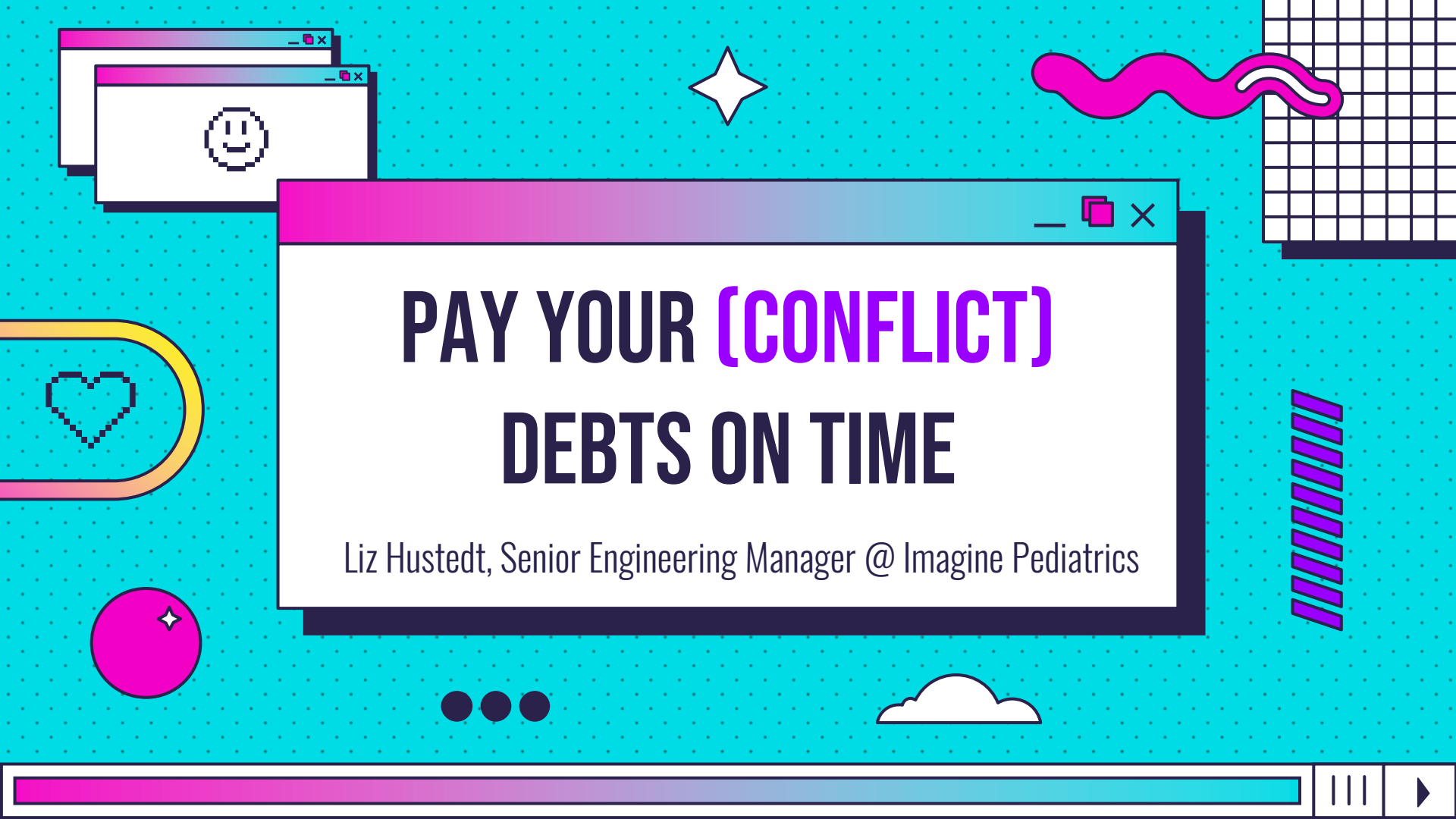




PAY YOUR **(CONFLICT)** DEBTS ON TIME

Liz Hustedt, Senior Engineering Manager @ Imagine Pediatrics

liz_fam.jpg



HI,

I'M LIZ

herculiz.jpg



"Herculiz makes the
earth go round."



so nurse

very engineer

pretty ok with humans

HAVE YOU EVER...

“TAKEN SOMETHING OFFLINE?”

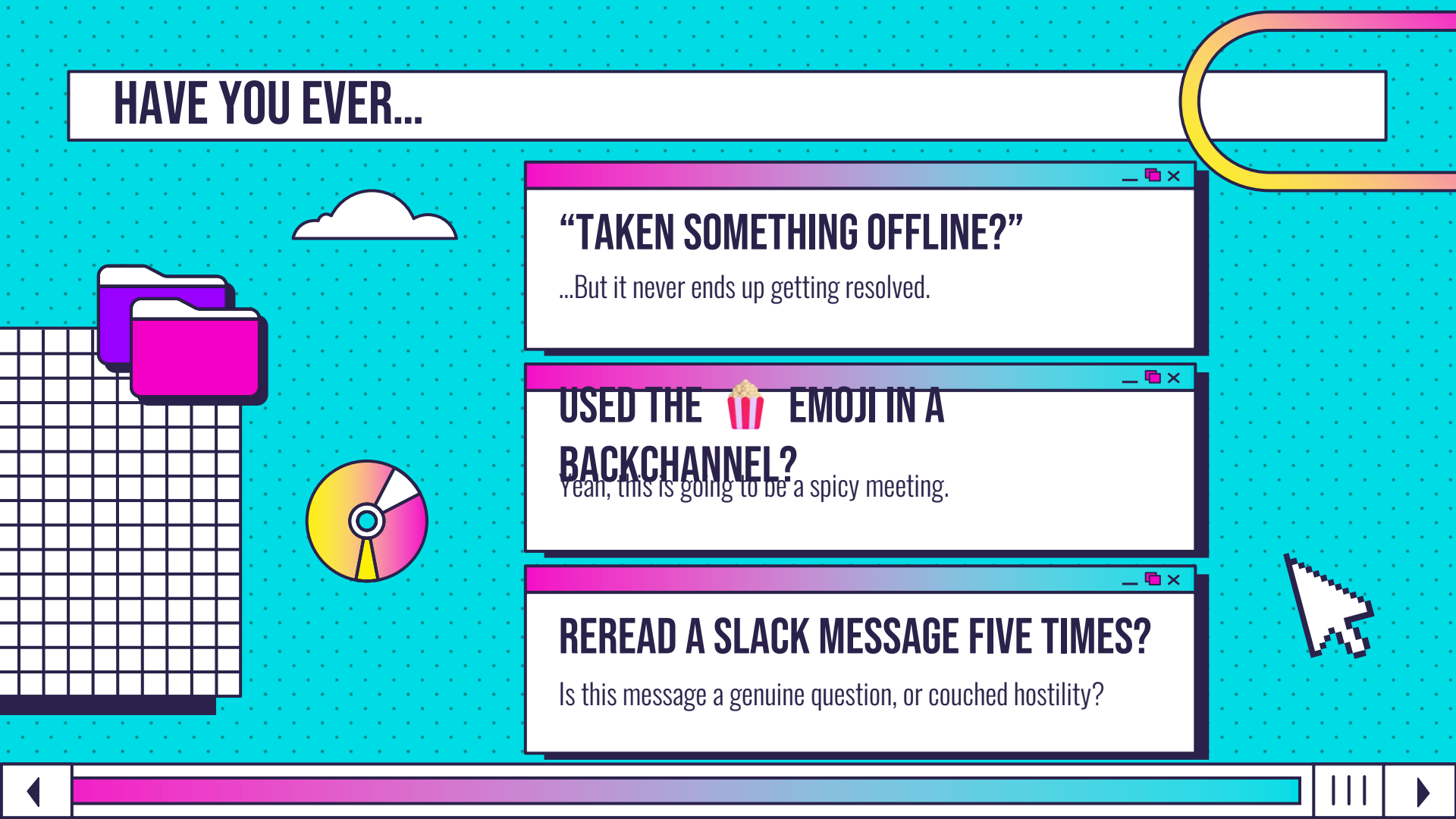
...But it never ends up getting resolved.

USED THE 🍿 EMOJI IN A BACKCHANNEL?

Yeah, this is going to be a spicy meeting.

REREREAD A SLACK MESSAGE FIVE TIMES?

Is this message a genuine question, or couched hostility?



OUTLINE FOR TODAY'S TALK



WHAT IS CONFLICT DEBT?

Let's start with the basics.



TWO CASE STUDIES

We'll explore two examples.



AVOIDANT ARCHETYPES

Avoidance comes in several flavors.



AVERSE ARCHETYPES

You'll learn how to move the needle towards a healthier style.



SO, NOW WHAT?

We'll discuss an impactful communication framework to equip you.



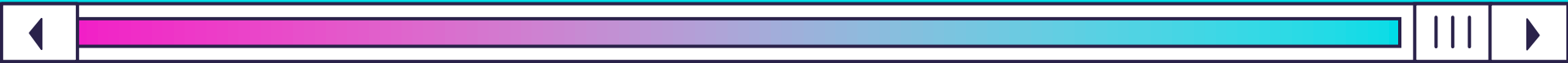
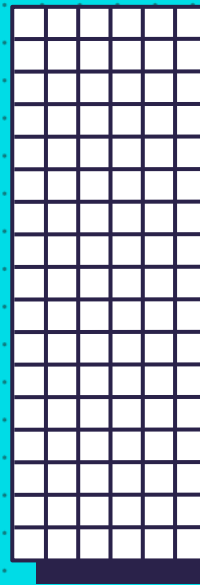
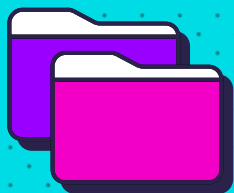
TAKEAWAYS

Tactics you can take home.





01. CONFLICT & DEBT



WHAT EXACTLY IS CONFLICT?



Conflict is the presence of opposing needs, priorities, or perspectives that create tension between people, teams, or systems. It's a **natural outcome of collaboration** and **diversity of thought**.

Conflict becomes harmful **only** when it's left unresolved, unacknowledged, or mismanaged.

Liane Davey, "The Good Fight"



WHAT EXACTLY IS CONFLICT?

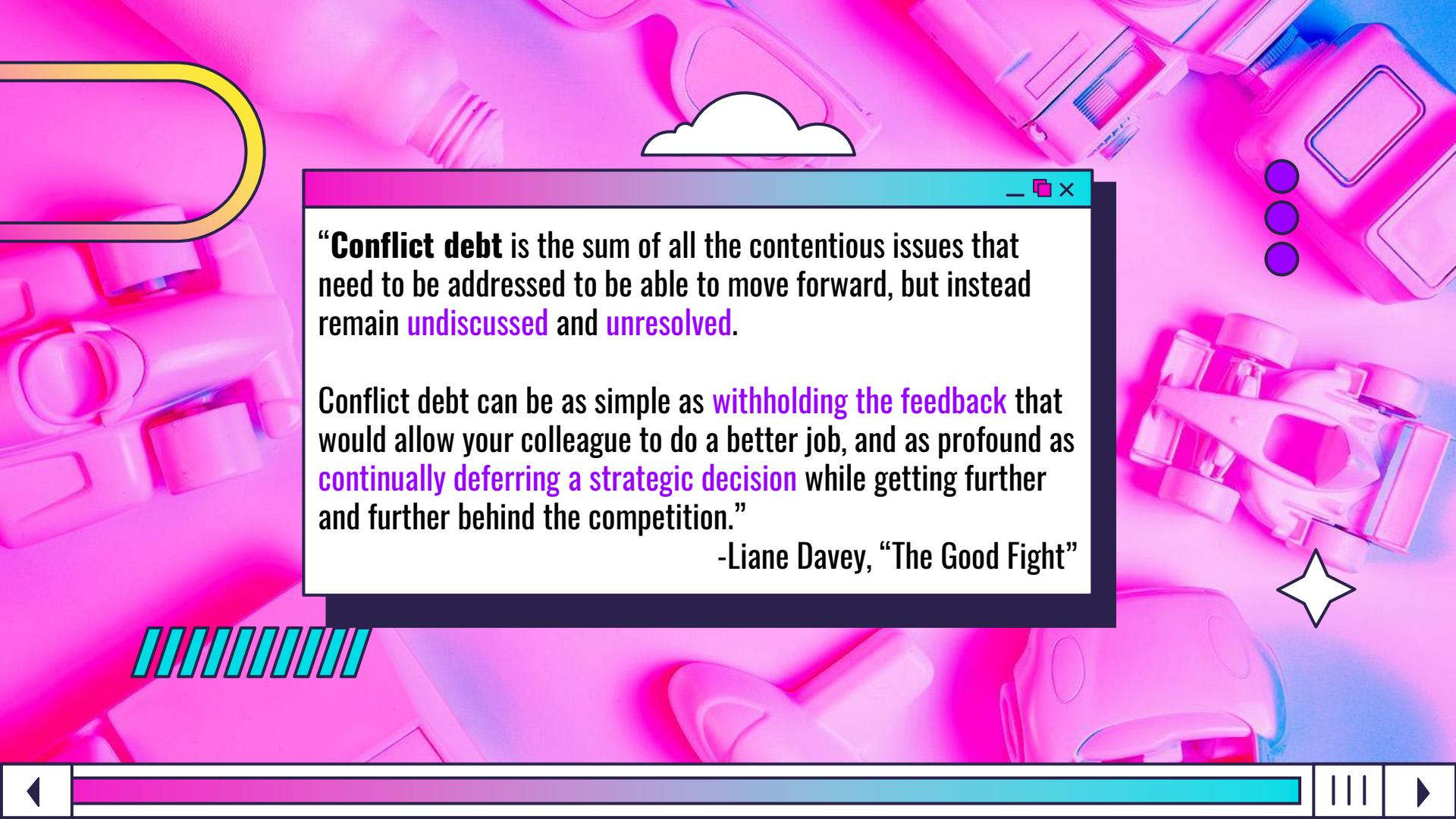


Conflict is the
priorities, or p
between peop
outcome of co

Conflict becom
unresolved, unac

CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE.
CONFLICT DEBT IS OPTIONAL.





“Conflict debt is the sum of all the contentious issues that need to be addressed to be able to move forward, but instead remain **undiscussed** and **unresolved**.

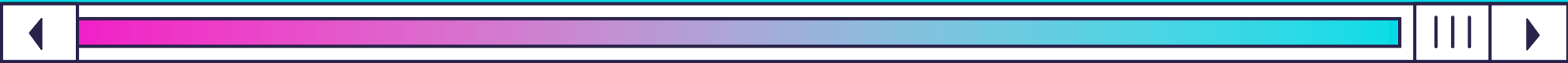
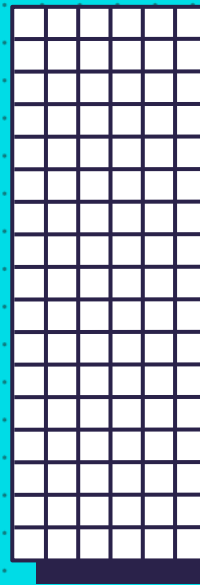
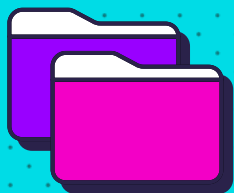
Conflict debt can be as simple as **withholding the feedback** that would allow your colleague to do a better job, and as profound as **continually deferring a strategic decision** while getting further and further behind the competition.”

-Liane Davey, “The Good Fight”





02. TWO CASE STUDIES



CASE STUDY #1: “FRANK”



MEET FRANK

Quintessential legacy developer,
with deep knowledge of a
proprietary C algorithm at a small
start-up.

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CULTURE CHANGE

An external team is brought in, and delivery slogs. Leadership attempts to “coach” Frank.

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REPAIR

Direct feedback, mediation, and a working agreement helped forge a path forward.



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CONCLUSION

Frank was eventually terminated. The conflict debt had taken its toll on the team.

CASE STUDY #2: A CANYON OF TRUST



SETTING THE STAGE

Years of conflict debt and a canyon of trust between levels made large strategic decision-making difficult.



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THE DECISION

Work began on an unpopular decision, and roadmaps were built on unresolved conflict.

CASE STUDY #2: A CANYON OF TRUST



SETTING THE STAGE

Years of conflict debt and a canyon of trust between levels made large strategic decision-making difficult.



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Work began on an unpopular decision, and roadmaps were built on unresolved conflict.



THE TURN

It took courage to question the plan, but the debt was already costly to the organization.



CASE STUDY #2: A CANYON OF TRUST



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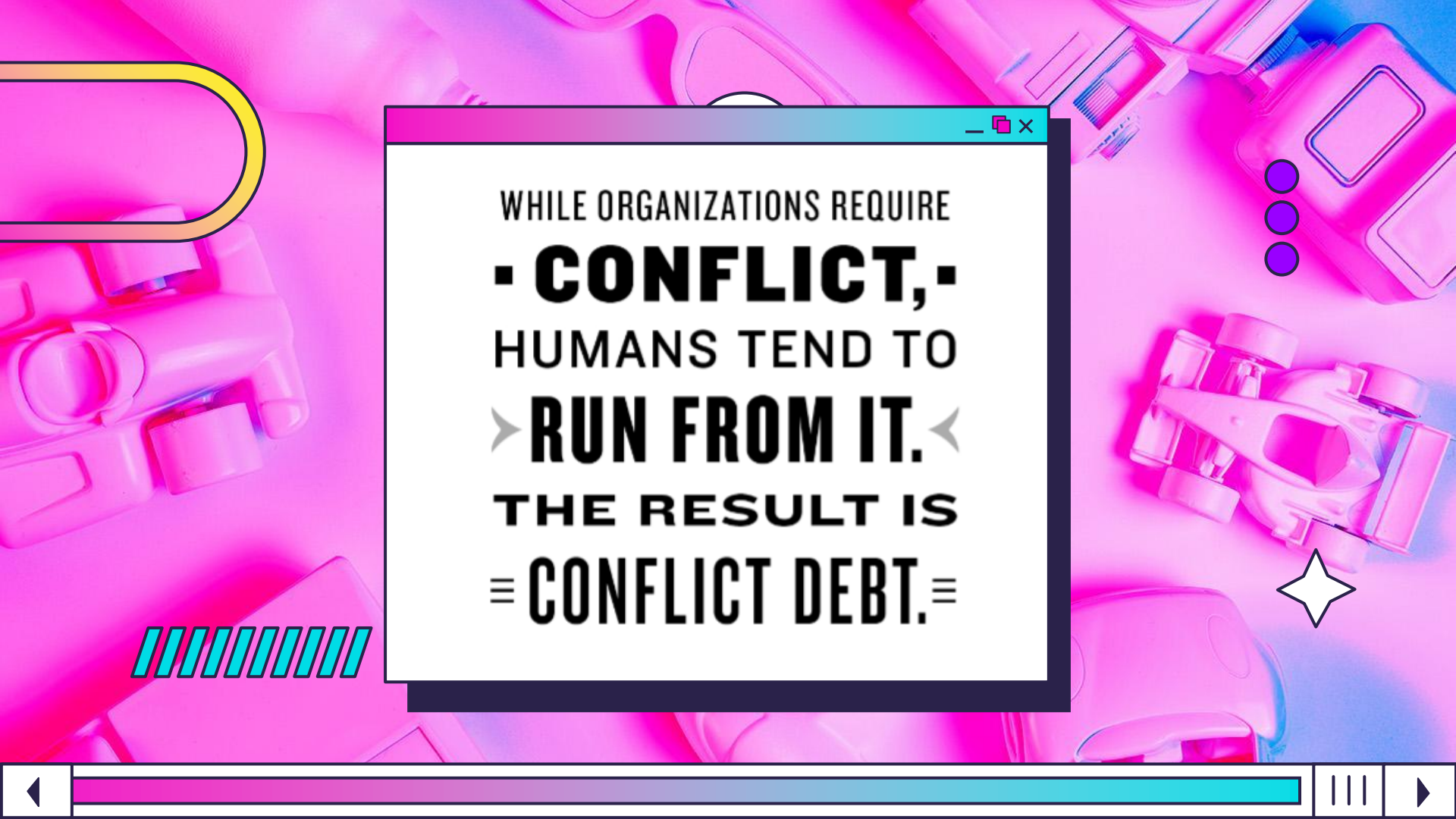
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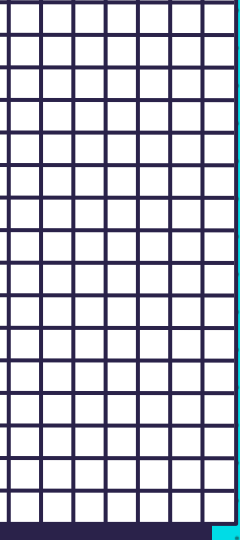
THE LESSON

Unresolved conflict doesn't disappear; it compounds until course correction is painful... and expensive.

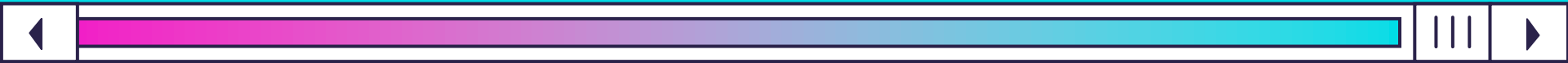




WHILE ORGANIZATIONS REQUIRE
▪ **CONFLICT,** ▪
HUMANS TEND TO
➤ **RUN FROM IT.** ◀
THE RESULT IS
≡ **CONFLICT DEBT.** ≡



STOP LETTING YOUR CONFLICTS **SPILL INTO** YOUR WORK





REFLECT: HOW DID YOUR EARLY LIFE SHAPE YOUR ATTITUDES AROUND CONFLICT?

- “Just play nice!”
- “Stay out of trouble.”
- “Mind your own business!”
- “Pick your battles.”
- “Don’t talk back.”
- “Just ignore it.”



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CONFLICT AVERSION VS. CONFLICT AVOIDANCE



CONFLICT AVERSION

A natural discomfort or nervousness around difficult conversations.



CONFLICT AVOIDANCE

A pattern of chronically sidestepping or suppressing conflict, to the detriment of alignment and trust.



CONFLICT AVERSION VS. CONFLICT AVOIDANCE



CONFLICT AVERSION

- Racing heart before feedback sessions
- Over-prepping for a tough meeting
- Worrying about “What if I upset them?”
- Procrastinating *briefly*, but addressing the issue



CONFLICT AVOIDANCE

- Canceling recurring 1:1s with someone difficult
- Never surfacing disagreements. “Sure, sounds good!”
- Gossip / backchanneling instead of direct dialogue
- Issues repeatedly deferred until they explode



CONFLICT AVERSION VS. CONFLICT AVOIDANCE



CONFLICT AVERSION

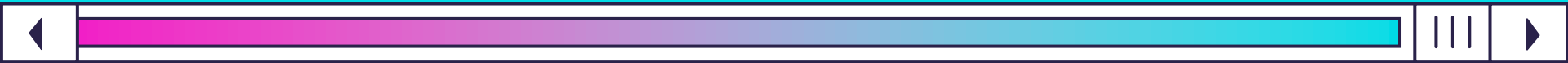
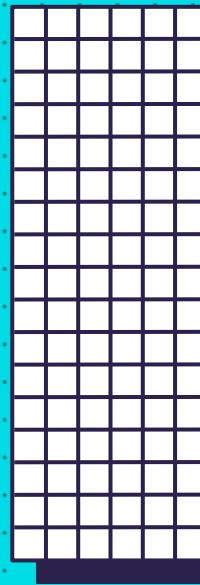
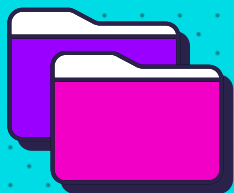
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AVOIDANCE ARCHETYPES



THE SIDE-STEPPER

Surely if I ignore the problem, it will go away.



THE PEACEMAKER

We wouldn't want anyone to be upset, now, would we?



THE BULLDOG

The only way? MY WAY.



THE SYCOPHANT

If I only ask my friends, I'll always be right!



bushes.gif



01. THE SIDE-STEPPER

- Withdrawal / Non-response
- Delay tactics
- Minimal engagement
- Deflection





.gif _ □ ×



01+. THE ENGAGER

- Shows up, even when it's tense
- Gives timely responses to conflict
- Employs constructive pauses
- Offers grounded input

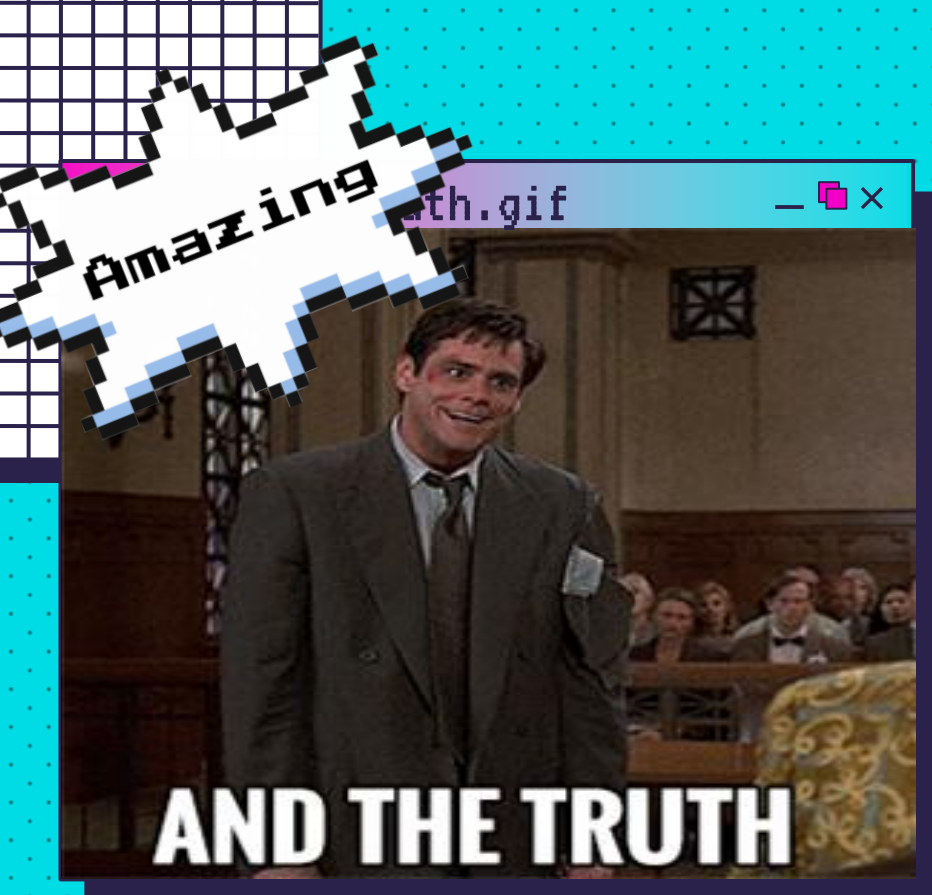


ouiija.gif



02. THE PEACEMAKER

- Over-facilitation
- Excessive deference
- People-pleasing behaviors
- Avoid hard truths



02+. THE TRUTH-TELLER

- Balanced facilitation
- Empathetic challenge
- Constructive candor
- Long-term focus

strut.gif



03. THE BULLDOG

- Over-insistence
- Escalation
- All-or-nothing framing
- Dominating airtime



challenge.

Now with
less
sodium!



03+. THE CHALLENGER

- Direct, but respectful
- Curious probing
- Flexible framing
- Shared airtime



ouija.gif



04. THE SYCOPHANT

- Echo chamber building
- Avoids scrutiny
- Performative alignment
- Curated consensus

ouija.gif

Building early buy-in is about **pressure-testing your idea**, so it's stronger when it hits the table.

Curated consensus is about **bubble-wrapping your idea** so it never has to be tested at all.

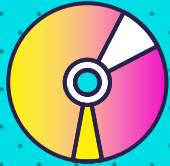
HANT



04+. THE CONNECTOR

- Inclusive pre-alignment
- Curiosity-driven questions
- Respect for dissent
- Transparent framing

CONFLICT AVERSION VS. CONFLICT AVOIDANCE



CONFLICT AVOIDANCE

Impact on teams:

- Issues tend to **re-emerge**
- Fragile, surface-level **consensus**
- **Low** psychological trust
- Risk of **echo chambers**



CONFLICT AVERSION

Impact on teams:

- Problems are surfaced & **resolved earlier**
- Builds **lasting alignment**
- Strengthens **psychological safety**
- **Improves decision quality** through diverse perspectives



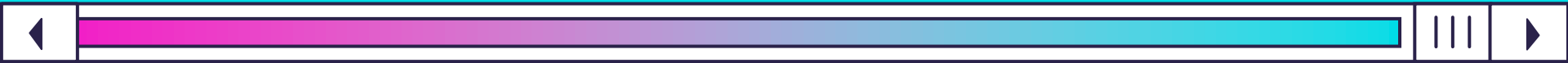
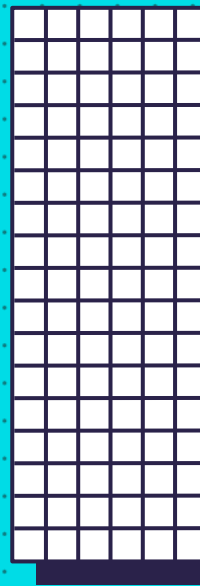
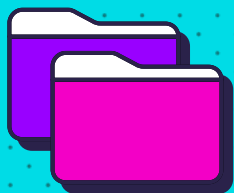
smash.gif



DON'T **SQUASH**
THE CONFLICT
DOWN

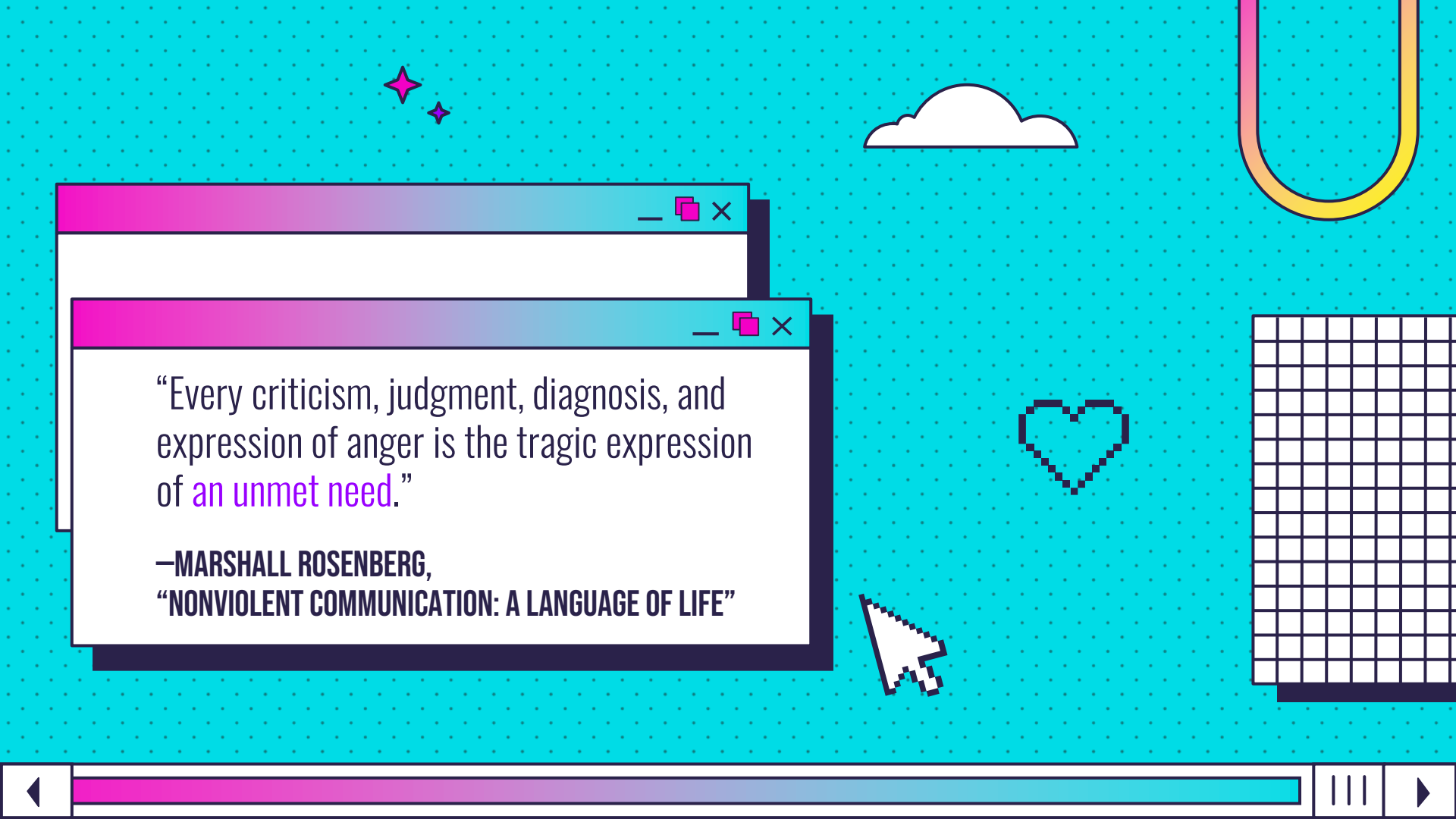
But how do we actually move from the shadow
side to the **healthy side**?





NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION (NVC)

- Framework for difficult conversations that balances *honesty with empathy*
- Helps name *what's really going on*, without blame or defensiveness
- *Builds connection* by understanding each party's needs

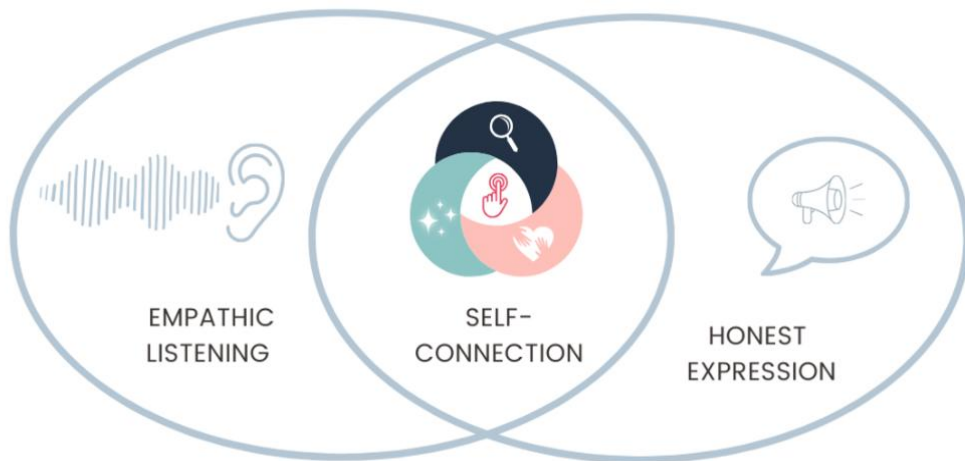


“Every criticism, judgment, diagnosis, and expression of anger is the tragic expression of **an unmet need**.”

—MARSHALL ROSENBERG,
“NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION: A LANGUAGE OF LIFE”



3 COMMUNICATION OPTIONS



natibeltran.com





2. COMMUNICATION OPTIONS

NVC ≠ The “Nice Voice Club”

It's not about being soft. It's about
being clear without being cruel.



THE 4 ELEMENTS OF NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION



natibeltran.com

OBSERVATION

Facts, description of what is seen/
heard (devoid of interpretations)

FEELINGS

Emotions
(disentangled from thoughts)

NEEDS

Universal longings, values, drives
(not strategies or solutions)

REQUEST

Are you willing to ... ?
(specific, actionable, positive)

EXAMPLES OF NVC IN PLAY

BEFORE NVC:

“What the hell is this code? Did you even test it?”

AFTER NVC:

“When I read the function and didn’t see any unit tests, I felt... *curious* and mildly terrified, because I need confidence that production won’t catch fire. Would you be willing to walk me through your test plan?”

EXAMPLES OF NVC IN PLAY

BEFORE NVC:

“Hey, you keep missing deadlines, and it’s making the whole team look bad. What’s going on?”

AFTER NVC:

“When I saw the integration ticket slip past the release date without an update, I felt frustrated and anxious, because I need predictability and transparency to plan work effectively. Would you be willing to post a short update in the channel when things are blocked?”

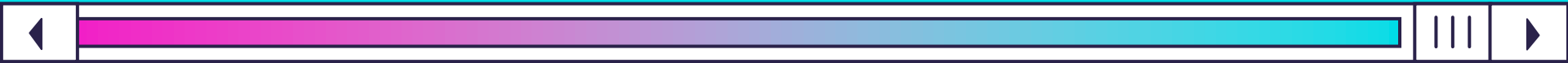
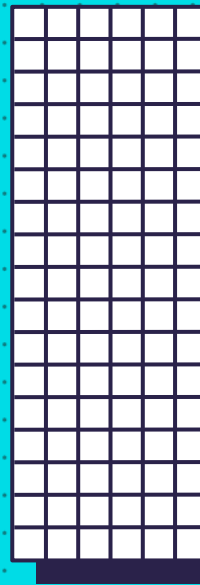
EXAMPLES OF NVC IN PLAY

BEFORE NVC:

“You keep changing the requirements. How do you expect us to hit deadlines when the goalposts keep moving?”

AFTER NVC:

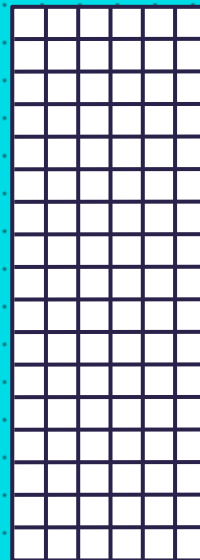
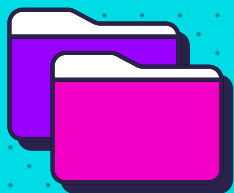
“**When** the scope for the onboarding feature changed again this sprint, **I felt** overwhelmed and concerned, **because I need** clarity to do my best work. **What conditions need to be in place** for us to lock the scope for the rest of this cycle and capture any new ideas in the next sprint?”

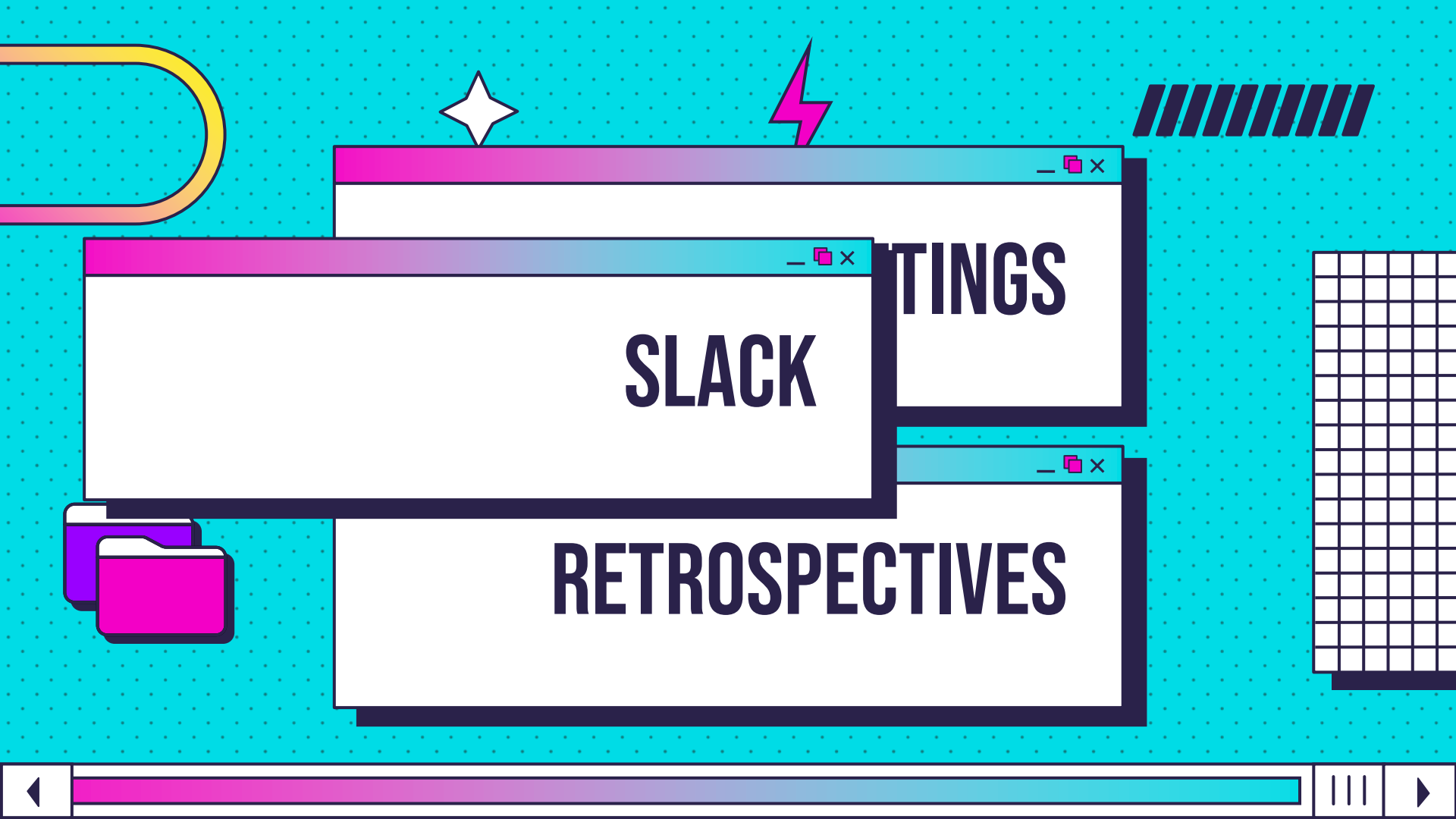




1:1 MEETINGS

RETROSPECTIVES

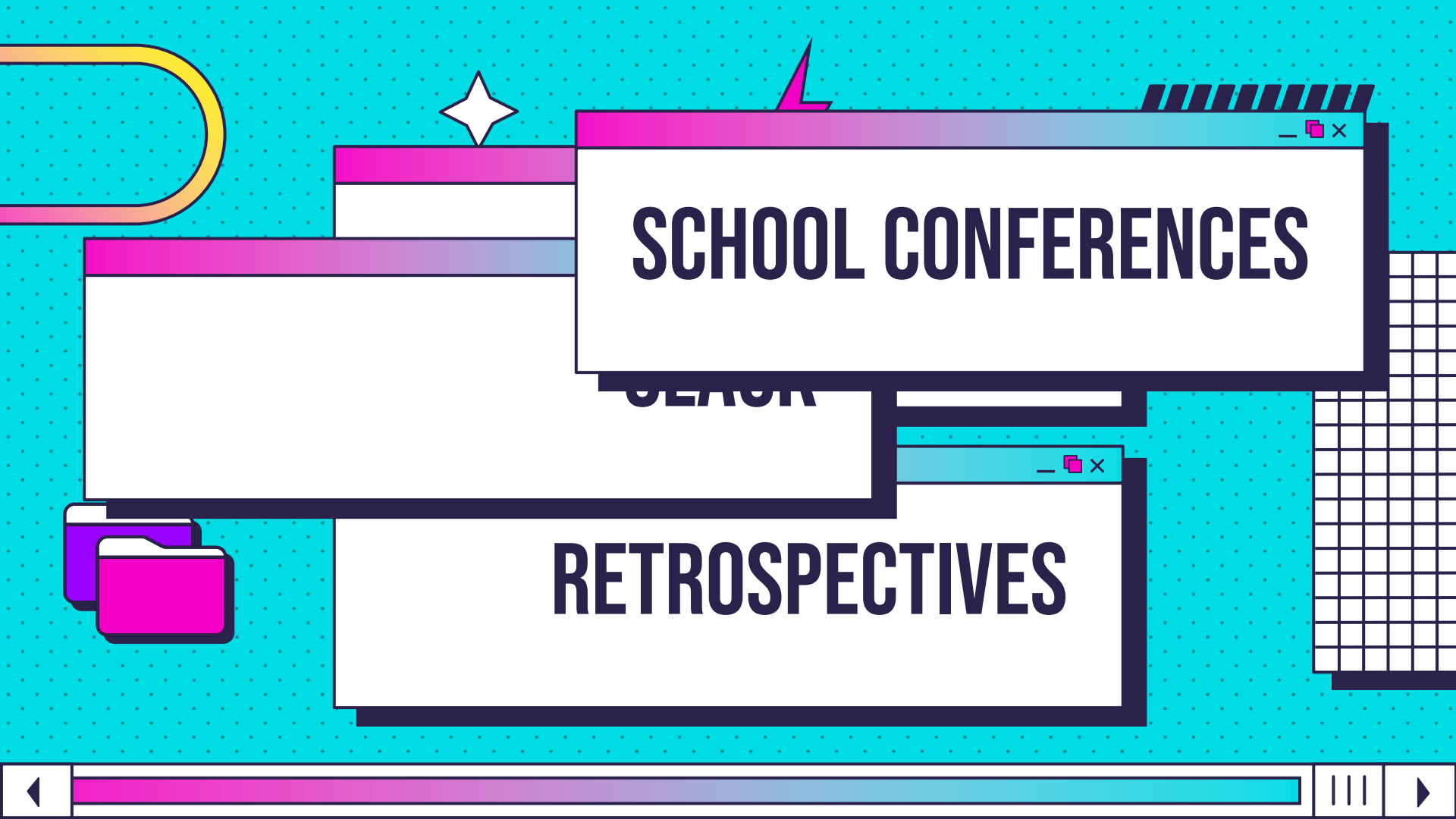




SLACK

TINGS

RETROSPECTIVES



SCHOOL CONFERENCES

RETROSPECTIVES



SCHOOL CONFERENCES

FRIEND CONFLICTS

IVES



SCHOOL CONFERENCES

FRIEND CO

THE GROCERY STORE



SCHOOL CONFERENCES

**DEFINITELY YOUR IN-
LAWS**

THE GROCERY STORE

book.png

Nonviolent COMMUNICATION

A Language of Life



3rd Edition

Words and the way we think matters.
Find common ground with anyone, anywhere,
at any time, both personally and professionally.

MARSHALL B. ROSENBERG, PhD

REAL EXAMPLES:

- School Integration and Racial Conflict Mediation
- Peacebuilding in Conflict Zones
- Also, Microsoft's CEO Likes It

giraffe.gif _ □ ×



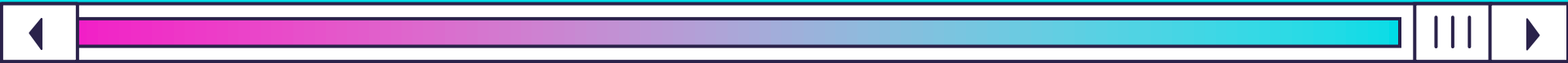
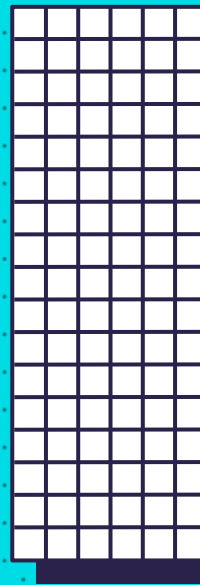
YES, THERE ARE PUPPETS

But also **growing evidence**:

- Study indicating [improvements in empathy](#)
- Study on [reducing workplace conflict](#)
- Study on measuring [NVC objectively](#)



CAN'T I JUST, LIKE,
FIRE EVERYONE?



Windows

An error has occurred. To continue:

Press Enter to return to Windows, or

Press CTRL+ALT+DEL to restart your computer. If you do this,
you will lose any unsaved information in all open applications.

Error: 0E : 016F : BFF9B3D4

Press any key to continue _



TAKEAWAYS



RECOGNIZE

Reflect on your relationship with conflict, and recognize the debt accumulating in your organization.



PRACTICE

Find new ways to talk about conflict. Nonviolent Communication is a powerful framework.



INFLUENCE

Use your new superpowers to unlock others. It's your duty as a leader and commitment to those around you.



OK BYE!



DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?
MEET ME DURING OFFICE HOURS!

 lizhustedt@gmail.com

 <https://www.linkedin.com/in/lizhustedt/>

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FINISHED!

