



Say the Thing

Team Resilience &
the Conversations You're Avoiding
Literacy Texas 2026 Conference

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Melanie has spent 20+ years leading change across nonprofit and public-sector settings, including serving as CEO of Literacy Advance of Houston, where she guided merger with Memorial Assistance Ministries (MAM) that doubled service capacity.

She holds a BS in Sociology, an MBA in Leadership, an MSW in Administration and Policy, and certifications in Prosci Change Management and IDEO Design Thinking. She founded Adaptive Ascent Group to bring senior-level strategy and design support to small and mid-size nonprofits.



What We'll Move Through Today

01

Being Human

Grief, assumptions, and the tensions of leading people right now

02

From Telling to Learning

A three-part shift for having the difficult conversation instead of avoiding it

03

Say the Thing

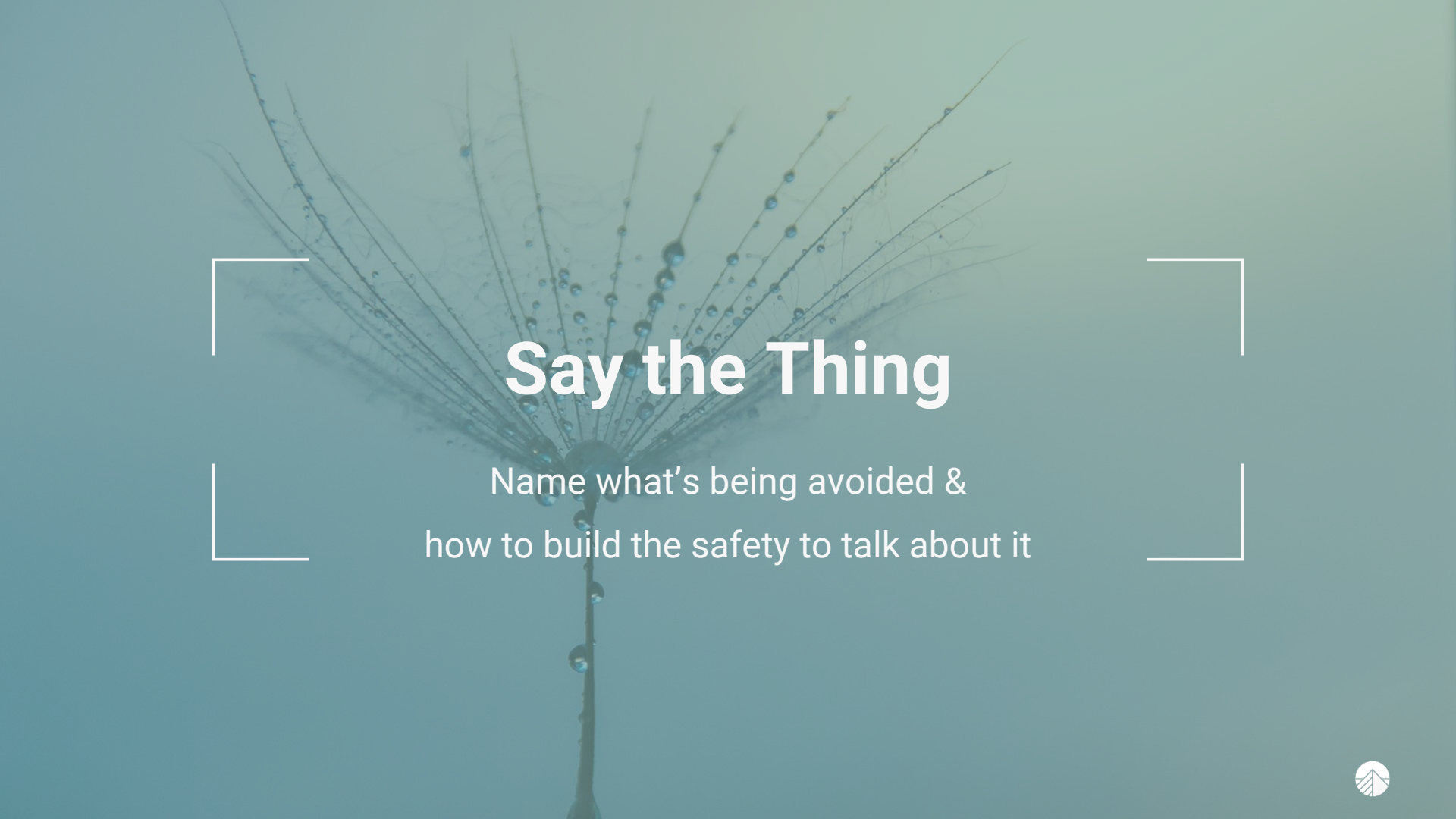
Naming what's avoided, what it costs us, and the values underneath it

04

Practice, Out Loud

A real conversation, practiced in fixed roles, & debriefed together in the room





Say the Thing

Name what's being avoided &
how to build the safety to talk about it



What Happens When We Delay

► The core idea

- The conversation doesn't disappear when you avoid it. It just changes location, into the body.
- When a conversation stays emotionally charged and unresolved, the brain's threat-detection system activates and the body prepares for fight, flight, fawn, or freeze, even though nothing physically dangerous is happening.

Delay compounds: everyday stress that stays unresolved gradually pushes the nervous system into a stuck, protective mode. **Truth is kindness.** Delay is not.



Values: Your Operating Rhythm

► The Definition

Not a moral code. The personal beliefs and rhythms that quietly steer how you show up, decide, and react, especially under pressure.

Why it matters here: most hard conversations aren't really about the topic on the surface.

They're about a values gap we're often oblivious to, so it goes unnamed & leads to feelings of our identity being rejected.

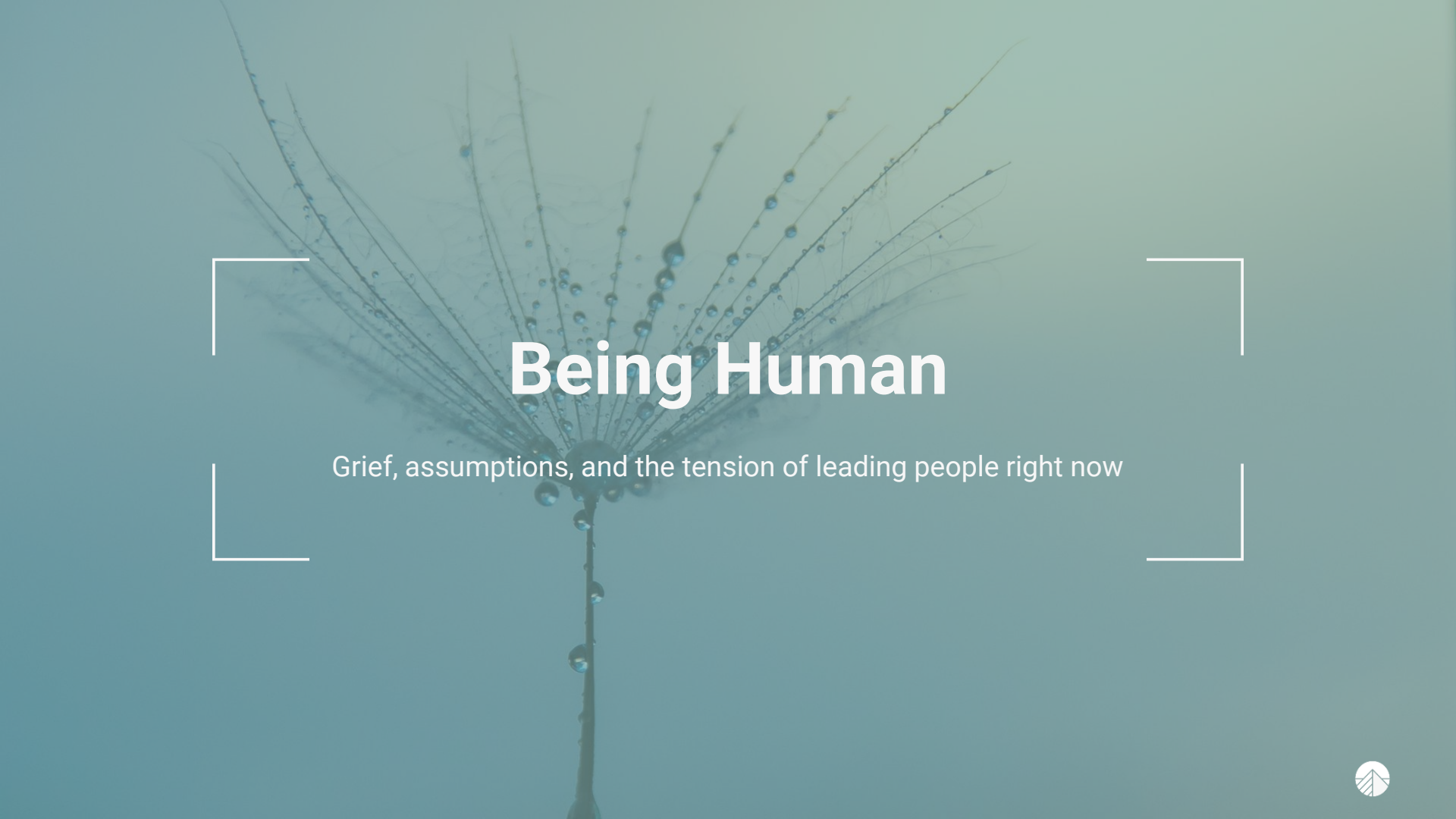
► The Table Exercise

Three minutes: write your own values privately.

Five minutes at your table:

- Find at least one shared theme
- Name the widest values gap & how it might show up



A close-up photograph of a dandelion seed head, where the seeds are still attached to the central receptacle. The seeds and the central part are covered in numerous clear water droplets. The background is a soft, out-of-focus teal color. The entire image is framed by a thin white border that forms a large rectangle with inward-pointing corners.

Being Human

Grief, assumptions, and the tension of leading people right now



Humans Grieve. At Work, Too.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross - <https://www.ekrfoundation.org/5-stages-of-grief/change-curve/>

► The stages of grief

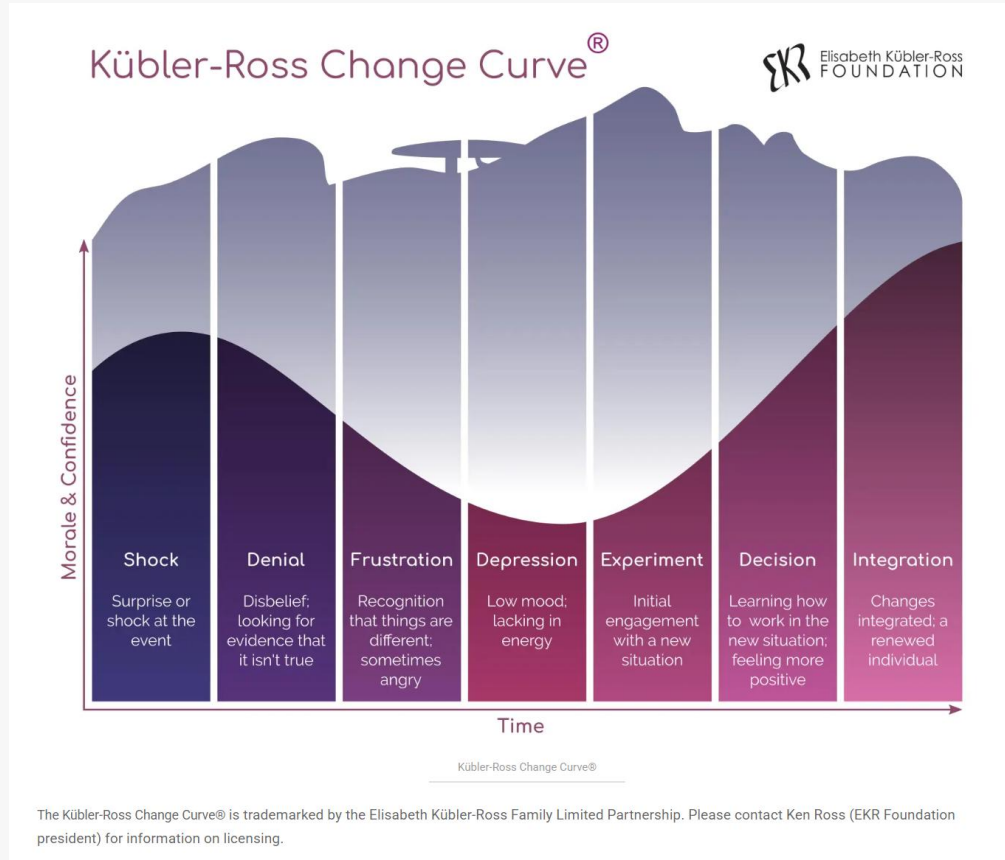
Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance. *Hope*.

Every one of these can show up on your team after a reorg, a funding loss, or a role change, and they rarely arrive in a linear order.

Nobody is broken for grieving at work. The job is to recognize which stage you're looking at, not to rush anyone past it.



The Change Curve



Checking Your Assumptions

► Values + Grief = Being Human

We bring all our family-of-origin stuff to work, layered with today's stressors, layered with the current state of things and the loss of funding.

► Why This Matters Now

What you know is a small fraction of what's actually happening in someone else's week. Checking your assumptions means asking before deciding what a reaction means.



The Tension of Managing People

► The core idea

You often know more than your team. That gap is real, and it's not always yours to close by telling. Holding information you can't share yet, while still leading people who deserve honesty, is one of the real, unglamorous costs of the job.

OR...maybe what you're holding is that nobody knows much of anything?

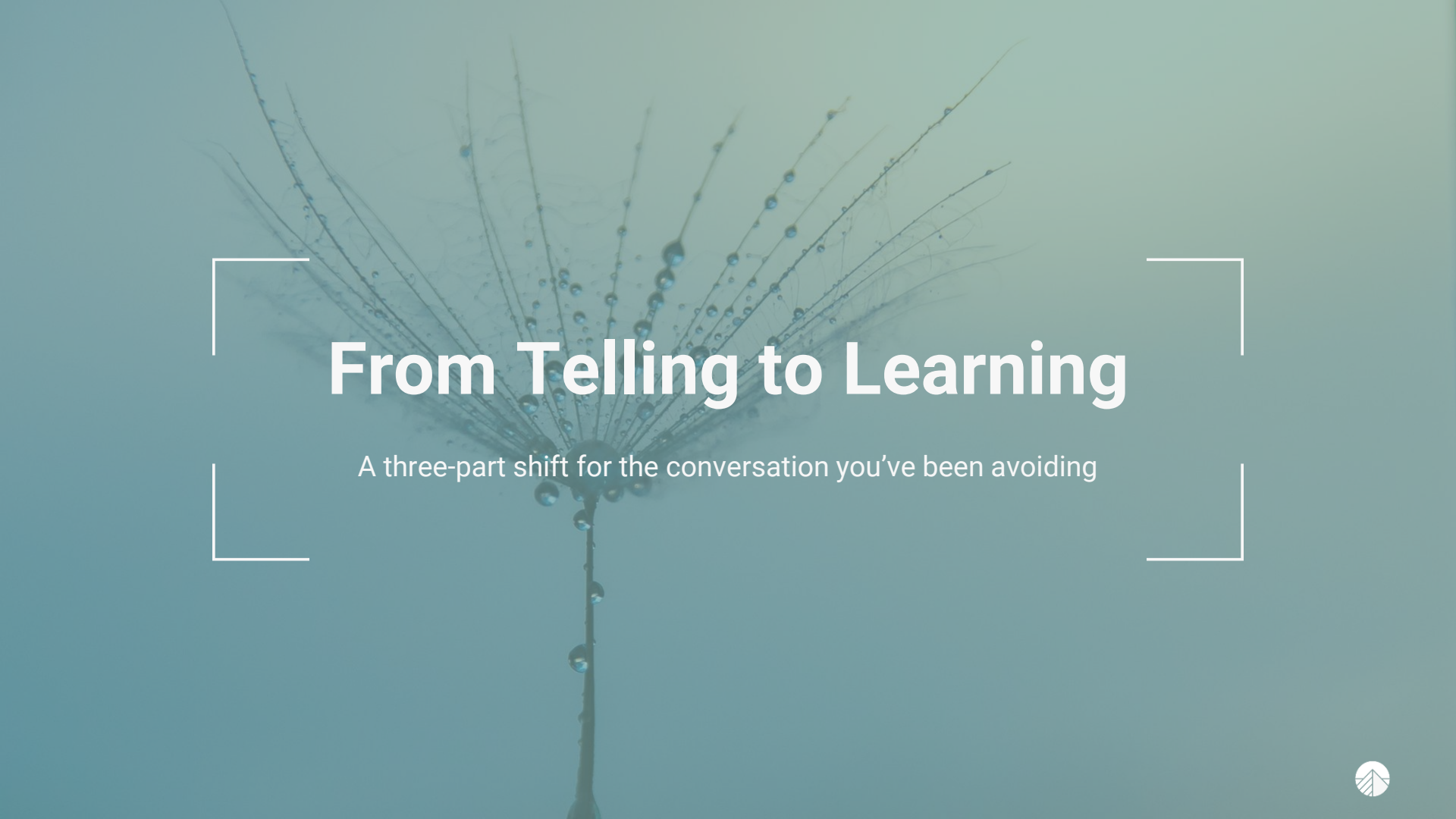


Take Care of You

► The boundary

- This Only Works If You're Still Standing
- You cannot take on the responsibility of another adult's reaction. You can only make sure your own values stay in line, and that you're actually cared for.
- If you're protecting everyone else, you're the one holding the physical and psychological stress.
- That stress doesn't stay contained. Your team feels it whether you name it or not.
- Standing, regulated, and honest is worth more to your team than a shield.



A dandelion seed head is centered in the frame, its seeds radiating outwards. Each seed is coated with a small, clear water droplet. The background is a solid, muted teal color. The overall composition is symmetrical and serene.

From Telling to Learning

A three-part shift for the conversation you've been avoiding



The Learning Conversation

Stone, Patton & Heen — Difficult Conversations

01

The Shift

From telling someone what's true to
learning what's true together

02

Inquire to Learn

Ask from genuine curiosity & not to build
a case

03

Paraphrase for Clarity

Say back what you heard before you
respond to it

04

Acknowledge Feelings

Name what you're seeing, without
agreeing or fixing it



Why a Learning Stance Changes the Outcome

► The payoff

- A learning stance doesn't just make hard conversations easier. It changes what the conversation can produce.
- Teams led by managers who ask before telling recover faster from change, and trust survives disagreement instead of being damaged by it.
- This isn't about being softer. It's about being more accurate.
- The benefit shows up everywhere: retention, morale, project alignment & better programs



Practicing Together

► How this works

- Groups of three. One person practices a real conversation they've been avoiding. One person is the practice partner. One person observes.
- One pass only, fixed roles, no rotating. Go rough — this is practice, not performance.
- Use the three skills: inquire to learn, paraphrase for clarity, acknowledge feelings. One skill at a time is enough.



What Worked?

► Full Room Debrief

- What worked? Which specific phrases landed?
- What did it feel like in your body when it worked, or when it didn't?
- What can you commit to trying this week?

► For the Observers

You saw the conversation from outside. What did you notice that the person practicing couldn't see themselves?

Name it plainly. That's the whole job of an observer.



You've Got This!

► Before you go

Thank you for being here, and for being willing to say the thing.



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