Holding Environment

Why this content might be relevant to you

- You are interested in examining what is meant by a *holding environment* and how this relates to organisational structures/design in your school
- You would like to explore how good leadership and governance structures can enable innovation and change
- You would like to understand how to create enabling spaces and structures in your school and classroom.
- You would like to create a 'positive holding environment' in your school in which anxieties, defensive positions and cycles of negative reinforcement can be surfaced, explored and worked with.

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Holding Environment: understanding the language and tradition (a bit of history)

- The term *Holding Environment* comes from The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations' tradition of bringing psychoanalytical and other clinical theory to the understanding of organisations.

- The background is the significant development in understanding the human and group psyche that was happening around the beginning of the 20th century.

- In the discipline of psychoanalysis came the search to understand the fundamental conflict of the human inner world. There are two opposing theories *instinctual* and *relational* that have characterised this journey.

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Holding Environments—a reality

The concept of *Holding Environment* evolved from the requirements for optimum support of both survival and growth of the most fragile and vulnerable life on the planet—the human fetus. In addition to basic biological requirements, research indicates that even before birth the human child needs a receptive environment, one that is willing to accept what he/she offers (Kaplan, 1978).

Donald Winnicott's ideas of the *holding environment* went beyond the intimacy of the mother and child relationship to the conditions for playing and creativity vital to child and adult development.
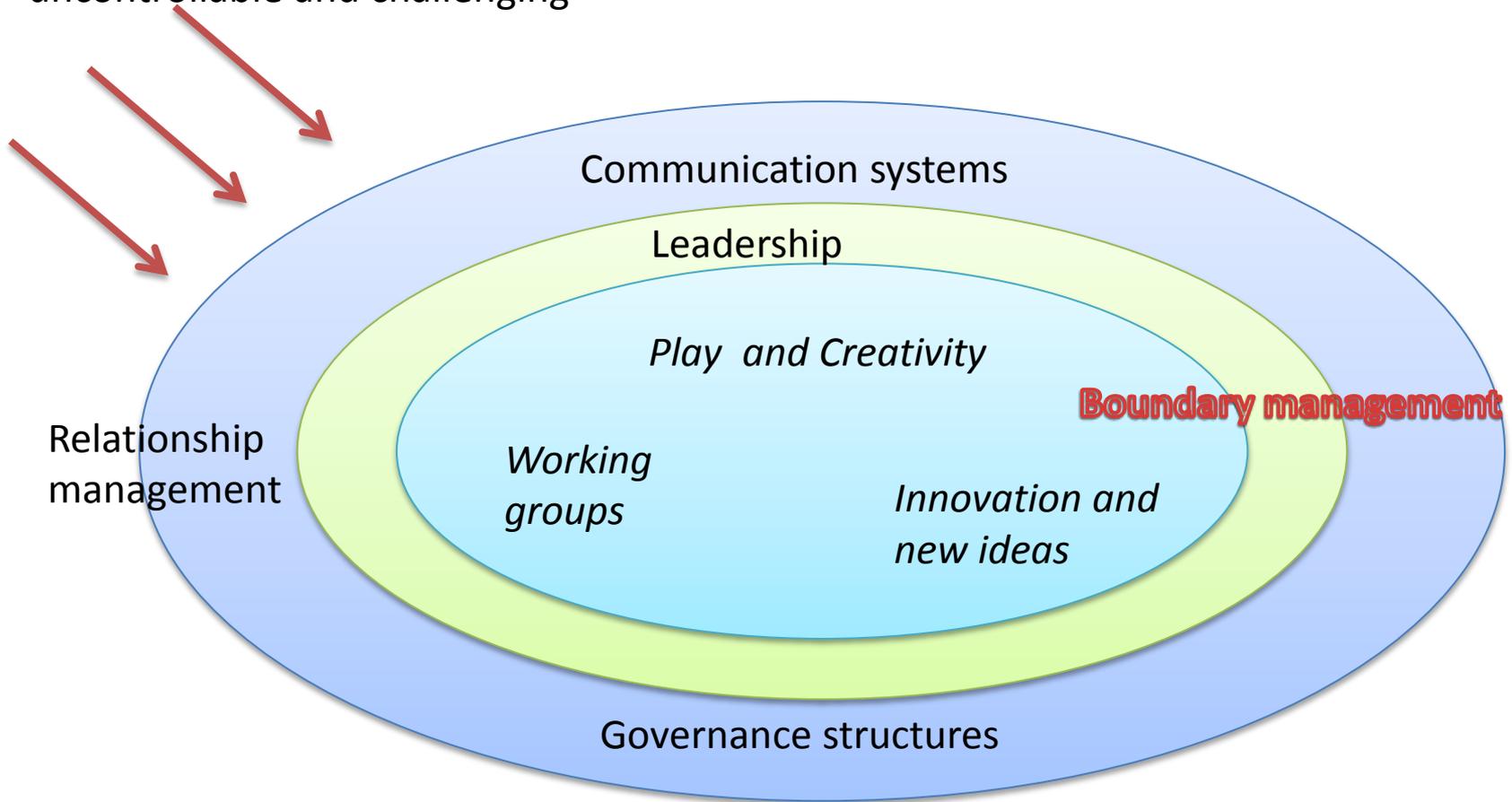
Holding Environments as an analogy to organisation

The group, system or organisation attempting to provide a *holding environment* is symbolically faced with the same dilemma as that of a new mother. The group, system or organisation in order to be receptive to the birth of new ideas, and changes that will eventually stimulate growth must be nurtured in an atmosphere that is encouraging, supportive, and "open" to those experiences. It must foster and support those conditions so that those who <u>risk</u> sharing fledging ideas and work in progress feel supported in their vulnerability.

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An organisational *Holding Environment*

The external environment uncontrollable and challenging

Communication systems

Leadership

Play and Creativity

Boundary management

Relationship management

Working groups

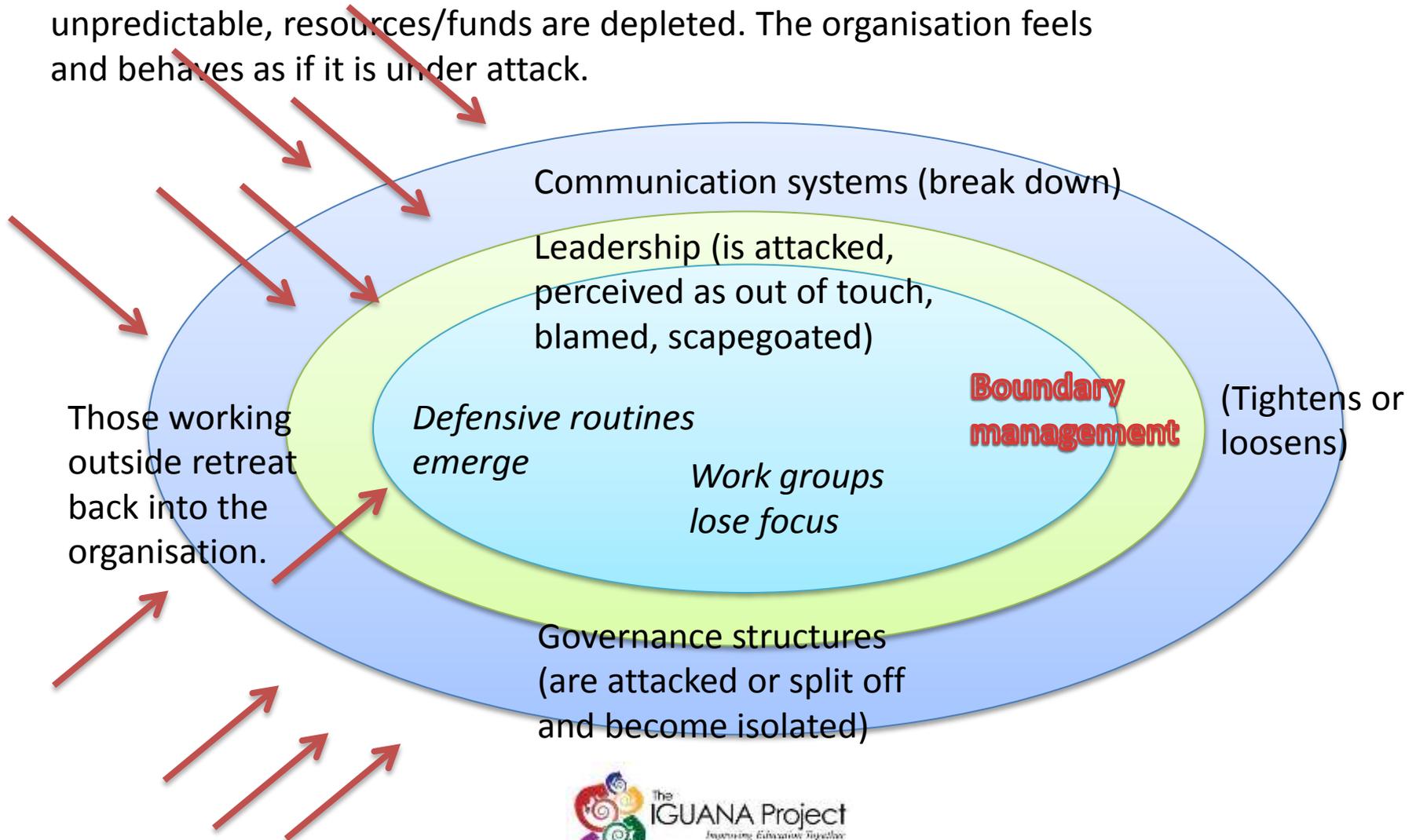*Innovation and new ideas*

Governance structures

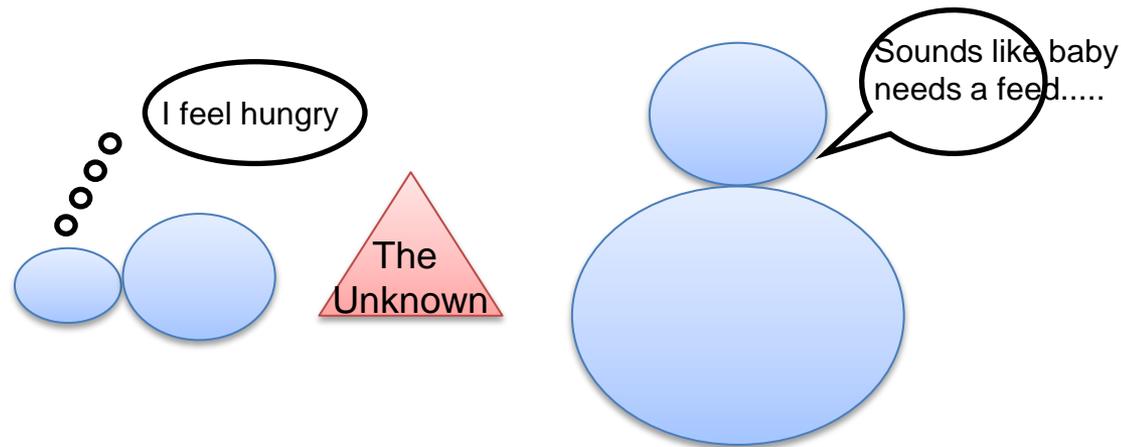# What happens when *Holding Environments* break down?

- The *Holding Environment* becomes vulnerable when conditions of uncertainty and change prevail.

- Depending on the structures and systems in place these condition impact the individual, group or organisation and its capacity to take risks, experiment, innovate.

- The organisation will need to work through how it deals with it fears and anxieties about income, changing markets, depleting resources and strategies to address these

The unknown and defensive routines

The external environment becomes more turbulent and unpredictable, resources/funds are depleted. The organisation feels and behaves as if it is under attack.

Communication systems (break down)

Leadership (is attacked, perceived as out of touch, blamed, scapegoated)

Boundary management

(Tightens or loosens)

Those working outside retreat back into the organisation.

Defensive routines emerge

Work groups lose focus

Governance structures (are attacked or split off and become isolated)

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How our early development experiences affect our psychic selves and systemic interactions

- The baby and mother as the first significant relationship and the processes by which the baby achieves affect i.e how it gets what it wants and needs. The translation of feelings into results and how this is integral to the development of the child.

- It is the experience of the mother's response that becomes the basis for moving from the internal life into external reality. Much of the child's early experience is based upon what Klein refers to as phantasy: the ability to conjure a response from internal feelings and what is got in return the 'good breast' or the 'bad breast'.

- Klein related these early stages with our capacity to cope with uncertainty and the unknown and how our internal life becomes a mediator with the external environment

Organisational theory has drawn on the work of Melanie Klein (1959) in this regard, arguing that organisations deploy two defensive positions or stances which people use that interfere with the expression of their inner experience.

- The first one – <u>the defensive position</u> – is driven by fear of total indifference. Members of the work group are afraid of opening up their inner experience to support change for fear that no-one in the organisation will respond.
- The second one – <u>the paranoid position</u> – is driven by fear of retaliation. It is difficult to risk expressing vulnerable inner experiences (i.e., to tell the truth in a controversial situation) when faced with the possibility of being attacked or punished).

What does this mean in practice?

A holding environment suggests that 'appropriate' containing structures are in place. Individuals are able to take up their authority and leadership roles.

Questions to explore in your practice?

- The school has the structures in place to achieve this containment (governance, senior management, middle management)?
- Those who are in positions of power and the structures which are constructed to support them have the capacity to allow for deviation from the norms which are inherent within them
- There is an openness to new suggestions and ideas in your school
- Students and staff feel safe in the school, they can take risks. The difficulty around taking risks, changing behaviours is acknowledged and worked through.
- It is an empathetic environment, fantasies around change aren't allowed to escalate and there is mediation between external/internal world.
- Negotiations and contracting processes are clearly managed and worked through.
- There is an ability to experience and become aware of the irrational aspects of organisational life, both in self and in others.
- Extent to which members feel safe and able to critically reflect

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