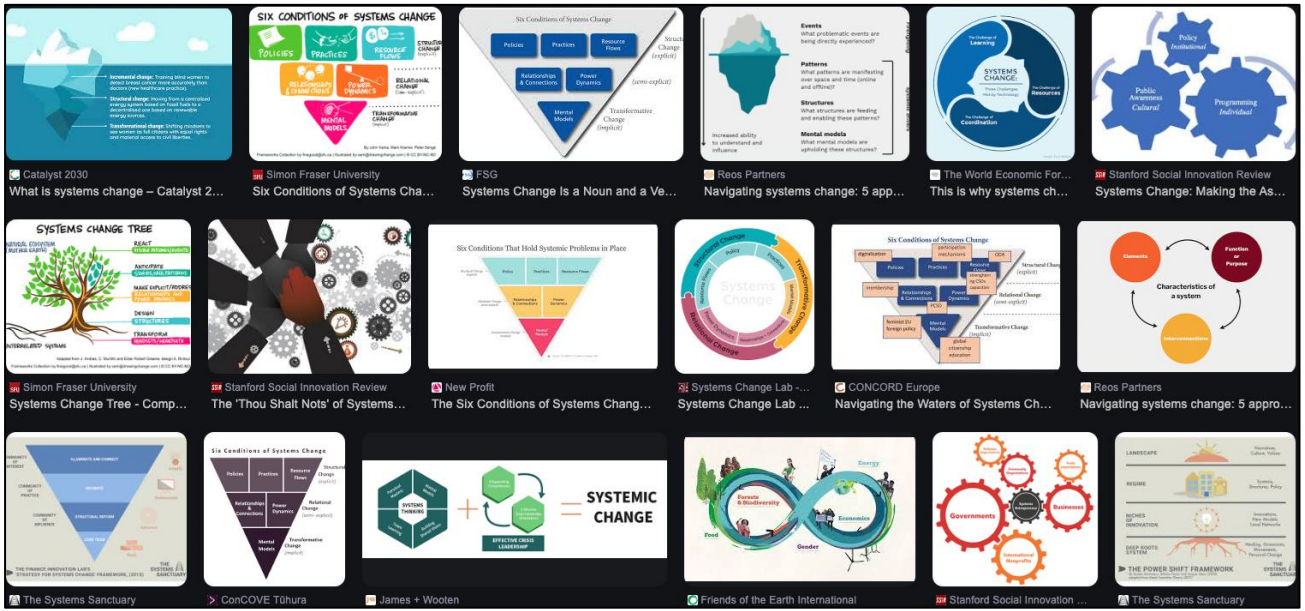
United Nations Development Program (UNDP)



2022

Background & Context

Overwhelming increase in models, toolkits, etc.



Background & Context

Freeze-change-unfreeze =/= living systems

We asked ourselves:

How do you approach systems change when there’s no pause button?

We start with a different premise:

We see living systems as threads rhythmically weaving through time.



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Living Systems as Threads

Starts with processual ontology

Living Systems as Threads:

Processual view - see reality as dynamic vs. static, emphasizes time over space

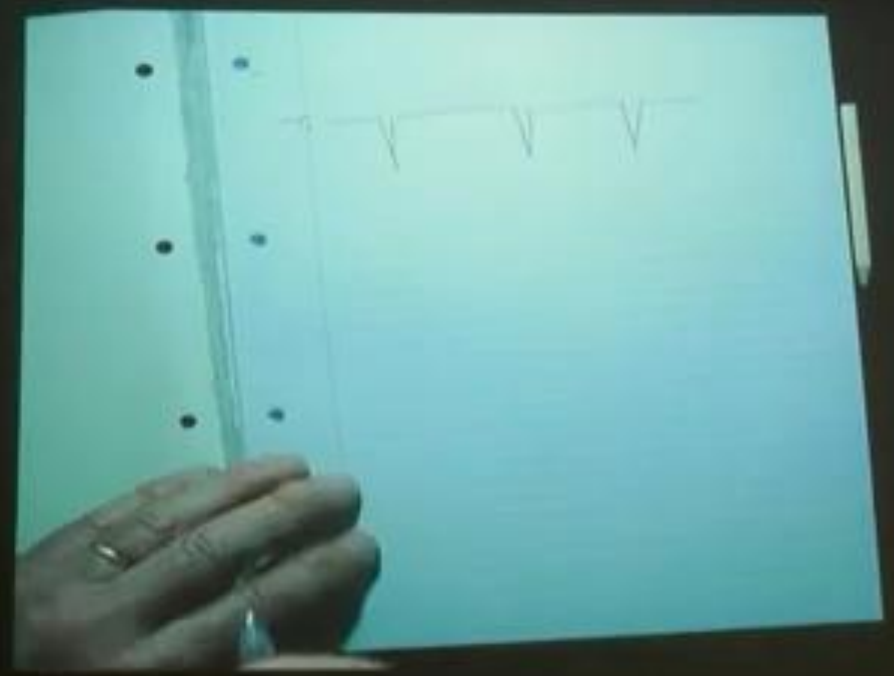


The idea:
Seeing the world as made up of processes, moving through time

We emphasize:
The most fixed structures - such as mountains - as slow-moving processes

We downplay:
The perception of reality as snapshots in time (change as freeze -> change -> unfreeze)

Drawn from:
Heraclitus and Lao Tzu
JJ Gibson's "Ecological approach to visual perception" (1979)

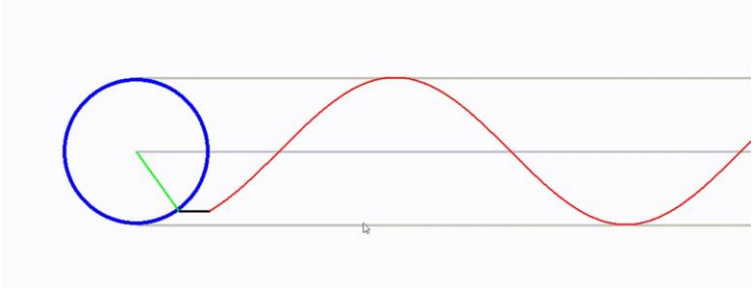


Living Systems as Threads

Tim Ingold, lines, threads, weaves, and rhythms

Concept 1 of 3:

Threads & rhythms - Understanding the natural unfolding of a living system



The idea:
All living systems have a natural, inherent, rhythm

We emphasize:
The system of interest as threads moving through time

We downplay:
Understanding systems as a set of parts in a spatial configuration

Drawn from:
Tim Ingold's "Life of Lines" (2015)
Classical Chinese Medicine (or any philosophy of body)



Living Systems as Threads

These rhythmic lines weave together in a *texture*.

Concept 2 of 3:

Texture - rhythms weave together in a texture



The idea:
A moving texture influences - and is influenced by - the systems of interests weaving together

We emphasize:
Understanding and working with the “knot” that forms between multiple threads (systems of interests) in a texture

We downplay:
Neat system boundaries that delineate inside vs. outside

Drawn from:
Keekok Lee’s concept of “Contextual Dyadic Thinking” (2017)
Socio-Ecological Systems (Emery & Trist)



Living Systems as Threads

There’s a dynamic, ever-shifting *propensity* in the texture.

Concept 3 of 3:

Propensity - the inherent potential for change in a particular situation

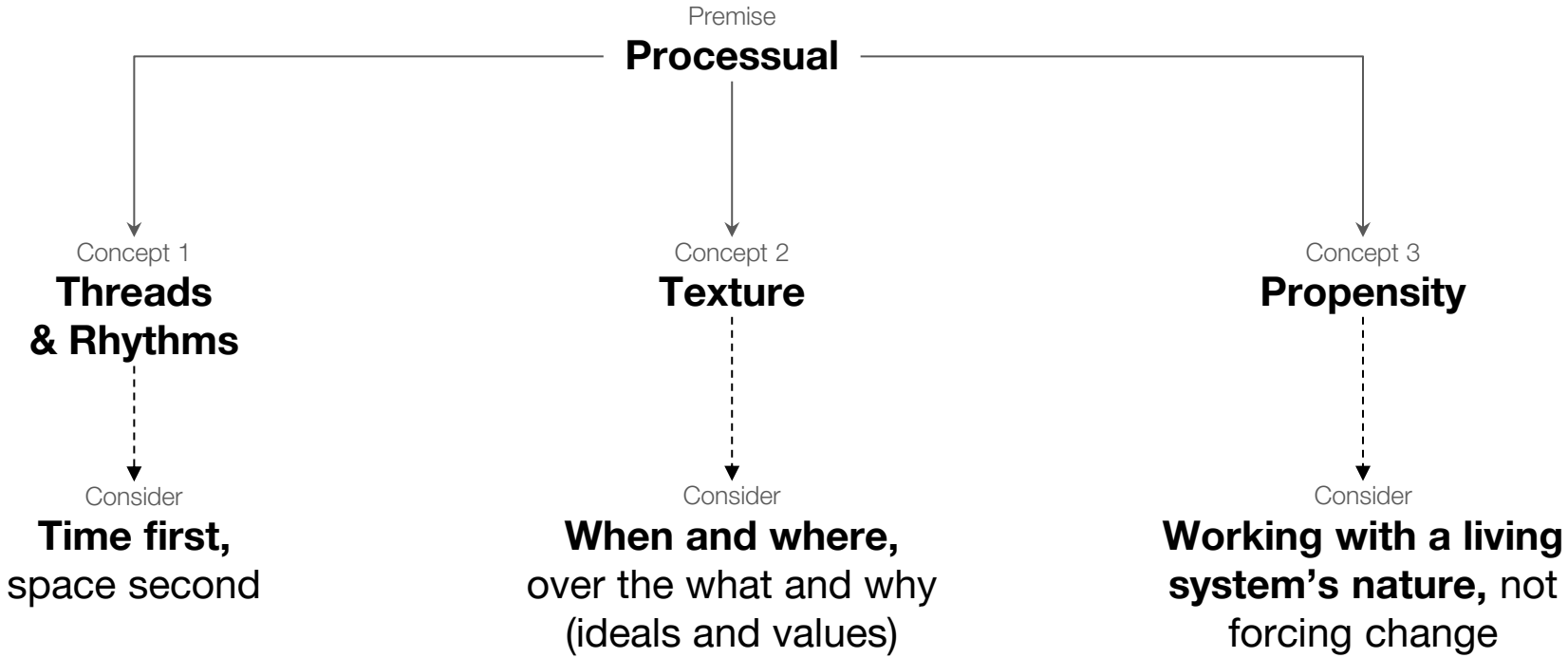


The idea:
The unique situation in a contexture has a tendency towards change

We emphasize:
Exploiting the tendency towards a desired change when the living systems natural behaviours interact

We downplay:
Pre-determining a desired change and pushing systems towards it, regardless of time

Drawn from:
Sun Tzu
Francois Jullien's "The Propensity of Things" (1999)


Premise
Processual
Concept 1
Threads & Rhythms
Consider
Time first, space second
Concept 2
Texture
Consider
When and where, over the what and why (ideals and values)
Concept 3
Propensity
Consider
Working with a living system's nature, not forcing change

1. Background Context

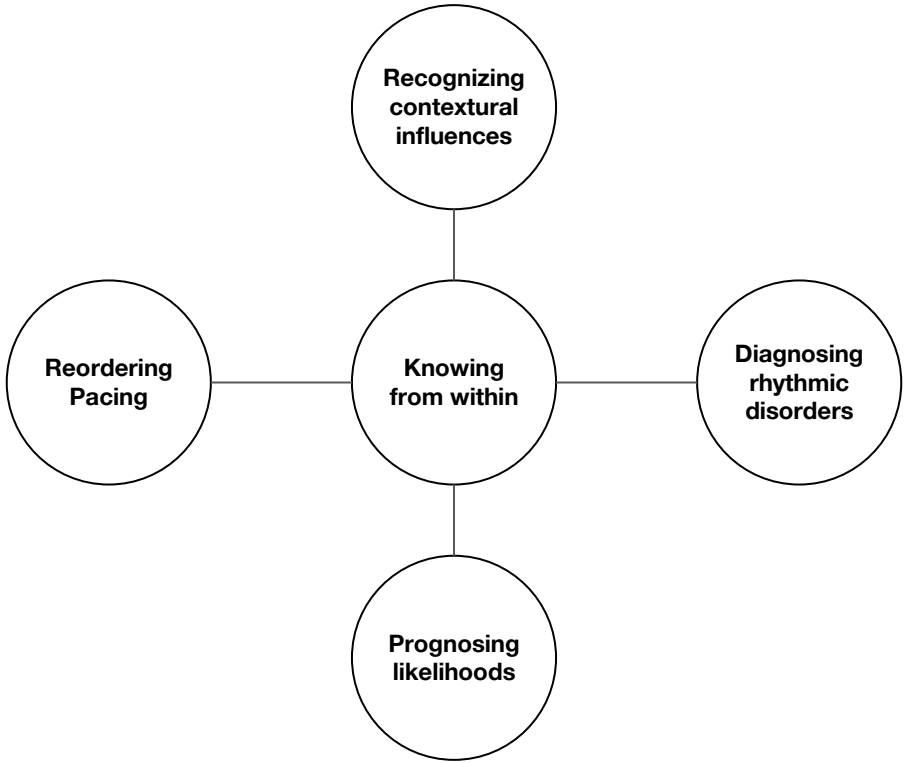
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Conceptual Model & Method:

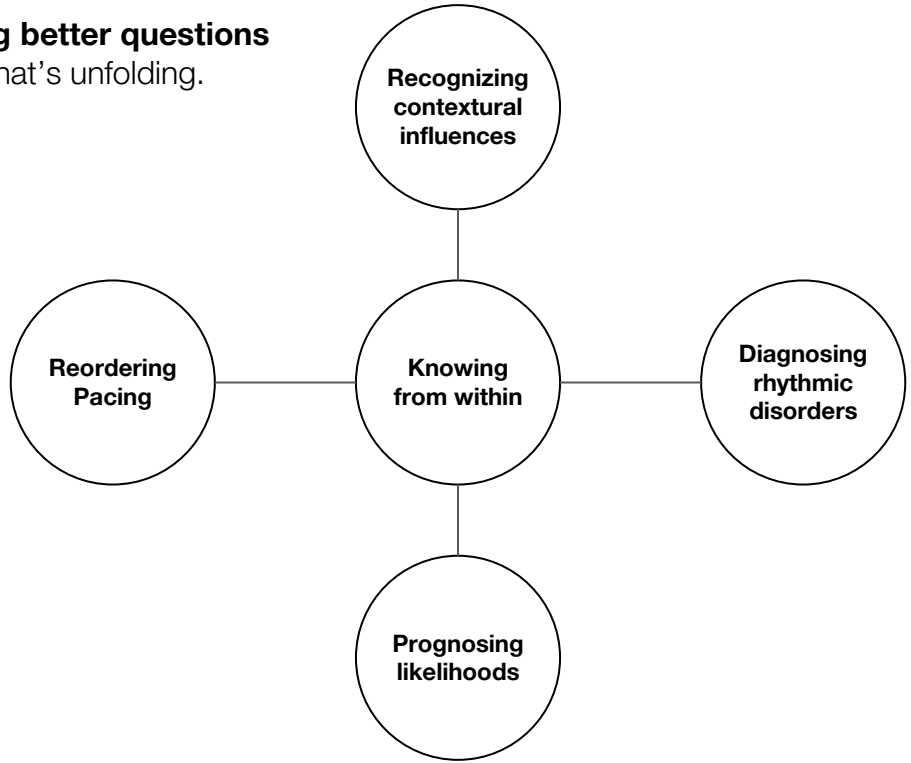
Hub & Four Spokes Model & Inquiring Method



Conceptual Model & Method:

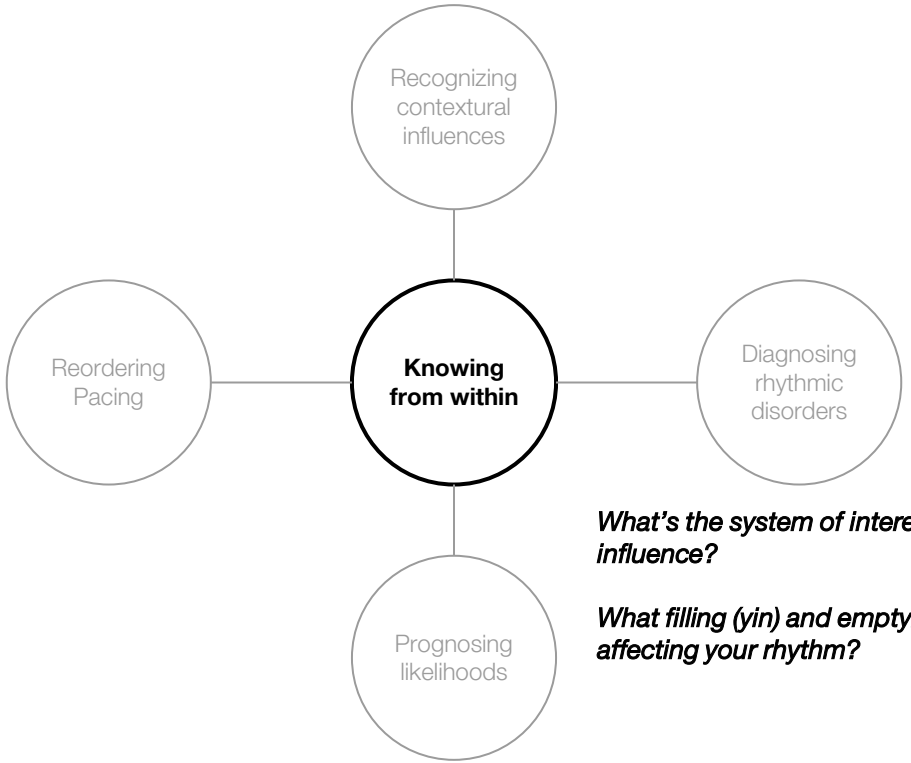
Hub & Four Spokes Model & Inquiring Method

Our method focuses on **asking better questions** about the **nature of change** that's unfolding.



Conceptual Model & Method:

Hub & Four Spokes Model & Inquiring Method

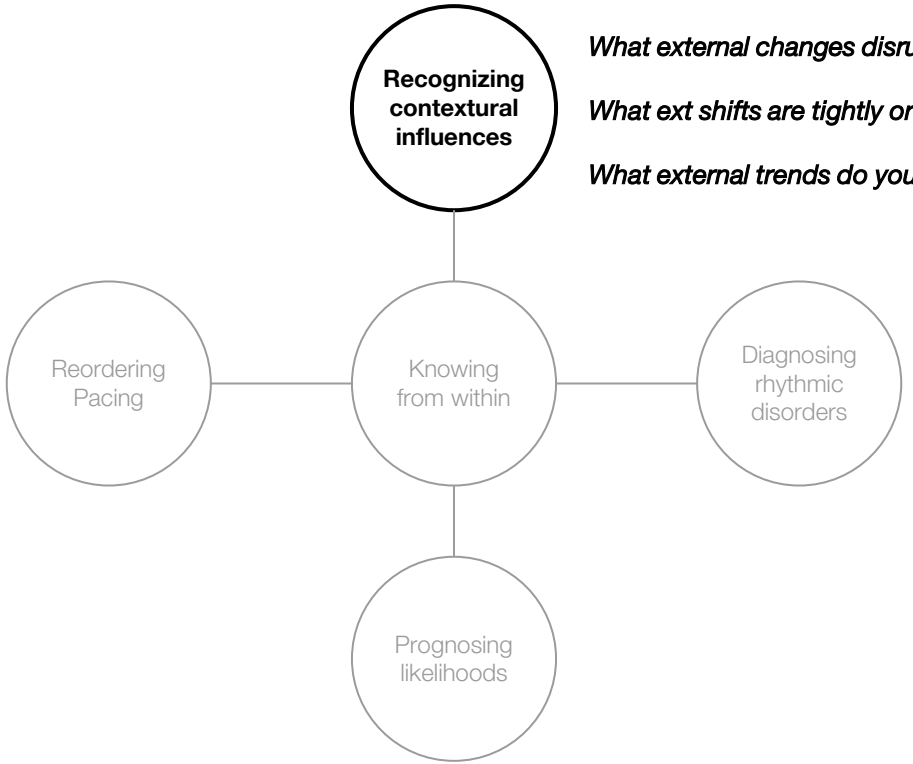


What's the system of interest that you can reasonably influence?

What filling (yin) and emptying (yang) processes are affecting your rhythm?

Conceptual Model & Method:

Hub & Four Spokes Model & Inquiring Method



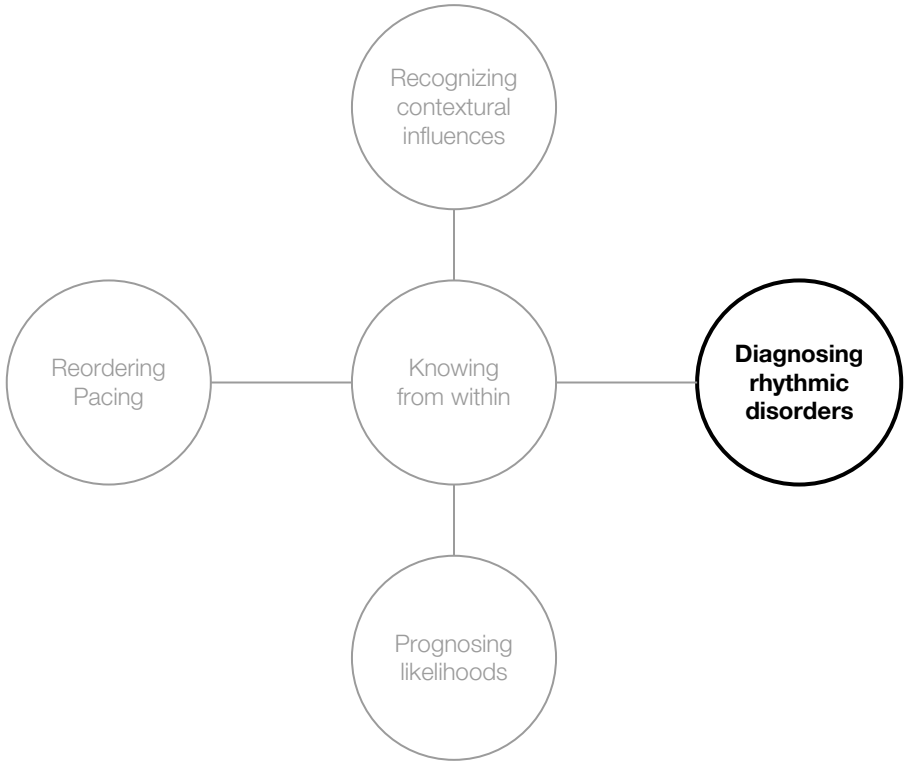
What external changes disrupt your system?

What ext shifts are tightly or loosely coupled to your system?

What external trends do you expect to continue?

Conceptual Model & Method:

Hub & Four Spokes Model & Inquiring Method



Is your rhythm off a little or a lot?

Can you explain why your rhythm is off?

Do you expect being "off" to last a long time?

Do you think being "off" is going to fix itself?

Conceptual Model & Method:

Hub & Four Spokes Model & Inquiring Method



When is it a good time or bad time to make the change?

Where in the landscape does this change work best?

Who likes this change? And who doesn't like it?

Conceptual Model & Method:

Hub & Four Spokes Model & Inquiring Method



When is it a good time or bad time to make the change?

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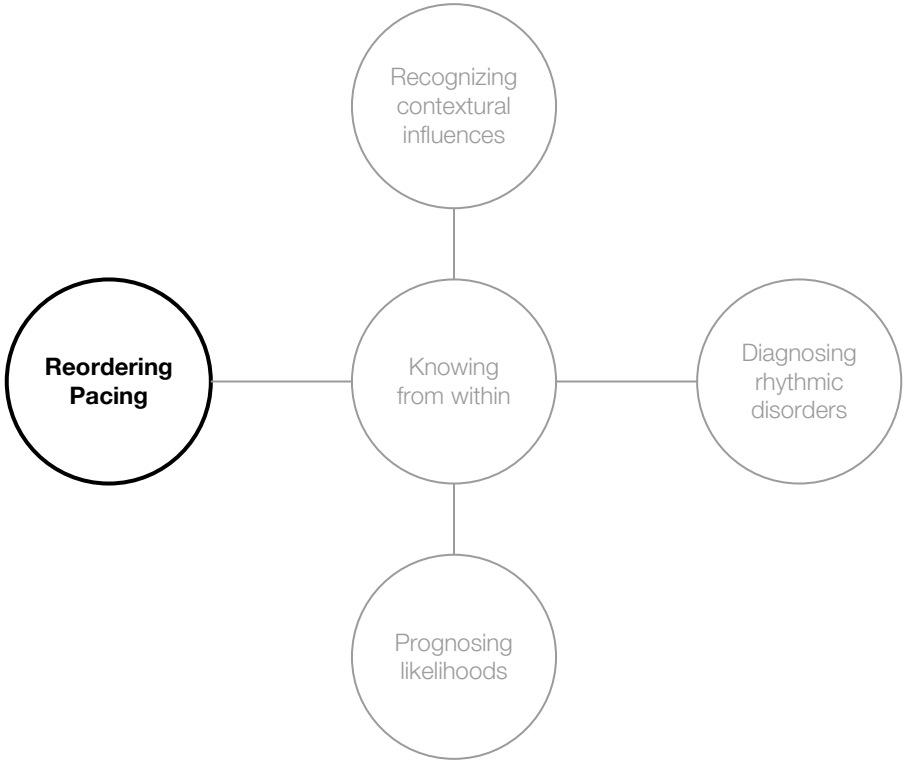
Who likes this change? And who doesn't like it?

Conceptual Model & Method:

Hub & Four Spokes Model & Inquiring Method

What are the commitments for doing "more/faster"?

And what are the commitments for doing "less/slower"?

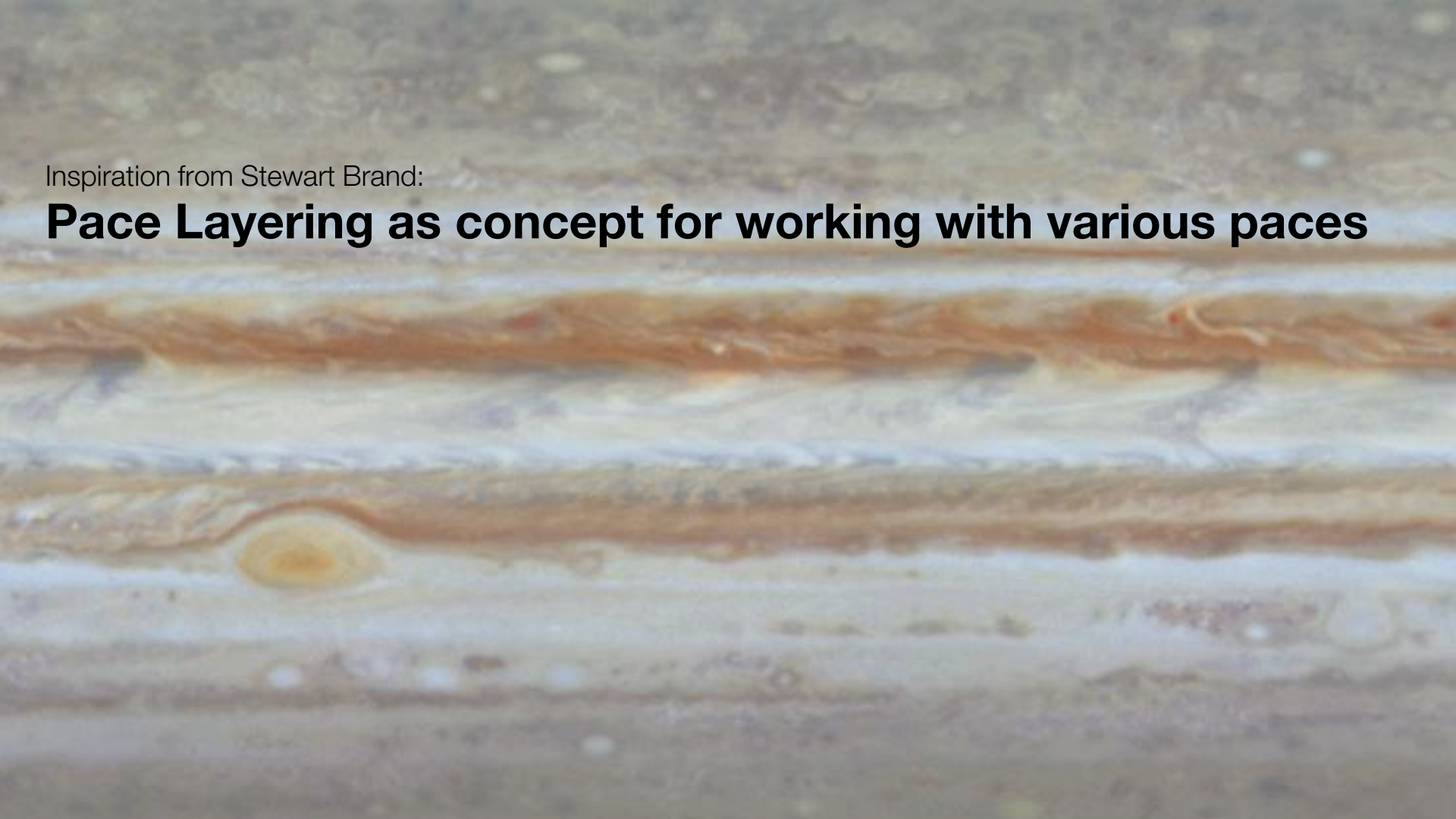


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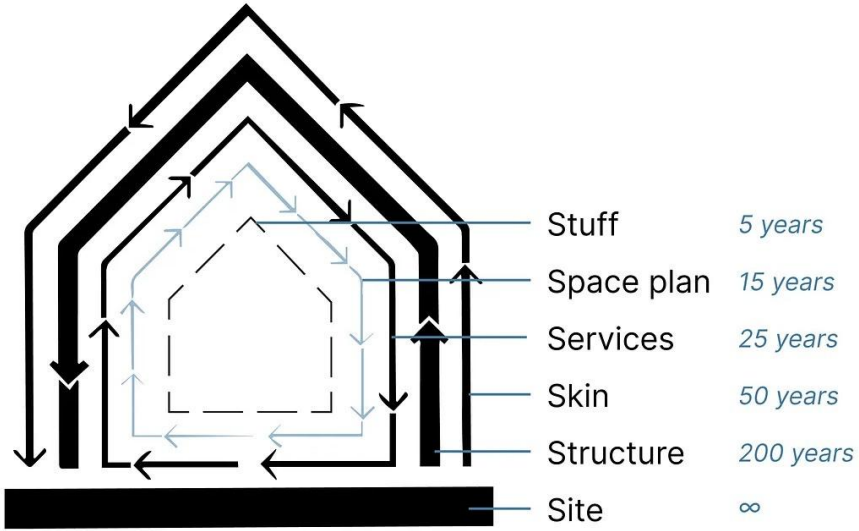


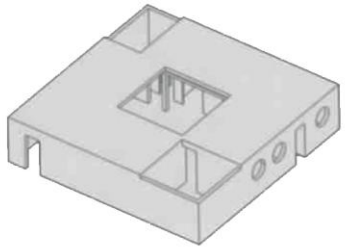
Inspiration from Stewart Brand:

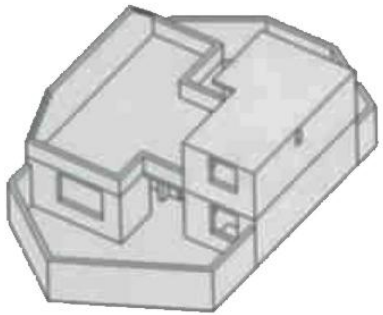
Pace Layering as concept for working with various paces

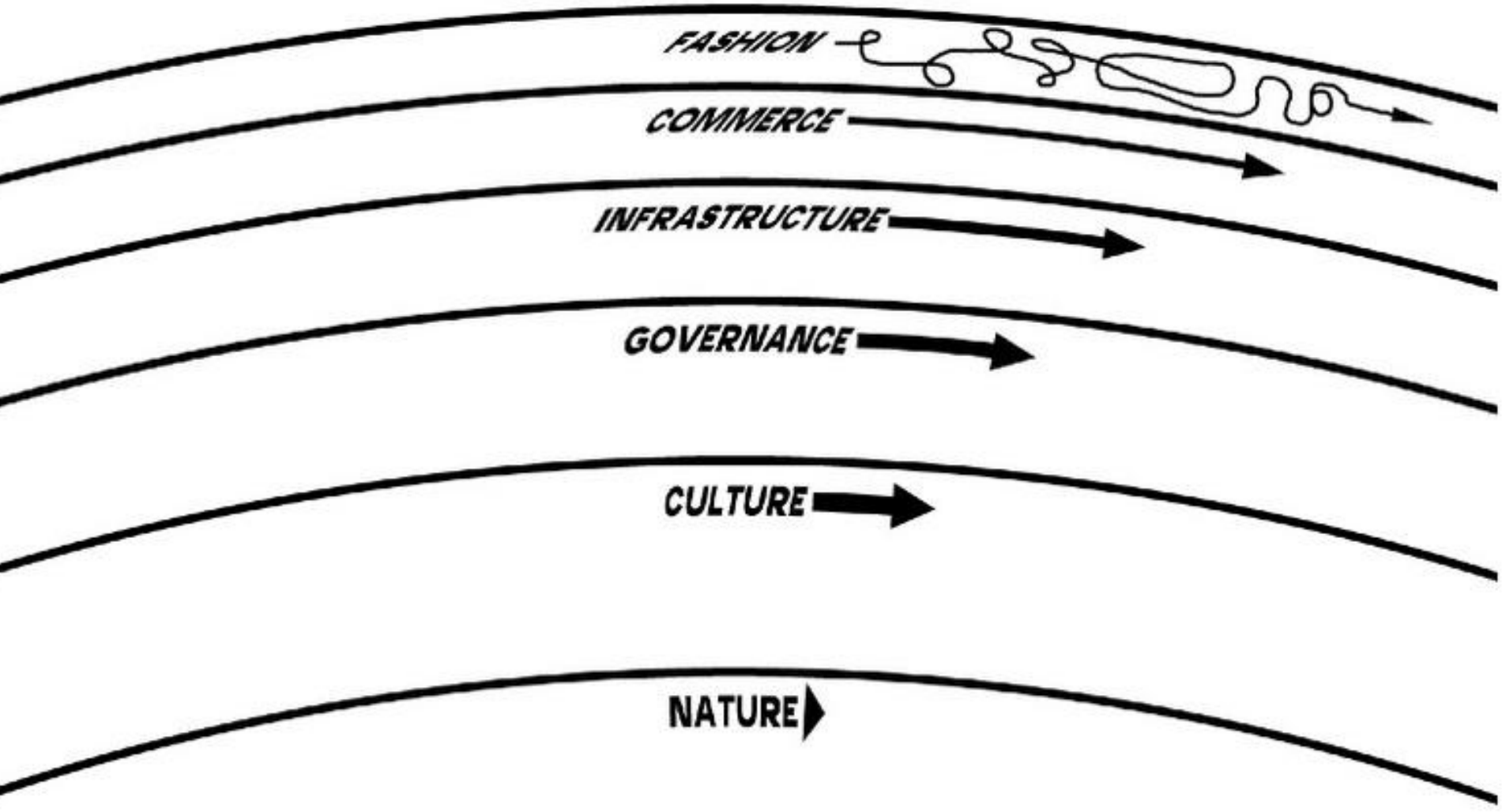
Pacing Changes:

Sheering Layers, different parts, different speeds








FASHION
COMMERCE
INFRASTRUCTURE
GOVERNANCE
CULTURE
NATURE

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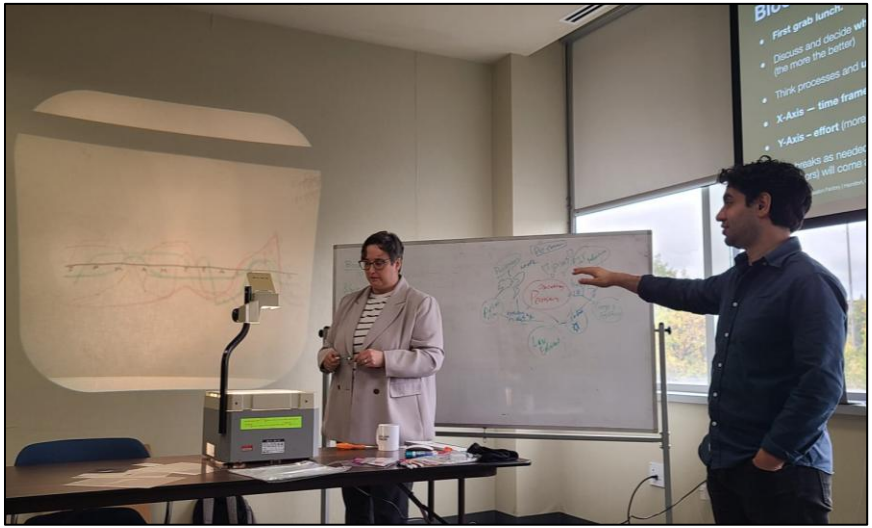
Pacing Changes:

We've started drawing waves….seriously.

Rich pictures
(static)



Layered pacing maps
(processual)



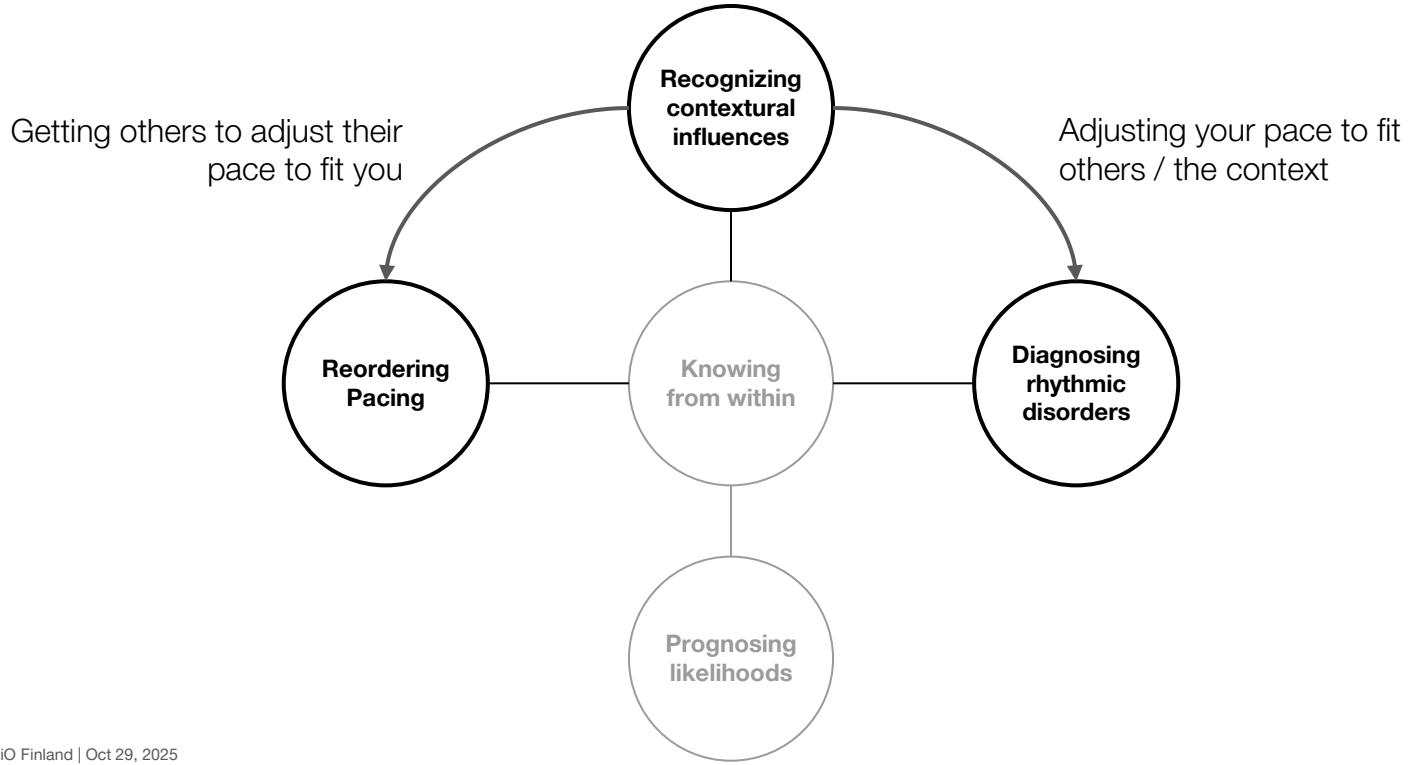
Pacing Changes:

Making our varying rhythms more legible.

Development	Marketing
Early-bird	Night-owl
Work from home	Work from office
Before kids	After kids
Pre-budget deciding	Post-budget spending
Democracy strengthening	Democracy slipping
…	…

Pacing Changes:

Pacing Changes method can run clockwise or counter-clockwise depending on systems' rhythms



The single-minded prompt to consider:

How do we account for rhythms and paces in our system(s) change(s) work?

Implications:

Some personal mindset shifts that *rhythmic thinking* has led to for me

- An absolute answer → the **it-depends'ness** of a situation (thinking in context first)
- Idealistic → **Pragmatic**
- Does it scale? → Can we make it more **local**?
- Chronos (clock time) → **Kairos** (felt time)
- Lawful order (law, policy, rules, etc.) → **Negotiated order** (coordination, flexibility, spontaneity)
- Designing the solution → **Designing the multiparadigm inquiry into the issue** for an agreeable outcome
- Designer's bias towards action → **Designer's bias towards learning** (humbling design)

Looking forward to continuing the conversation …at *your* pace.

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David Ing – coevolving@gmail.com