

Building Great Engineer Cultures from 0 to Scale



Marty Weiner

First CTO@Reddit

Founding Engy@Pinterest



u/Mart2D2



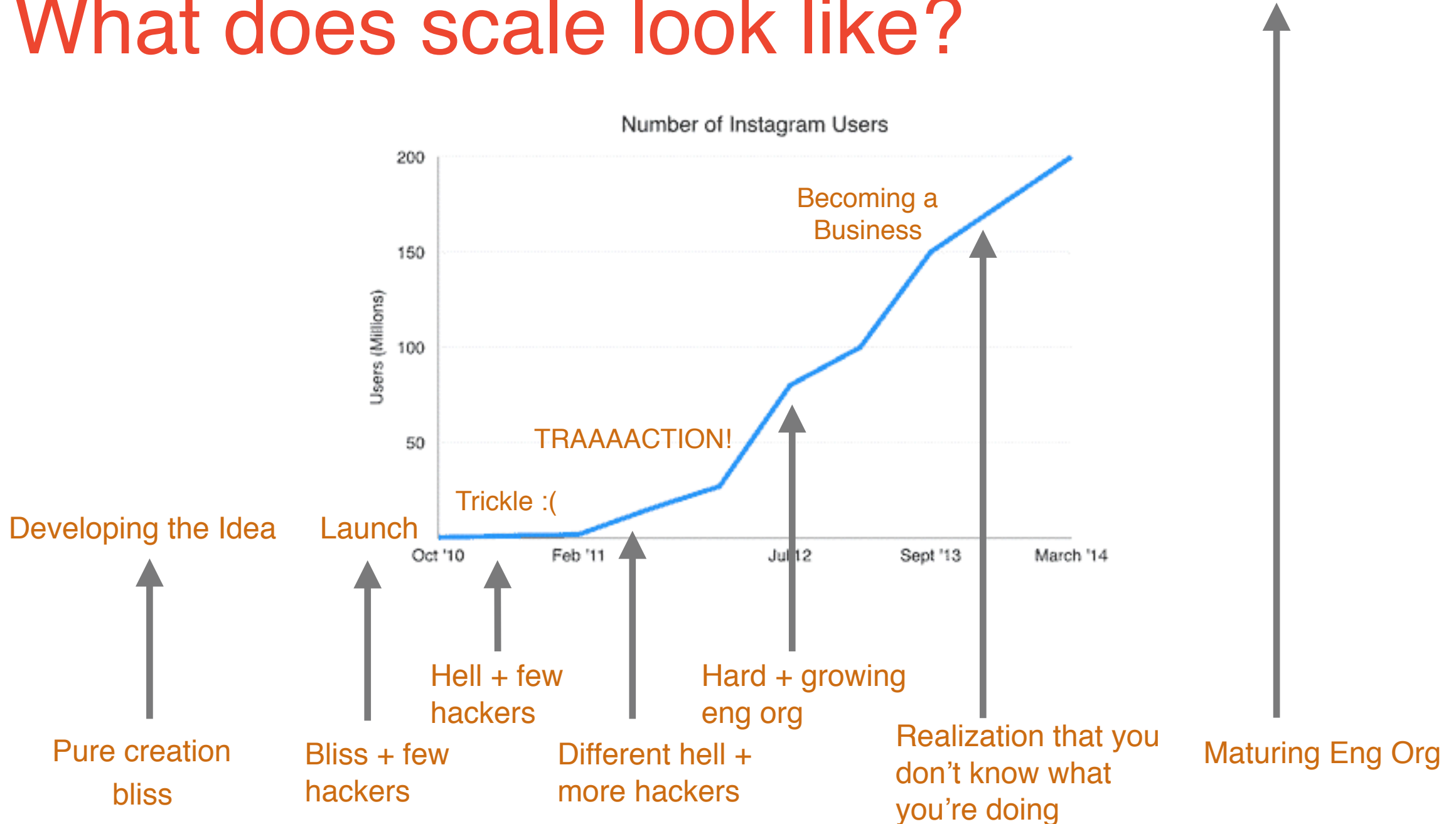
@MartyWeiner



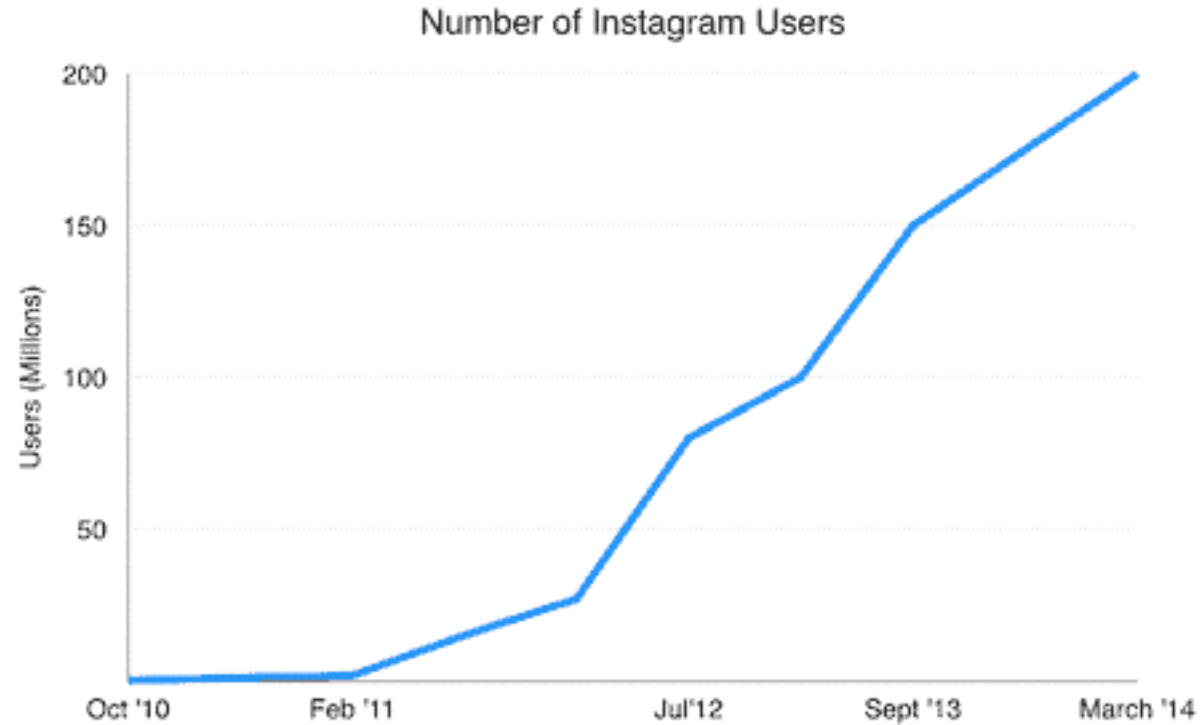
Building a Startup is Hard

I'd like to make it less hard!

What does scale look like?



Inflection Points



Adolescence

**Awkward
Teenage Years**

Maturation and Adulthood



Awkward Teenage Years

- You've found a path to success! But...
 - Your app is breaking all the time
 - Your tech debt is mounting
 - You have no HR / support staff
 - You need funding
 - You need to build product
 - Your lead engineer is an asshole
 - You have to fire the nice engineer who can't code
 - Hiring is difficult
 - You have 15 engineers and growing and whatever systems / processes you had previously are no longer working

BRACE YOURSELF



TRACTION HAS COME

Only 45 minutes...

Warm and Friendly

Customer obsessed

Direct and painfully honest

Research oriented

What is your company's culture?

Collaborative

Design oriented

Eng Oriented

Dog Eat Dog

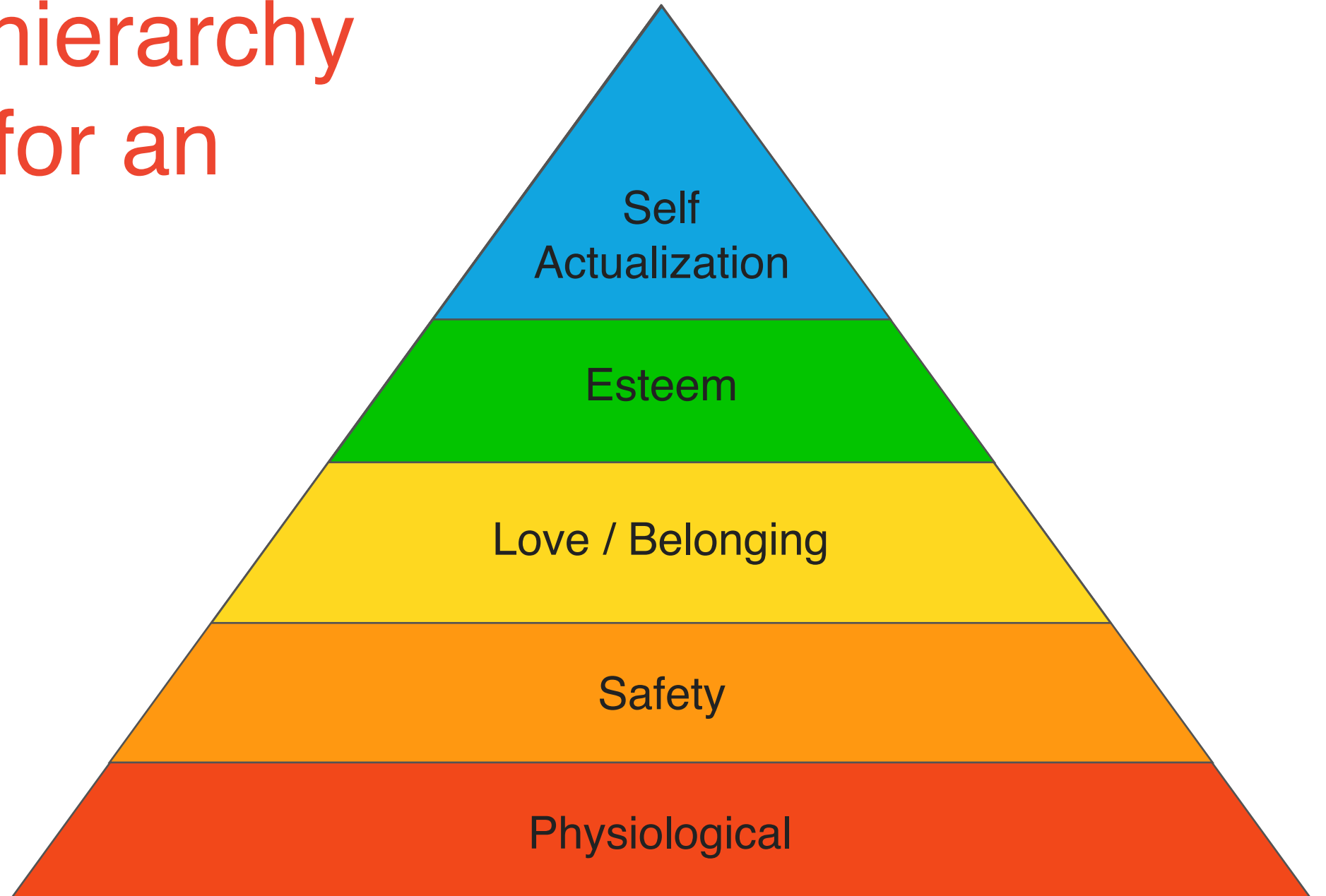
Ship perfection

Transparent

Ship fast and take risks

Secretive

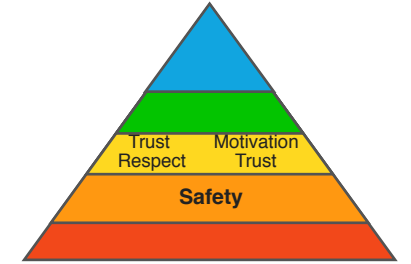
Maslow's hierarchy of needs (for an individual)



Organization's hierarchy of needs



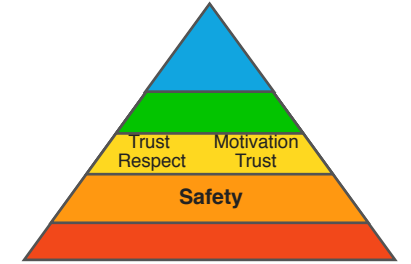
Safety



Do people feel tomorrow will be ok?

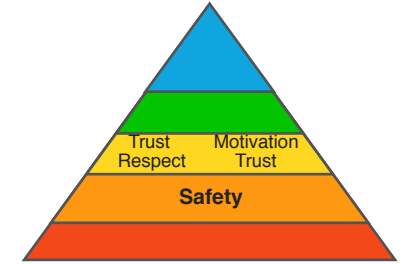
Safety - Often Eroded By...

- Discomfort about funding
- Discomfort about company trajectory / mission
- Discomfort about job security and/or career trajectory
- Discomfort about physical and emotional safety (sexual harassment, violence, anger)

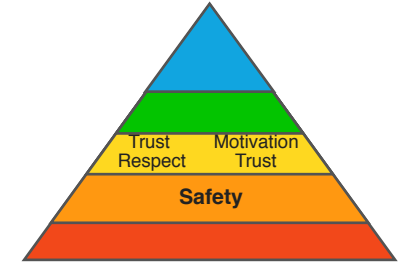


Safety - Fixed By

- Transparency
 - (e.g., sharing information about funding and the plan)
- Painting a clear picture of goals and vision
- Being open and honest with people about careers and status
- Firing people who undermine safety
- Building an inclusive environment

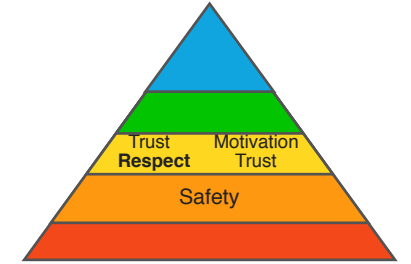


Safety



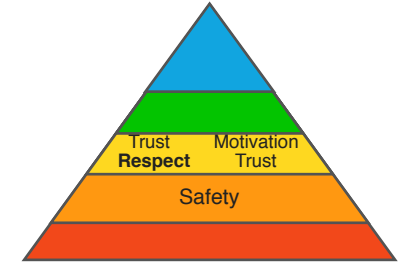
Fix safety first and **fast**

Respect



Interacting within the boundaries of social norms

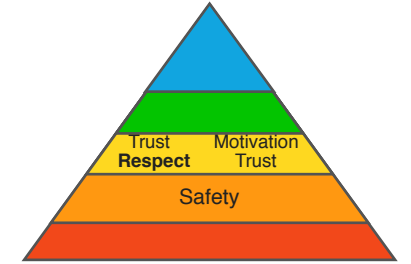
Respect



Do people feel respected and communicate with respect?

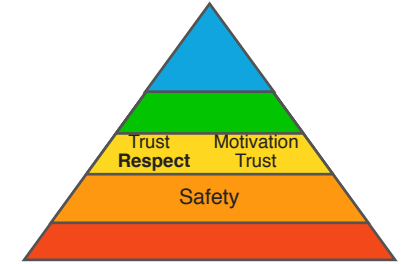
Respect - Often Eroded By...

- A-holes
- Miscommunications
- Those who lack awareness of social norms
 - *cough* *cough* engineers
 - Kidding! :)
 - But not really kidding...

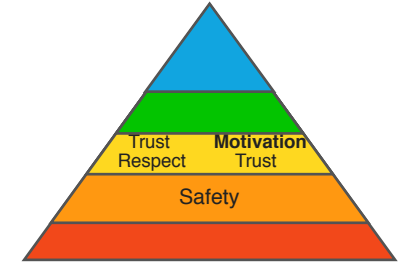


Respect - Fixed By...

- Clarifying company values and enforcing them
- Hiring carefully, firing fast when needed
- Teaching how communication works and social norms

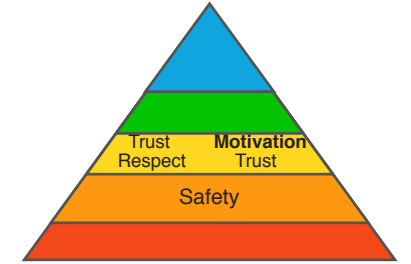


Motivation



Are people excited to accomplish the mission?

Motivation

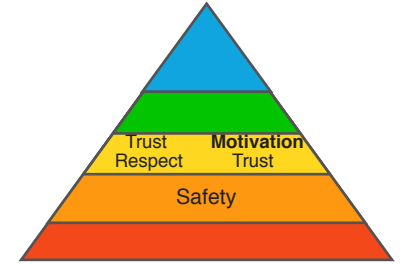


“Autonomy, Mastery, and Purpose”

- Daniel Pink

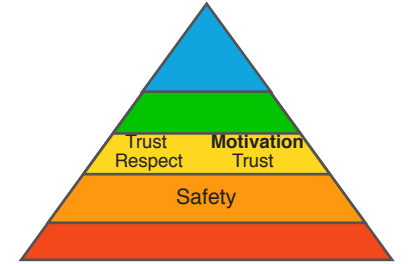
Motivation - Often Eroded By...

- Too much / not enough autonomy
- Unclear purpose

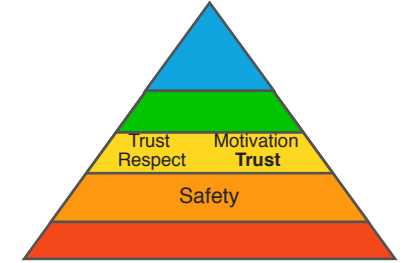


Motivation - Fixed By...

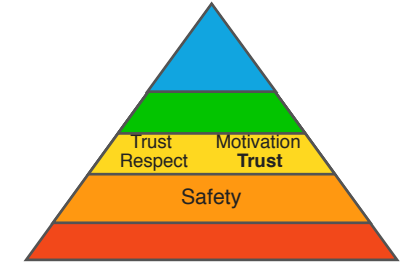
- Give appropriate amount of autonomy for a team / person
 - See “[Situational Leadership](#)” model
- Add good goals & incentives that match why people are here
- Ensure your goal formulation appropriately balances top-down & bottom-up



Trust



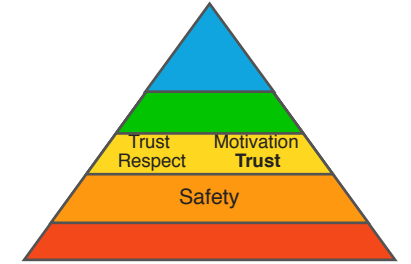
Are people comfortable relying on each other?



You'll know you have achieved trust
when dependencies are not felt

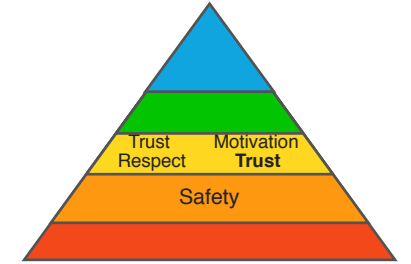
Trust - Often Eroded By...

- Lack of (healthy) communication
- Lack of (healthy) assumptions about others
- Inconsistent delivery on promises between teams / people



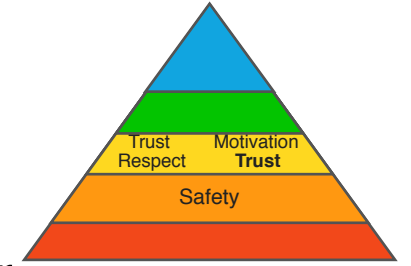
Trust - Sometimes Eroded By...

- Dishonest or subversive individuals



Trust - Fixed By...

- Having teams identify their customer and orient them to their customer
- Clarify team goals and ensure they're met **ON TIME**
- Increase direct communication between key individuals
 - “Go get coffee together!”
- Increase communication of status



Organization's hierarchy of needs



Tip #1

If you don't drive your company's
culture, it will drive itself

Tip #2

Fortunately, the culture can be driven!

Communication Between 2 People

“I’m not bad at communication.
I’ve been doing it all my life.”

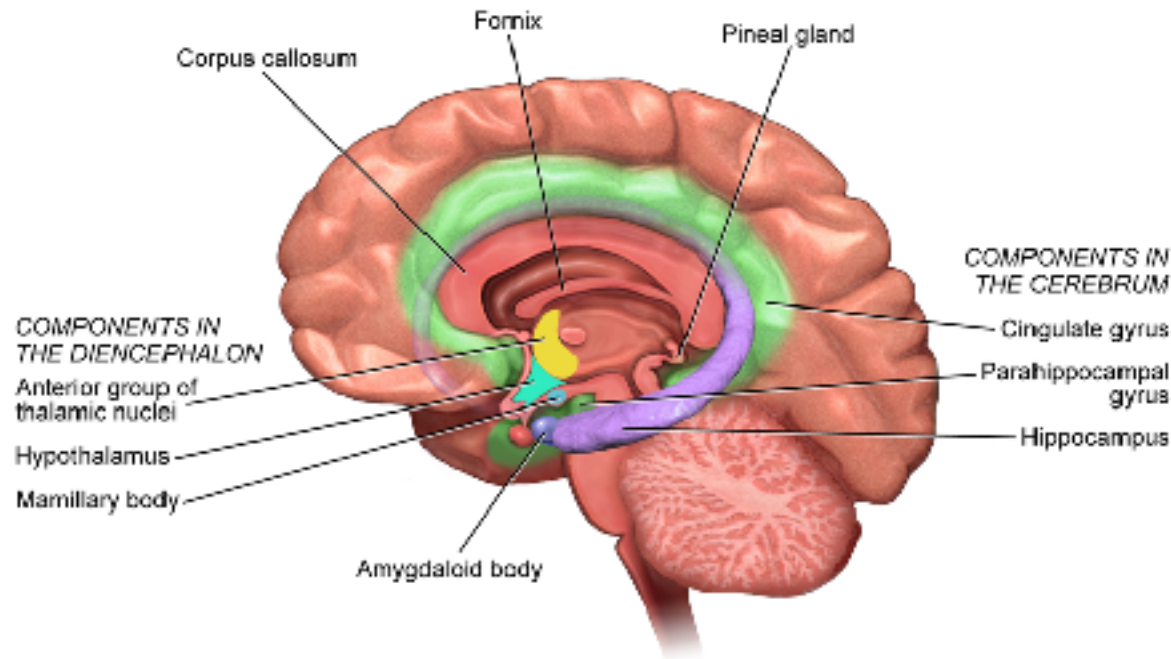
- you

Nope, we all suck at communication

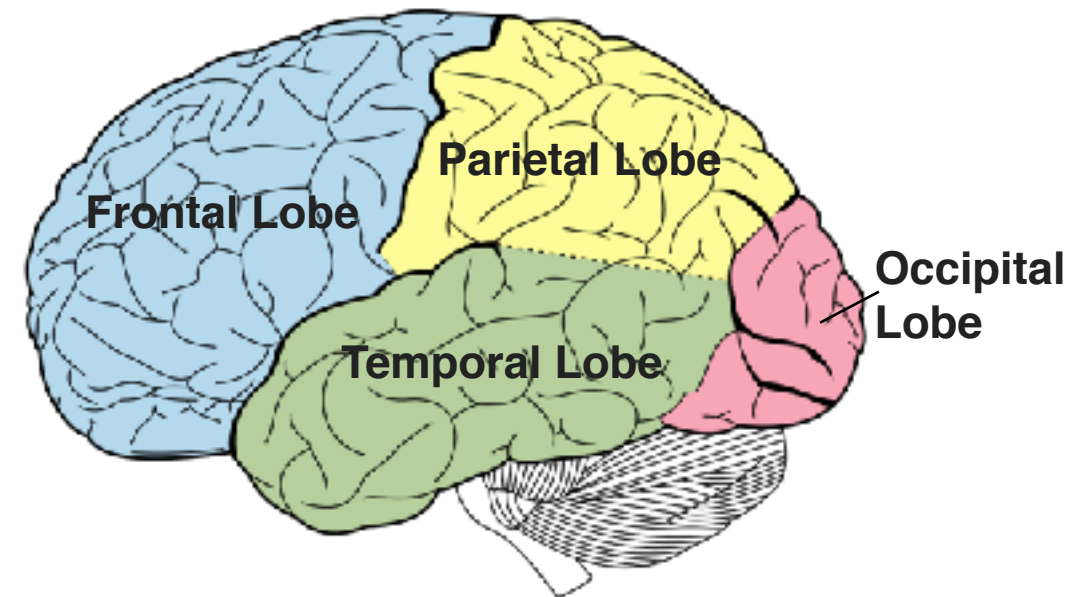
Your Brain Hypersimplified

- Limbic system = Emotions + Long Term Memory (faaast)
- Cerebral Cortex = Rational Thought (sloooow)

The Limbic System



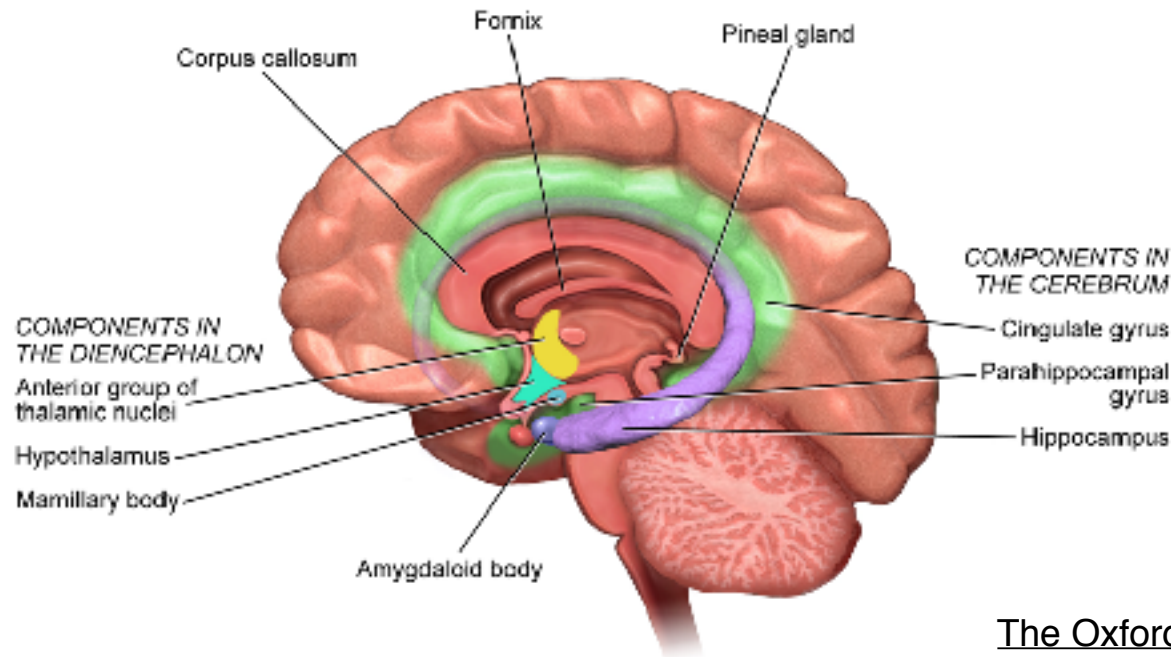
Cerebral Cortex



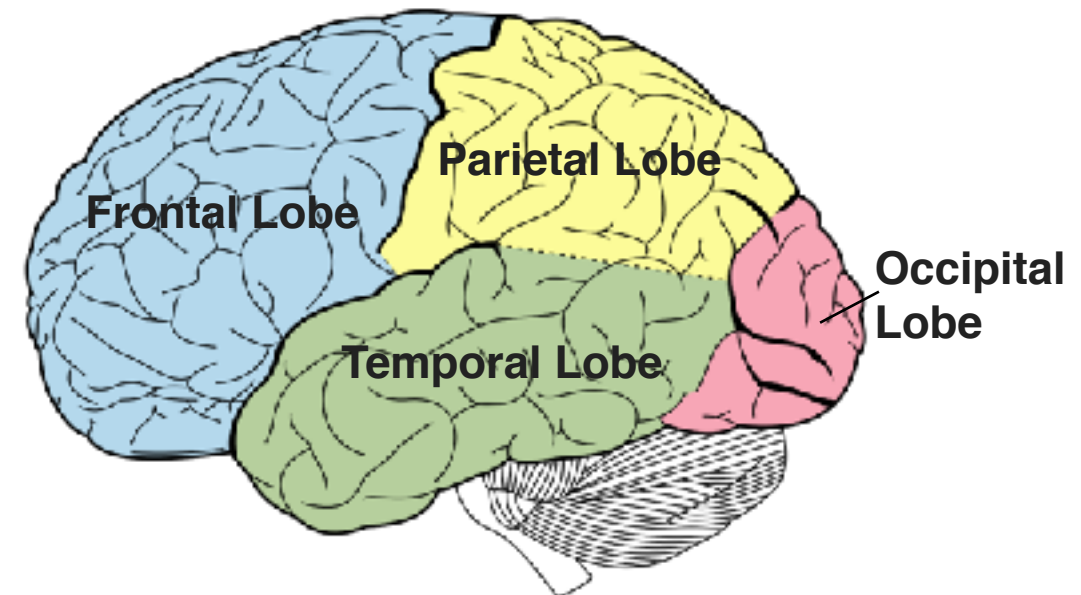
Your Brain Hypersimplified

- Limbic system = Emotions + Long Term Memory (faaast) $\leftarrow 10\text{ms}$
- Cerebral Cortex = Rational Thought (sloow) $\leftarrow 500\text{ms to }10\text{s}$

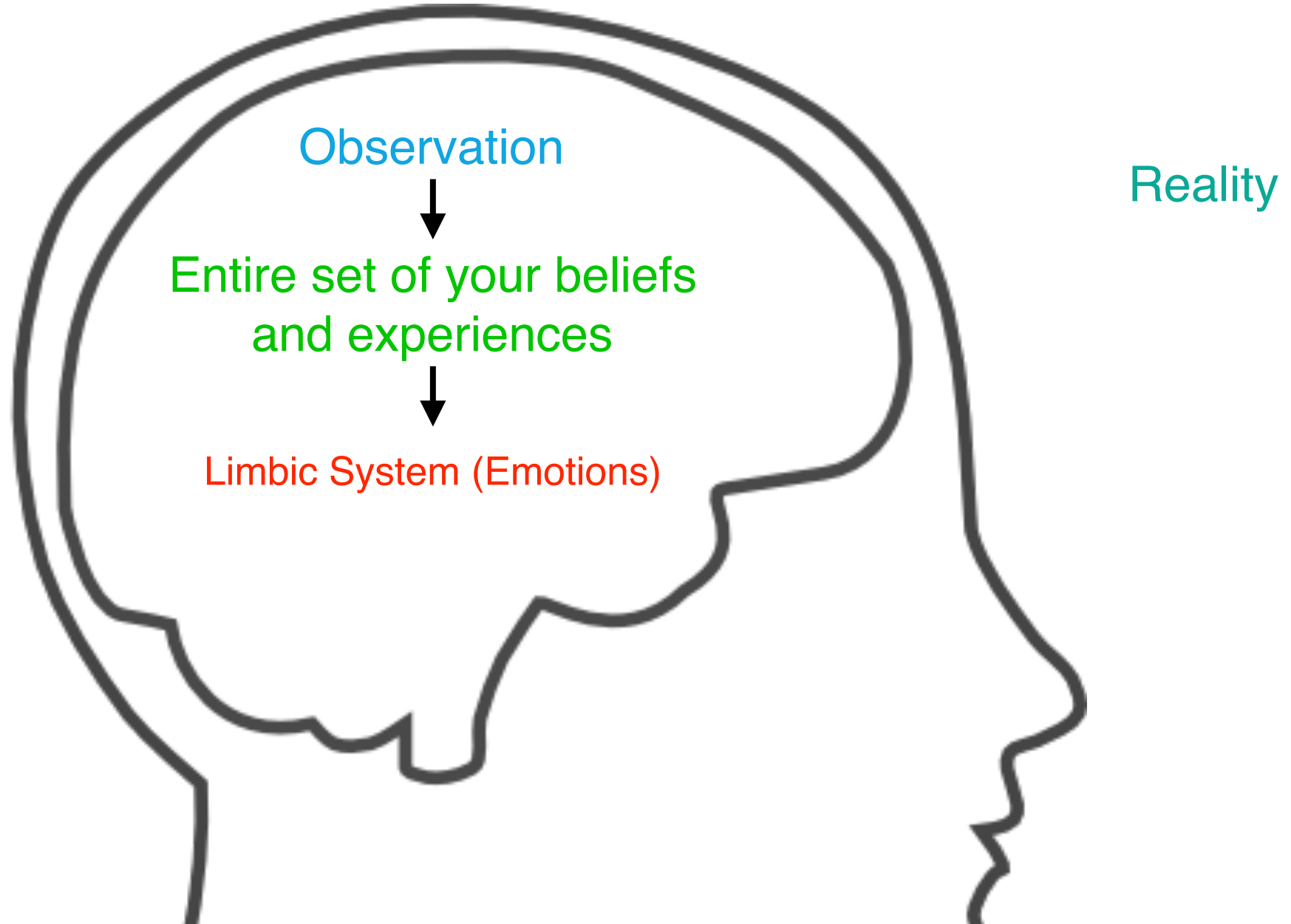
The Limbic System



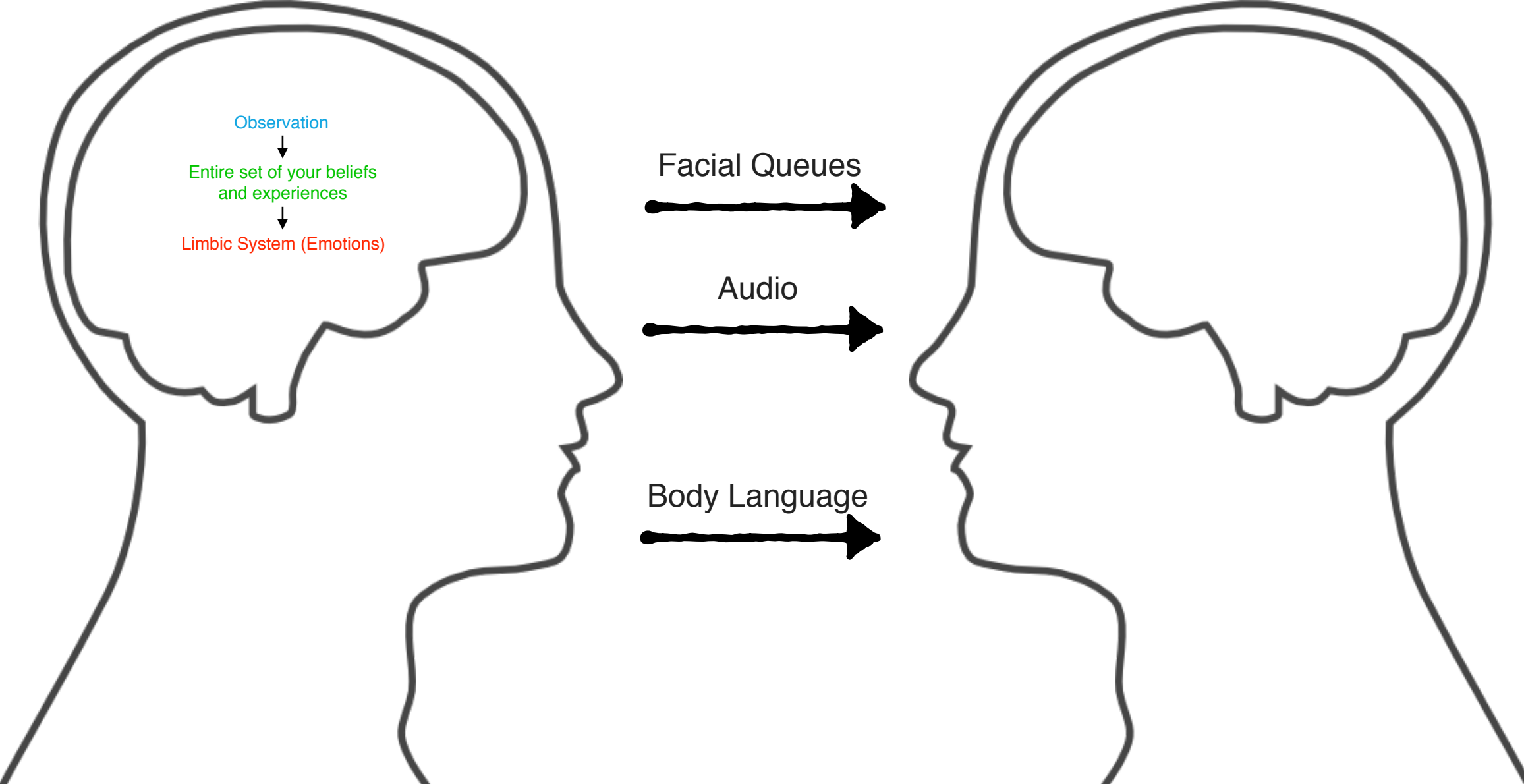
Cerebral Cortex



Why is communication so hard?



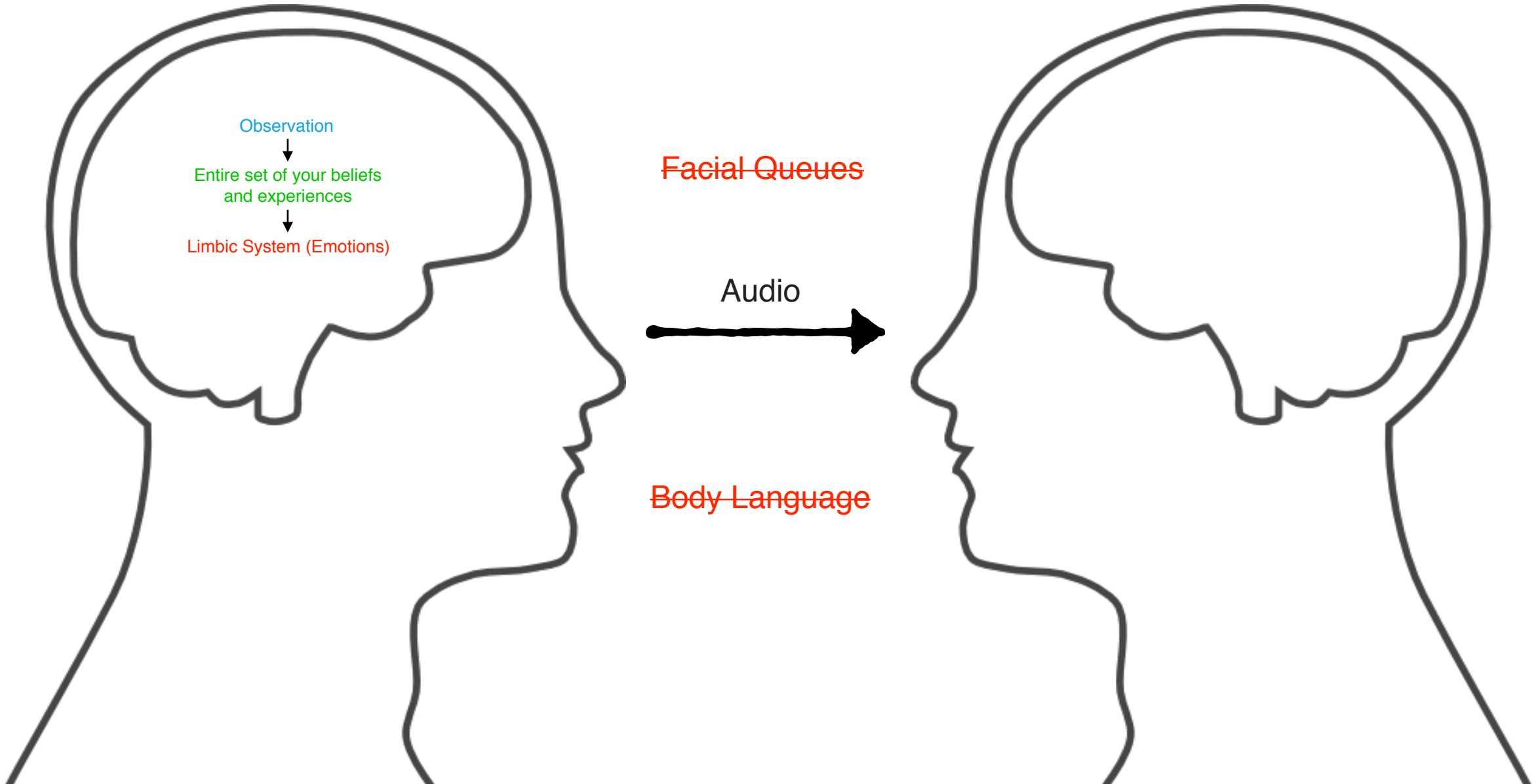
Why is communication so hard?



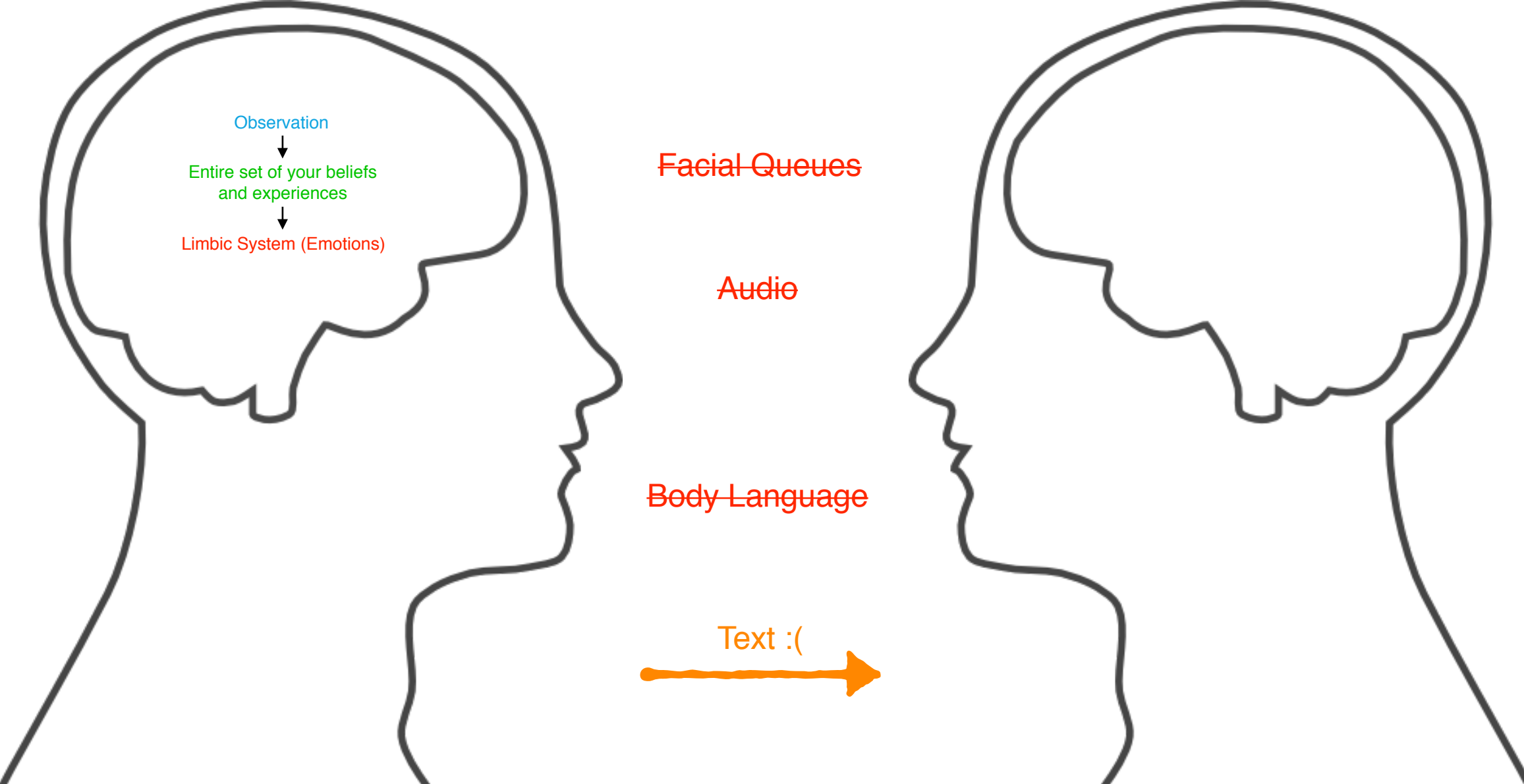
“Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are”

by Amy Cuddy

Why is communication so hard?



Why is communication so hard?



Observation

Entire set of your beliefs
and experiences

Limbic System (Emotions)

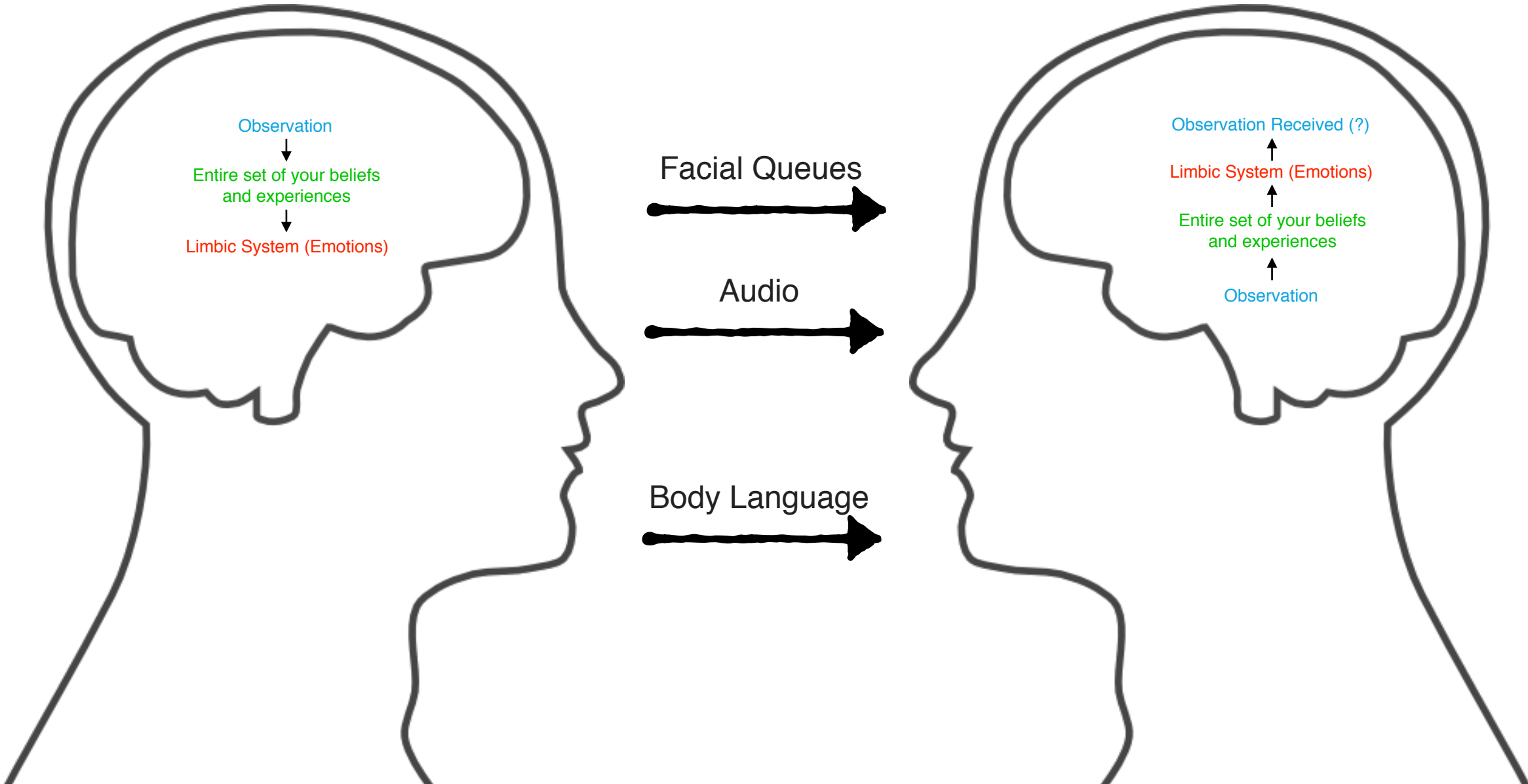
Facial Queues

Audio

Body Language

Text :(

Why is communication so hard?



If you see a tense conversation over email, cut it off. Get people in a room.

“Text Message Confusion”
by Key and Peele

Build Empathy

- Communicate the “why”
 - So they don't have to fill in your motivations
 - So they don't have to add an exception to their beliefs
 - ***Often times the underlying assumptions are different***
- Assume positive intent
- “Be Unfailingly Kind” - Michael Lopp

Recognize Amygdala Hijack

- Get good at recognizing when you are emotional or when somebody else is
 - Some key signals:
 - Combative or defensive words and body language
 - ***Repeating the same point twice***
 - STOP the conversation. Recognize you or them has “gone limbic”.

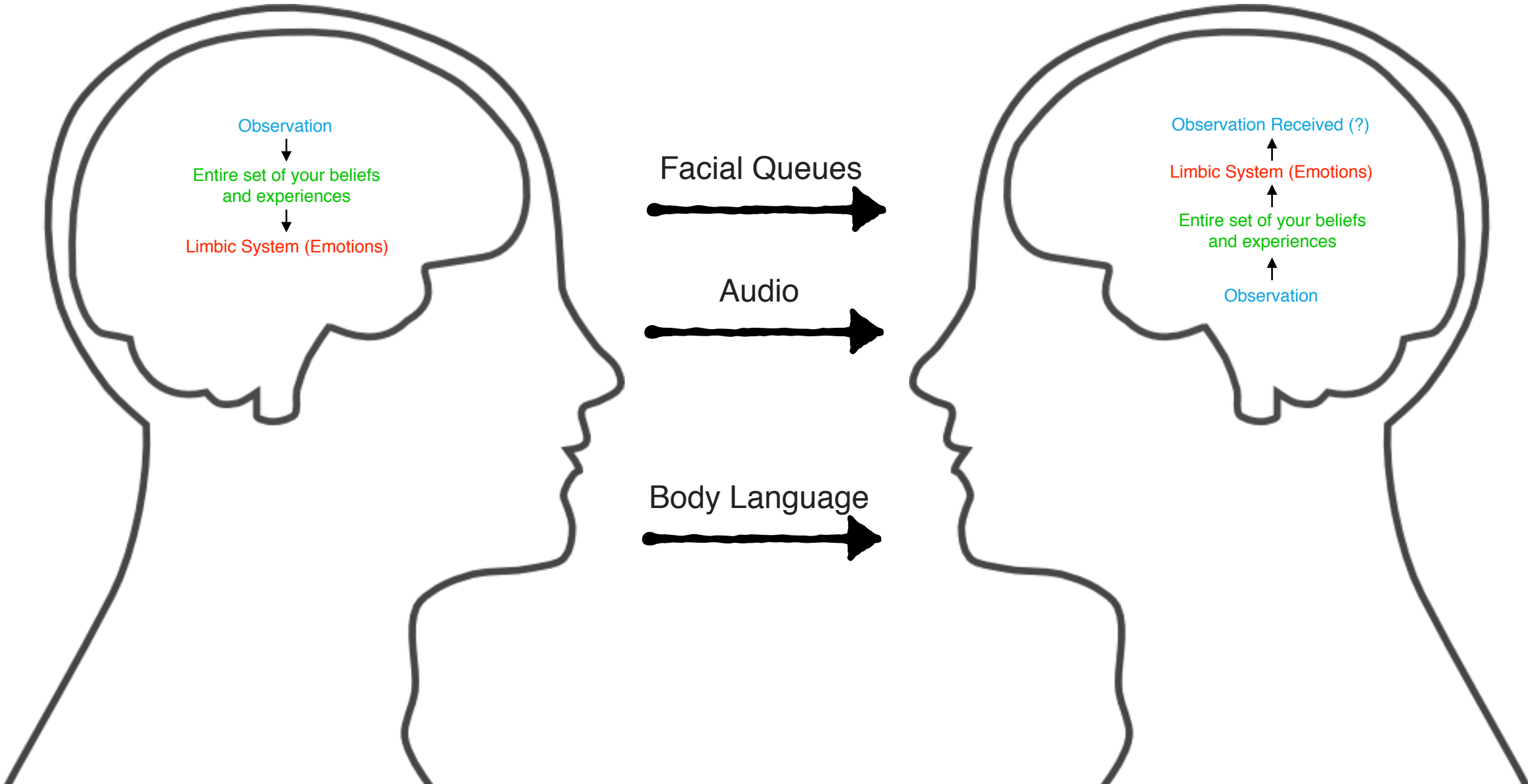
Feedback and Listening

- Strive toward a culture of giving **and receiving** feedback well
 - More reading: “[Situation, Behavior, Impact](#)”
 - Be specific, be timely
 - ***Practice Active Listening***

Active Listening Technique

by US Dept of State (?!)

Why is communication so hard?



“If you give a good idea to a mediocre team, they will screw it up. If you give a mediocre idea to a brilliant team, they will either fix it or throw it away and come up with something better.”

- Ed Catmull, Creativity Inc.

Ask Me Anything



Marty Weiner
CTO, Reddit
u/Mart2D2
@MartyWeiner



Appendix