

GROUP WORK ON THE EDGE

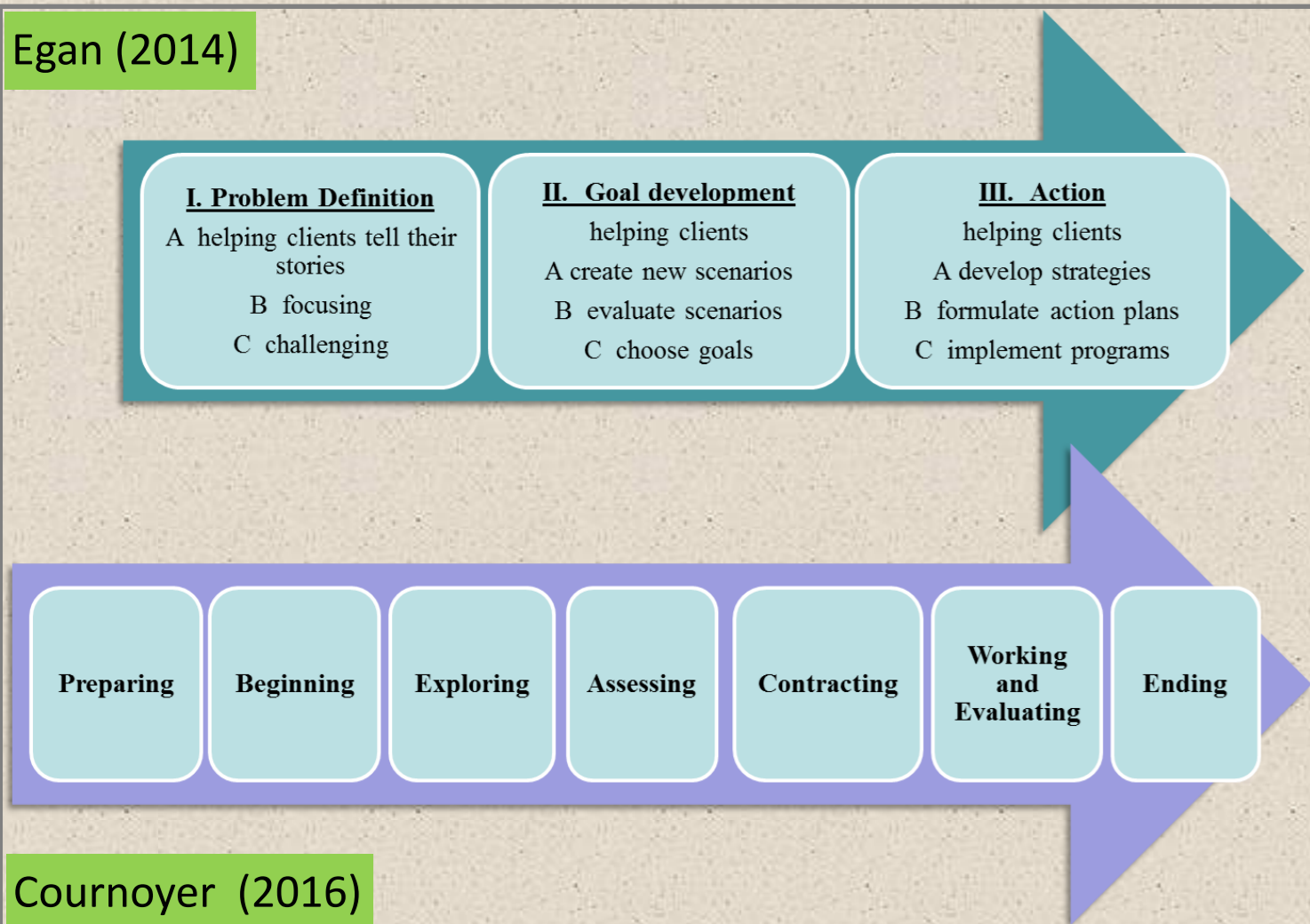
Embracing the messiness of group facilitation



WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

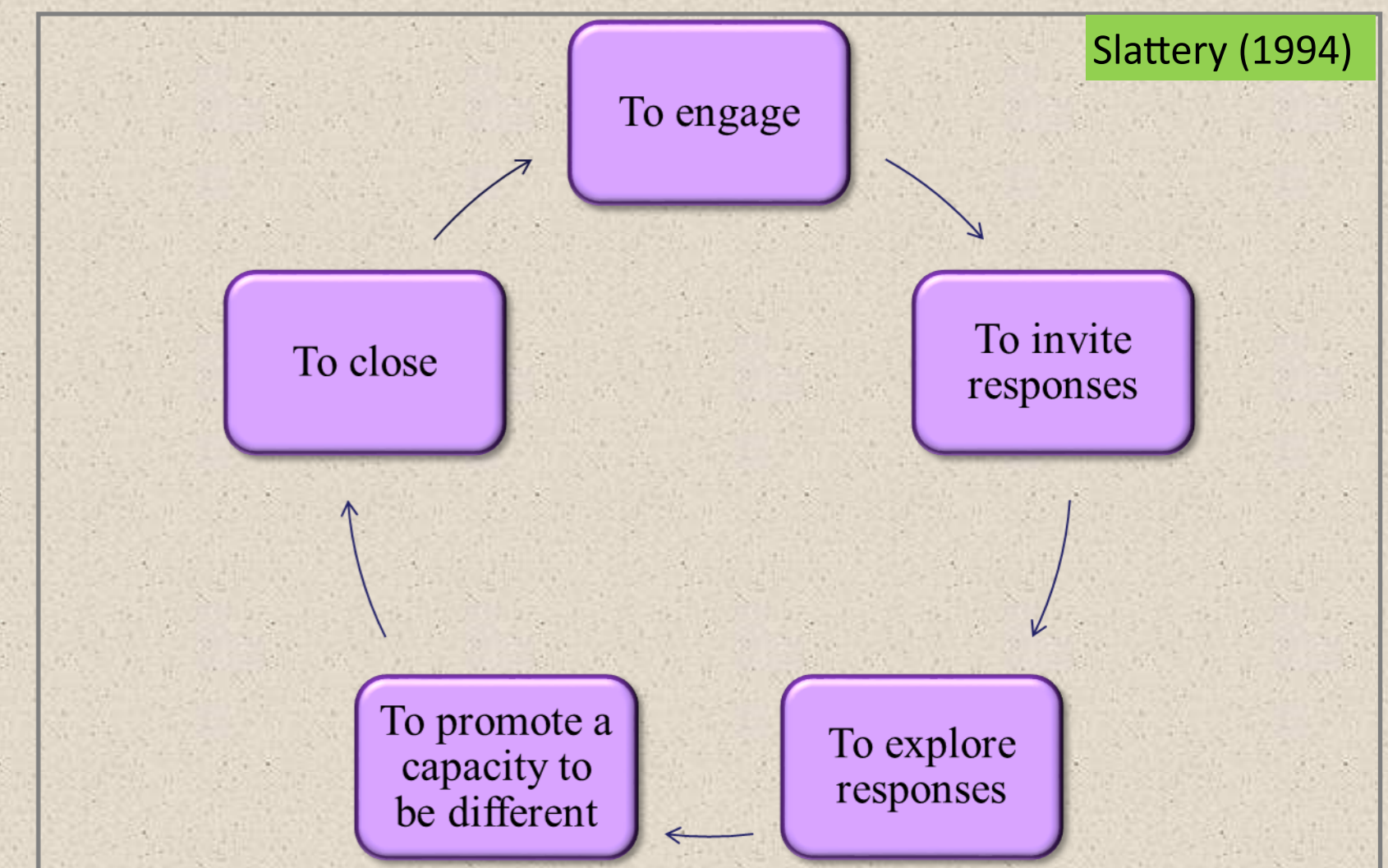
Dr Neil Hall
Western Sydney University

Group work is a key intervention method in social work. Although there is a very useful range of readings relating to group work with marginalised people, I have found that many of them leave important areas up to individual interpretation. On one hand this absence of prescription does allow for some flexibility in practice, but more often than not it can leave group workers floundering when it comes to situations where the 'tidy' theory does not match the very real situation of working with 'harder' & 'messier' marginalised groups. Apart from the challenge of balancing the multiple roles of a group facilitator, this mismatch puts workers in situations where they may lose confidence. Furthermore, workers also stand at risk of straying into unethical practice and potentially doing more harm than good; through poorly conceived, inadequately planned and unprofessionally delivered group work interventions. My hope is that we will find ways to apply the theoretical basis and fundamental skills of groups to working with marginalised people and to facilitating groups in those unpredictable, flexible and informal settings in which social workers invariably find themselves.

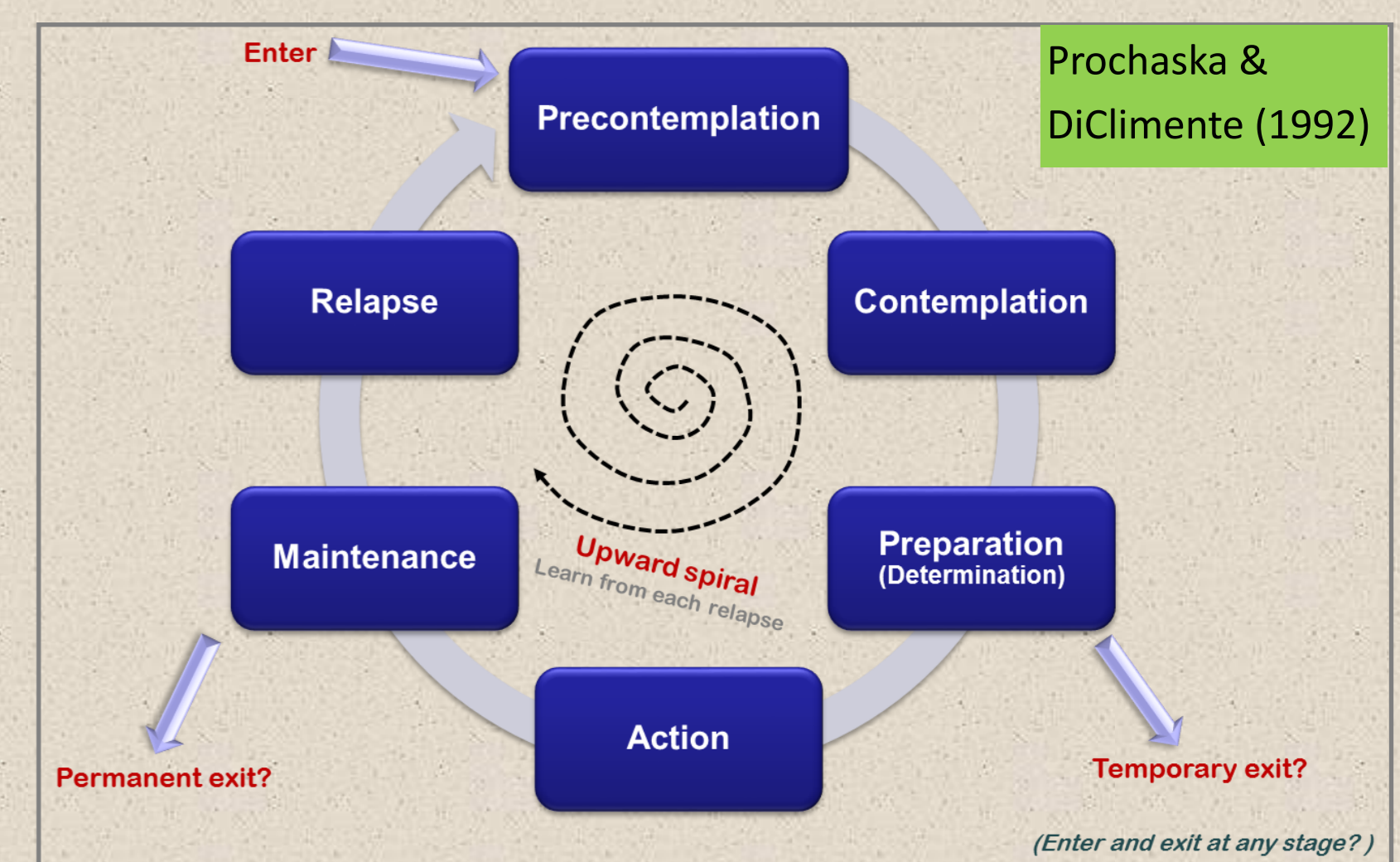


Embracing the mess starts with rethinking some current understandings of groups which tend to conceive of group process as either being linear, cyclical or organic.

Understandings of groups		
Linear	Cyclical	Organic
Clinical	Responsive	Dynamic
Organised	Fluid	Random
Sequential	Circular sequence	Non-consecutive
"The shortest distance between two points is a straight line"	"We go round and round and round in the circle game"	"Life is like a box of chocolates – you never know what you're gonna get"



- Tuckman (1965)**
- Forming
 - Storming
 - Norming
 - Performing
 - Mourning

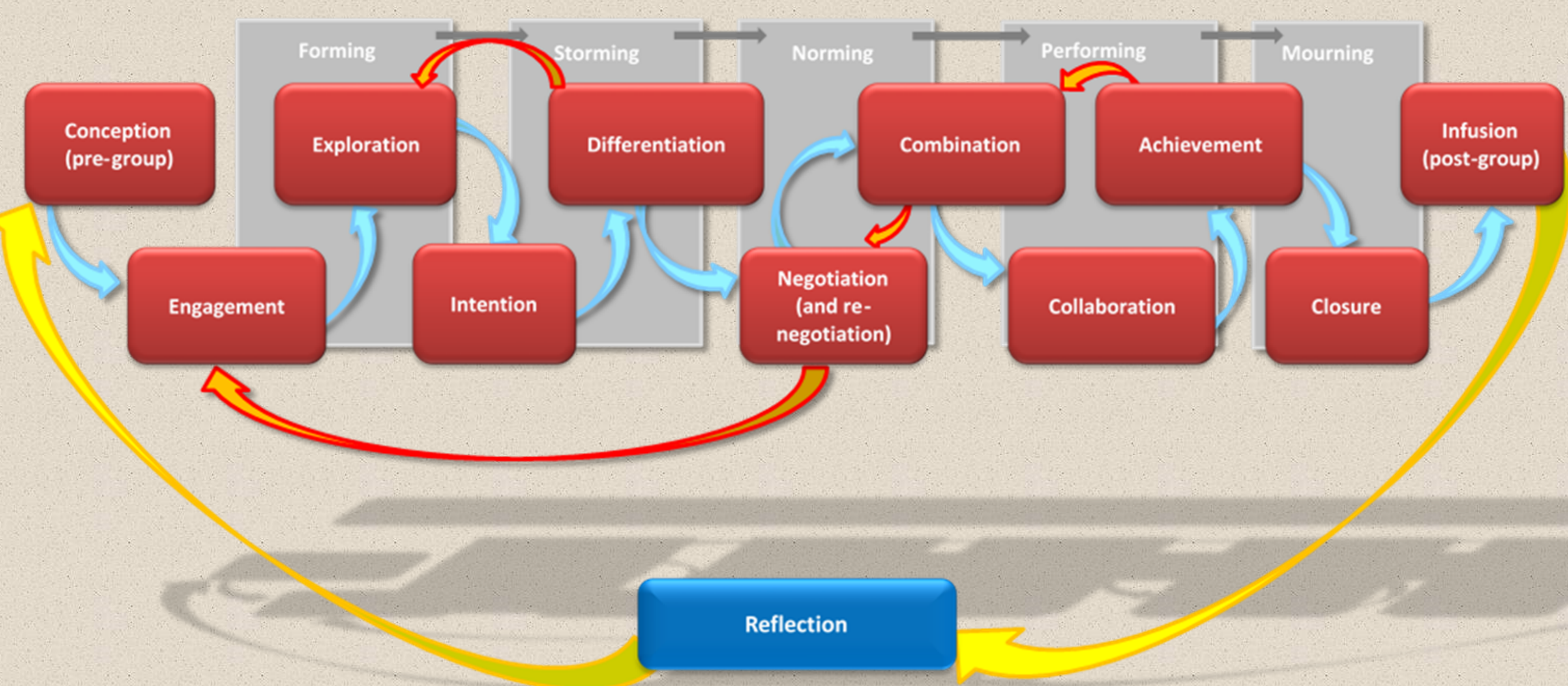


For a video presentation, scan here...



Group evolution

Blending the multiple understandings of the stages of groups can create a 'Model of Group Evolution' that more closely portrays the range of group work experiences we might encounter in our social work practice settings.



While there is a general forward direction that groups move from start to end, there is also some movement back and forth between the various phases together with circular movement within them.

The model may give the impression that groups are like a roller coaster, so what might that mean?



To further cloud matters, how groups follow this evolution pattern also depends on ...

- Type and length of group
- Setting/context/agency support
- Communication patterns/learning styles
- Diversity of group membership
- Individual reasons for joining a group
- Previous experience of a group
- Facilitator experience

Be prepared - then develop ways to balance our multiple roles and respond flexibly to the messiness of working around people's needs

- Take time to engage: People, process & content
 - Plan: Plan A, Plan B, Plan C etc
 - Boundaries: For everyone including you
 - Practice: Any new techniques
 - Trust: Evidence-informed programs
 - Theory: Training, reading, supervision, reflection, give every activity a PURPOSE
- IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU!