



A deeper dive on the iceberg model

A learning resource for changemakers.

Purpose of this guide

This guide provides an overview of the Iceberg Model. We use the model extensively with people, groups and organisations seeking to make deeper, positive change to the systems that underpin communities and organisations. The model shifts attention from surface, 'event-based' reactive thinking, to 'systems-based' redesign and transformative thinking.



For further tools, visual guides, sample process templates, or to arrange a facilitated session, contact the Australian Resilience Centre.

Why the Iceberg Model?

The Iceberg Model is a powerful tool for drawing attention towards deeper change. The model is a foundation for systems thinking and resilience practice. It recognises that what's visible—crises, conflict, or a project failure—is just the tip of the iceberg.

Beneath every “event” are layers of repeating patterns, systemic structures, and, at the base, mindsets that shape everything above.

Understanding this structure:

- Shifts focus from ‘fixing’ problems to changing system conditions
- Reveals leverage points, showing how lower layers shape and shift what's possible at the surface
- Supports more effective design, dialogue, and collective action, regardless of audience

Dive in: the four layers

Events

What is seen: Incidents, disruptions, conflicts, observable crises—these demand attention, resources, and often lead to reactive responses.

- **Examples:** Disaster events (fires, floods), loss of infrastructure, sudden community division, the failure of a key employer, a community tragedy.
- **Limitations:** Staying at this layer risks ‘whack-a-mole’ approaches, limited to short-term recovery or patching visible problems. This exhausts people and resources.

Patterns

What repeats: Trends, cycles, or repeated sequences of events. Patterns are less visible than singular events but show up with a broader view.

- **Examples:** Shifting weather patterns, recurring leadership challenges or restructures, ‘boom and bust’ economic cycles.
- **Importance:** Observing patterns enables communities and organisations to anticipate, adapt, and break stuck cycles—shifting from reactive to proactive.

System Structures

What enables and constrains: The formal and informal parts of the system—rules, connections, networks, feedbacks, flows and physical infrastructure.

- **Examples:** Who sets rules for community development, how resources are distributed, funding models that shape what projects are funded.
- **Why it matters:** Change at the structure level shifts the whole systems capacity to create new patterns to anticipate and respond to events.

Mindsets

The deep foundations: The deeply held beliefs, stories, values, and paradigms that define what is considered legitimate, possible and important. Typically, one mindset dominates the design of the systems above.

- **Examples:** The core beliefs and values behind the rules, including how resources are allocated and shared, about the core purpose of an organisation or program, about who gets to set the rules and who doesn't.
- **Role in change:** Mindsets shape system structures, sustain or transform patterns, and even define what an "event" means to a community or organisation.

Diving deep: each iceberg layer in depth

Events: the visible tip

Events are what grab headlines and galvanise immediate response. They appear isolated but usually signal something deeper. Events get all the attention.

Key narrative:

When communities only focus on disaster responses, infrastructure failures or sudden conflicts, the risk is becoming reactive—managing symptoms without addressing causes. For government or agencies, this means policy is delivered as a series of one-off fixes, rather than a considered effort to change whole systems.

Prompt for groups:

- What happened?
- Who responded and how did they respond?
- Did the response target the symptom or the deeper cause?
- Why did it happen— was it a once off or is it part of something bigger?

Patterns: what links events

Patterns become clear when multiple events are seen in relation to one another. This often happens only with some distance or hindsight. It starts to become clear if Events are a part of a trend or a repeating cycle. Patterns might include increasingly severe weather events, cycles of leadership churn, recurring disengagement, or new forms of trust and cooperation that emerge.

Key narrative:

A single economic downturn may pass, but if job loss, industry transitions and social disadvantage repeat, a pattern is at play. Identifying these patterns is a first shift towards adaptive action. Adaptive action anticipates what is needed, enabling communities to test, learn and change course with intention. Adaptation is necessary, but usually not sufficient to offset repeated patterns emerging from deeper in the iceberg. Patterns are the visible signals of deeper, often hidden system dynamics.

Prompt for groups:

- If we placed these Events on a timeline, what emerges – a pattern or a trend?
- What might be driving the recurrence of this pattern?

System structures: the invisible machinery

System structures are what organise, resource and constrain action. They include both concrete things (funding models, formal institutions, infrastructure), and less visible elements (informal rules, exclusion from decision making, access to opportunities). It is the relationships *between* elements that matters.

Key narrative:

Longstanding mistrust, stalled projects, or disengagement aren't just the product of bad luck, they are often held in place by underlying structures (e.g., exclusive decision-making, siloed funding). Systems can become locked-in, rigid and unable to flex, requiring a deliberate effort to redesign. When systems redesign what matters, like expanding who is involved, and how feedbacks flow, it becomes possible to break old patterns and form new ones.

Prompt for groups:

- What are the rules, roles, or feedback processes that keep this pattern in place?
- Who holds power to change these?
- What changes to structure might make new patterns possible?

Mindsets: shaping the whole system

Mindsets are the source code of the system. They include the values, beliefs, assumptions, stories, and unspoken "truths" that shape how systems are organised. They are often so embedded that they go unquestioned ("This is just the way things are done here"). It takes time and careful engagement to uncover Mindsets and how they structure and organise the systems above.

Key narrative:

If a community narrative sees outside intervention as a threat to identity, even the best ausresilience.com.au

intentioned projects will feel imposed and create resistance. If leadership frames resilience as only “bouncing back”, transformational change to a different identity becomes difficult. Change here at the bottom of the iceberg requires openness, collaboration, reflection and shared storytelling about what is and what could be.

Prompt for groups:

- What assumptions are we making about our place, our people, or what can change?
- What stories are driving our approach?
- Whose worldview and values are represented—and whose are not?

Connection between layers: how lower layers influence those above

Every iceberg layer shapes the one above it. Change rarely sticks unless it is supported by change in deeper layers.

Mindsets → System structures

Deep beliefs and shared stories shape how systems are designed, who has legitimacy to make the rules, and what rules stay in place.

- **Example:** Many people now face housing insecurity. Beliefs about home ownership, tax breaks, wealth distribution, public housing and assumptions that lack of housing is something only a certain type of person experiences shape the housing system in Australia, driving new patterns of housing stress.
- When mindsets change (e.g., seeing outsiders as partners not threats), system structures—like governance models or engagement processes—can be redesigned to build trust and inclusion.

System structures → Patterns

Structures create or limit the repetition of patterns. Inclusive governance, transparent information flows, or flexible funding rules can break cycles of distrust and disengagement, replacing them with cycles of learning and adaptation.

- **Example:** When recovery funding is made contingent on community-led planning and decision making, communities can shift toward active involvement in recovery, learning, capacity and network-building, creating and reinforcing positive engagement patterns.

Patterns → Events

The same structures and patterns will keep producing the same types of events until they are intentionally changed.

- **Example:** Continued cycles of drought and top-down response will keep producing poor local scale adoption and outcome—until adaptive, participatory planning shifts the system.

Events as signals, not targets

By interpreting events as signals of deeper systemic dynamics, organisations and communities avoid falling into the trap of “fixing” one problem only for others to appear. Instead, they can use visible events to probe for change at deeper system levels.

How to shift: intervening at the lower layers

1. Narrative and reframing

Practices that invite diverse values, respectfully question assumptions and beliefs and make space for multiple perspectives are essential for shifting mindsets. This might look like using deliberate language framing, using empathy mapping, hosting cross-boundary value exploration workshops or reframing values conflicts towards higher shared values and vision.

Redesigning structures together

Structures change most effectively through co-design, not imposition. This is particularly true for:

- Resource allocation and authority (who sets the rules?)
- Feedback and reporting processes (how is data collected and shared? who sets the performance metrics for success? Who evaluates success?)
- Knowledge generation process (who’s knowledge is accepted and privileged, who’s is excluded?)
- Network building and the deliberate distribution of power and information.

Enabling new patterns through deep learning.

Strong systems create double- and triple-loop learning:

- **Single loop:** Adjusting actions to achieve targets (often event-based).
- **Double loop:** Questioning whether the patterns and strategies are right.

- **Triple loop:** Questioning underlying structures, beliefs, and mindsets (“Are we even solving the right problem?”)

Summary

Systems do not change by addressing events in isolation. While responding to events is necessary, without careful attention to what lays underneath the Event, repeated responses to similar events exhausts capacity. By examining trends and Patterns, by making hidden system structures and functions explicit and visible, and collectively working with the deeper values, beliefs, assumptions and stories that underpin the system, communities and organisations can catalyse system redesign and transformation, moving from ‘coping’ to co-creating futures.



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