From Tension to Building Trust

Designing and Facilitating High-Stakes External Engagement

IAP2 BC & Yukon

Lunch and Learn

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Agenda

- Changing context
- Preparing ourselves
- Preparing our projects
- Future explorations

Changing Context for Public Participation

Public Outrage

- Often connected to perception that a moral principle has been violated. Creates a perception of injustice, mixed with anger
  - Emotions override facts
  - Complicated problems become simplified
- Finding others who see things similarly creates a feeling of social acceptance, which releases dopamine in the brain
- Social media platforms are designed to reward provocation, incivility and emotional extremity because these draw our attention, which in turn generates revenue

Sources: Nature.com
Ayolov, Peter, Moral Outrage Networks: The Sociology of Digital Anger

Outrage in Public Participation

- Perceived, or real, lack of transparency in a public engagement process can lead to public outrage
- Pre-existing community anger and low-trust can be triggered and amplified by a new project
- Communities feeling unheard may feel like they have limited options
- Coordinated networks with ideological agendas can target public institutions
- Polarized viewpoints can lead to lack of clarity on how to move ahead

Compounding Factors

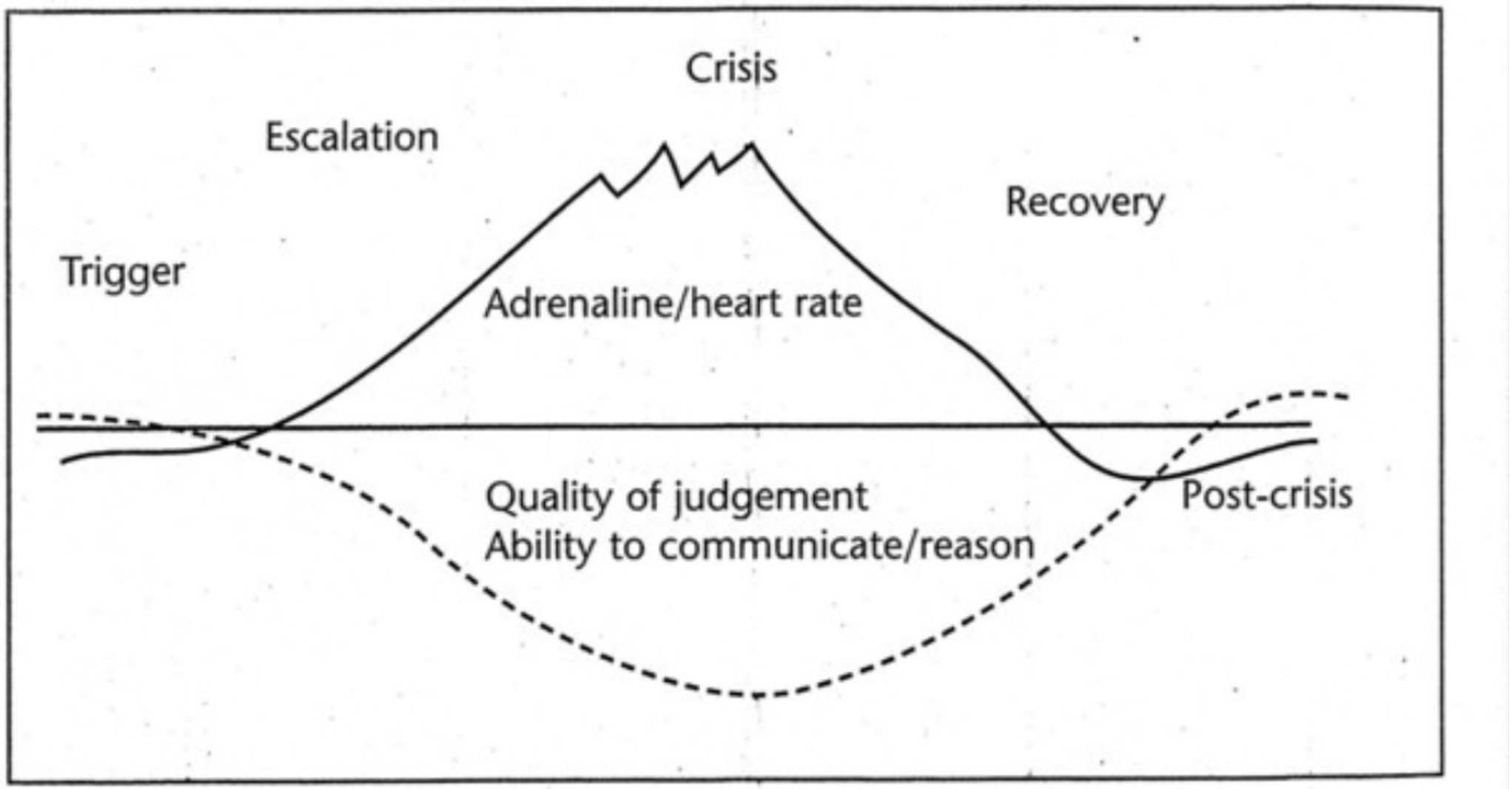
- Tight timelines and high urgency
- Power imbalances
- Changes that impact people's place of living, livelihood or recreation habits
- Disinformation and misinformation
- Rigidly held perspectives
- Poor historical relations between participants
- Concerns about safety or autonomy
- Fear of disempowerment in the process
- Back-channel lobbying and influence
- Managing participant expectations that may go beyond the scope of the project
- Responding to diverse participant and/or institutional positions that seem in conflict

Preparing Ourselves

Being Triggered: Tell-Tale Signs

- Not breathing, uneven or rapid breathing
- Physical sensations: body tensions, clenched fists, sweating
- Talking really, really fast or not speaking clearly
- Judgemental or blaming thoughts
- Difficulty in paying attention, spacing out, falling asleep
- Internally (or externally) arguing; justifying yourself
- Emotional outbursts
- Feeling sorry for yourself, feeling victimized
- Feeling frozen, shut down, deadened

Anger Arousal Cycle



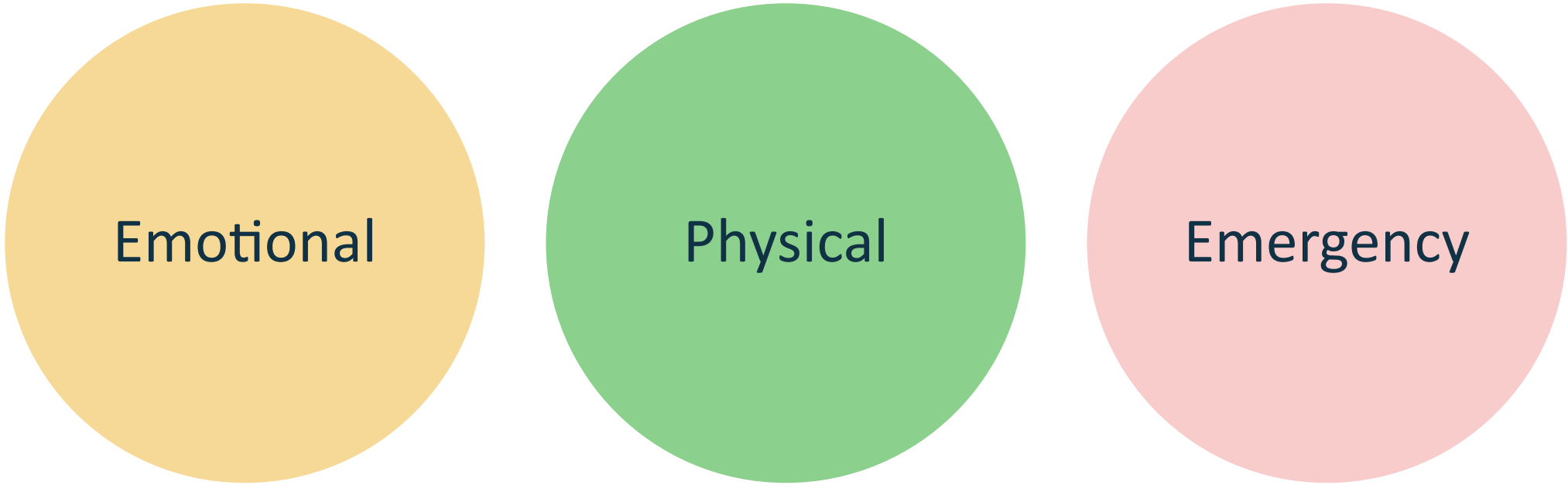
Source: Just Outcomes

Options for Responding

1. Name the moment (“What I heard/observed…; what I felt”)
2. Slow down and breathe
3. Protect marginalized people, as the highest priority
4. Help the participant save face; try to avoid shame
5. Speak authentically and connect to purpose
6. Guide the group to debrief and understand…
   - What happened?
   - Why was it problematic? (Focus on behavior not character, and on impact not intent)
   - How can we do this differently?
   - Give choices
7. Rebuild the container

Prepare Your Project

Safety



Planning for High-Heat Engagement





Have and use a plan to avoid, reduce and/or manage unsafe or unproductive behaviours when and if they arise.

Planning

- Identify contentious issues that may cause conflict
- Issue framing
- Staff who are comfortable and experienced in facilitating and deescalating conflict
- Clarify purpose and scope of influence
- Encourage registration to allow for pre-communications
- Venue safety and accessibility
- Plan for vulnerable times when there are fewer staff around

Event Format & Design

- Avoid formats that encourage speeches
- Multiple ways to participate
- Adequate information resources and people
- Strategy for "off-topic" input
- Determine need for security
- Floor plan to allow people to move easily
- Prepare posters of meeting guidelines

Meeting Day Readiness

- Review program, roles, contingency plan, key messages, FAQs, phone numbers, fire exits, first aid
- Create a positive welcome
- Be professional: try to understand concerns from an objective perspective and don't take their passion personally
- Be empathetic
- Resource people to answer group questions or engage a disruptive participant
- Manage escalation
- Debrief onsite/within a few days and record lessons learned

Future Explorations

Ideas for Next Steps

- Reflect on past engagement challenges: discuss the insights to foster a culture of learning
- Establish/review practices and systems that strengthen organisational preparedness for modern engagement contexts
- Learn brain science about the roles of emotions and facts in public discourse
- Practice skills and capacities that help you reduce defensiveness and support psychological safety for participants

Thank You!



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