Food for Thought

BRIDGE THINKING ON PEOPLE, TEAMS AND CHANGE

How this pathway drives change

Why meaningful team change needs a connected journey rather than a collection of isolated interventions.

When a team is not working as well as it should, there is often a temptation to look for the intervention that will fix it. Coach the leader, run a team workshop, carry out a 360, bring everyone together for an away day or perhaps finally have the difficult conversation that has been avoided for too long. Any one of those things may be useful, but our experience at Bridge is that meaningful team change rarely sits neatly inside one intervention, because teams themselves simply don't work that way.

Teams are ecosystems. What happens in one part inevitably affects what happens elsewhere. The way a leader behaves influences how people respond to them, but the behaviour of the team also influences the leader. Relationships, history, organisational pressures, unclear accountability and established ways of working all sit alongside one another. Sometimes what looks like a relationship problem is actually being fuelled by a process that doesn't work. Equally, something that appears to be a process problem may have far more to do with trust, behaviour or conversations that people have stopped having. More often than not, several of these things are happening at the same time.

That thinking sits behind the Strategic Team Shift pathway. Rather than deciding at the outset that we already know what is wrong, the pathway allows us to build a much fuller picture as we move through it. We work with the leader, individual team members and the team collectively, sometimes separately and sometimes together, with each stage giving us greater insight into what people are experiencing and what may need to change. There is a clear structure to the process, but it isn't rigid. What we learn at one stage helps shape what happens at the next, giving us enough discipline to know where we are going while still allowing the work to respond to the reality of the team in front of us.

The strength is not in any single intervention. It is in the way the whole pathway works together.

We begin by understanding, not diagnosing

The first stage is about stakeholder alignment and understanding the context in which the team is operating. What has brought us here? What is the leader experiencing? What pressures are affecting the team? What has already been tried and, importantly, what would meaningful improvement actually look like? These may seem like obvious questions, but they are an important discipline because if we arrive believing we already understand the challenge, there is a danger that everything we subsequently hear gets interpreted through that assumption.

It also means establishing what success should look like before the work begins. We are not simply interested in whether people feel better at the end of a workshop or whether everybody agrees that the process was useful. We want to understand what we would expect to be different in the way people communicate, make decisions, handle challenge, take responsibility and work together. That gives us something much more meaningful against which to consider progress as the pathway develops.

Creating an aerial view of the team

The 360° work begins to broaden that picture because there is the leader's experience of the team, but there is also the team's experience of the leader and the experience team members have of one another. The purpose isn't to collect evidence against anybody or to decide who is right. It is to create greater self-awareness while allowing us to begin seeing the team from more than one position.

This is where the facilitator's role becomes particularly important. We sometimes describe it as having an aerial view, or being able to look down on the chessboard. Individual people can only ever see part of what is happening because they are standing inside it, whereas the facilitator gradually begins to see the relationships between those different experiences. That doesn't mean taking something said in one confidential conversation and carrying it into another. Confidentiality has to remain intact. The skill is in recognising patterns and understanding the wider system without betraying the individual conversations that helped reveal it. Over time, that gives us a much richer view of where leadership, relationships, behaviour, structures and organisational pressures may be interacting.

Why we deliberately separate the leader and the team

One of the most important elements of the pathway is that we don't immediately put everybody into a room and ask them to sort things out. There are points where the leader and the team need to work separately, because people do not necessarily have the same conversation with their leader sitting beside them. That doesn't automatically mean the leader has created an unsafe environment; power changes conversations, as do history, relationships and previous experience. Sometimes people simply need space to work out what they really think before they are ready to talk about it collectively.

The same applies to the leader. Leaders need somewhere they can be uncertain, challenged and reflective without feeling that they are having to perform leadership in front of their team. Through individual coaching and mentoring, both the leader and team members have the opportunity to explore their own contribution to what is happening. The 360° insight gives that work something real to begin with, allowing us to explore self-awareness, emotional intelligence, emotional management, relationships and the gap that can sometimes exist between what somebody intends and how their behaviour is actually experienced by somebody else. That individual work matters because collective change becomes much harder if everybody arrives at the collective conversation believing that somebody else is the problem.

Building a shared understanding of high performance

As the individual work develops, we begin moving towards the collective and exploring what high performance actually looks like for this particular team. This isn't about producing a generic list of characteristics that could apply to any team in any organisation. It is about understanding what these people need from one another if they are going to work effectively together, particularly when things become difficult or the pressure increases.

That gives us a very different basis for discussing behaviour. Rather than deciding who is dysfunctional or who is toxic, we can begin looking at the patterns that support performance and those that get in its way. We can explore what happens when somebody disagrees, where accountability becomes blurred, how challenge is handled, what happens to communication under pressure and which behaviours strengthen or weaken trust. Gradually, the conversation begins to move away from simply describing what people don't like towards creating a much clearer picture of the team they actually want to become.

Turning conversation into practical change

This is where the Team Hackathon becomes particularly important, because there is little value in spending weeks understanding a team beautifully if nothing practical changes as a result. Some of the barriers we uncover will be behavioural, but others will sit in the mechanics of how the team operates. Decision-making may be unclear, meetings may create more confusion than clarity, accountability may disappear between functions, information may not reach the people who need it or a process may inadvertently encourage exactly the behaviour everybody says they want to change.

The Hackathon gives the team an opportunity to work on those things rather than simply talk about them. Bridge works actively alongside the team to redesign the barriers they have identified, which might mean creating new processes, clearer governance, different communication rhythms, better decision pathways or much clearer agreements about who owns what. This is an important distinction because we aren't disappearing into a room and returning with our recommendations for how everybody else should work. The team is involved in creating the answer, which means people are far more likely to understand it, challenge it where necessary and ultimately take responsibility for making it work.

Learning as we move

The new ways of working then have to live in the real world. Individuals or smaller groups may take responsibility for implementing different elements and seeing what happens. Some ideas will work exactly as intended, while others will need adjusting, and occasionally a new barrier only becomes visible once the team begins doing something differently. Rather than seeing that as a failure of the process, it becomes another source of information about how the team actually operates.

This is one of the reasons we don't see Strategic Team Shift as a sequence of isolated activities. The 360° work informs the coaching and mentoring, which in turn affects people's readiness for the collective work. Team sessions expose barriers that influence the Hackathon, while implementation reveals what works and what still needs attention. Those experiences then inform the conversations that follow. The structure remains clear throughout, but the pathway is continually learning about the team at the same time as the team is learning more about itself.

Bringing people back together

Working separately only has value if there is deliberate reconnection, which is why there are key points in the pathway where the leader and team come back together, including through Speak Your Truth. By this stage, people should be arriving at that conversation differently from how they might have arrived on day one. They have had time to reflect on their own contribution, consider how their behaviour is experienced, explore what the team needs from them and begin addressing some of the practical barriers that have been getting in the way.

Speak Your Truth is therefore not intended to become a dramatic clearing of the air or an opportunity for everybody to unload their frustrations. It creates the space for greater honesty, but that honesty needs to be accompanied by listening, responsibility and a willingness to move forward. The purpose is not simply to say what has been difficult; it is to use greater openness to strengthen how people work together from that point onwards. As the team begins to present back the areas in which it has grown, the changes it has developed and the commitments it is prepared to make, something else begins to happen as well: Bridge is carrying less of the process and the team is increasingly carrying it for itself.

From facilitated change to team ownership

That transfer of ownership is ultimately one of the most important things the pathway is designed to achieve. A team shouldn't finish an intervention dependent on the person who facilitated it, because if progress disappears as soon as the consultant leaves the building, we haven't really changed very much. The work has to become part of the way the team operates rather than something that happened to them for a few months.

The Bridge Client Playbook brings together the learning, behaviours, new ways of working, responsibilities and commitments developed throughout the pathway. It might capture how the team wants to communicate, how decisions will be made, what accountability looks like, how challenge will be handled, the standards people expect from one another and how the team will recognise and address drift. What makes it valuable, however, isn't simply what appears in the finished document; it is the way that content came into being. The team has helped create it, discuss it, challenge it and test it, so the Playbook becomes a practical expression of the team's own way of working rather than a set of recommendations handed to them by Bridge.

Perhaps that is the real value of approaching team change as a pathway. Meaningful change is rarely one dramatic breakthrough. More often it is a series of connected shifts: somebody begins to see their own impact differently, a conversation that has been avoided finally becomes possible, a practical barrier is redesigned, responsibility becomes clearer, trust begins to strengthen and people discover that they can challenge one another without the whole thing falling apart. Each stage creates the conditions for the next, and gradually responsibility for sustaining what has changed moves away from the facilitator and back to where it ultimately needs to sit, with the leader and the team themselves. That is why the strength of the approach isn't found in any single intervention; it comes from the way the whole pathway works together.