

# What power do we have in the face of destabilizing change?

Brigitte Marshall - Thursday November 6th 2025

## Neurobiology and Change

When destabilizing change hits, our brains respond as though we're under physical threat. The amygdala - the brain's "alarm system" - activates the autonomic nervous system. Stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol flood our bodies, preparing us for action. This results in fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses. These are not conscious choices, but survival instincts, triggered in milliseconds before our rational brain has a chance to weigh in.

### Reflection Questions:

- In your organization, how do you see fight/flight/freeze/fawn responses show up when destabilizing change occurs?
- How have you personally learned to recognize and manage these instincts in your leadership?

## SCARF Framework - David Rock (2008)

The SCARF model identifies five social needs as critical as food or safety: **Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness.**

- *Status*: Being recognized as competent and valued.
- *Certainty*: Clear expectations, predictability.
- *Autonomy*: Choice and agency in one's work.
- *Relatedness*: Belonging, trust, common ground.
- *Fairness*: Just and equitable treatment.

Threats to any of these domains activate the same stress responses as physical threats.

### Reflection Questions:

- Which of the SCARF domains do you see most threatened in your current context?
- What practices or policies have you put in place to increase certainty, fairness, or autonomy for staff and learners?

## Human Responses in Context

Threat responses manifest differently in organizational life:

- **Fight**: Resistance, anger, pushing harder to control.
- **Flight**: Avoidance, disengagement, delay.
- **Freeze**: Overthinking, paralysis, retreat.
- **Fawn**: Compliance, appeasement, avoiding conflict.

These are normal - but left unchecked, they can block collaboration and innovation.

### Reflection Questions:

- How have you supported staff or colleagues to move from a threat response into a growth response?
- How do you create conditions where vulnerability and courage can coexist?

## Caring for Ourselves

Dominant culture often prizes intellect over emotion, but when stress dominates, cognitive capacity, creativity, and learning all shut down. Self-compassion - practices that involve both mind and body - activates brain regions that support resilience, empathy, and motivation. Self care practices can help leaders and staff regulate stress and remain grounded.

### Reflection Questions:

- What role does self-care and compassion play in your organization's approach to leadership and change?
- How have you modeled vulnerability and self-compassion in destabilizing moments?



## Joanna Macy: [Radical Presence and Active Hope](#)

Macy encourages us not to fear grief or rage - they are signs of caring. She calls for *radical presence* (being fully attentive to the moment) and *Active Hope*: not a passive feeling, but a practice of facing hard truths, imagining better futures, and acting to bring them about.

**Key Quote:** “Active Hope is not about feeling hopeful. It’s about becoming active participants in bringing about what we hope for.”

### Reflection Questions:

- How do you and your organization practice “radical presence” with your staff, learners, or communities?
- What does “Active Hope” look like in your leadership practice?

## Ruha Benjamin: [Imagination as Collective Power](#)

Imagination, Benjamin argues, is not individual but social. Oppression thrives by shrinking what people can imagine, making inequality seem inevitable. Collective imagination resists this, expanding the realm of the possible. Artists, educators, and activists make new futures believable by telling new stories and enacting new practices.

### Reflection Questions:

- What is one example of your organization practicing “collective imagination”?
- How do you counter “oppression of the possible” in your daily work?

## From Fiction to Reality

What once seemed fantastical is now real:

- *Frankenstein* → organ transplants.
  - *From the Earth to the Moon* → Apollo launches.
  - Dick Tracy's wrist radio → smartwatches.
  - *Star Trek* communicators → flip phones.
  - *The Jetsons* → video calling.
- And imagination can also forewarn oppression (*The Handmaid's Tale*).

### Reflection Questions:

- How do you draw inspiration from bold ideas or stories that once seemed “impossible”?
- How do you discern between liberatory and oppressive possibilities when envisioning the future?

## adrienne maree brown: [Emergent Strategy](#)

Brown urges us to shape change like nature does: adaptive, relational, and emergent.

- Change is constant → learn to evolve.
- Intentional adaptation → align growth with justice.
- Small is all → small patterns scale upward.
- Interdependence → transformation is collective.
- Fractals → micro-patterns mirror macro-patterns.

### Reflection Questions:

- How has your organization embraced small, adaptive steps that later grew into larger transformation?
- How do you cultivate interdependence and collective leadership within your teams?

## Collective Imagination Practice

Oppression thrives on limited possibility. The exercise: “*Imagine if...*” → “*Yes, and...*” builds futures thinking without constraint.

### Reflection Questions:

- What's an “Imagine if...” statement that your organization has acted on in real time?
- How do you sustain a culture of possibility instead of defaulting to “we can't”?

## Institute for the Future: [Strategy in the Age of Chaos](#)

IFTF identifies three barriers:

- Biases of the present.
- “Forbidden futures” we resist considering.
- Legacy structures and vested interests.

In chaotic times, leaders must work in two modes: short-term crisis response + long-term building. Success requires:

- **Improvisation** (responding in the moment).
- **Imagination** (seeing radically different futures).

**Reflection Questions:**

- **How have you balanced crisis management with future-building in your leadership?**
- **What practices help you overcome biases or reluctance to consider “forbidden futures”?**

## Howard Zinn: Small Acts

*“Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can quietly become a power no government can suppress...”* The future is not distant but a succession of presents. Change begins with small, integrity-filled acts today.

**Reflection Questions:**

- **What small acts of leadership or equity practice have you seen multiply into larger shifts?**
- **How do you encourage your communities to act now, rather than waiting for “someday”?**

## Leadership for This Time

Jim Knight reminds us leadership is often framed as “direction-setting,” but the pandemic showed we are in charge, not in control. The [National Equity Project](#) invites “inside-out leadership”: self-awareness, building alliances, collective experimentation. Equity requires relational, adaptive leadership, not command-and-control.

**Reflection Questions for:**

- **How do you embody “inside-out leadership” in practice?**
- **What alliances or partnerships have helped you lead through destabilizing change?**

[Change Music Spotify Playlist](#)