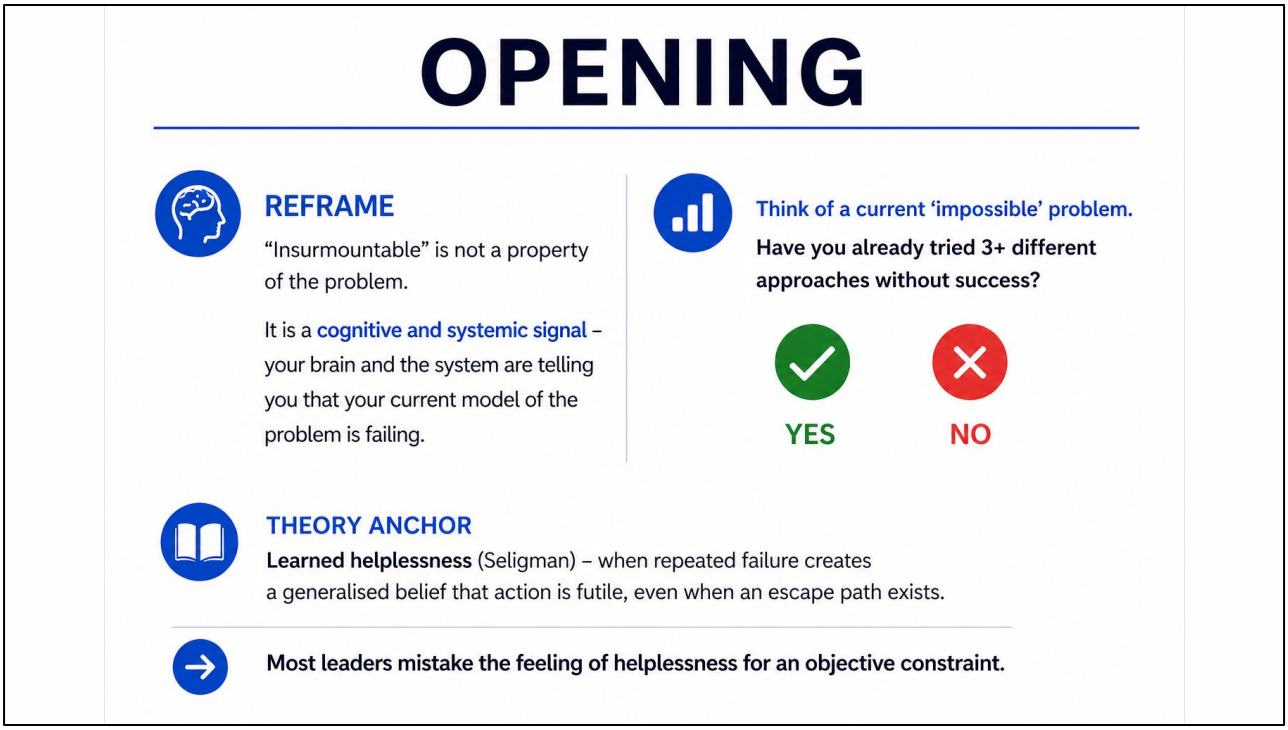
This idea posits that the term *insurmountable*, in theory, is a cognitive and systemic signal rather than an objective property of a problem It shifts the focus from "trying harder" (First-Order Change) to "changing the rules/frame" (Second-Order Change). This is a standard recommendation for high-level leadership challenges.



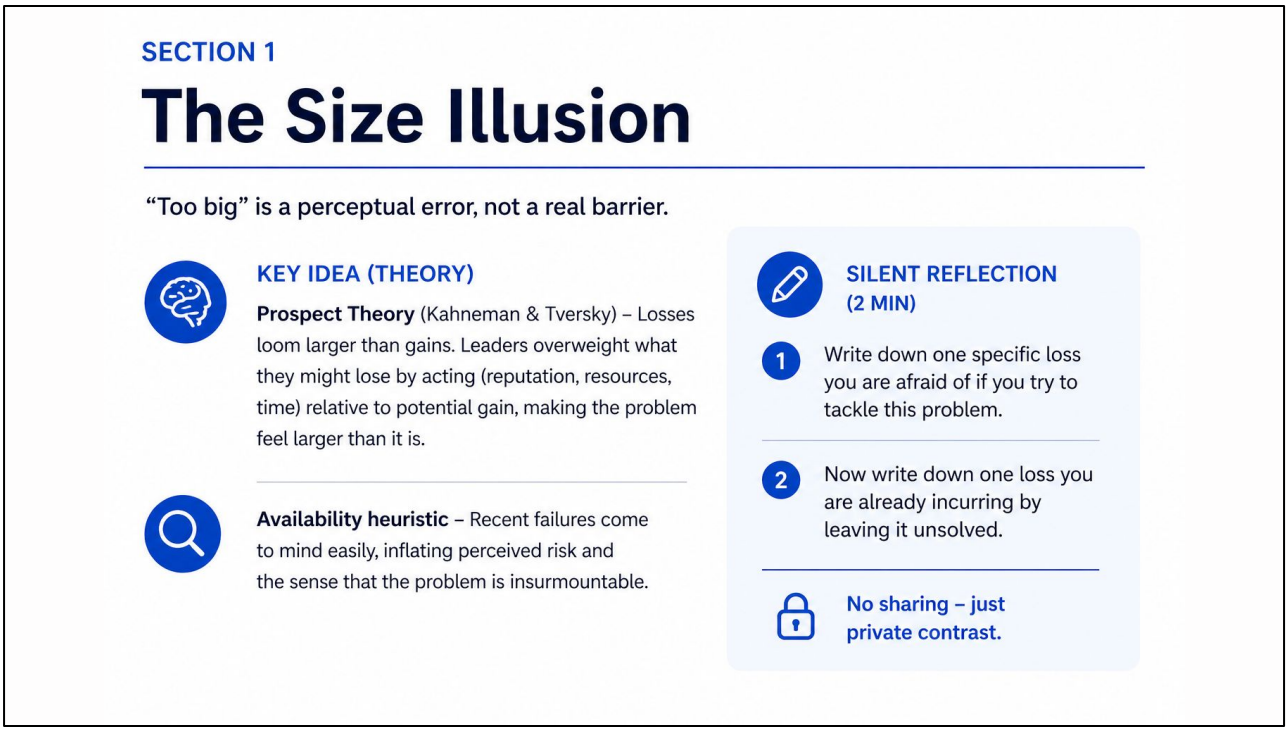
Opening (5 min)

Reframe: "Insurmountable" is not a property of the problem. It is a cognitive and systemic signal – your brain and the system are telling you that your current model of the problem is failing.

Hook (interaction):
Quick poll: "Think of a current 'impossible' problem. Have you already tried 3+ different approaches without success?" (Yes/No)

Theory anchor: Learned helplessness (Seligman) – when repeated failure creates a generalised belief that action is futile, even when an escape path exists. Most leaders mistake the *feeling* of helplessness for an *objective* constraint.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learned_helplessness



Core Sections (50 min total)

Section 1: Why we misdiagnose size as the issue (12 min)

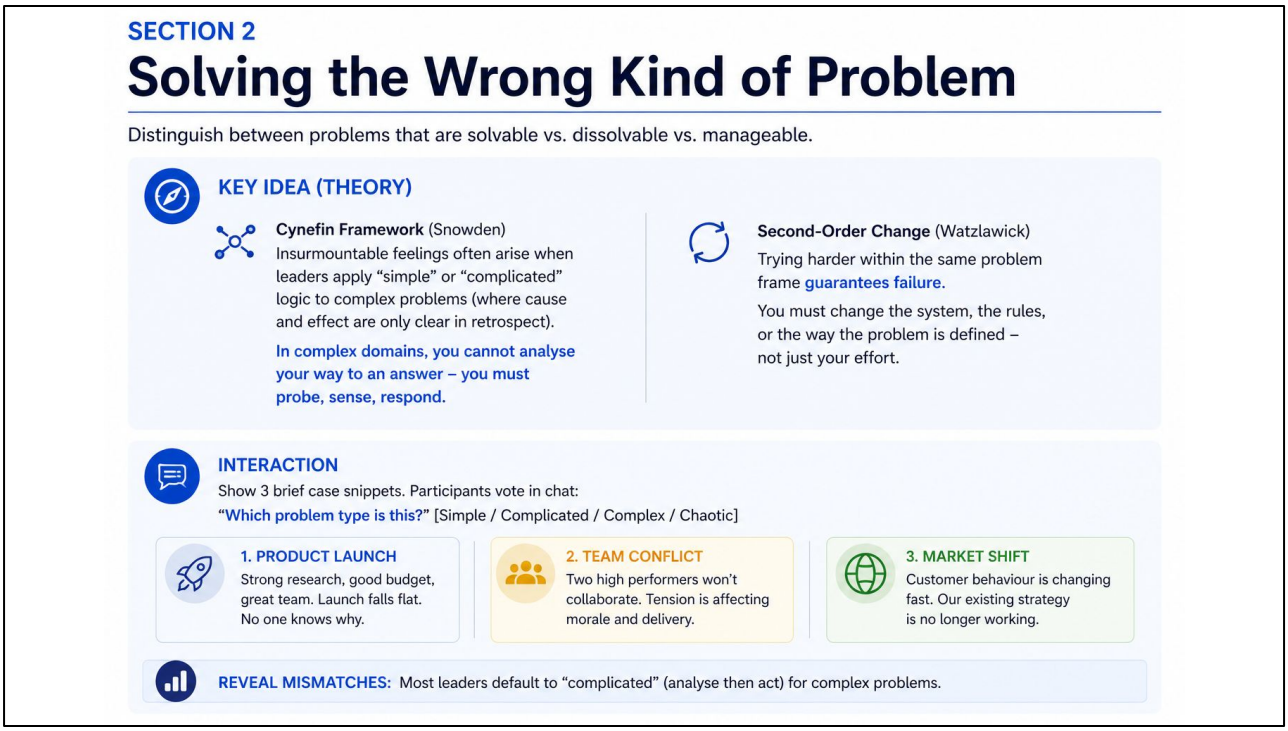
Title: The Size Illusion

Purpose: Show that "too big" is a perceptual error, not a real barrier

Key idea (theory): Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky) – Losses loom larger than gains. Leaders overweight what they might lose by acting (reputation, resources, time) relative to potential gain, making the problem feel larger than it is. Also availability heuristic – recent failures come to mind easily, inflating perceived risk.

Interaction: Silent reflection (2 min): "Write down one specific loss you are afraid of if you try to tackle this problem. Now write down one loss you are already incurring by leaving it unsolved." (No sharing – just private contrast.)

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prospect_theory
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Availability_heuristic
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_constraints



Section 2: The problem-type mismatch (13 min)

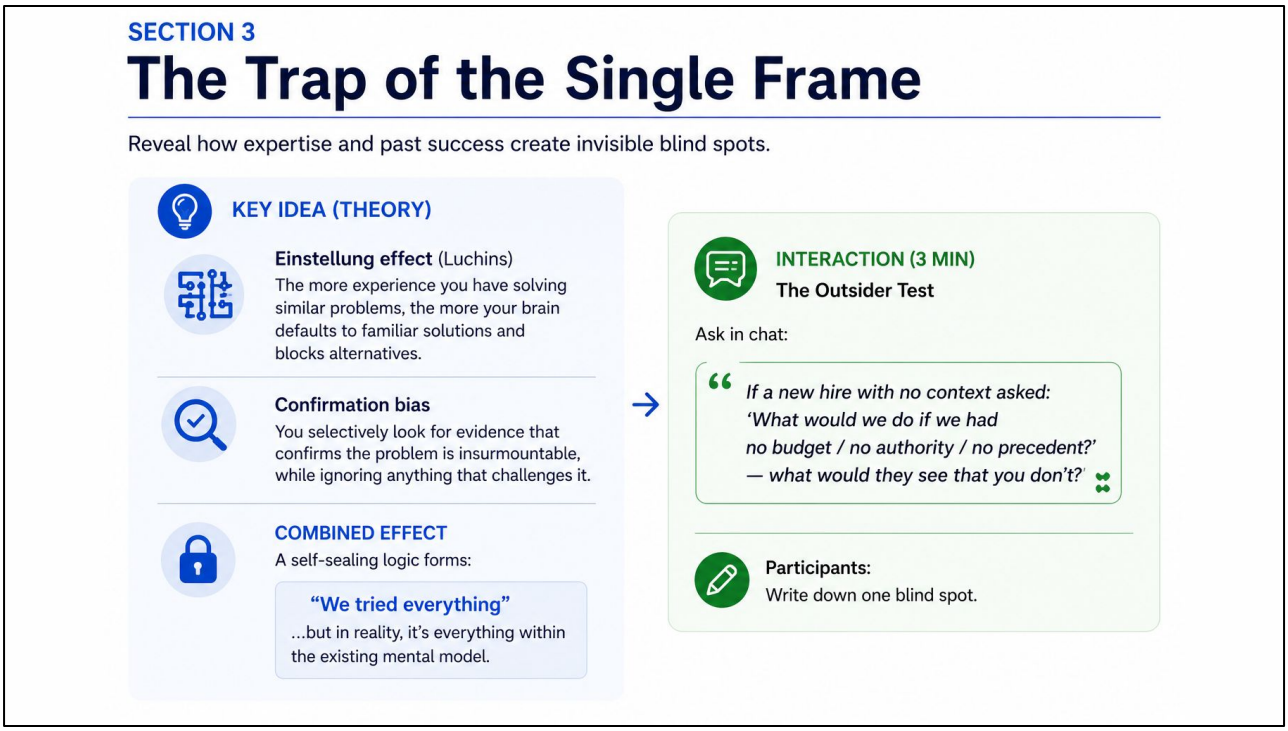
Title: Solving the Wrong Kind of Problem

Purpose: Distinguish between problems that are solvable vs. dissolvable vs. manageable

Key idea (theory): Cynefin framework (Snowden) – Insurmountable feelings often arise when leaders apply "simple" or "complicated" logic to complex problems (where cause and effect are only clear in retrospect). In complex domains, you cannot analyse your way to an answer – you must probe, sense, respond. Also second-order change (Watzlawick) – trying harder within the same problem frame guarantees failure.

Interaction: Show 3 brief case snippets (product launch, team conflict, market shift). Participants vote in chat: "Which problem type is this? [Simple / Complicated / Complex / Chaotic]" Reveal mismatches – most leaders default to "complicated" (analyse then act) for complex problems.

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin_framework
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thinking_In_Systems:_A_Primer
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_psychology#First-order_and_second-order_change



Section 3: The Self-Sealing Mental Model (13 min)

Title: The Trap of the Single Frame

Purpose: Reveal how expertise and past success create invisible blind spots

Key Idea (Theory)

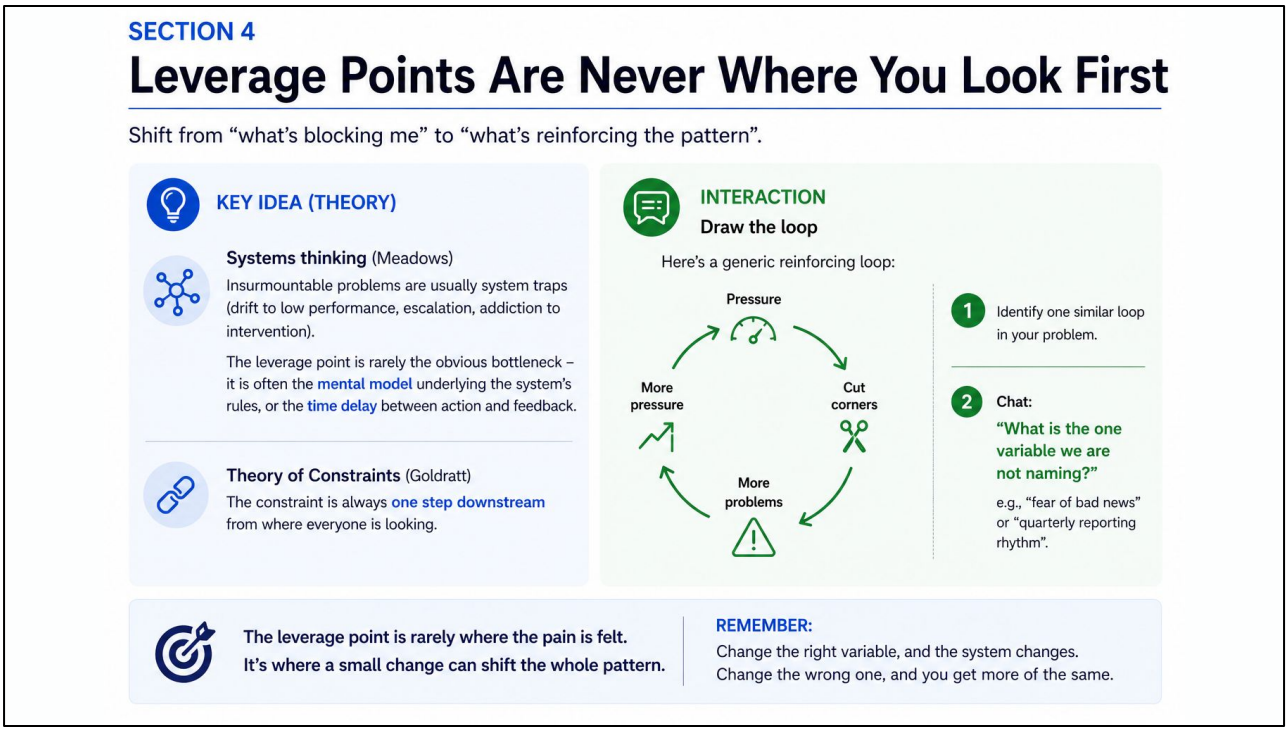
- **Einstellung effect (Luchins)** – The more experience you have solving similar problems, the more your brain defaults to familiar solutions and blocks alternatives
- **Confirmation bias** – You selectively look for evidence that confirms the problem is insurmountable, while ignoring anything that challenges it

Combined effect:
A self-sealing logic forms:

> "We tried everything"
> …but in reality, it's everything within the existing mental model

Interaction (3 min): The Outsider Test
Ask in chat:

> "If a new hire with no context asked: *'What would we do if we had no budget / no authority / no precedent?'* — what would they see that you don't?"



Section 4: What Is Invisible Actually Runs the Problem (12 min)
Title: Leverage Points Are Never Where You Look First
Purpose: Shift from “what’s blocking me” to “what’s reinforcing the pattern”
Key Idea (Theory)

- Donella Meadows – Systems thinking
  Insurmountable problems are usually system traps (e.g. drift to low performance, escalation, addiction to intervention).
  The real leverage point is rarely the visible bottleneck — it often sits in:
  - the mental model shaping the system’s rules
  - the time delay between action and feedback
- Eliyahu M. Goldratt – Theory of Constraints
  The constraint is typically one step downstream from where everyone is looking

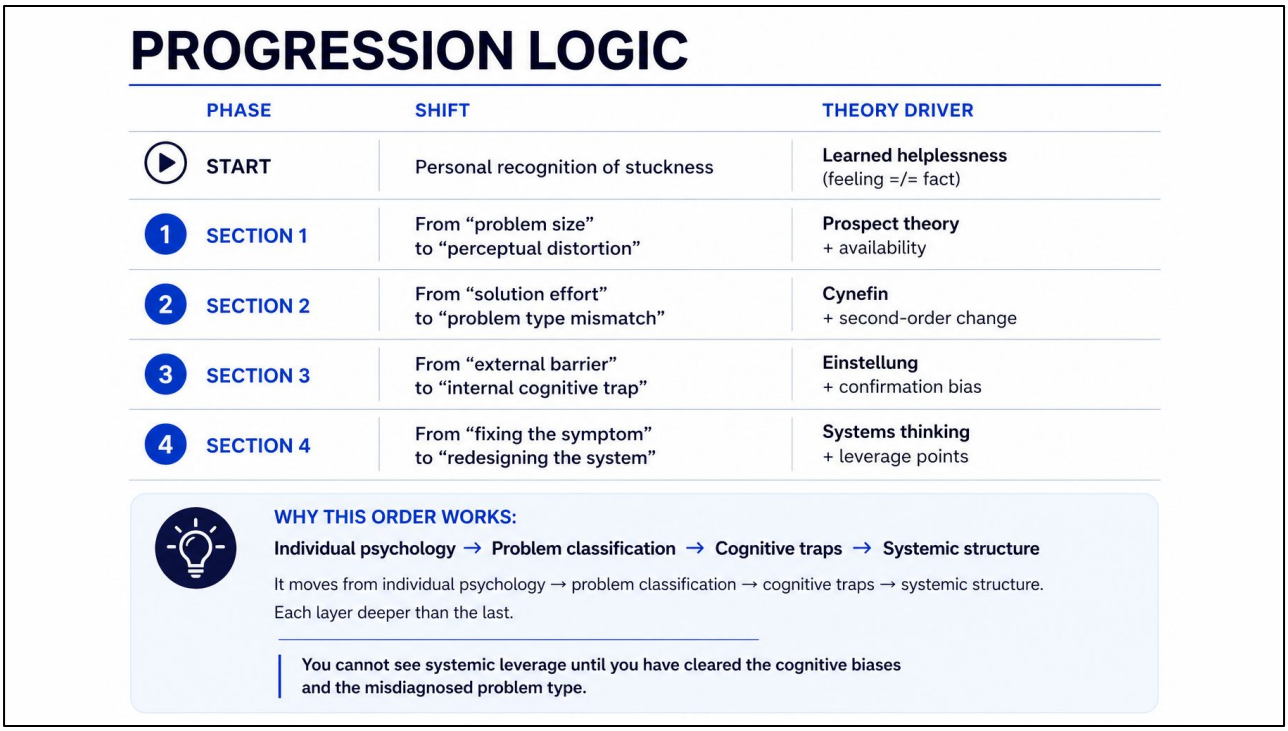
Combined idea: You don’t fix the problem where it shows up — you fix what keeps recreating it
Interaction (3–4 min)

Draw the Loop
Show a simple reinforcing loop on screen:
pressure → cut corners → more problems → more pressure → cut more corners
Ask participants:

- “Where do you see a loop like this in your world?”
- “What’s the one variable we are not naming?”

Examples they might surface:

- fear of bad news
- quarterly reporting rhythm
- leadership response patterns



Progression Logic

Start
Shift: Personal recognition of stuckness
Theory driver: Learned helplessness
→ The feeling of being stuck is not the same as the reality

Section 1
Shift: From “problem size” → “perceptual distortion”
Theory driver:

- **Prospect theory**
- **Availability heuristic**

Section 2
Shift: From “solution effort” → “problem type mismatch”
Theory driver:

- **Cynefin framework**
- **Second-order change**

Section 3
Shift: From “external barrier” → “internal cognitive trap”
Theory driver:

- **Einstellung effect**
- **Confirmation bias**

- **Systems thinking**
- Leverage points (Meadows)

Why this order works

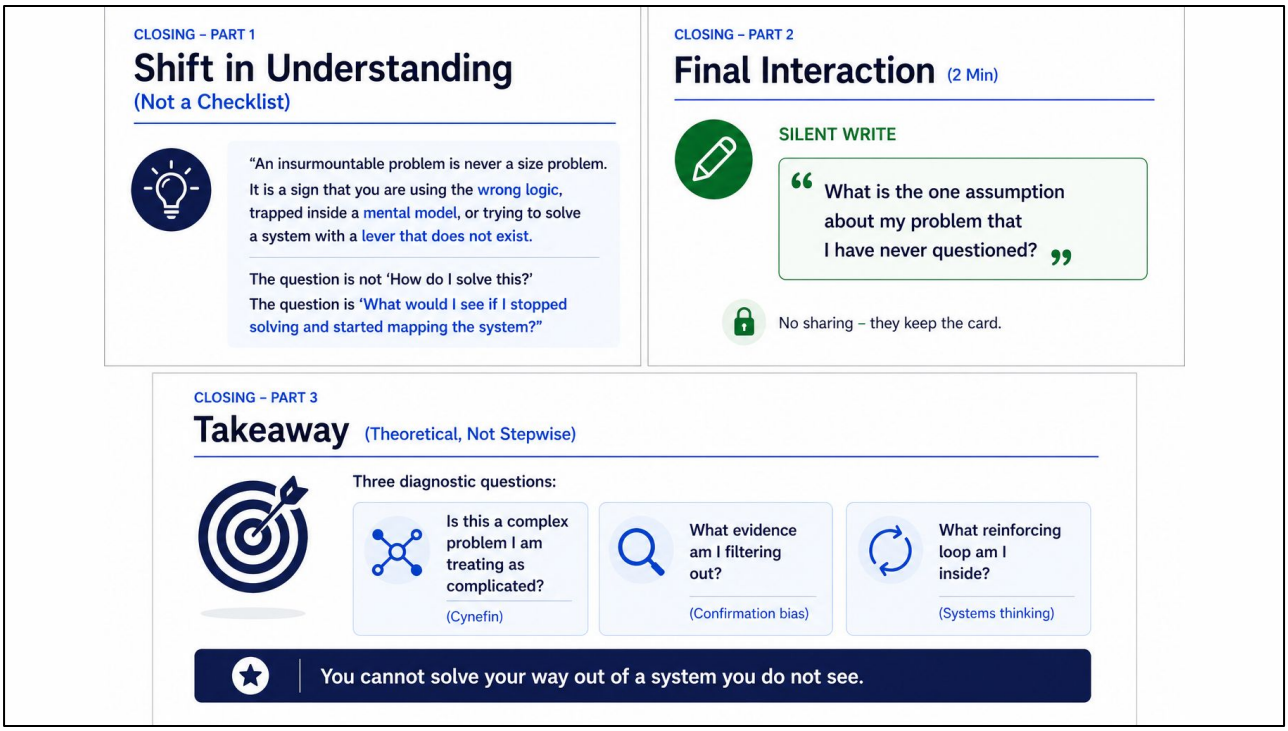
It deliberately moves **layer by layer deeper**:

- Starts with **individual psychology** (how it feels)
- Then **reframes the problem itself** (what kind of problem it is)
- Then exposes **cognitive traps** (how we limit our own thinking)
- Finally reveals **systemic structure** (what is actually driving outcomes)

The key point:

> You don't get to systemic leverage
> until you've cleared misdiagnosis and cognitive bias

Otherwise, people try to "fix the system"…
using the exact same thinking that created the problem in the first place.



Closing (5 min)

Shift in understanding (not a checklist):
"An insurmountable problem is never a size problem. It is a sign that you are using the wrong logic, trapped inside a mental model, or trying to solve a system with a lever that does not exist. The question is not 'How do I solve this?' The question is 'What would I see if I stopped solving and started mapping the system?'"

Final interaction (2 min):
Silent write: *"What is the one assumption about my problem that I have never questioned?"*
No sharing – they keep the card.

Takeaway (theoretical, not stepwise):
A single PDF slide with three diagnostic questions (no steps):

1. *Is this a complex problem I am treating as complicated?* (Cynefin)
2. *What evidence am I filtering out?* (Confirmation bias)
3. *What reinforcing loop am I inside?* (Systems thinking)

Last line: *"You cannot solve your way out of a system you do not see."*