MARGARET
BOSSEN

@MBOSSEN

# MAKING SENSE OUT OF ANY MESS

From the book by Abby Covert

"If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe."

– Carl Sagan, Cosmos

MAKE SENSE OF THINGS

- Making progress in the face of chaos, confusion, and complexity is something we all have in common.

- Information Architecture is a set of concepts that can help to… make sense of messes caused by misinformation, disinformation, not enough, or too much information.

MAKE SENSE OUT OF MESSES
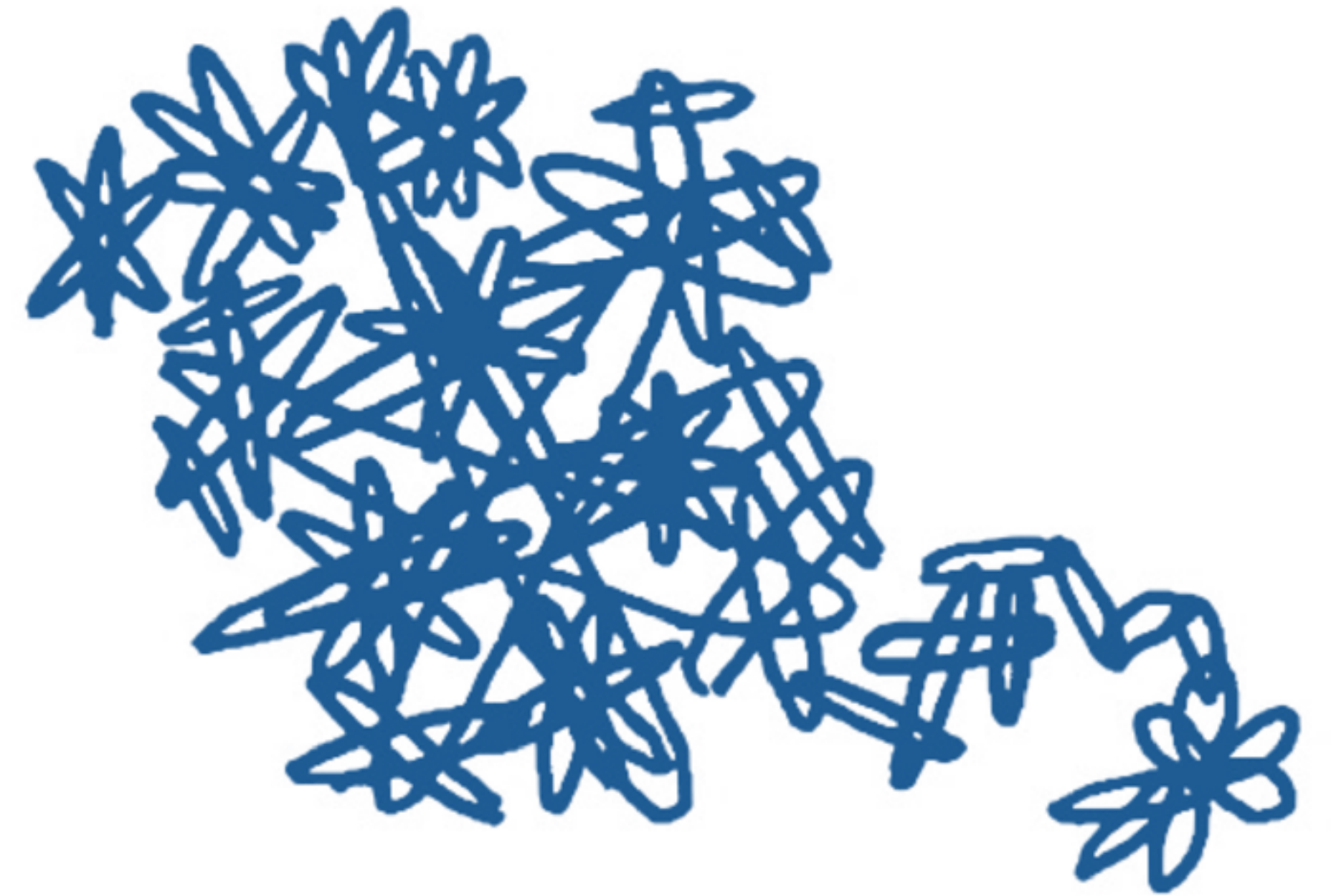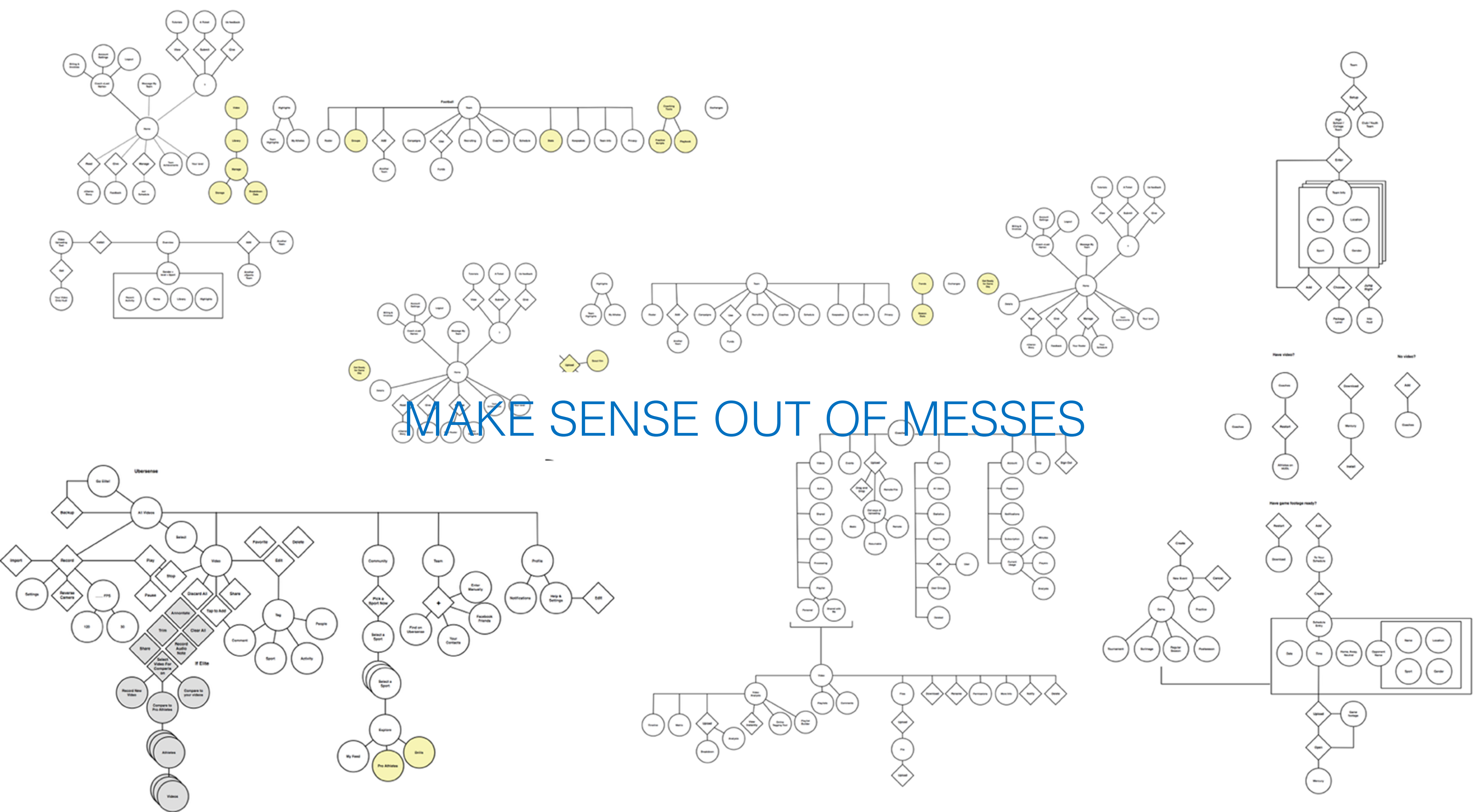
IDENTIFY THE MESS

MESSES ARE MADE OF INFORMATION & PEOPLE

A mess is any situation where something is confusing or full of difficulty.

We all encounter messes.

- STRUCTURES OF TEAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS

- PROCESSES WE UNDERTAKE IN WORKING TOGETHER

- HOW PRODUCTS AND SERVICES ARE REPRESENTED, SOLD, AND DELIVERED TO US

- HOW WE COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER
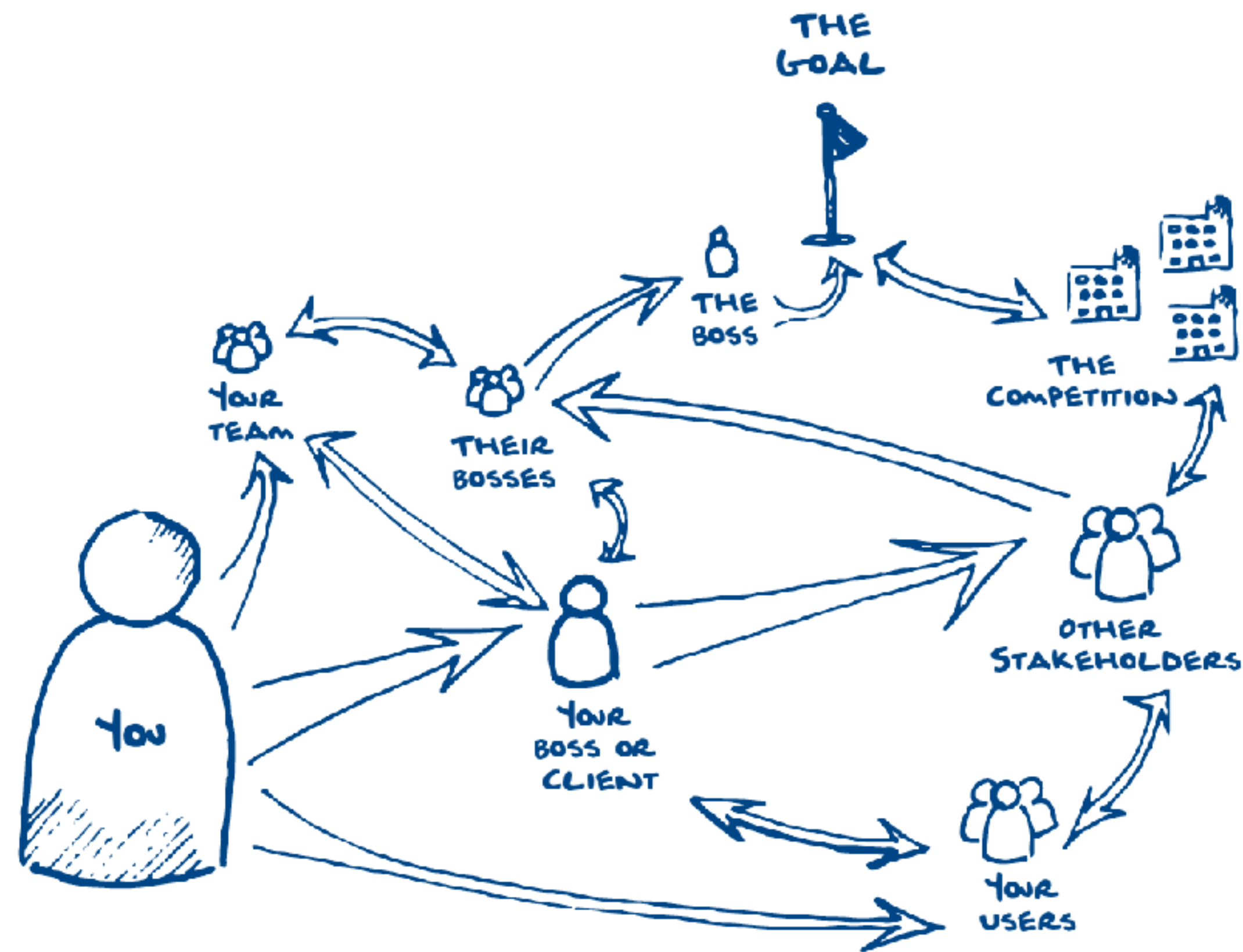
THE POLITICS of MAKING SENSE

SHINING A LIGHT ON
THE MESSES WE FACE

The first step to taming
any mess is to
shine a light on it
so you can outline its
edges and depths.

- WE CAN BE PARALYZED BY FEAR AND NOT KNOW HOW TO APPROACH THE MESS

- CONFUSION, PROCRASTINATION, SELF-CRITICISM, AND FRUSTRATION KEEP US FROM CHANGING THE WORLD.

INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE IS EVERYWHERE

Information architecture is the way that we arrange the parts of something to make it understandable.

- ALPHABETICAL CROSS-REFERENCES AS USED IN A DICTIONARY OR ENCYCLOPEDIA

- LINKS IN WEBSITE NAVIGATION

- SECTIONS, LABELS, AND NAMES OF THINGS ON A RESTAURANT MENU

- CATEGORIES, LABELS AND TASKS USED IN A SOFTWARE PROGRAM OR APPLICATION

- SIGNS THAT DIRECT TRAVELERS IN AN AIRPORT

INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE IS EVERYWHERE

We've been learning how to architect information

forever!

- PAGE NUMBERING, ALPHABETICAL ORDER, INDEXES, LEXICONS, MAPS, AND DIAGRAMS ARE ALL EXAMPLES OF INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE ACHIEVEMENTS

- TECHNOLOGY CONTINUES TO CHANGE THE THINGS WE MAKE AND USE AT A RATE WE DON'T UNDERSTAND YET.

- IN REALITY, THERE AREN'T THAT MANY CAUSES FOR CONFUSING INFORMATION.

CAUSES FOR CONFUSING INFORMATION:

- Too much information
- Not enough information
- Not the right information
- Some combination of these (eek!)
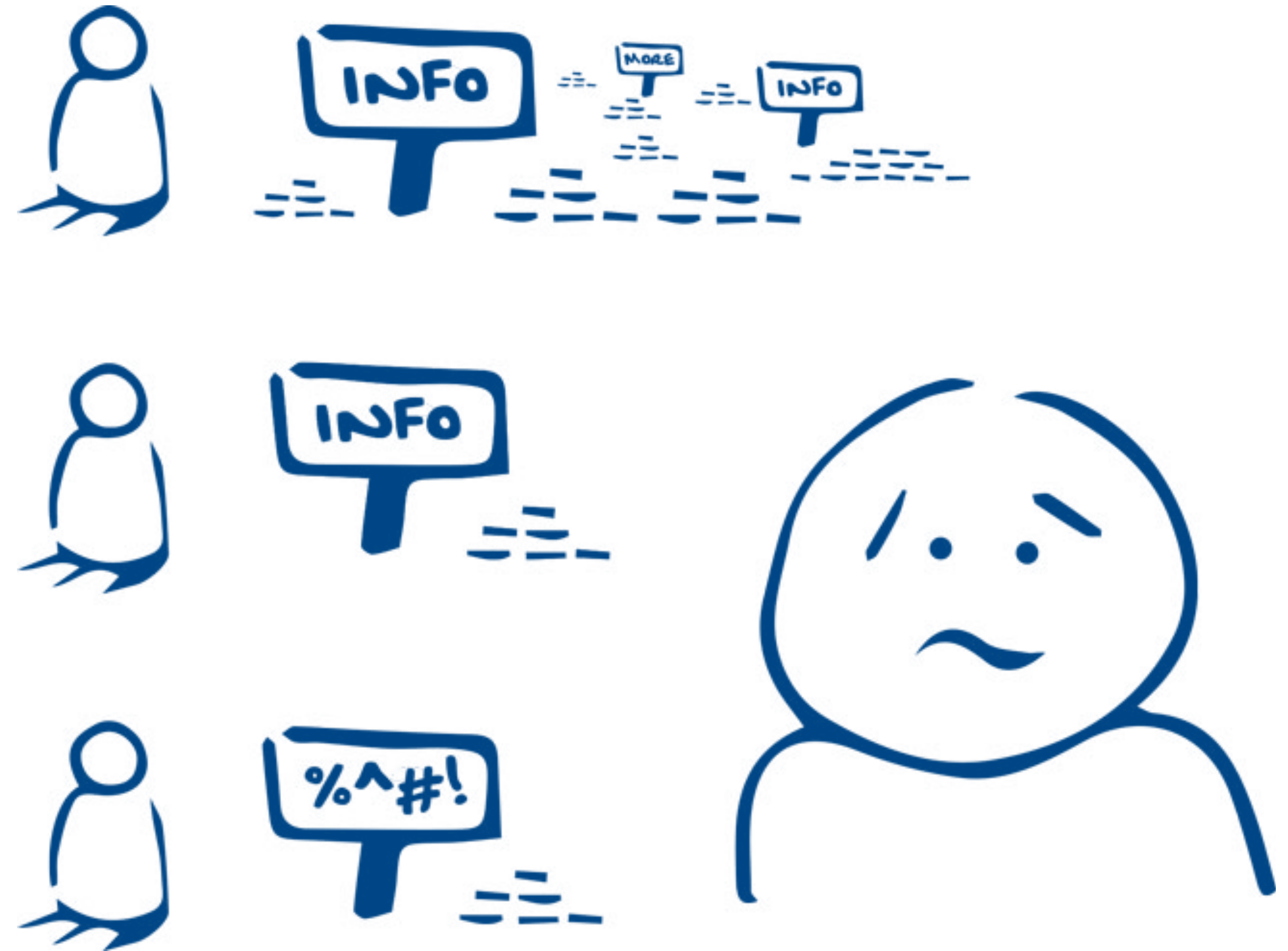
PEOPLE ARCHITECT INFORMATION

When we architect information, we discover how to structure and communicate our message.

Everything around you was architected by another person.

- INFORMATION IS A RESPONSIBILITY WE ALL SHARE.

- TO BE SUCCESSFUL, WE NEED TO SEE INFORMATION AS A WORKABLE MATERIAL.

- LEARN TO ARCHITECT INFORMATION IN A WAY THAT GETS US TO OUR GOALS.

EVERY *THING* IS COMPLEX

Some things are simple.
Some things are complicated.
Every single *thing* in the
universe is complex.

Complexity is part of
the equation.

- LACKING A CLEAR DIRECTION OR AGREEING ON HOW TO APPROACH SOMETHING

- COMPLEXITY COMES FROM CREATING, CHANGING, AND MAINTAINING USEFUL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS

- PEOPLE HAVING DIFFERING PERCEPTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS MAKE MESSES COMPLEX TO WORK THROUGH

KNOWLEDGE IS COMPLEX

Knowledge is surprisingly subjective.

True means "without variation," but finding something that doesn't vary feels impossible.

- BE COURAGEOUS! UNRAVEL CONFLICTS AND ASSUMPTIONS

- AGREE ON WHAT THINGS MEAN, WHAT IS ACTUALLY TRUE

- WHEN OTHERS HAVE A DIFFERENT INTERPRETATION OF WHAT WE'RE MAKING – IT MAKES THE MESS SEEM EVEN BIGGER AND MORE IMPOSSIBLE

EVERY *THING* HAS INFORMATION

Things come in all sorts, shapes, and sizes sharing one thing: Information

Information is represented by a particular arrangement or sequence of things.

- THINGS MAY BE ANALOG OR DIGITAL

- USED ONCE OR FOR A LIFETIME

- MADE BY HAND OR MANUFACTURED BY MACHINES

- EVERY MESS AND EVERY *THING* SHARE ONE IMPORTANT *NON-THING*: INFORMATION.

WHAT IS INFORMATION?

Information
is as old as language.
It is not a thing.
It's subjective, not objective.

It's what a user interprets from the arrangement or sequence of things they encounter.

- WE CAN ARRANGE THINGS WITH THE INTENT TO COMMUNICATE CERTAIN INFORMATION.

- HOWEVER WE CAN'T ACTUALLY MAKE INFORMATION.

- OUR USERS DO THAT FOR US.

INFORMATION IS NOT DATA OR CONTENT

Data is facts, observations, and questions about something.

Content can be cookies, words, documents, images, videos, or whatever you're arranging or sequencing.

- THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INFORMATION, DATA, AND CONTENT IS TRICKY.

- *ABSENCE* OF CONTENT OR DATA CAN BE JUST AS INFORMING AS PRESENCE

INFORMATION IS ARCHITECTED FOR DIFFERENT NEEDS

A dictionary or a thesaurus is nothing like your favorite book.

Architecture and content determine how you interpret and use the information.

- RIP OUT THE CONTENT FROM YOUR FAVORITE BOOK AND THROW THE PAGES AND WORDS ON THE FLOOR?

- DEFINE EACH WORD FROM YOUR FAVORITE BOOK AND ORGANIZE THE DEFINITIONS ALPHABETICALLY?
DICTIONARY

- ARRANGE EACH WORD FROM YOUR BOOK BY GATHERING SIMILARLY DEFINED WORDS?
THESAURUS

"8 of 10 Doctors
Do Not Recommend"

"Doctor Recommended"

- Both are true statements, but each serves a different intent
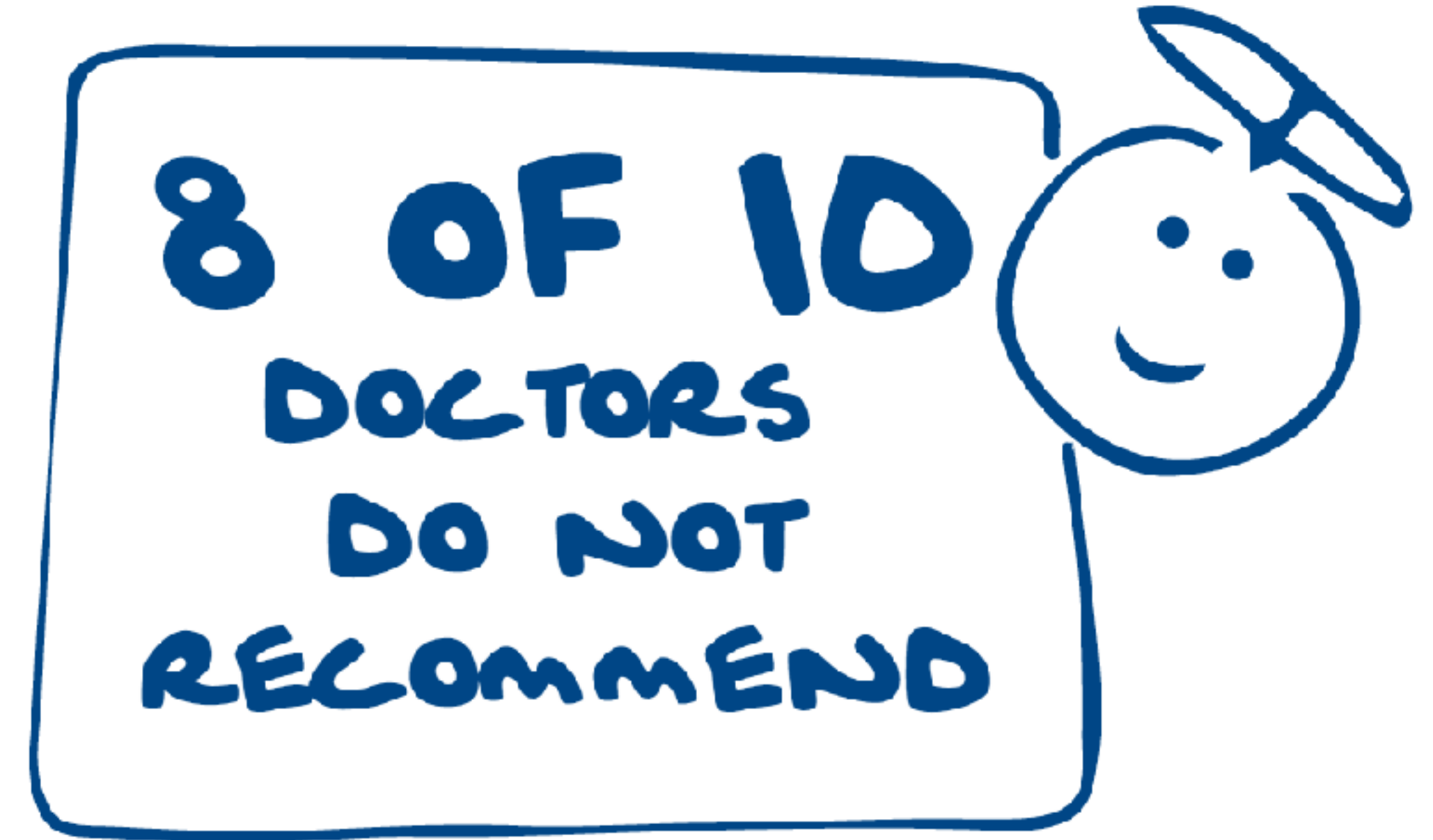
USERS ARE COMPLEX

User is another word for a person, implying that they're using the thing we're making.

When it comes to our use and interpretation of things, people are complex creatures.

- WE'RE FULL OF CONTRADICTIONS!

- WE EXPECT THINGS TO BE DIGITAL, BUT ALSO, IN MANY CASES, PHYSICAL.

- WE WANT THINGS TO FEEL "AUTO-MAGIC" BUT STILL RETAIN A HUMAN TOUCH.

- WE WANT TO BE SAFE, BUT NOT SPIED ON.

Now – in this modern age:

We have easy access
to other people's experiences
to help us decide if something
is worth experiencing at all.

STAKEHOLDERS ARE COMPLEX

A stakeholder is someone who has a viable and legitimate interest in the work you're doing.

Sometimes we choose our stakeholders; sometimes, we don't have that luxury.

- WORKING TOGETHER IS DIFFICULT WHEN STAKEHOLDERS SEE THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY THAN WE DO

- TO FIND THE BEST PATH FORWARD, SOMETIMES WE HAVE TO BE THE ONE WITHOUT OPINIONS AND PREFERENCES

TO DO IS TO KNOW

Practicing IA means having the courage to push past the edges of your current reality.

It means asking questions that inspire change.

It takes honesty and confidence in other people.

- SOMETIMES, WE HAVE TO MOVE FORWARD KNOWING THAT OTHER PEOPLE TRIED TO MAKE SENSE OF THIS MESS AND FAILED.

- WE MAY NEED TO SHINE THE LIGHT BRIGHTER OR LONGER THAN THEY DID.

- WE MAY KNOW THE OUTCOMES OF THEIR FATE, BUT WE DON'T KNOW OUR OWN YET.

- **WE CAN'T KNOW UNTIL WE TRY.**

These unknowns and scary things
are all potential realities.

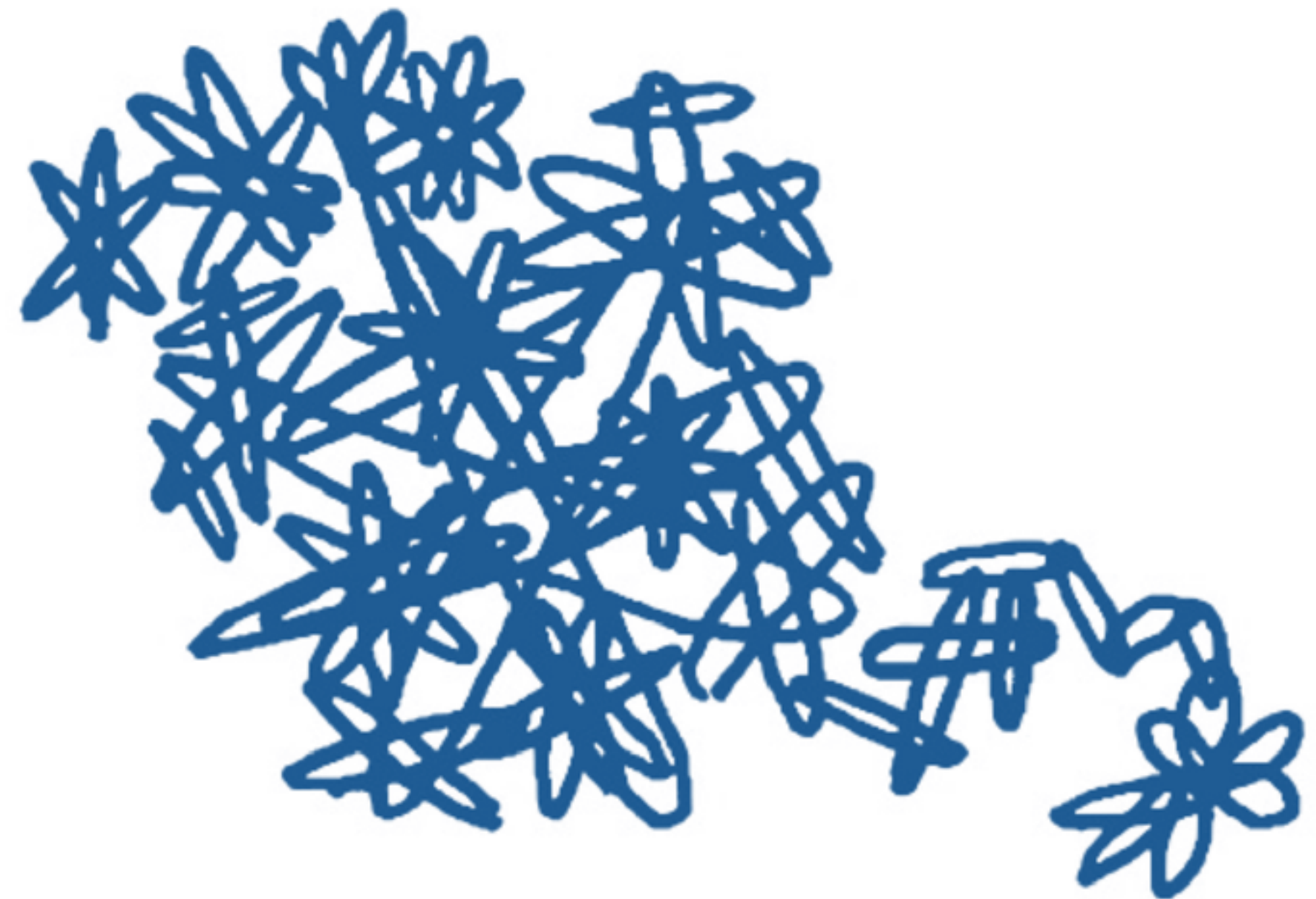Understanding that is
part of the journey.

The only way to know
what happens next is to do it.

EXERCISE!!

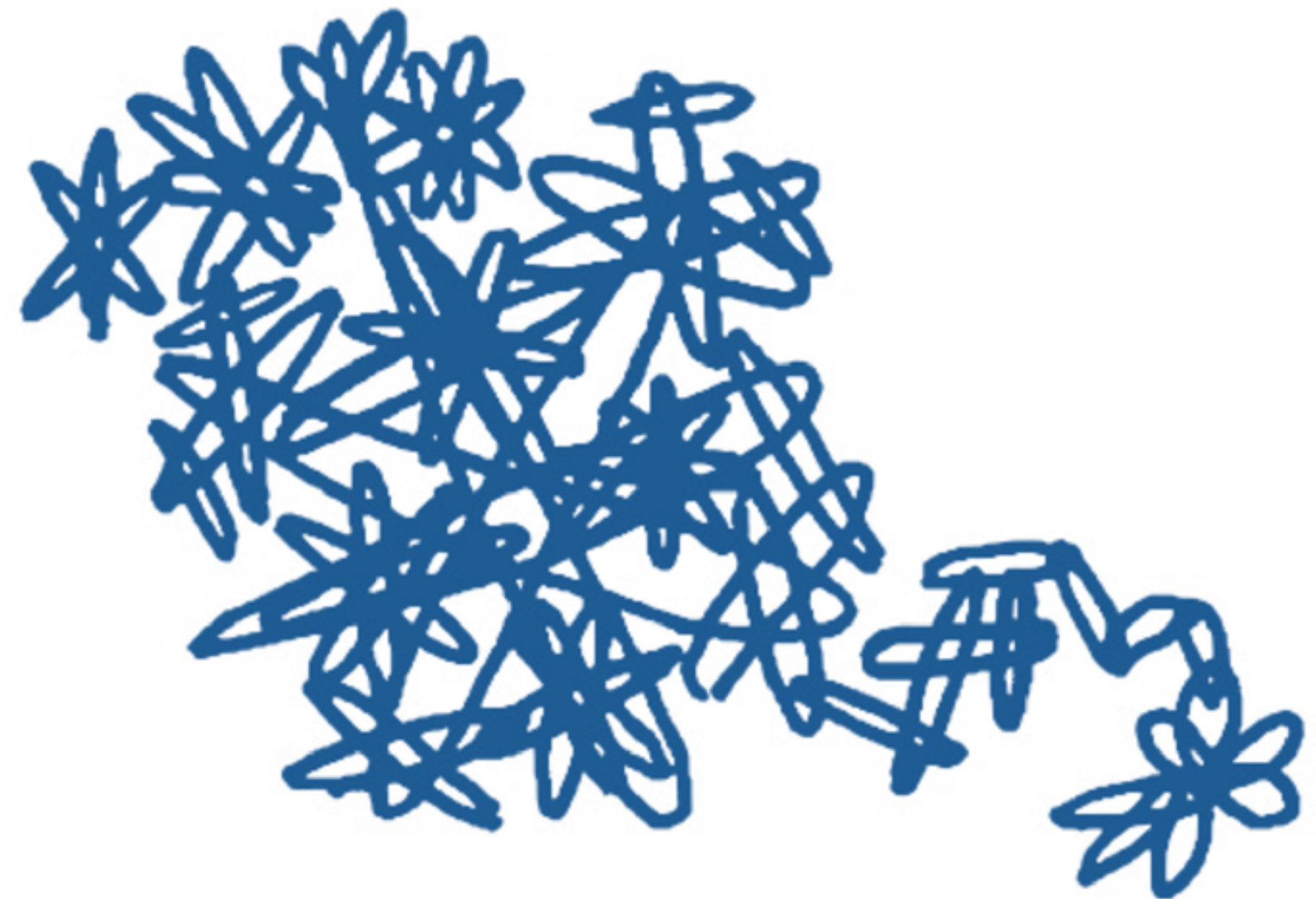# IDENTIFY THE MESS YOU'RE FACING

Users:

- Who are your intended users?

- What do you know about them?

- How can you get to know them better?

- How might they describe this mess?

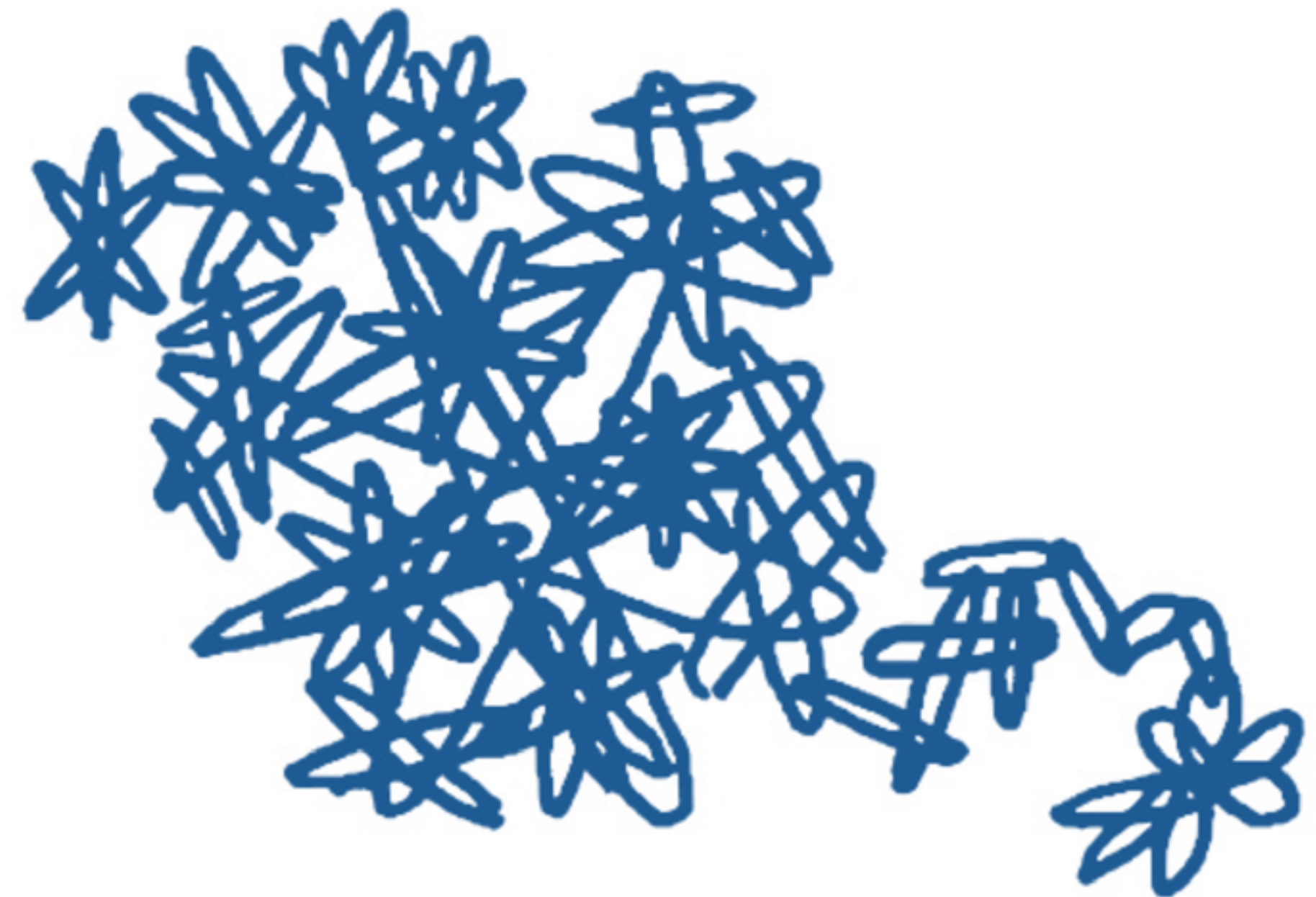# IDENTIFY THE MESS YOU'RE FACING

Stakeholders

- Who are your stakeholders?

- What are their expectations?

- What are their thoughts about this mess?

- How might they describe it?

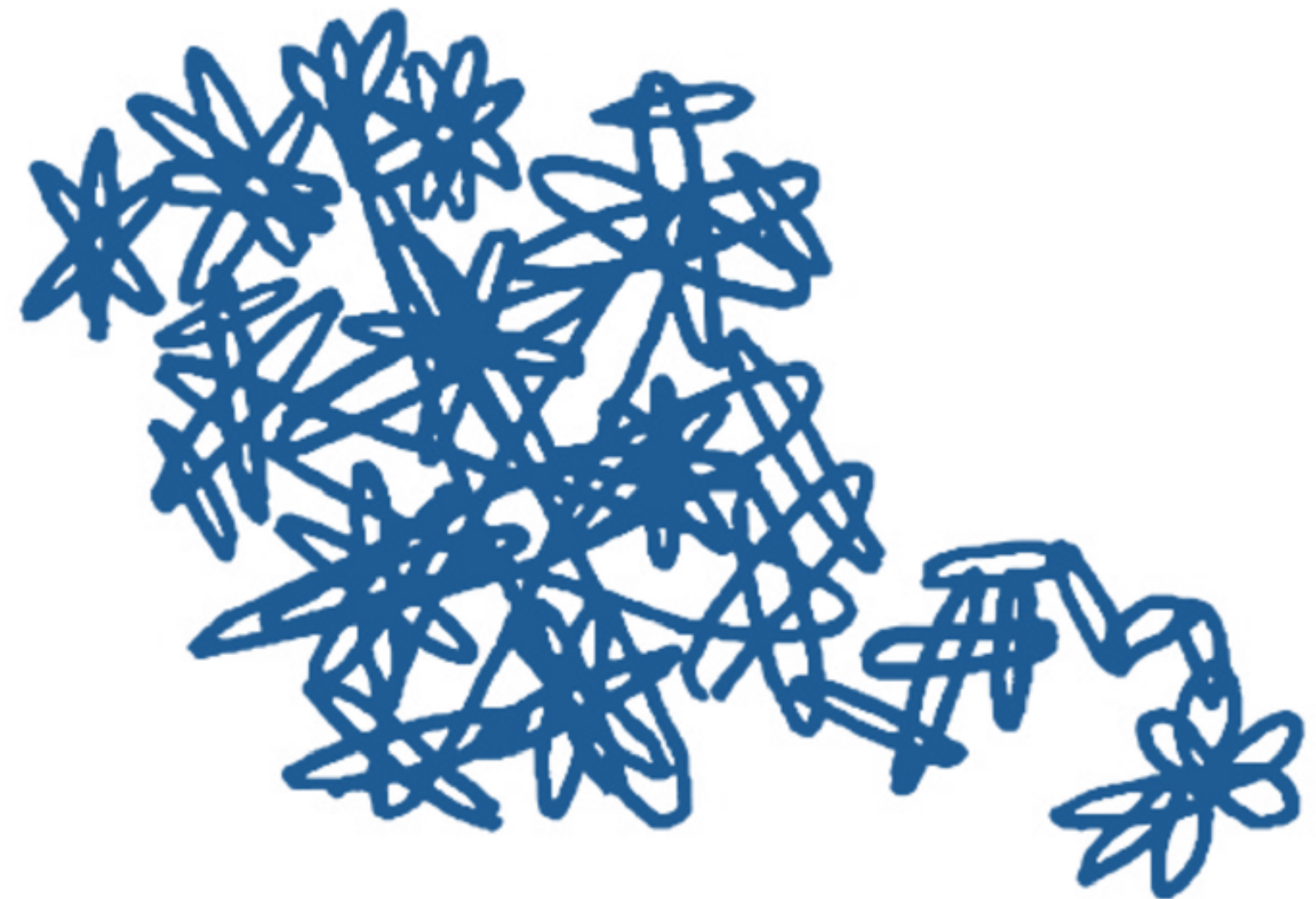# IDENTIFY THE MESS YOU'RE FACING

Information

- What interpretations are you dealing with?
- What information is being created through a lack of data or content?

IDENTIFY THE MESS YOU'RE FACING

Current State:

- Are you dealing with too much information?

- Not enough information?

- Not the right information?

- Or a combination of these?

THANK YOU

ON TO CHAPTER 2 →