Planning an Evaluation of Systems Change

A Tamarack Webinar featuring:

Meg Hargreaves & Mark Cabaj

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COMMUNITY CHANGE FESTIVAL

October 1-4, 2018
Toronto, ON

Over 4 days, explore the 5 interconnected practices every changemaker needs to move ideas to practice to impact. Through workshops, open space dialogue, tools, immersive tours, and peer input processes, go deep into one approach or advance your skills in each.

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Today's Speakers

Meg Hargreaves
Senior Fellow, NORC
Economics, Justice, and Society

Mark Cabaj
President,
From Here to There Consulting

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What is a "System"?

Systems Definition

A system is a network of interdependent components that work together to try to accomplish the aim of the system.

W. Edwards Deming

Thinking Systemically

"...a view that balances part and whole and focuses on complex interrelationships and patterns from multiple perspectives."
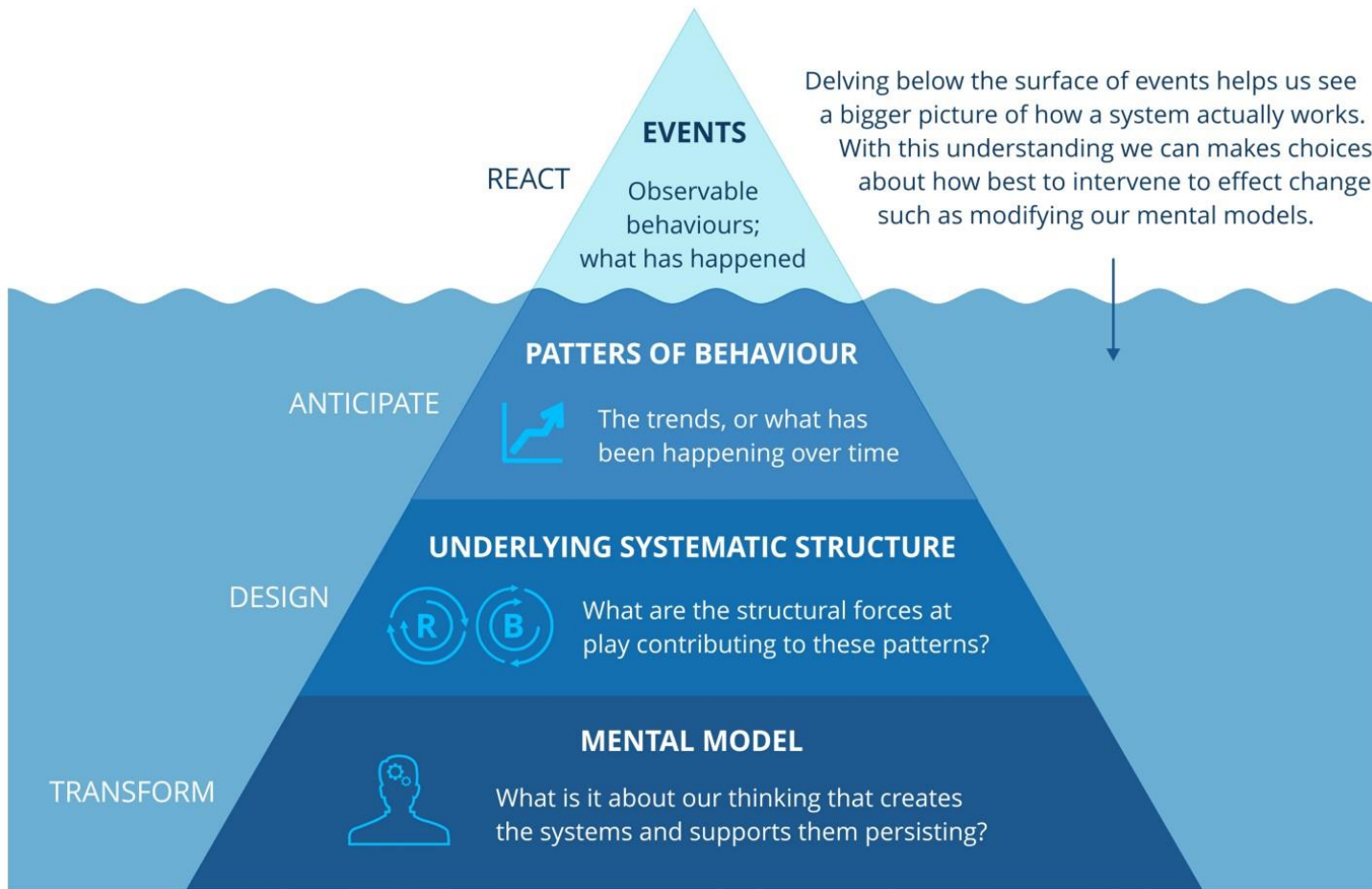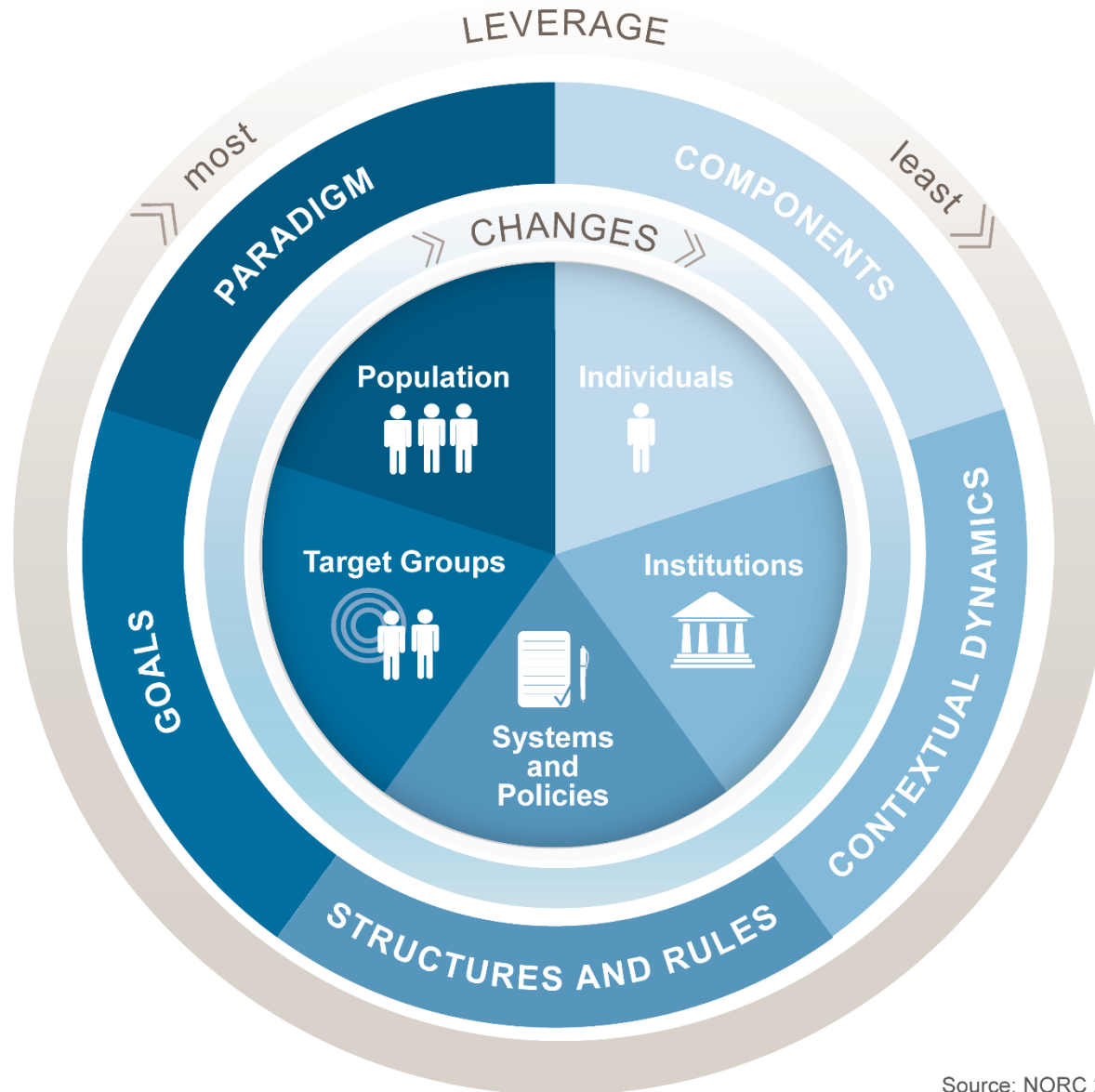
Derek Cabrera

What is the major difference between evaluating programs and evaluating systems?
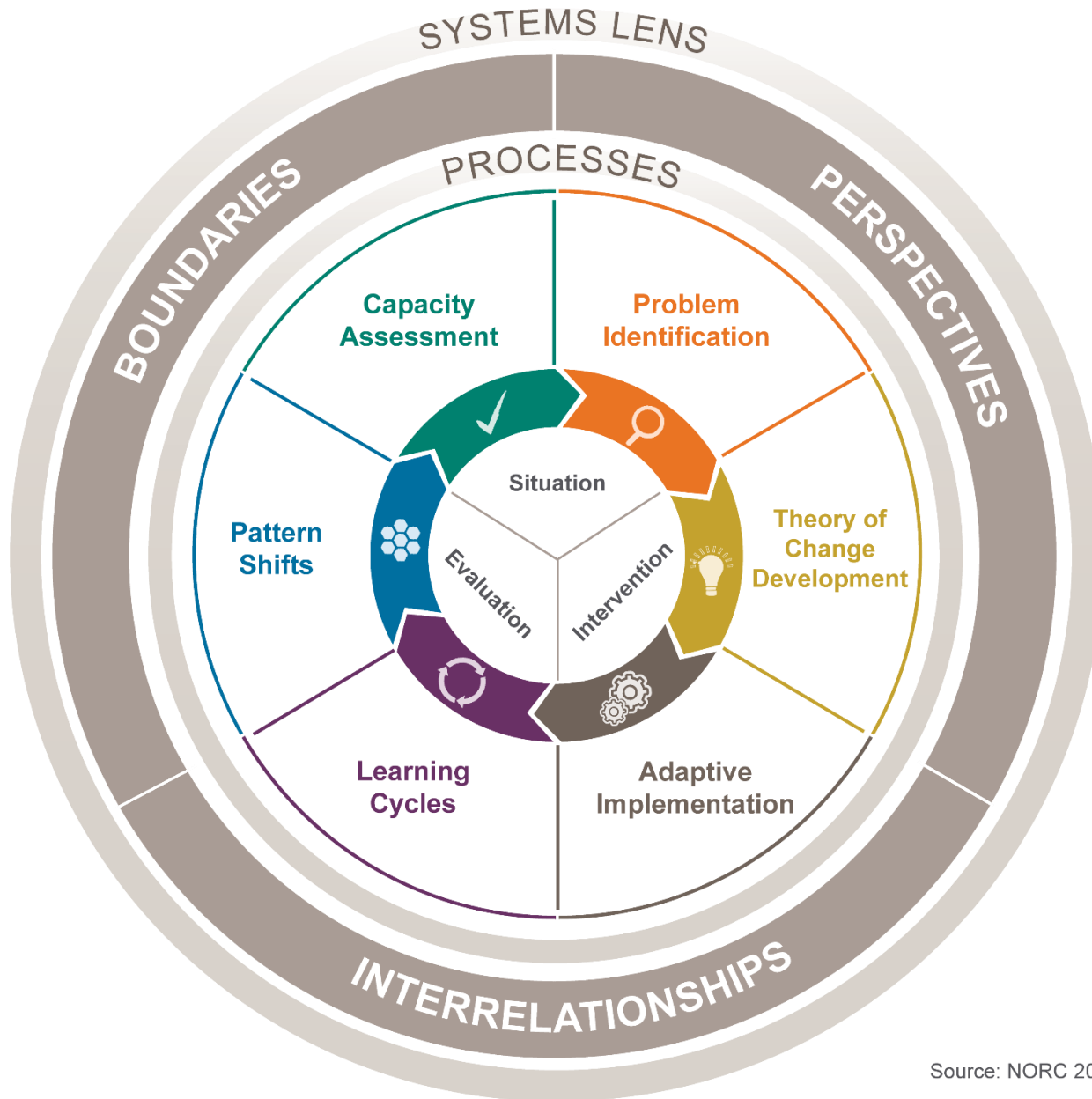
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Thinking Systemically: Iceberg Model

Systemic Intervention Wheel

Source: NORC 2018

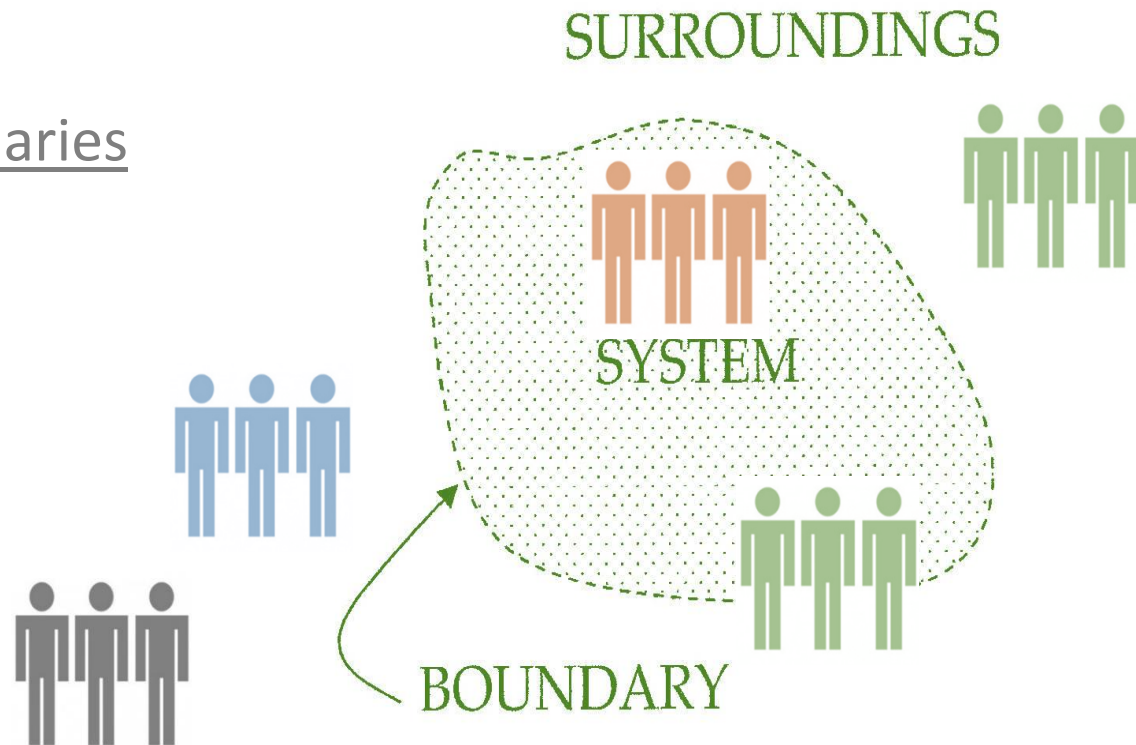What was the motivation in preparing a planning guide for evaluating systems change?

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Systemic Evaluation Design

Source: NORC 2018

One of the first steps to evaluating systems change is describing the system. How do you begin, and what questions do you ask?

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I N S T I T U T E

Systems Boundaries

All systems
have boundaries

SURROUNDINGS

SYSTEM

BOUNDARY

Systems Interrelationships

Systems are wholes whose specific structures arise from the interactions and interdependence of their parts...

Fritjof Capra

Systems Perspectives

A systems approach begins when first you see the world through the eyes of another.
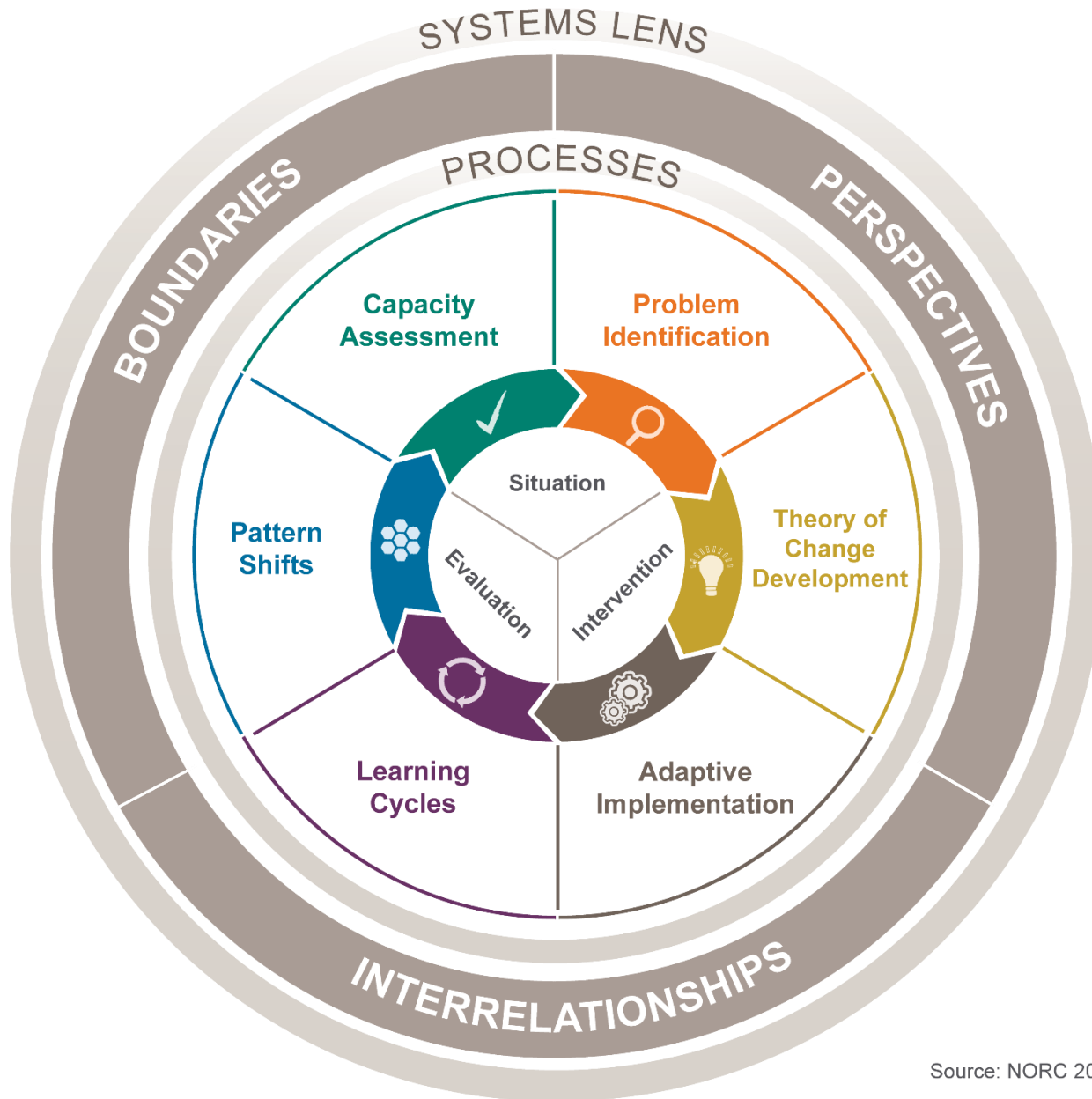
C.W. Churchman

Systems Dynamics

4 Basic Types

- Random

- Simple

- Complicated

- Complex (adaptive)

Systemic Evaluation Design

Source: NORC 2018

Capacity Assessment

What is capacity assessment?

- Capacity assessments identify the baseline conditions that are present to support a change process.
- They can focus on individual, program, organization, network, service system, community, or larger capacity.
- They encompass multiple dimensions, and can be conducted at any point in a change process.
- Example: ACEs and Resilience Collective Community Capacity (ARC3) Survey
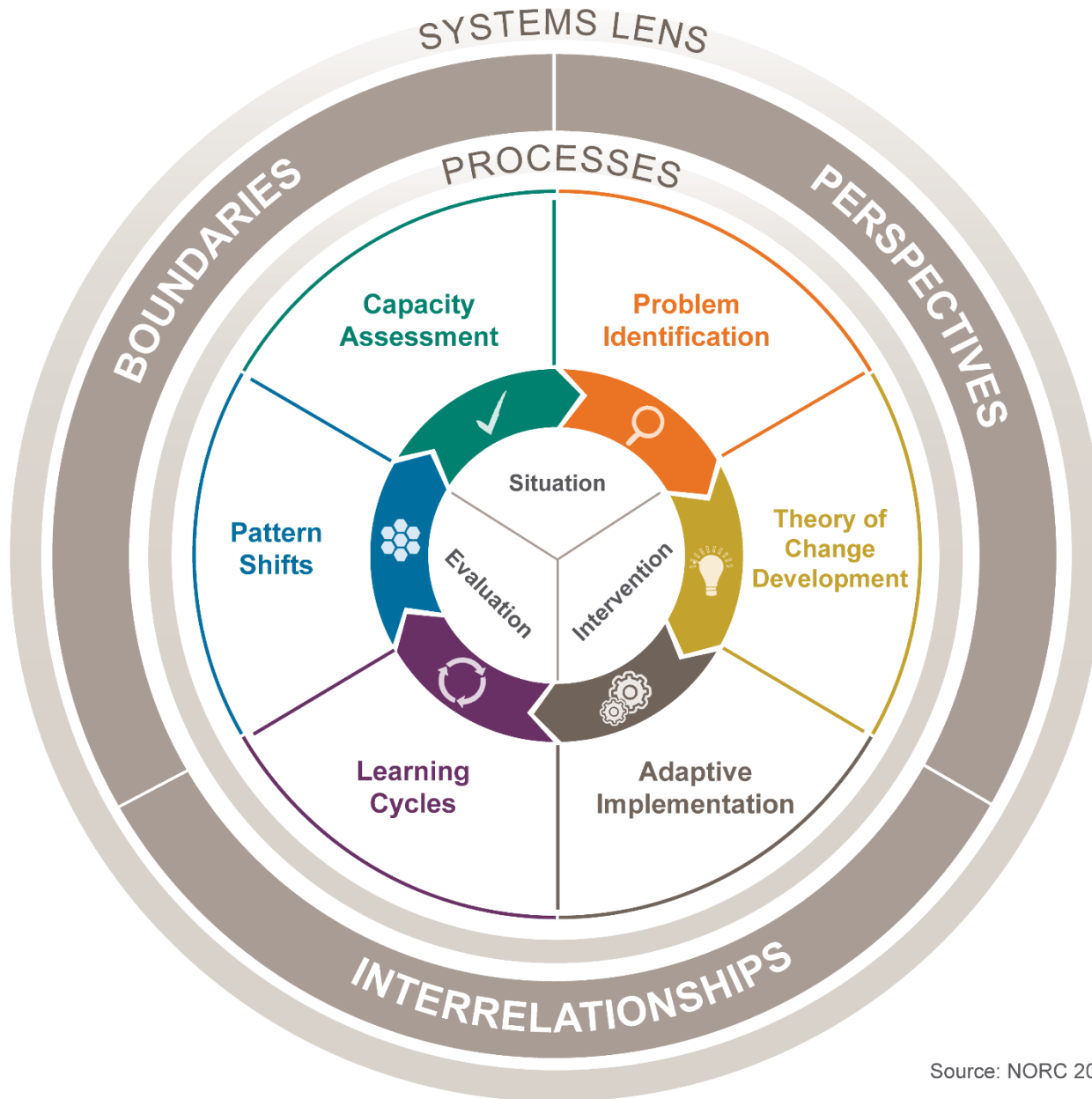
Problem Identification

What is problem identification?

- One way to determine a system's boundaries is to identify a problem of interest and ask who or what is involved in it, influences it, or is influenced by it (Checkland and Poulter 2006).
- Complex problems are "wicked" (Rittel and Webber 1973) in that: they are more difficult to define, and have interrelated root causes.
- They are beyond the capacity of any one organization to solve, and so require collaborative action by many stakeholders.
- There are systems-informed tools and techniques for mapping systems and diagnosing and framing problems. Examples include: systems mapping, network analysis, causal loop diagrams, social-ecological models, and methods for identifying root causes.
- Example: reframing poverty as "a lack of interrelated assets, including income, housing, and social connections" instead of "a lack of income" leads to a different set of solutions (M. Cabaj).

The next part of the scoping work is to describe the intervention. What are you exploring here?

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Systemic Evaluation Design

Source: NORC 2018

Developing a Theory of Change

What is a Theory of Change?

- A theory of change (TOC) is a tool for articulating what actions are needed to achieve specific goals. It explains how a group of early and intermediate accomplishments set the stage for producing long-range results. (Aspen Roundtable - A. Anderson)
- It can be developed for any level of intervention – an event, a project, a program, a policy, a strategy or an organization. It can be developed for an intervention:
  - where objectives and activities can be identified and tightly planned, or
  - that changes and adapts in response to emerging issues and to decisions made by partners and other stakeholders (Patricia Rogers, 2014)
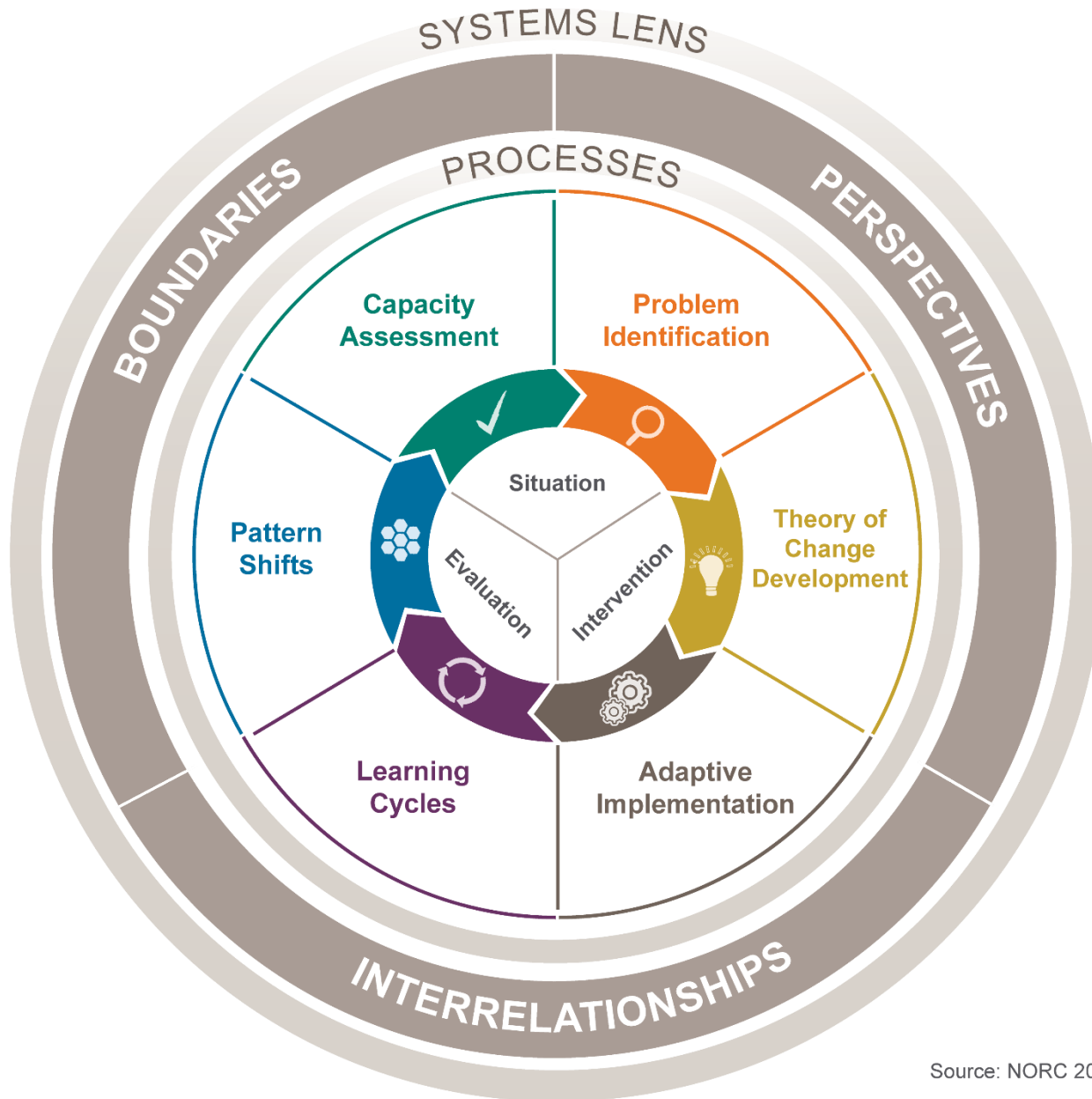
Adaptive Implementation

What is adaptive action?

- Adaptive processes are used to implement an initiative's theory of change to achieve its goals.

- Adaptive management helps managers and practitioners maintain flexibility in their decisions under conditions of uncertainty. It gives them the latitude to make adjustments to improve their progress toward their goals.

- Adaptive action cycles involve reflective practice, which can be done by individuals, teams, or larger groups. One tool is use asks "What?" "So What? "Now What?" questions to drive a cycle of inquiry. (G. Eoyang and R. Holladay, 2013)

What are some questions you propose relating to the evaluation itself?

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Learning Cycles

What are learning cycles?

- Iterative cycles of action, reflection, and learning provide feedback to change initiatives. These cycles work at different levels.

- Quality improvement methods, such as PDSA (Plan-Do-Study Act) cycles are appropriate for process improvement projects.

- Rapid program evaluation methods are appropriate for organizational change initiatives.

- Developmental evaluation and other systemic change evaluation methods are best for complex systems change initiatives.

- These learning cycles and methods can be nested in comprehensive evaluations to track shifting patterns of processes and outcomes at multiple levels and from multiple vantage points.

Tracking Shifting Patterns

What are pattern shifts?

- Systemic patterns refer to shifts in patterns of behaviors, activities, or outcomes at different levels:
    - program component processes or parameters,
    - institutional feedback, system structures,
    - formal laws and policies,
    - informal social arrangements or norms,
    - system goals, and
    - larger narratives or paradigms.
- These pattern shifts reflect changes in system boundaries, perspectives, and/or connections.
- Patterns are emergent, dependent on many actors. They are self-reinforcing and contextually-specific - unique to a time and place.
- These pattern shifts or outcomes occur at different levels: programs, organizations or institutions, networks, communities, or populations.

What tips might you give to people who are committed to being more effective systems change evaluators, but are still relatively new?

Final Advice

Tips for systemic change practitioners and evaluators

1. Go lightly on explanations of systems or complexity theory with evaluation users. Translate systems ideas into clear, practical, project-based language that they understand.
2. Don't be wedded to a pet evaluation method as it will dominate the evaluation design. Use a broad toolkit of methods, selecting techniques that are situationally appropriate.
3. Use a pragmatic evaluation approach, mixing traditional qualitative and quantitative social research methods with new systems-informed techniques.
4. Teach people how to identify potential leverage points and emergent opportunities for change. Teach them how to use theories of change and develop multiple pathways of action to achieve their goals.
5. Teach them to assess and improve their individual, organizational, and collective capacity to create the conditions that support change.

Where can people go for more support?

QUESTIONS?

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