

Most organizational conflict
looks **interpersonal**.



Its roots are often **institutional**.

DISAGREEMENT IS DESIGNED

How Institutions Shape Disagreement



#1

Disagreement is not the problem.

The issue is not disagreement itself, but how it is **structured, interpreted, and engaged.**

When disagreement is suppressed, learning declines.

When it is engaged thoughtfully, institutions become stronger.

#2

Governance shapes disagreement.

Institutions shape **which voices are heard, which are ignored, and how dissent is handled** once it surfaces.

How does your organization signal if dissent is legitimate?

#3

Systems enable constructive conflict.

Organizations benefit from **multiple pathways for raising concerns** and addressing conflict, from informal feedback channels to formal processes.

At your organization, what pathways exist for raising concerns before conflict escalates?

#4

Conflict often reflects misalignment.

Alignment connects commitments to strategy. **Congruence** ensures those commitments show up in everyday practice.

When commitments are not reflected in strategy, authority, and incentives, tension will surface.

Where might strategy and everyday practice be drifting apart?

#5

Culture shapes how disagreement is expressed.

Voice and **silence** signal different things
depending on context.

In some settings, speaking up signals engagement.
In others, silence reflects attentiveness, respect, or
relational awareness.

#6

Leaders teach disagreement.

Leaders teach people **how to engage disagreement**. Through **norms and systems**, they shape whether it strengthens collective work or fractures it.

What are people learning about disagreement from leadership behavior?

DIAGNOSTIC

Where does disagreement break down in your organization?

Is governance clear about how dissent is handled?

Do systems exist for addressing conflict constructively?

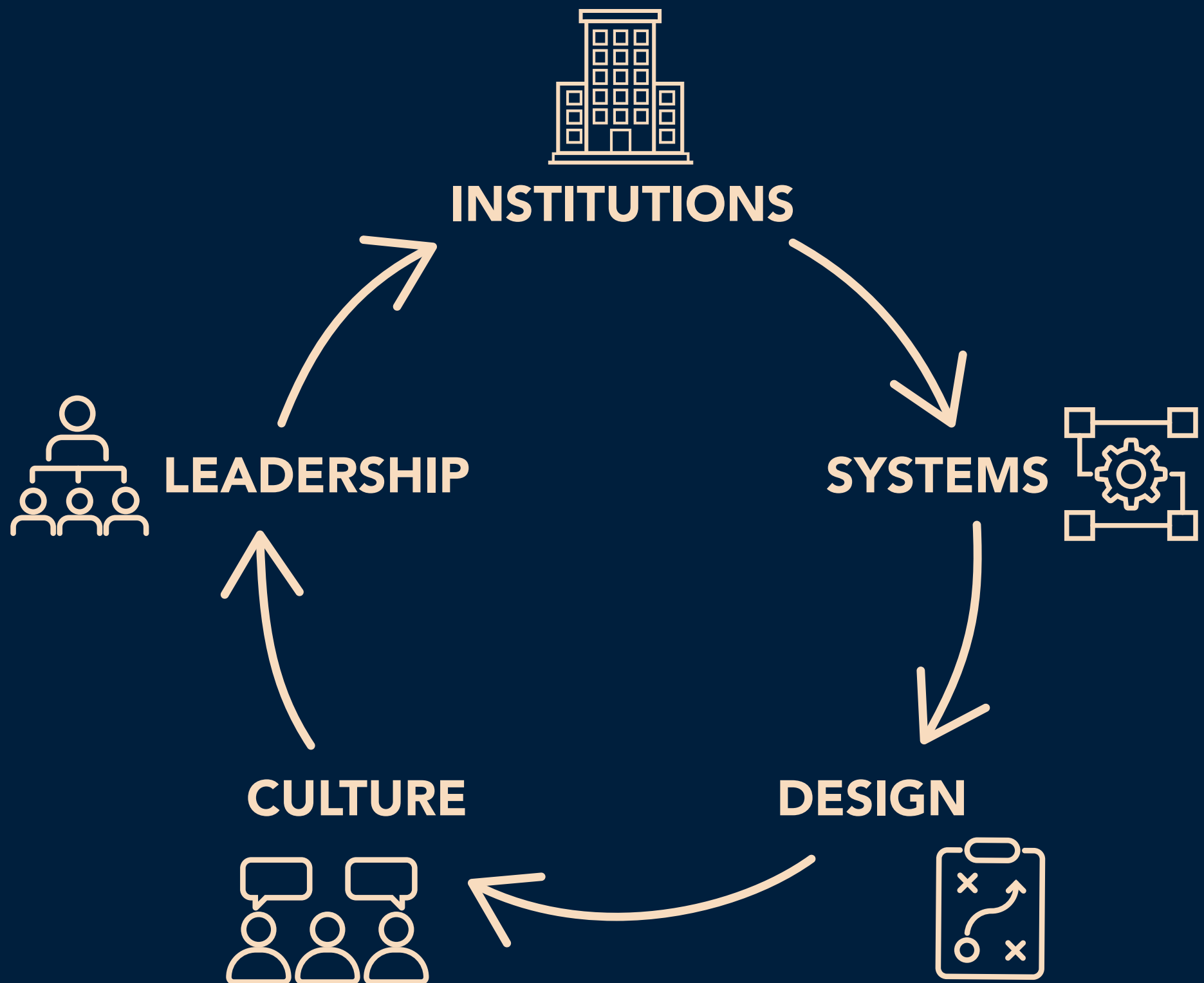
Are strategy and everyday practice aligned?

Are cultural norms around voice understood?

Do leaders actively teach people how to disagree?

Conflict may appear interpersonal but often originates in systems, design, or culture.

Disagreement Is Designed



Durable institutions are not those that avoid tension,
but those designed to learn from it.



Artwork by Nancy Marks

Holding the Tension

A 5-article series on how institutions shape disagreement

Stanford Social Innovation Review

Ahmmad Brown | Tisch College of Civic Life

Read the series at

ssir.org/holding-the-tension

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