The “iceberg” is a common systems thinking tool for understanding different levels of perspective and leverage in a complex system.

You may be aware that only 10% of an iceberg is visible above the ocean surface; the remaining 90% is invisible. Metaphorically, we can say that what we see “on the surface” of a social system is also only part of the whole—the visible or evident part—while much else is invisible or hard to discern. This exercise affords a means to discover and reveal what lies “below the water line” in a systemic sense: the underlying causes of what we see on the surface.

Instructions:

Draw an iceberg somewhat as shown here on a large flip chart, and lay the page on a flat surface. The idea is to gradually fill in the four sections of the iceberg chart with post-it notes on which you’ve written ideas and observations about the situation in question. It’s helpful to write one idea or observation per post-it, and to write in marker so that others can read the chart from a distance.

“Events” are things that happen that tell us something significant about the state of the situation on which you’re focusing. Think about something you might read in a newspaper headline, or about which you might tell a story. An event is a one-time occurrence in time and space—not something that repeats again and again.

When events repeat, we have a “pattern.” Considering many events over time, you may notice patterns—not only patterns of behavior,
but including other patterns as well. Ultimately, if you expand the period of time broadly enough, all significant events will show up in some sort of pattern. Patterns describe the events that keep happening.

Underlying patterns are “structures.” Structures are anything that causes or supports a pattern that is truly structural in some sense—not an idea, a belief, or a paradigm. Those are called “mental models” and represent the deepest level of causation in the iceberg exercise.

A structure can be a policy, a law, a rule, something physical like geography or architecture, a practice, or anything else that you think causes or supports the pattern. Why does that policy exist, you might ask? That’s where you start to uncover mental models, the ideas, beliefs, dogmas, and world views that support the structure, that make it necessary.

Leverage points—places to intervene for maximum impact across a whole system—can be found at the levels of structures and mental models. Intervening at these levels of a system is the key to acting with larger impact, as distinct from “fire-fighting,” or addressing something at an “event” level.

Please feel free to copy the drawing provided. We use a whole flip chart page in portrait orientation, and draw by hand with markers.