MAPPING TOXIC POLARIZATION:
HOW DOES IT ALL FIT TOGETHER?

When you begin opening yourself up to the complexity of the challenges we face, it can feel overwhelming.

One practice we can use to start making sense of all the complexity is problem mapping.

By breaking down challenges into component pieces and paying attention to how they fit together—what reinforces what?, what counter-acts what?—we can begin to deepen our understanding of the core dynamics driving the issue. While this doesn't tend to deliver any clear and simple answers, it does start to surface possible new insights, and new points-of-entry for intervention.

So first: Get together what you need. I recommend getting 2 different colored post-it note and a big piece of paper you can arrange them on and draw connections on, but you can use index cards or scraps of paper instead, or just draw this out.

Now, when you're ready to start:

1. DEFINE YOUR CORE FOCUS

What is the problem or issue you want to understand better?

This could be at any level your wish to understand better! Anything from **"Tension with my mom over politics"** to **"The partisan hostilities in Congress"** to **"Toxic Polarization in America."** Write this at the center of your paper or workspace.

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If you do not have post-it notes and a large paper workspace, you can use the template on the last page of this packet.
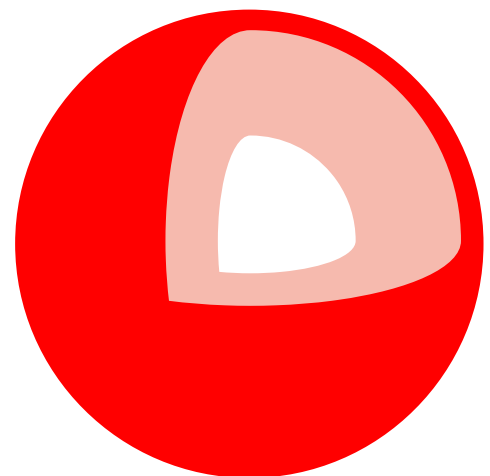
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2. IDENTIFY PRIMARY DRIVERS

What are the forces or factors that are driving this problem, or are making the problem worse? On one color of post-it notes or note cards, take 2-3 minutes to write down all the primary drivers of the problem you're trying to understand. Write down one driver per post-it note. These drivers can be at the individual level (i.e. attitudes, biases) and at broader context levels (i.e. media coverage, gerrymandering).

3. IDENTIFY PRIMARY ELEMENTS THAT KEEP YOUR PROBLEMS FROM BECOMING WORSE
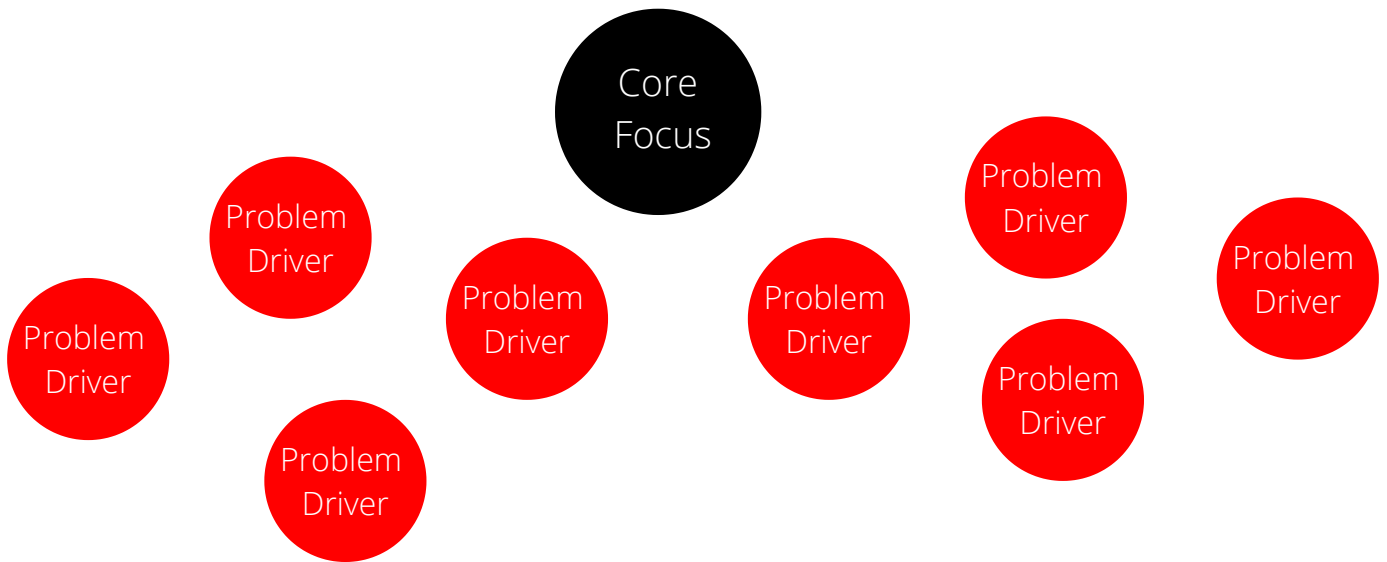
What forces or factors help to reign in the problem, or help to make things better?

On a different color of post-it notes or note cards, take 2-3 minutes to write down all the things that help keep the problem you are trying to understand from getting worse. What constrains the problem? Write down one element per post-it note. These elements can be at the individual level (i.e. attitudes, interpersonal relationships) and at broader context levels (i.e. cultural taboos against violence, cross-cutting civic organizations).

4. ARRANGE THE MOST INFLUENTIAL PROBLEM-DRIVING FACTORS BENEATH YOUR CORE FOCUS.

On your piece of large paper or workspace with your core focus written at the center, begin to arrange the problem driving factors at the bottom of the page. Put the most influential factors closer to the core focus, and put the less influential factors farther away from the core focus.

Core Focus

Problem Driver

Problem Driver

Problem Driver

Problem Driver

Problem Driver

Problem Driver

Problem Driver

Problem Driver

# 5. ARRANGE THE PROBLEM-MITIGATING ELEMENTS ABOVE YOUR CORE FOCUS

Next, begin to arrange the problem-mitigating factors at the top of the page. Put the most influential factors closer to the core focus, and put the less influential factors farther away from the core focus.

Problem Mitigator

Problem Mitigator

Problem Mitigator

Problem Mitigator

Problem Mitigator

Problem Mitigator

Problem Mitigator

Problem Mitigator

Core Focus
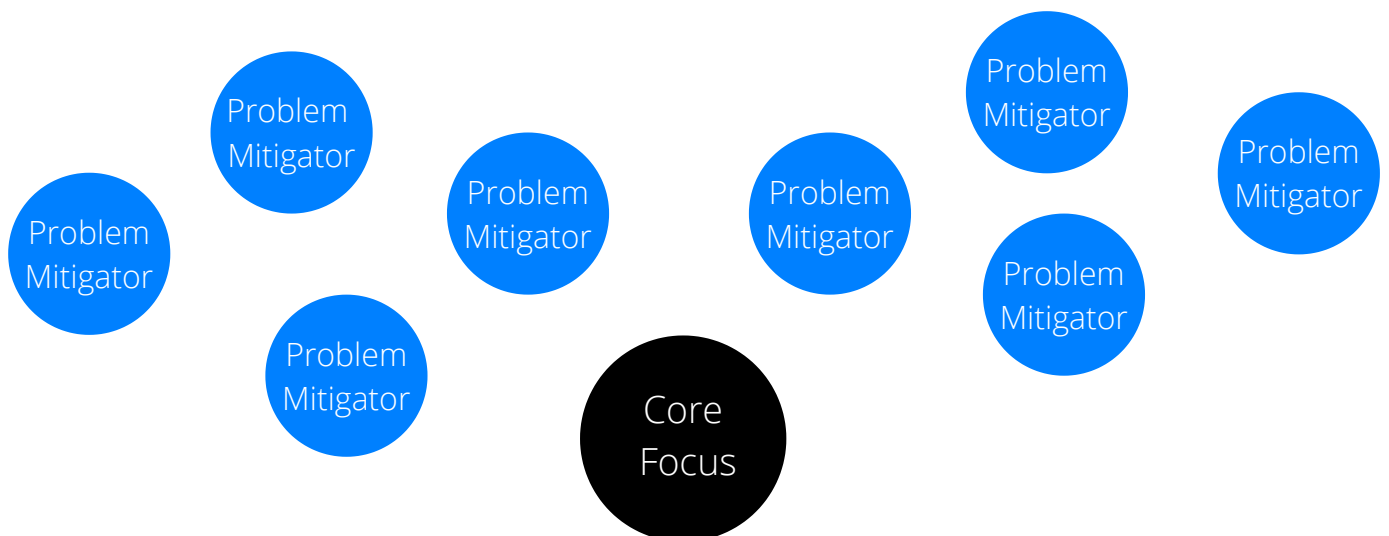
6. DRAW CONNECTIONS

In one color pen or marker—I recommend green—draw connection arrows between elements that increase each other.

In another color pen or marker—I recommend red—draw connection arrows between elements that decrease, block, or weaken each other.
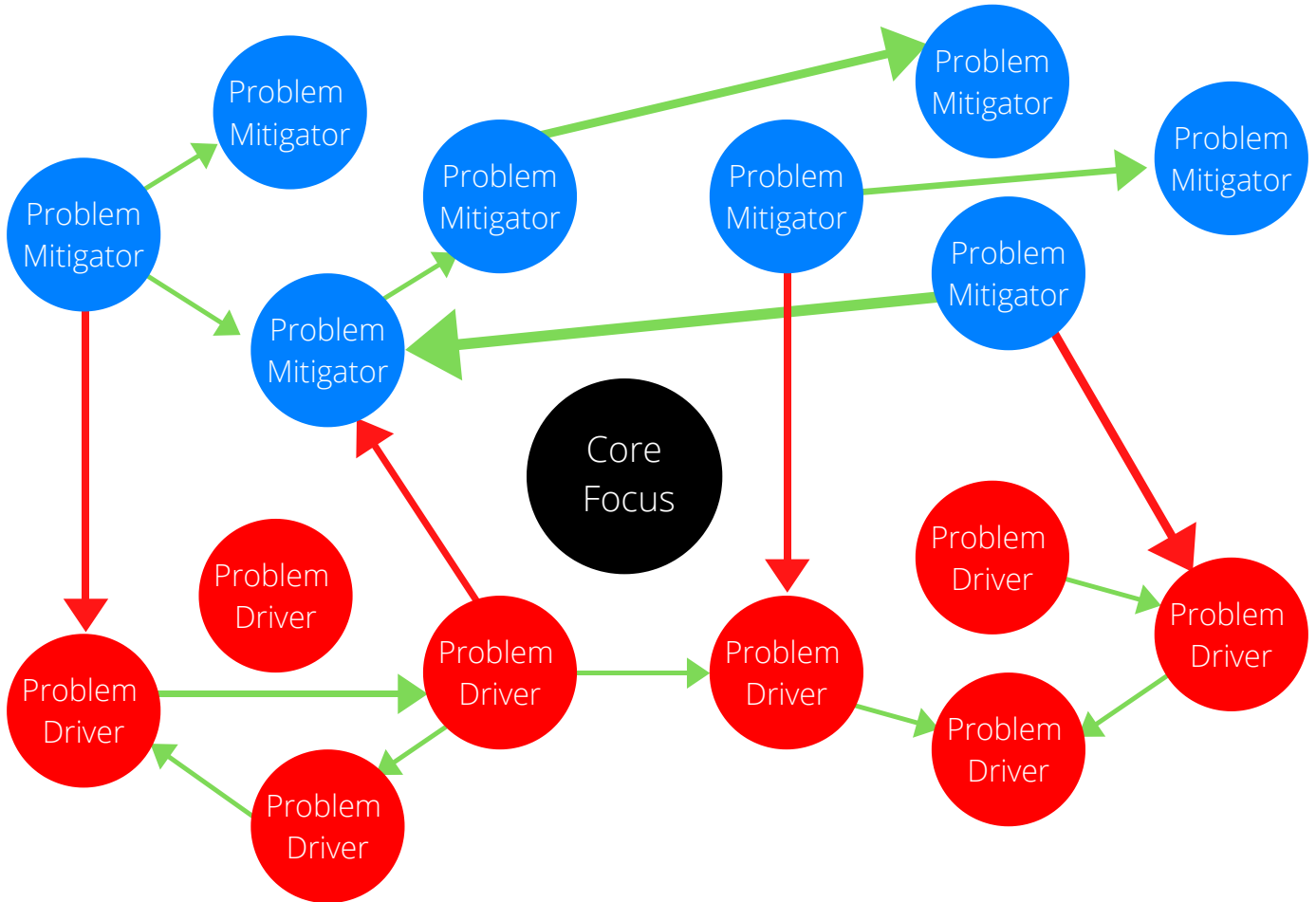
7. SEE CONNECTIONS

Step back and look over your map. What do you notice?

Where is there the most energy in this map? Which elements are the most connected to other elements?

Which of the elements are local to the people involved—within our capacity to change?
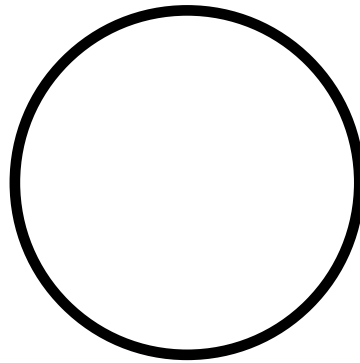
Which of the elements are actionable—feasible to influence?

As you look at the elements that are connected, what unintended consequences might result from introducing any specific change?

Problem Mitigators

Core Focus

Problem Drivers