

Social cohesion



INSTITUTE OF
COMMUNITY DIRECTORS
AUSTRALIA



Social cohesion and leadership in a forever-changing Australia.

Today we will:

1. Share uncomfortable observations
2. Challenge assumptions
3. Reimagine how we build connection across difference.

I invite us to consider together:

1. How do we show up as bridge builders?
2. How do we listen, really listen?
3. How can for-purpose organisations shape a more trusting, equal and participatory society?

Let's take a sidestep for a moment

#1 BYPASSING WORDS

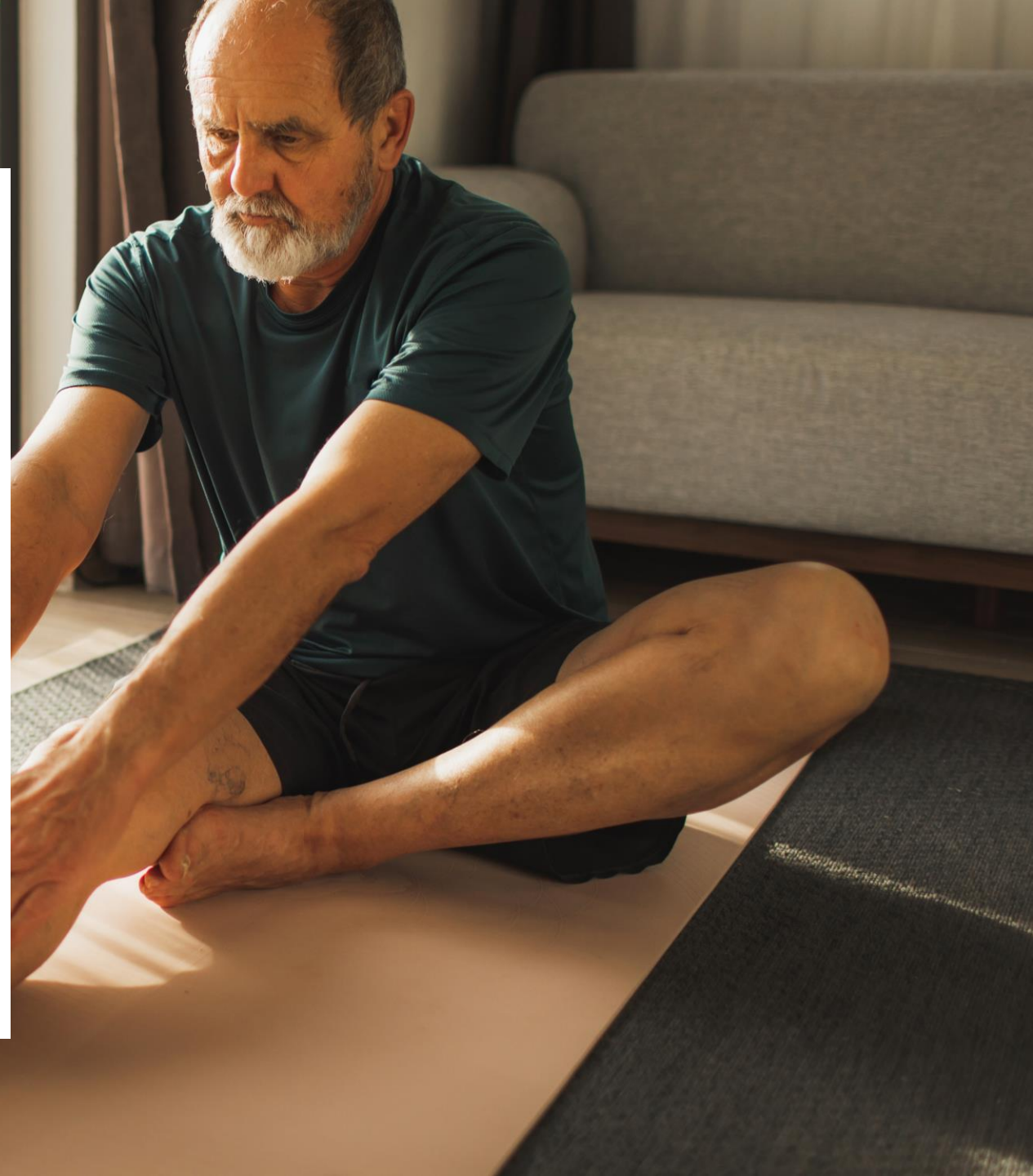
*How do we create conditions in which
we notice what is going on beyond the
words people might use?*



Let's take a sidestep for a moment

#2 A SORE HAMSTRING

*It takes skilled attention—and often
discomfort—to uncover the **actual** issue*



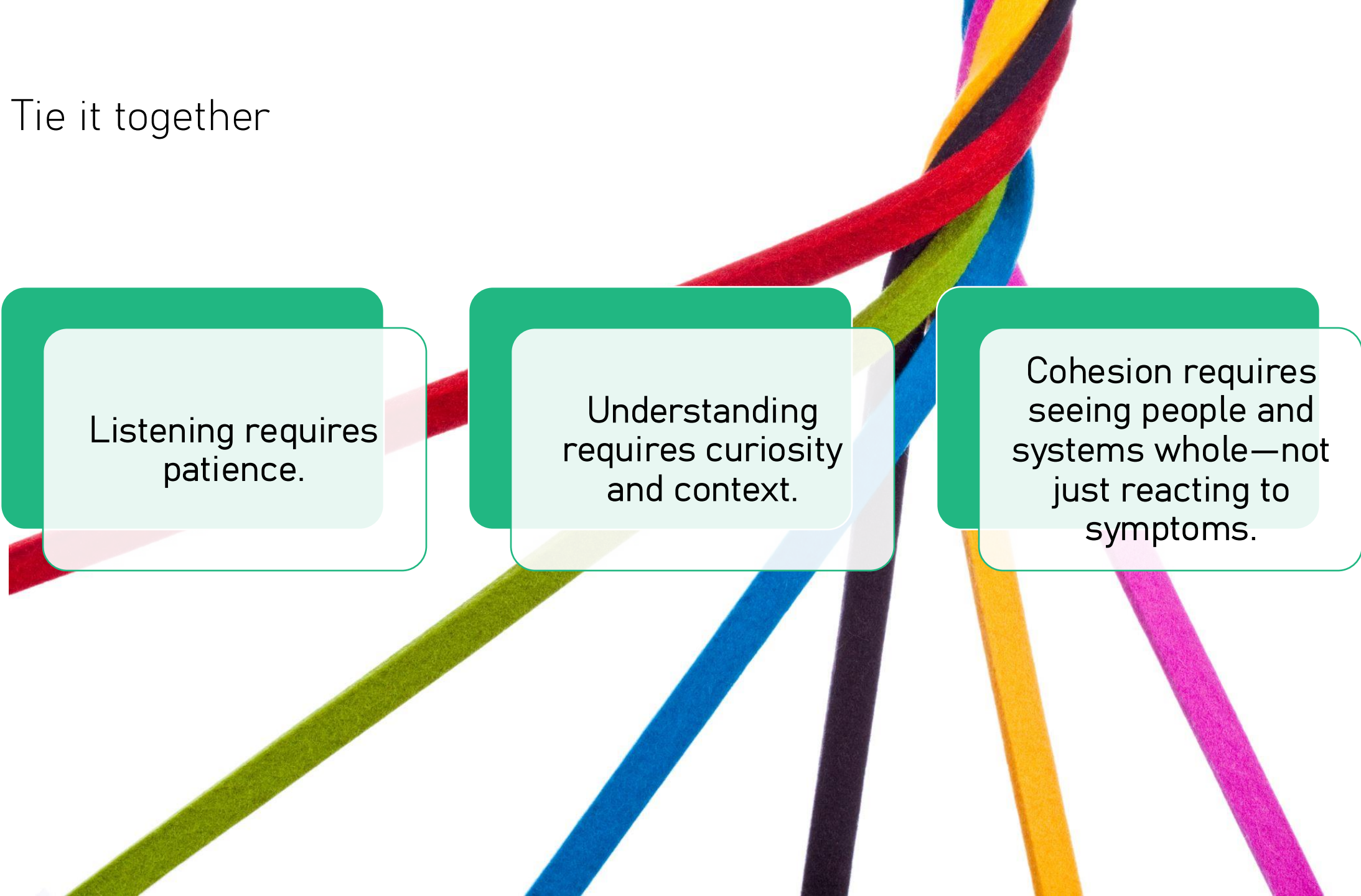
Let's take a sidestep for a moment

#3 ADOLESCENCE

*What **systems** might be standing in the way of social cohesion?*




Tie it together

The graphic features three light green rounded rectangular boxes with green borders, arranged horizontally. Each box contains a line of text. The background is composed of several thick, colorful ropes (red, green, blue, purple, yellow, and pink) that are twisted together, creating a complex, intertwined pattern that suggests the theme of 'tying things together'.

Listening requires
patience.

Understanding
requires curiosity
and context.

Cohesion requires
seeing people and
systems whole—not
just reacting to
symptoms.



First, let's
break it

WHAT WOULD AUSTRALIA LOOK LIKE
AT ITS LEAST SOCIALLY COHESIVE?

So what is social cohesion then?

- Core values:

trust, belonging, shared values, active participation, equality of opportunity


- Scanlon Foundation's Social Cohesion Index measures:

belonging, social justice, acceptance, and political participation in Australia.

- Intersectionality:

social cohesion is experienced differently across cultural, economic, and generational lines

*"Imagine it's five years from now, and this one part of Australia has changed.
What's happening? What do you hear or see?"*



How might we get there?

Pain Point

Fragmented communities

Economic despair

Neighbourhood distrust

Weakened volunteerism

Marginalisation

Polarised discourse

New Story Prompt

What does it look like when communities *know* each other?

What would a hopeful, fair future look like for someone who is 18 years old today?

What builds trust in daily, local ways?

What would reignite community spirit and shared action?

What's one way we could centre voices we've sidelined?

What does civil disagreement sound like? Feel like?

Why does social cohesion matter to for- purpose organisations?

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF NFPS IN
CREATING SOCIAL COHESION?



- Cohesion leads to better *performance* and fewer crises.
- Trust reduces governance risk.
- Leadership legacy

Where does leadership sit?

1. Leadership as meaning-making:

Leaders as interpreters.

2. Emotional intelligence and inclusive leadership practices:

Leaders as bridge builders.

3. Importance of moral courage and principled decision-making:

Leaders as example setters.



Practical strategies

1. Modeling civil discourse through showing how to hold disagreement with civility and generosity and curiosity.
2. Listening and showing we are listening: everyone wants to feel heard
3. Physical safety and psychological safety
4. How leadership can respond to backlash with empathy and integrity.

• Practical tools

- Tell me more
- When, what, how?
- Don't fix discomfort too quickly
- Be transparent with decision making even when the answer is no.



Deep Listening

1. Intentional presence
2. Self-awareness
3. Empathetic engagement
4. Reflective feedback
5. Suspension of judgment



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Addressing the question of power and cohesion

Power is real but it's complex: when something looks too simple, ask another question

The binary is seductive but lazy

Rebalance without retribution

Seek to learn more

Challenging assumptions

If people really
cared about
community,
they'd show up

We've
consulted—so we
understand what
people need


I did it once-
upon-a-time so I
know what they
need

Challenging assumptions #1



“IF TEAMS ARE PERFORMING WELL, THEY
DON'T NEED TO TALK TO EACH OTHER.”

Challenging assumptions #2




“IF NO ONE’S RAISING CONCERNS, THINGS
MUST BE FINE.”

Challenging assumptions #3

“DIVERSITY MEANS EVERYONE FEELS INCLUDED.”

Challenging assumptions #4



“RECOGNITION ISN’T A PRIORITY—WE’RE ALL
HERE FOR THE MISSION”



We are the change

I am inviting participants to reflect:

- When have I helped bring people together?
- What biases do I carry that might hinder cohesion?
- How does my leadership create space for 'the other'? Who could 'the other' be for me?