



Critical Conversations

Resolving Conflict In the Midst of Difficult Dialogue!

A Customized, Team-Based, Leadership Seminar

Speaker: Mark J. Sullivan, Ph.D.

Navigating High-Demand, High-Challenge Environments for Impact



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Making A Difference?

What have you done
that has made a
difference when you
are in a tough
conversation?



Putting A Name To Trouble!



When Trouble Visits...

Red Hot

BULLYING

DEMONIZING

CONTROLLING

Ice Cold

DEFLECTING

AVOIDING

WITHDRAWING

RESISTANT



The Range of the Emotional-Social Landscape



RECEPTIVE

Red Hot

Gracious

BULLYING

Attacking; Threatening in an aggressive, hostile manner

Tolerant, even comfortable with imperfection, vulnerability and competitive forces

ACCEPTING

DEMONIZING

Labeling, distorting or **stereotyping** in an explicit fashion

Curious, interested, and open to alternative possibilities and realities; Suspends judgement

INQUISITIVE

CONTROLLING

Interrupting or forcefully managing what is said

Embracing differences that genuinely supports multiple parties; Investing in new ways

COOPERATING

DEFLECTING

Sarcastic; Distorting reality in a stilted, twisted fashion; Masking or 'gas-lighting'

Leveraging cross-functional and **inclusive practices**, positions, and policies opportunistically

COLLABORATING

AVOIDING

Changing the subject; Shifting the focus; Leaving the 'elephant in the room'

Deepening relational trust, insight and understanding with empathy, joy, compassion

BONDING

WITHDRAWING

Being invisible; Detached, frozen, distant

Cultivating **heightened levels of functioning**; Celebrating competence, care, uniqueness

TRANSFORMING

Ice Cold

Spirited

Source: Mark J. Sullivan, Ph.D. 2024
Influenced by Gestalt and Rogerian practice and experiential outcomes.

ANGER FRUSTRATION

A conversation that does not go well usually ends up in anger, frustration, withdrawal, and/or future conflict avoidance as much as 92% of the time.

The frequency of conversational conflict in the American workforce has increased 220% in the last five years.

The Workforce Engagement Study
Accenture, 2018

CONFLICT AVOIDANCE



More and more, we live in a world of...

ANGER
SADNESS
FEAR

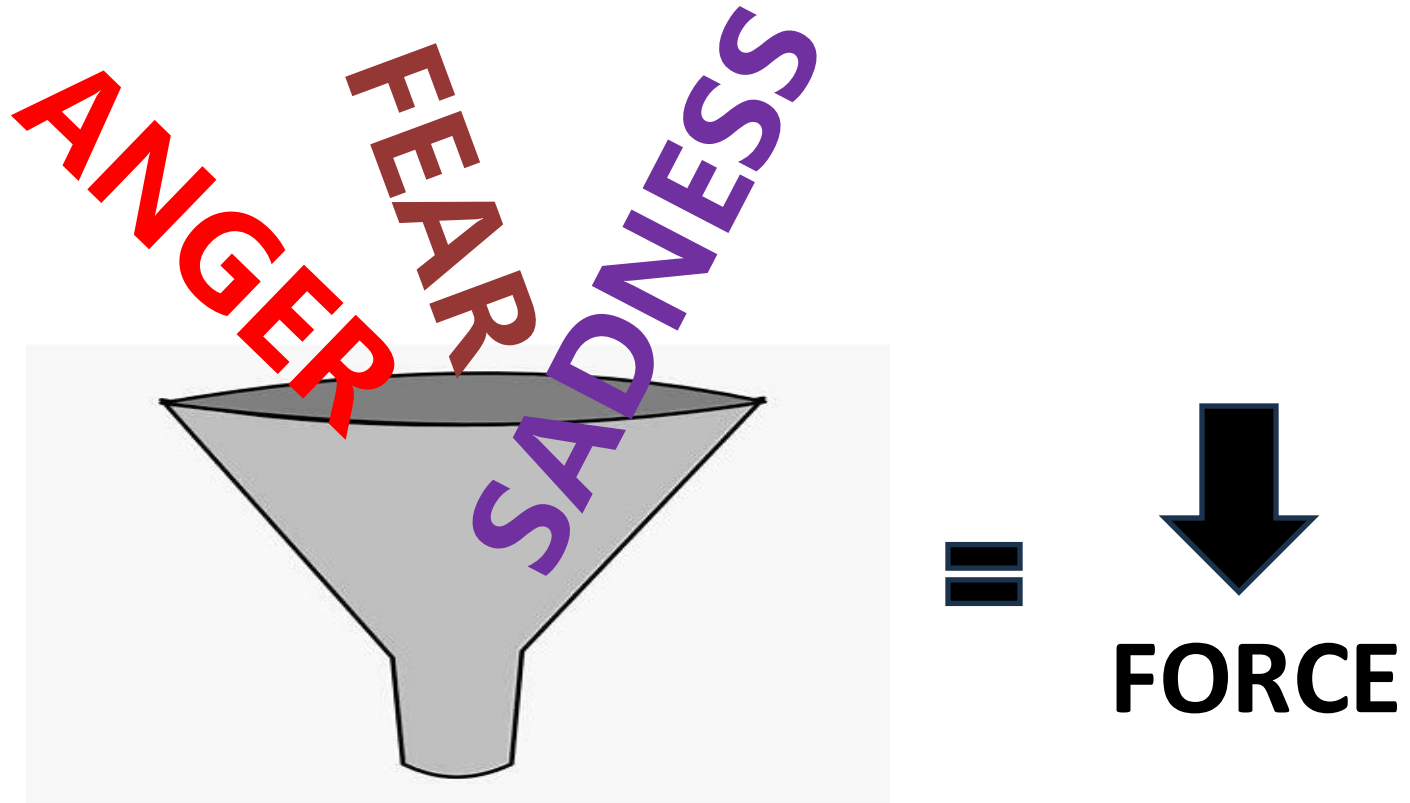
Factors influencing the way we see the world.

Stats by Gallop, Then & Now --

	<u>2015</u>	<u>2023</u>
ANGER	1/10 (10%)	1/5 (20%)
SADNESS	1/5 (20%)	1/3 (30.3%)
FEAR	It Depends	More

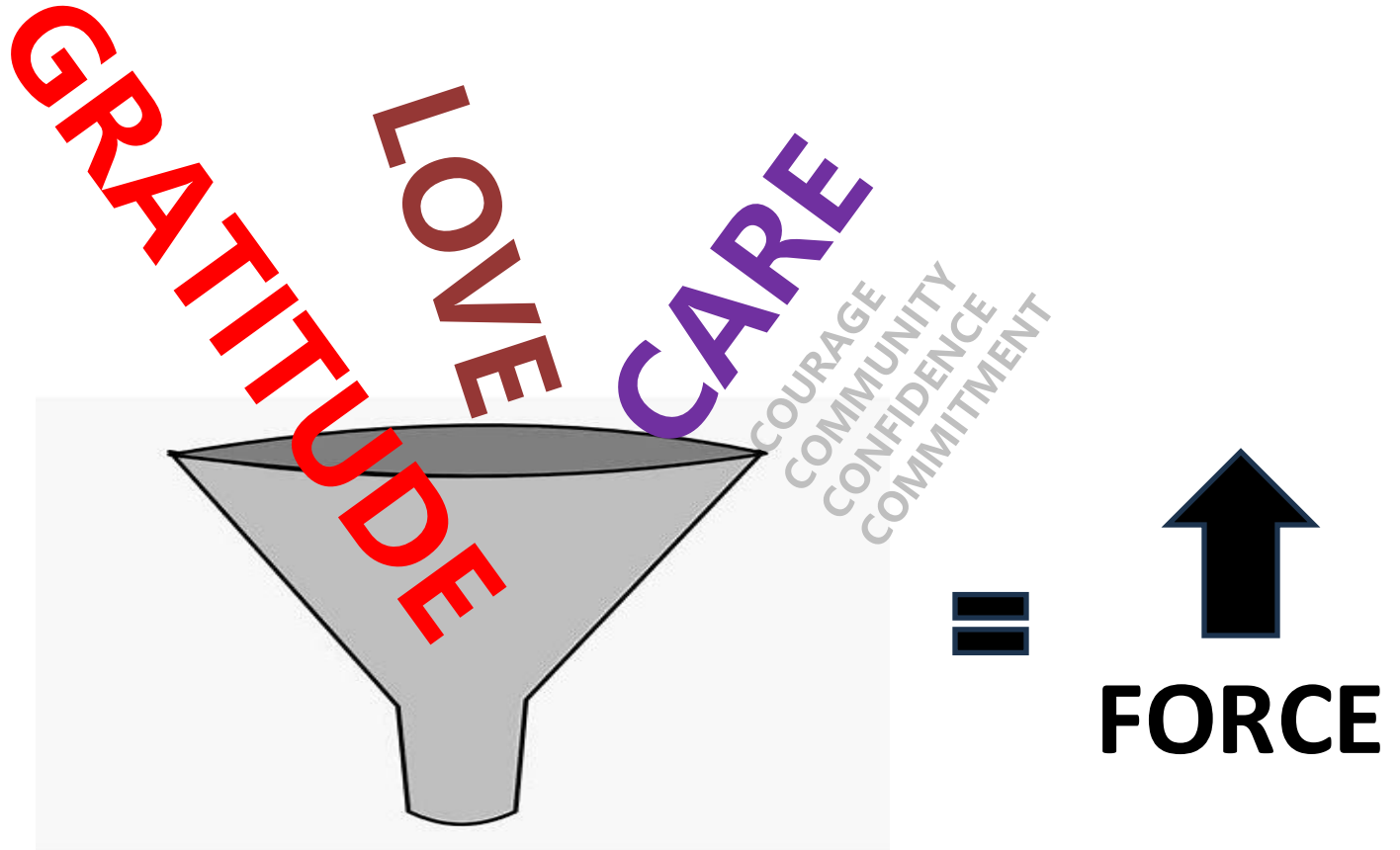
Gallop Poll, 2015 and 2023

An Animating Force That Drives A Response



Influences how we look at the world!

An Animating Force That Drives A Response



Influences how we look at the world!

Resilient Practices

5Cs

COURAGE

CARE

COMMITMENT

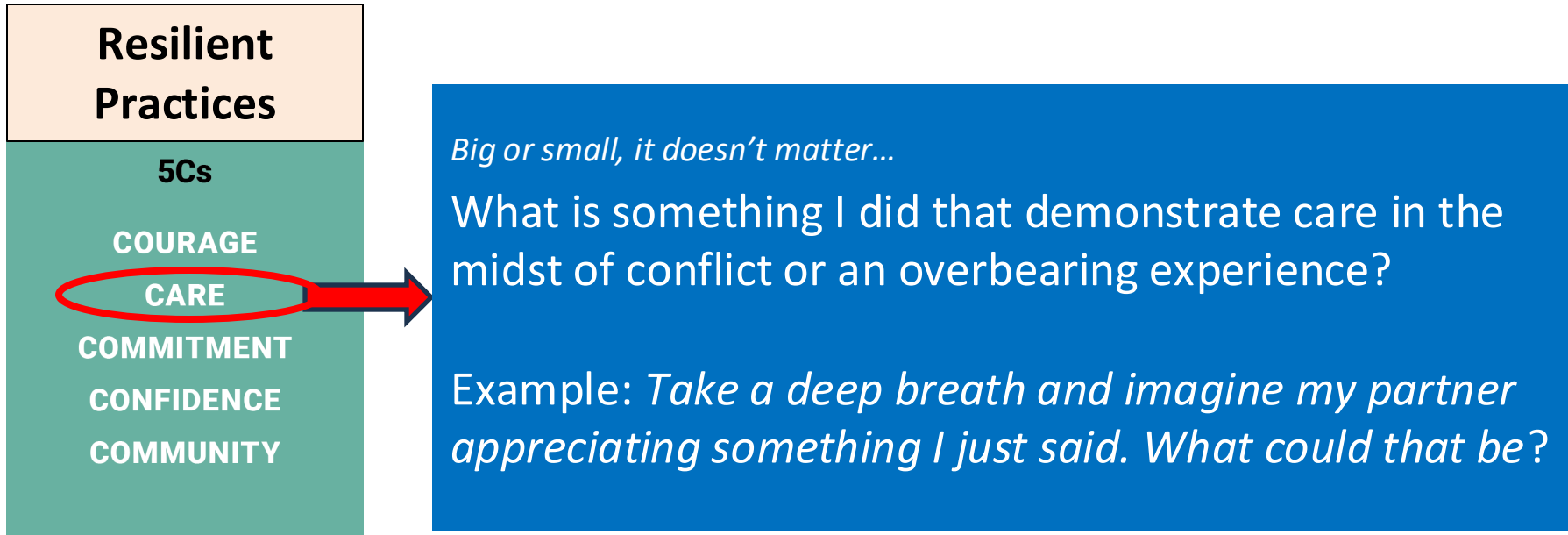
CONFIDENCE

COMMUNITY

A Difficult Conversation & Relationship!

Exercise:

Have a brief conversation with someone sitting near you in class. Pick which of the 5C's you feel would be helpful in supporting you in the midst of a Critical Conversation. Give an example of how you would use it. Listen to your partner doing the same.



Three Types of Critical Conversations

-- Three Samples of Frequent, Prickly Scenarios --

- Delivering **PRICKLY NEWS**

Giving or receiving bad news.

- Being **CHALLENGED** Amidst it All

Surprised or blind-sided: *"What's going on here?"*

- Being **Bullied or ATTACKED**

Loud and irrational: *"You are attacking me!"*

BULLYING

DEMONIZING

CONTROLLING

DEFLECTING

AVOIDING

WITHDRAWING

Engaging in Critical Conversations

-- A Framework To Use --

PREPARING For Critical Conversations



1. Identify your soft spots or weakness amid conflict and tension. How do you support yourself in the midst of weakness?
2. What is your greatest strength? Your superpower? How can you use it in the midst of vulnerability. Who and what can help you to be a better self when it matters most?
3. Visualize your engaging in a high conflict situation responding with quiet confidence, focused attention, while using your superpower in a controlled, empathic manner.

MANAGING Critical Conversations



1. Make clear by sharing an observable **fact** and related **opinion** based on the fact.
(Address Hazardous Half Minute)
2. Disarm by sharing **your contribution** to the mess; reinforce **your intent**, and how to **support** them.
3. Seek commitment and **new actionable behavior** that will make a sustainable difference.

Create the Purpose

Engaging in Critical Conversations

-- A Framework To Use --

PREPARING For Critical Conversations



1. Identify your soft spots or weakness amid conflict and tension.
2. Reflect on how you react to being vulnerable.
3. Rehearse clear, neutral and temperate responses.

MANAGING Critical Conversations



Create the Purpose



1. Make clear by sharing an observable **fact** and related **opinion** based on the fact.
(Address Hazardous Half Minute)
2. Disarm by sharing **your contribution** to the mess; reinforce **your intent**, and how to **support** them.
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The 5-S Model

Engagement Where It Matters

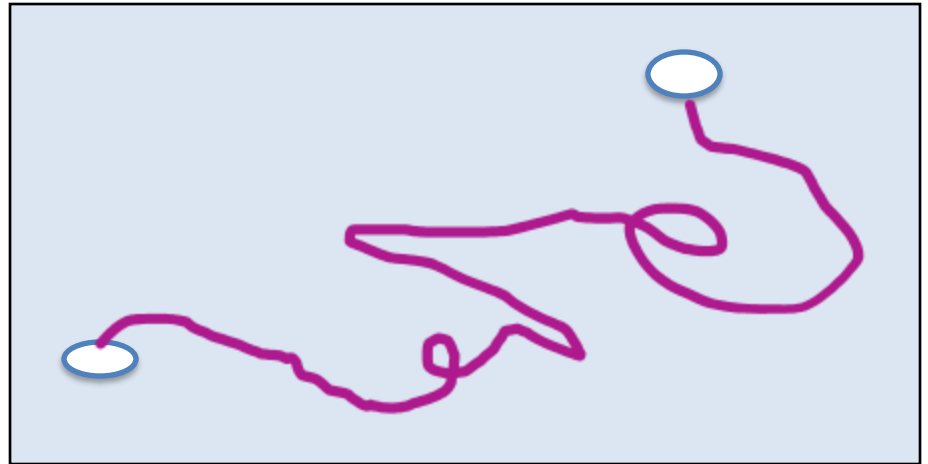
Creating Order & Meaning Out of Chaos

Engaging other in a constructive way that brings issues into clearer focus – in a safe, supportive and actionable manner.

Pre-Start: Create Purpose

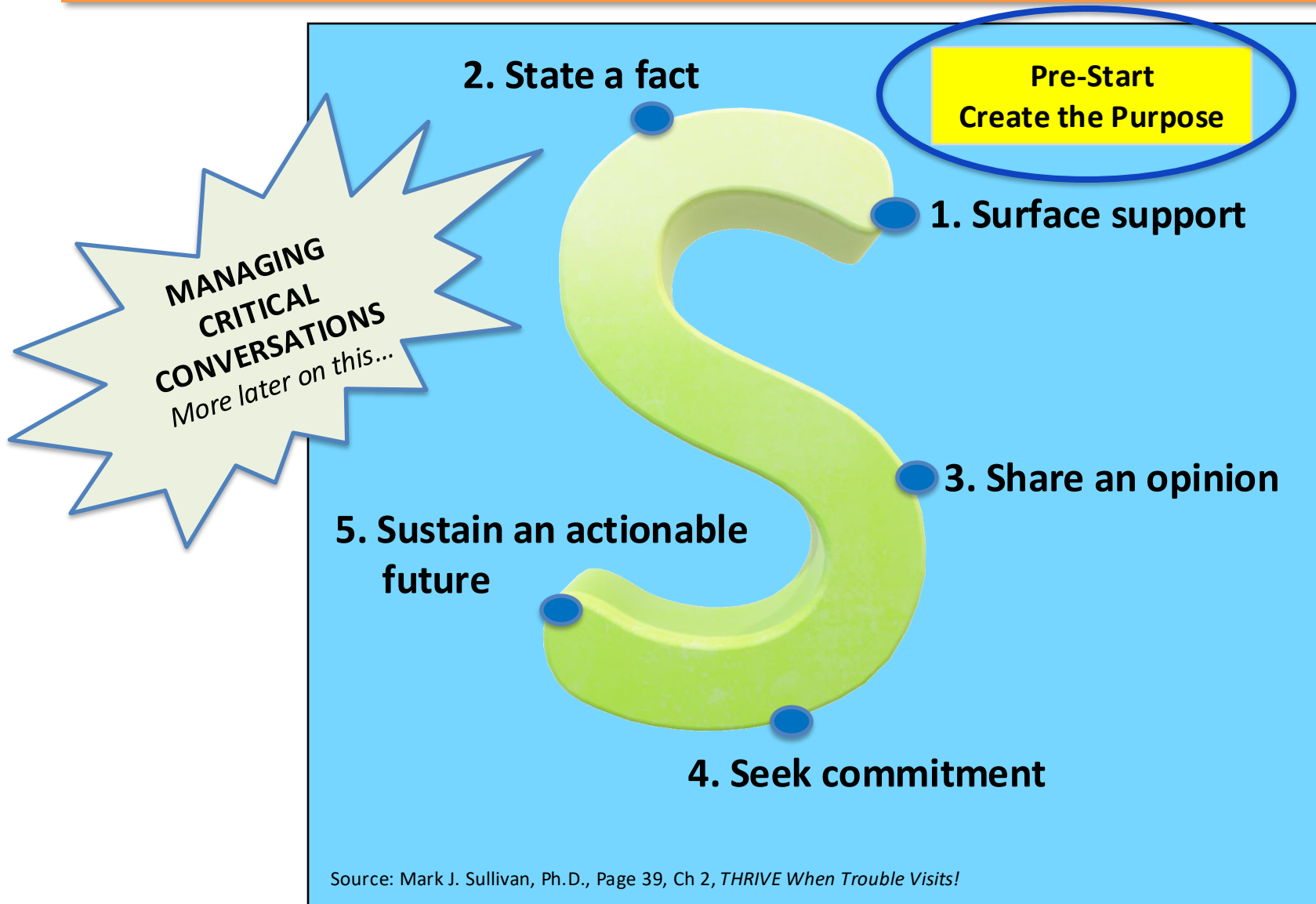
1. Surface support
2. State a fact
3. Share an opinion
4. Seek commitment
5. Shape an **actionable** future

(Solicit underlying barriers and ways to anchor for success.)



The 5-S Model

Engagement Where It Matters

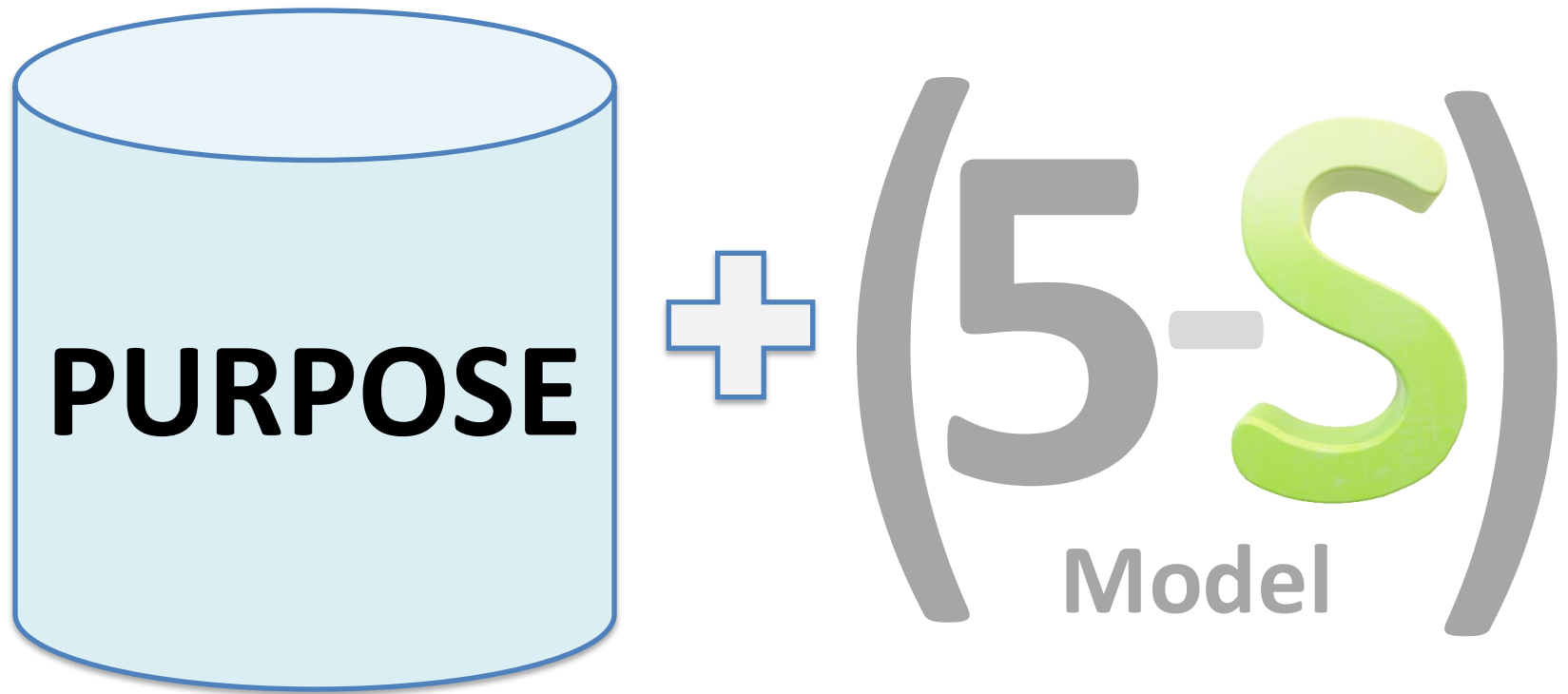


Shape shift in an agile manner to go where the action is in embracing resistance effectively.

The 5-S Model

Engagement Where It Matters

- Start with a clear purpose.



Ingredients Of A Good Purpose

TOPIC

TONE

OUTCOME

INTENTION

- Identifies the ***topic*** in which to focus on.
- Shape the conversational ***tone*** in a straightforward, ***non-threatening*** (not accusatory), hospitable manner.
- Signals the ***outcome*** in which to achieve.
- States the ***intention*** of the conversation:
 - What it is not, and
 - What it is

Statement of Purpose

Which PURPOSE provides the greatest clarity?

(Hint: It may not be perfect, but it is directionally correct.)

1. Did you see the game last night? How about those Cavaliers?
2. Hey I would like to go over some of the customer complaints I have been getting about you?
3. I would like to have a discussion about our customer satisfaction that makes a difference for you, our clients, and the company-at-large.

➤ Note: Three out of four: **Topic**, **Tone** and **Outcome**. But no **Intentions**.

Statement of Purpose

☒ TOPIC, TONE & OUTCOME

I would like to have a discussion about our *customer satisfaction* that makes a *sustainable difference for you, our clients and the company*.

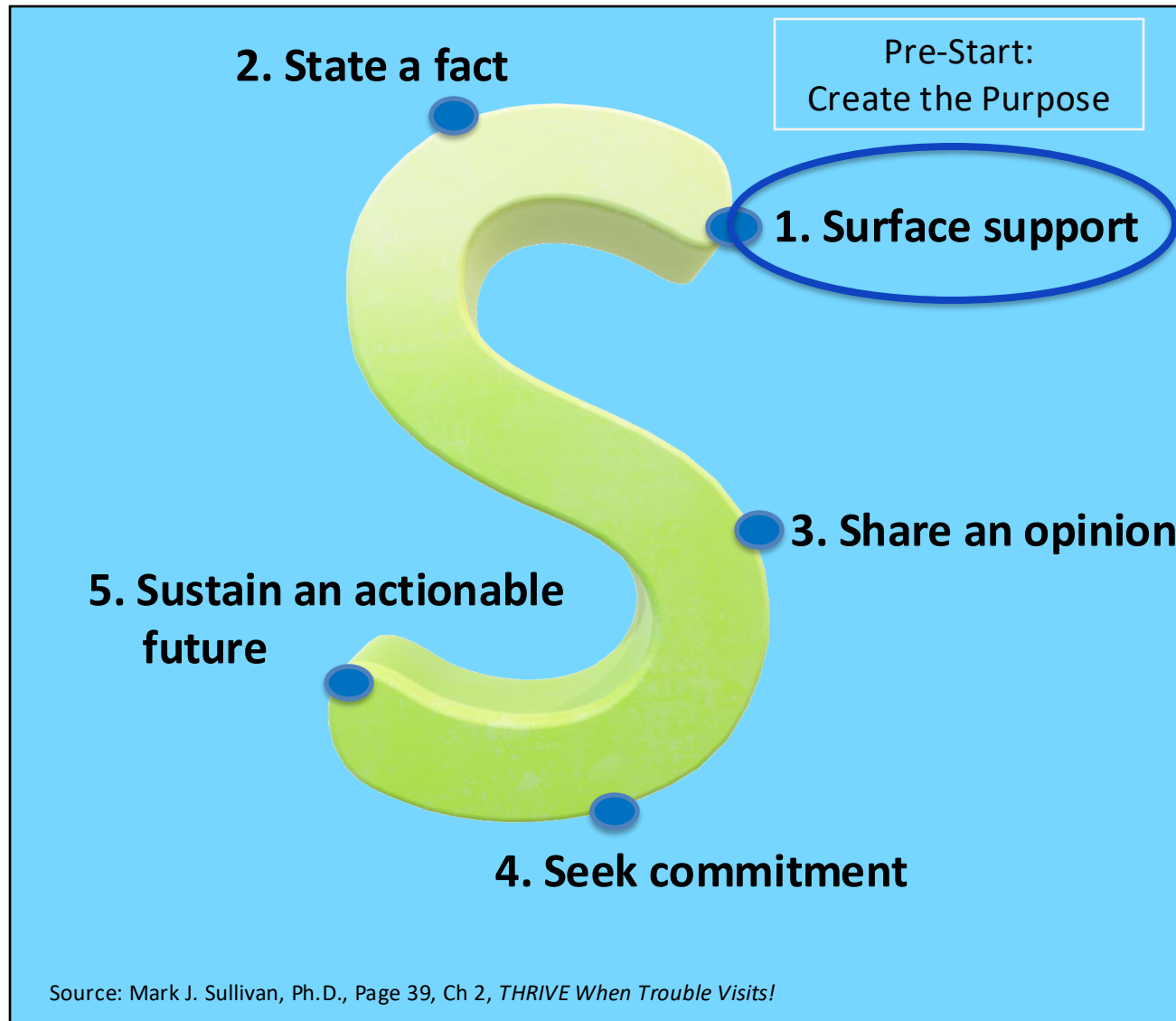
To be
added

☒ INTENTIONS

- **My intent is not to place blame and create trouble for you or others.**
- **My intent is to work with you in finding a way for you all to be successful in sustaining high quality and satisfaction for the long run.**

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Shape shift in an agile manner to go where the action is in embracing resistance effectively.

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Engagement Where It Matters

1. Share Support

- State their value, importance, or recent accomplishment.
- Give an example or a form of encouragement if need be.

What it sounds like:

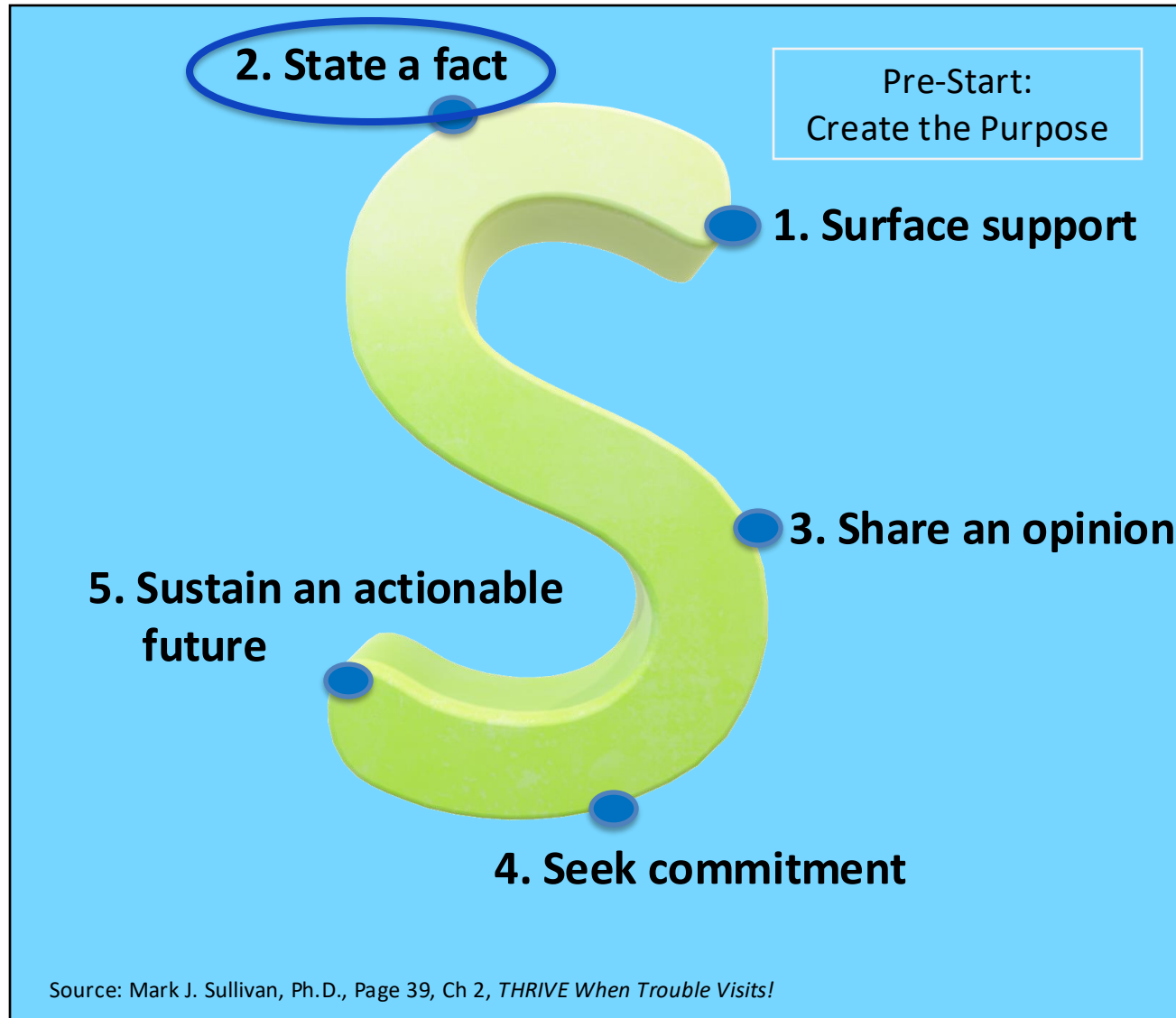


Evidence-Based!

- I was so impressed with how you have helped the new members on the team by sharing what to expect ahead of time.
- You make such a difference with team planning by your sharing your experience of what has worked in the past.

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Engagement Where It Matters



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2. State a Fact

- Observable behavior that states the what and when.
- Include context and frequency – number of times used

What it sounds like:

Fact:

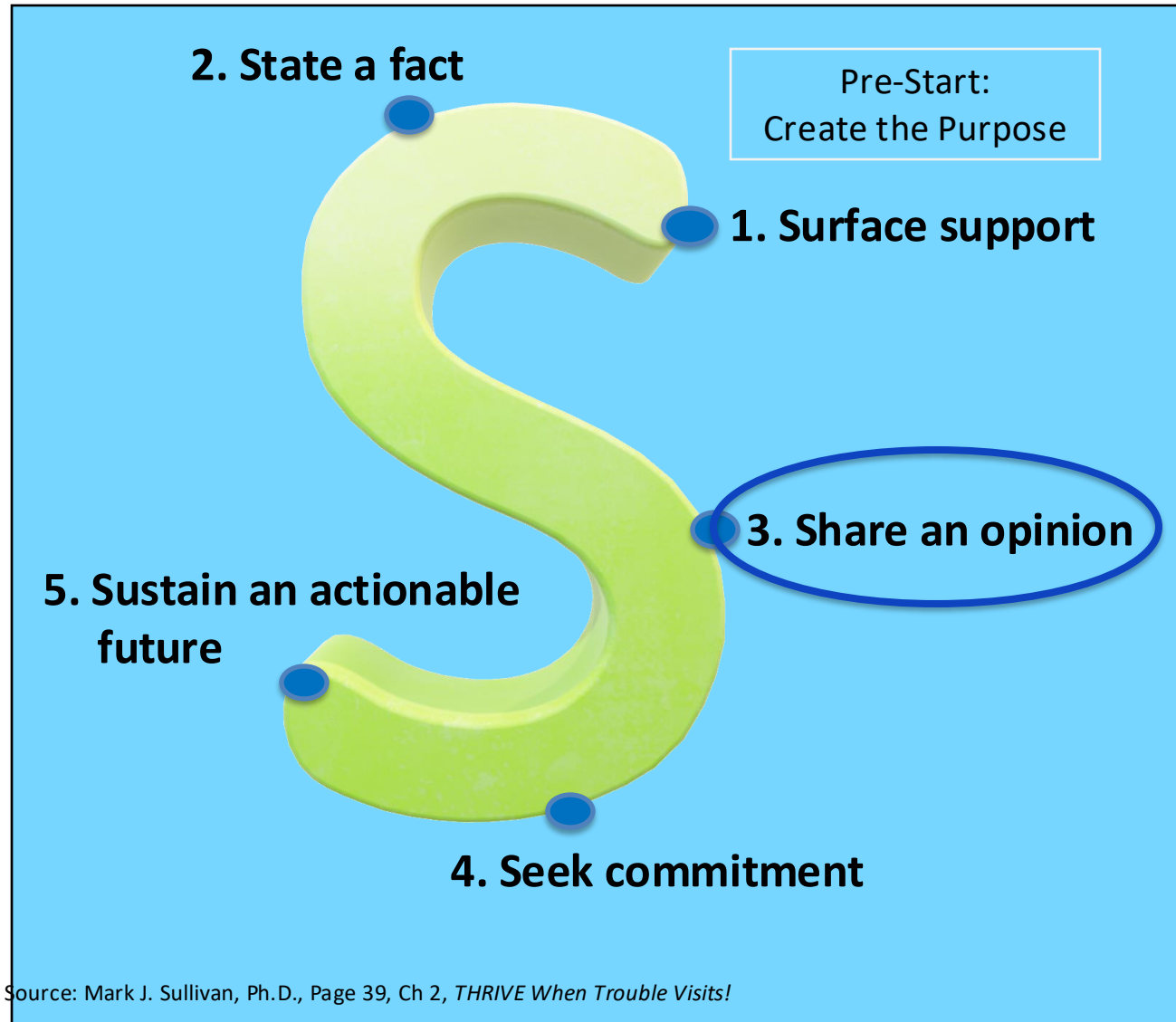


Evidence-Based!

During the staff meeting I heard you interrupt your peer three times while pointing your finger at them.

The 5-S Model

Engagement Where It Matters



Shape shift in an agile manner to go where the action is in embracing resistance effectively.

The 5-S Model

Engagement Where It Matters

3. Share an Opinion

- Describes in tentative terms how the fact leads you to believe something in a conclusive manner.
“I’m beginning to think...”
- Ask a check-out question

What it sounds like:

Fact:

During the staff meeting I heard you interrupt your peer three times while pointing your finger at them.

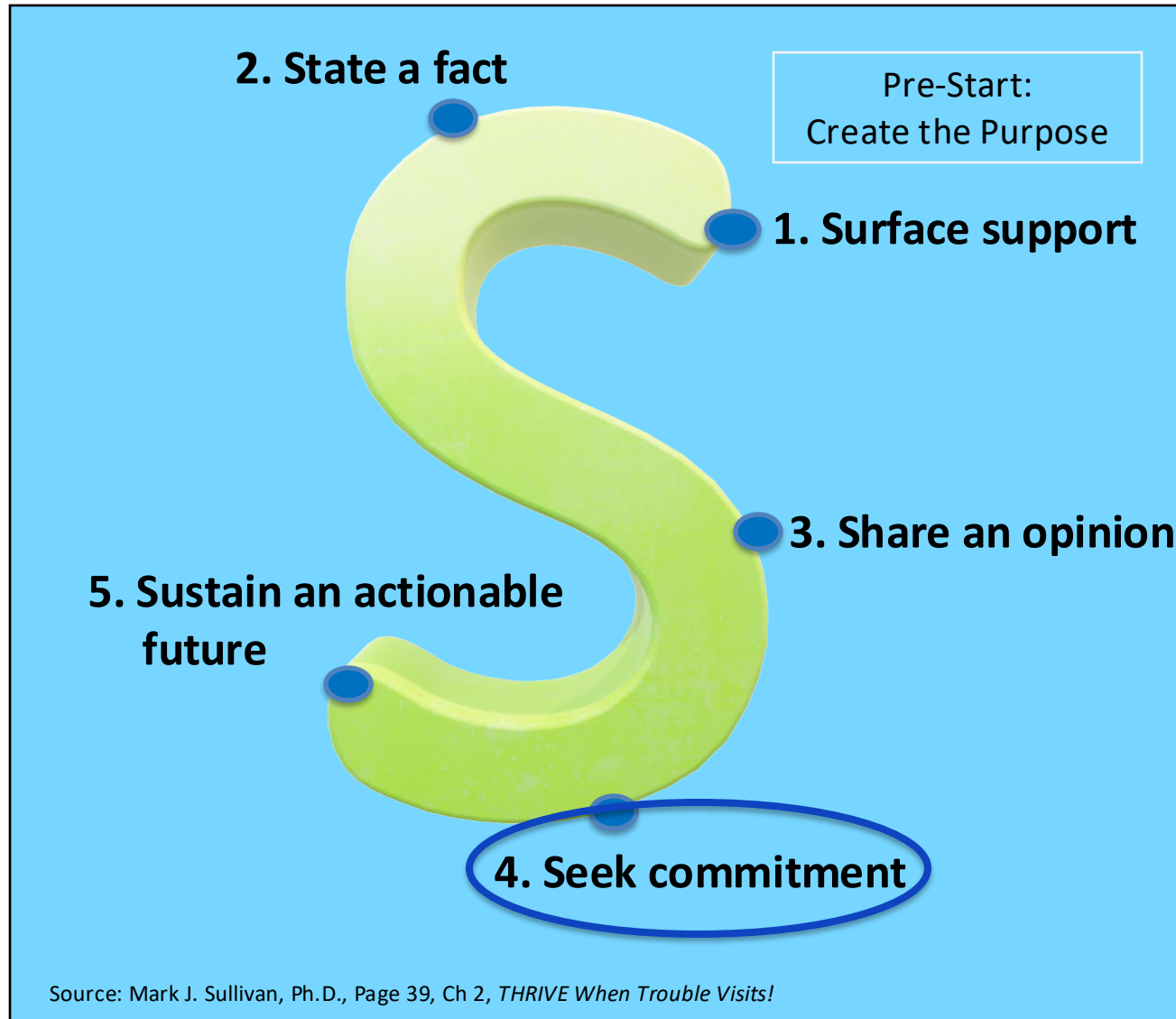
add Opinion:

It makes me think you are trying to control the conversation and not listen to your peer.

Add ? Am I missing something here? Or... Is there something else I need to know here?

The 5-S Model

Engagement Where It Matters



Shape shift in an agile manner to go where the action is in embracing resistance effectively.

The 5-S Model

Engagement Where It Matters

4. Seek Specific Type of COMMITMENT

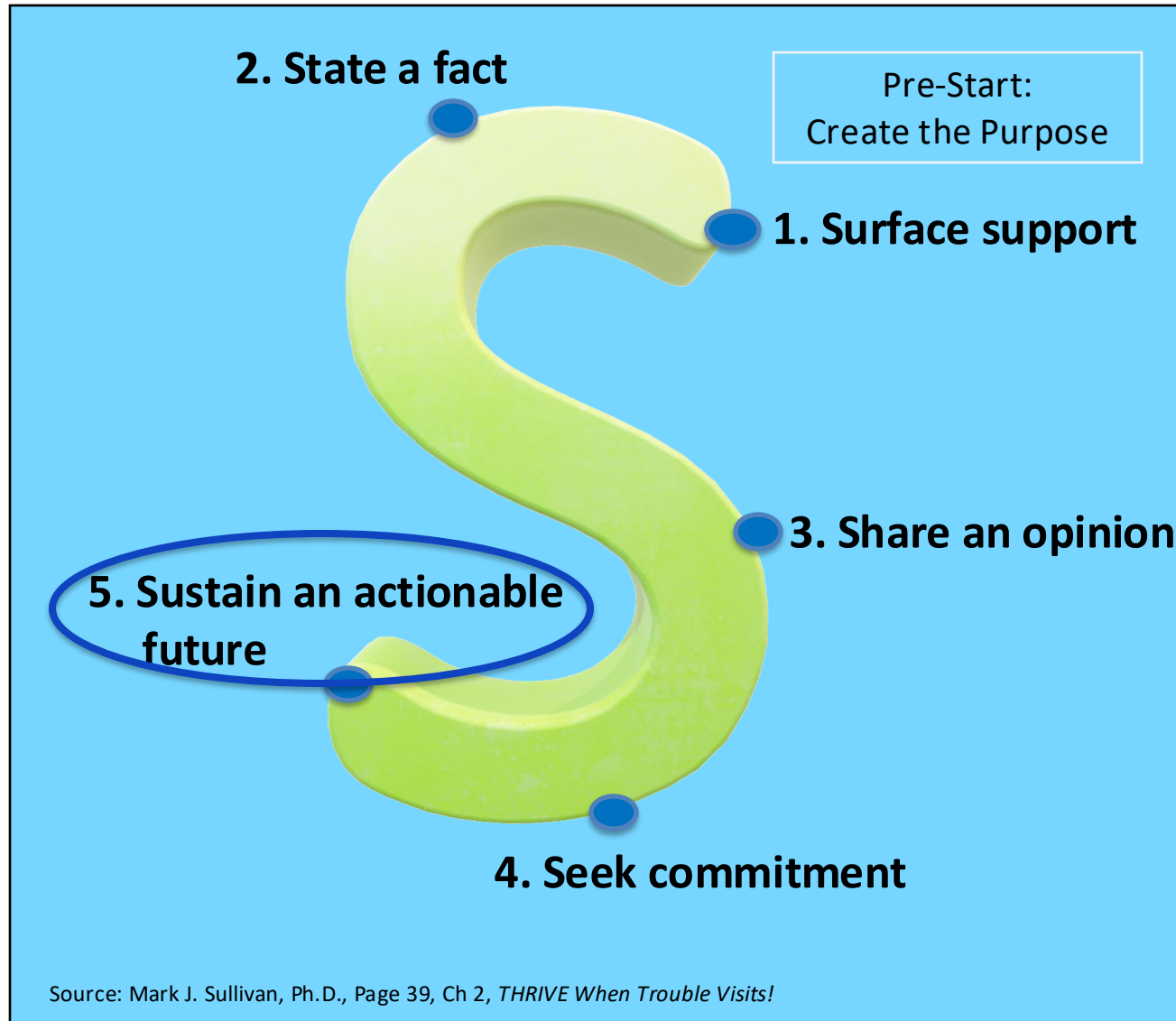
- Describe what success looks like
- State specifically what it will take to accomplish it
- Solicit an agreement to being committed to the action

What it sounds like:

- Committing to an improvement would be to regularly replace an interruption with silence and genuinely listen to the meaning behind their words until they are finished.
- To signal you heard them you could also restate what they said to their level of satisfaction (and not to your level of satisfaction).

The 5-S Model

Engagement Where It Matters



Shape shift in an agile manner to go where the action is in embracing resistance effectively.

The 5-S Model

Engagement Where It Matters

5. Shape An ACTIONABLE FUTURE

- State how you will be motivated to continue the new practice given current recognizable barriers or opportunities.

What it sounds like:

- In-spite of a continuingly difficult conversation I will progress forward respectfully listening and not interrupting because I really want to understand both sides so that our eventual agreement will not unravel.

Career Highlights:

- International keynote speaker
- Award-winning MBA business school professor
- Senior executive in multiple Dow 30s, Fortune 50, and G1K/global 1000 companies
- Executive Coach and Board Director
- Author of signature leadership books, journals, and newsletters
- Featured in multi-channel and live media



Mark J. Sullivan, Ph.D.

Organizational Psychologist

Specializing in cultivating growth and performance in high-demand, high-challenge environments.

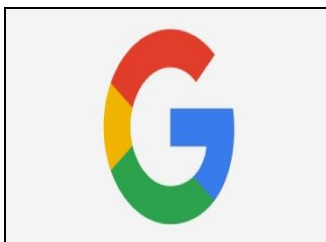
Education:

- Fitchburg State University, BS
- Harvard University, MA
- Case Western Reserve University, Ph.D.

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A select collection of signature organizations that have engaged
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