

Inside the Senior Leadership Team

Dale Smith on why leadership teams sometimes need a reset

Senior leadership teams are usually made up of experienced, capable people, yet bringing a group of successful leaders together does not automatically create an effective leadership team. History, relationships, pressure, power, loyalty and individual behaviour all influence what happens around the senior table, and those dynamics can eventually be felt far beyond it. Dale Smith, Creative Director at Bridge, talks about the thinking behind Senior Leadership Team Reset and why understanding the human ecosystem of a leadership team has to come before trying to change it.

There is no shortage of leadership development in organisations. Why did you feel there was a need for something different?

I think that is exactly where we started. Organisations spend a great deal of money developing leaders, and quite rightly so, but sometimes the issue is not that the people around the table need another lesson in how to lead. You can have eight or ten highly accomplished people in a room who are individually very good at what they do. They have experience, technical knowledge, qualifications and probably years of leadership development behind them. But the moment you put those people around one table, you have created something else. You have created a human system.

That system has relationships, history, loyalties, personalities, confidence, insecurity, competition and pressure running through it. You may have people who have worked together for fifteen years sitting alongside somebody who arrived three months ago. There may have been a previous leader who left a significant mark on the team, or restructures, redundancies and difficult periods that people have never really talked about. There can be alliances, favouritism and nepotism, historic battles between functions, people who have learned that proximity to a particular person gives them influence, and others who have learned that speaking up carries a cost.

None of that appears on an organisation chart, but all of it can influence what happens around the senior table. So when a senior team is struggling, putting everybody through another leadership workshop can completely miss the point. You are trying to develop the individual players without first understanding the game that is taking place around them. That is really where the idea of the Reset comes from. Before we decide what needs to change, we need to understand the ecosystem that has created the team we are looking at today.

When you first start working with a senior leadership team, what are you actually looking for?

I am interested in the unsaid as much as the said. Obviously, I listen carefully to what people tell me in individual conversations, but I also want to see the team operating naturally. I would much rather sit quietly in a real SLT meeting than create an artificial exercise where everybody knows they are being assessed and consequently arrives on their best behaviour.

I am watching who speaks and who does not, who interrupts and who gets interrupted, who can challenge whom and what happens when they do. I notice who looks at somebody else before answering, when somebody who was contributing suddenly becomes quiet, where the energy disappears and where it increases. I am particularly interested in what happens when pressure enters the room, because pressure has a habit of revealing behaviours that are much easier to manage when everything is going well.

The formal hierarchy is useful information, but it is only one piece of the picture. One of the principles I keep coming back to is that we need to follow the influence, not simply the hierarchy chart. The person with the greatest influence may be the CEO, but it may also be somebody who has been there for twenty years, somebody with a particularly close relationship with the CEO, somebody who controls important information, or simply somebody whose approval other people have gradually learned to seek.

This is also why I think you need one person holding the overall picture during the Reset. I sometimes describe it using the GP analogy. A good GP does not have to personally deliver every treatment you might need, but they understand the patient, the history and the wider picture, and they know when to bring in a specialist. Bridge works in much the same way. We may bring in specialist coaches, mediators or other expertise as the work develops, but somebody needs to retain sight of the whole chessboard.

When you observe a senior leadership team, are there different dimensions to what you are looking at?

I tend to think about four different tables operating around the senior table at the same time. There is the Formal Table, which is the one everybody recognises: strategy, governance, decisions, performance and accountability. Sitting alongside it is the Human Table, where you have trust, emotion, confidence, vulnerability, relationships and belonging. Then there is the Political Table, where power, territory, alliances, proximity, status and some of the game-playing we have already talked about can influence what happens. Finally, there is the Organisational Table, which is the connection back to employees, customers, values, culture and what people are actually experiencing beyond the boardroom.

What interests me is the relationship between those four because they are all operating at once, and they do not necessarily carry equal weight. One team may have a very strong Formal Table but a Human Table that is struggling. Another may have good relationships but a Political Table that has become disproportionately powerful. Sometimes the Organisational Table has almost disappeared because the SLT has become so absorbed in its own pressures and internal dynamics that the everyday experience of employees is barely entering the conversation.

The Reset allows us to start seeing where the balance sits. We are not saying that the Human or Political Tables are inherently negative; human relationships and organisational influence can be enormously positive. It is about understanding which table is influencing the team at any particular moment, whether that influence is helping or hindering it, and what that means for the decisions and behaviours that eventually travel out into the wider organisation.

You have mentioned the chessboard a few times. Are senior leaders really playing games with one another?

Sometimes they are, although I think we have to be careful about how we describe that. The Corporate Chessboard came from looking at the political behaviours that can develop inside organisations. It does not mean walking into a business trying to identify a narcissist or find the villain in the room. Apart from being irresponsible, that would be far too simplistic. What interests me is behaviour and the effect that behaviour has on other people.

Gaslighting behaviours can happen. Passive aggression can happen. People manage upwards, information can become currency, alliances develop and departments become territorial. Favouritism and nepotism can affect who has influence. People can undermine one another, protect their position or learn that being close to power carries more organisational currency than challenging it. None of those things requires us to diagnose anybody, but they can have a profound effect on the way a senior team operates.

The chessboard is useful because it gives people a way of looking at those behaviours without immediately making the conversation about good people and bad people. Once you can see the moves, you can also begin to recognise when you make them yourself. For me, one of the most powerful things somebody could say during a Reset is, "I think I can see when I do this now. When I feel this, this is how I tend to respond, and I need to work on that."

That is what I mean by behavioural realism. We are not trying to turn a group of senior leaders into perfect human beings. We are helping intelligent adults understand the behaviours they bring into the room, what triggers those behaviours and the impact they have on the wider system.

How important is the history of the team in understanding what is happening today?

It is fundamental, and this is another place where the medical analogy is useful. If you went to a good doctor with a problem, you would be rather concerned if they prescribed treatment before asking any questions. They want to know when it started, what changed, what the symptoms are, what makes it worse and what else was happening at the time. Yet organisations quite regularly commission a leadership intervention before anybody has properly investigated how the current situation developed.

Today's senior leadership team has been created, at least in part, by what came before it. Perhaps there was a very strong previous leader and everybody learned to defer upwards. Perhaps there was a period of instability and people retreated into their own departments. Two functions may have been fighting for years. Redundancies may have created a lasting sense of threat, or somebody may have left and changed the informal balance of power overnight. A new CEO can inherit relationships and behaviours that were formed long before they arrived.

We therefore need to understand the drivers that created the current team. Otherwise, there is a real danger that we treat the symptoms while leaving the causes untouched. That is why the Reset begins with a deep diagnostic. Depending on the organisation, that can involve psychometrics, individual interviews, direct-report and employee insight, organisational history and observing the SLT in real meetings. We are gradually putting the pieces together before deciding what the intervention needs to be.

One of the interesting things you have talked about is the SLT as a tribe. What do you mean by that?

There is some very useful behavioural research around psychological safety, belonging, social identity and the way people respond when they perceive interpersonal threat. I do not think we need to turn that into a neuroscience lecture to recognise something very human that happens at work. People gravitate towards places where they feel accepted, understood and reasonably safe.

If a senior leader does not experience that around the SLT table, they will often return to the part of the organisation where they do feel safe, and that is frequently their own function. Their department knows them, they understand the language, they feel competent there and there is a sense of familiarity and belonging. The problem is that they can also take the unresolved experience of the senior team back with them. The story can gradually become, "They do not understand what we are dealing with," or "Finance are blocking us again," or "Operations never listen." Without necessarily intending to, the leader begins recruiting their own department into a conflict that started somewhere else.

That is when something happening inside one meeting room starts to acquire tentacles across the organisation. Departmental rivalry becomes stronger, people receive competing narratives and an "us and them" culture can begin to form. I have said before that a team is only as dysfunctional as the tentacles that are feeding it, because those tentacles work in both directions. The wider organisation influences the SLT, but the behaviour of the SLT is also continually feeding the culture below it.

This is why psychological safety cannot simply mean everybody being nice to one another. Senior teams need disagreement. They need people prepared to say, "I do not agree with this," or, "I think we are making the wrong decision." What matters is whether the relationship can withstand that challenge. I do not need everybody around a senior table to be friends, but I do expect professional respect.

What do you do when relationships around that table have become genuinely difficult?

Sometimes two people have reached the point where every new disagreement arrives carrying the baggage of the previous ten. The original issue may almost have disappeared, because each person is now reacting as much to the history of the relationship as to what is happening in front of them. In those situations, mediation or facilitated relationship work can become an important part of the Reset.

I think of it as repackaging the friction from personal to professional. You do not have to suddenly like one another, go out for dinner together every Friday or pretend that the history did not happen. You do, however, have to find a way of disagreeing professionally and continuing to work together. That is part of being a senior leader.

The same applies to feedback. At the beginning of a Reset, people may only feel able to give some feedback anonymously. That tells us something in itself. As psychological safety develops, I want to move towards what I call a Circle of Truth, where somebody can eventually say to another member of the team, “When you do this, this is the impact it has on me,” and the other person can hear it without immediately becoming defensive.

That brings us into the difference between intention and impact. I may have had absolutely no intention of making you feel dismissed, but if my behaviour repeatedly has that effect, my good intention does not erase your experience. Equally, the person receiving the behaviour needs to be able to challenge it without turning the other person into a villain. Those are much more mature conversations than simply asking whether everybody gets on.

Why does the Reset need six months? Could you not uncover much of this through an intensive off-site?

You can uncover an enormous amount during an off-site, and the two-day Reset is an important part of the programme, but it cannot do the whole job. People can spend two very productive days together, have honest conversations, make commitments, have dinner, understand one another better and leave genuinely wanting things to change. Then Monday morning arrives. The emails start, the operational pressure returns, somebody challenges somebody in exactly the way they always have, and before long the old machinery starts turning again.

I sometimes think of it like a greenhouse. You do not plant something, water it once and return six months later expecting it to have flourished. You have to keep creating and protecting the conditions in which it can grow. Behavioural change inside a complex senior team is no different.

That is why Bridge stays close for six months. We continue observing meetings, work individually with leaders, help repair relationships where that is needed and introduce Reset Labs around the capabilities the diagnostic tells us the team needs. One team may need work around conflict and challenge; another may need communication and influence, presentation and storytelling, confidence, resilience or behaviour under pressure. The framework gives us the architecture, but the intervention has to respond to the actual team rather than forcing every SLT through an identical programme.

By the time we reach the two-day off-site, we have also earned the right to do that work. We are not arriving on day one with a box of exercises and asking everybody to tell us their communication style. We have listened, observed and started to understand the history, relationships and individual players. That makes the conversation very different.

You have also talked about the importance of the informal time during the Reset. Why does that matter?

Because senior leaders are still human beings, and sometimes we forget that. An off-site gives people an opportunity to step away from the roles they normally perform around the boardroom table. Having dinner together, talking about something other than the agenda and simply letting their hair down can reveal another side of the relationship.

I am not talking about cheesy team building, and I certainly do not need a group of senior executives building a raft together to prove that they can collaborate. What interests me is humanisation. If I have built a fairly fixed story about somebody because of the way I experience them in meetings, seeing another side of that person can begin to loosen the story. Equally, as a behavioural practitioner, you can learn an enormous amount about a team when the PowerPoint disappears and people stop performing their formal roles quite so consciously.

It is not a substitute for the harder work. It sits alongside it, because relationships are not rebuilt entirely through models and facilitated conversations. Sometimes understanding the human being behind the role changes the way two people subsequently approach one another.

Why does employee voice form part of a programme focused on the senior leadership team?

Because otherwise there is a danger that the senior team becomes its own closed system. The higher somebody progresses through an organisation, the easier it becomes for their understanding of that organisation to arrive through dashboards, reports, meetings and other senior people. They can become surprisingly distant from the everyday experience of the people they lead without ever consciously deciding to do so.

Part of the Reset is therefore about reconnecting senior leaders with the lived organisation. That could involve something like A Day in Your Shoes, where leaders spend meaningful time in another part of the business or alongside frontline employees. It is not a royal visit and it is not an opportunity to walk around being shown all the good things. The purpose is to listen, participate and understand what the organisation feels like from somewhere else.

There is a broader leadership point here as well. A senior leader should be able to bring the voice and experience of their own people into the SLT without arriving simply to defend their department. Once you sit at that senior table, you have a responsibility for the whole organisation. You can represent your people without turning everybody else into the opposition. Moving from loyalty to your own function towards a shared responsibility for the whole organisation is an important part of becoming a collective leadership team.

Where does the SLT Behavioural Playbook fit into all of this?

Towards the latter part of the Reset, because I want it to grow out of what the team has actually learned rather than become another aspirational document written at the beginning. Most organisations already have values, and values matter, but they tend to tell us why something is important. The Behavioural Playbook gets much closer to how this particular group of people has agreed to work together.

That means being practical. How are we going to challenge one another? What happens when we disagree? How do we communicate decisions once we leave the room? How do we support one another when the pressure is high? What do we do if somebody begins retreating into their functional territory? How do we stop difficult conversations at the SLT becoming destabilising stories elsewhere in the organisation? I think you should be able to speak your truth inside the room without destabilising the people outside it.

The SLT is effectively a microculture, so the Playbook also becomes important when somebody new joins. We do not want new members simply to conform; fresh people should bring fresh challenge. But equally, if a team has spent six months changing some deeply embedded behaviours, it makes no sense to leave the onboarding of a new senior leader entirely to chance. The team should be able to explain what it has learned about itself, how it has agreed to work and what collective leadership means in that organisation.

If you returned twelve months later, what would tell you that the Reset had really worked?

I would certainly want to hear from the senior team, but I would not only ask them. They may feel that their relationships are stronger, meetings are better and decisions are clearer, and all of that matters. The more interesting question is whether anybody beyond that room is experiencing the difference.

Are direct reports seeing greater consistency? Are departments collaborating differently? Is there less political noise travelling through the organisation? Are employees hearing fewer competing narratives from different senior leaders? Do people increasingly experience the SLT as one leadership team rather than a collection of powerful individuals representing separate territories? Those are the things that tell us whether behavioural change at the top is beginning to travel.

That is why we distinguish between the intensive six-month Reset and what happens afterwards. We stay involved more lightly because old behaviours have an extraordinary ability to return when pressure increases or circumstances change. Then, at around twelve months, we can go back to employees and direct reports, observe again and look at what has genuinely shifted.

For me, six months measures the Reset and twelve months measures the ripple. Ultimately, the purpose is not simply to create a senior team that enjoys better meetings or feels more comfortable with one another. It is to create a senior leadership team whose behaviour has a stronger, healthier and more consistent impact on the organisation it leads.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the Senior Leadership Team Reset is about what happens beyond the senior table. A leadership team can improve its meetings, understand one another better and become more effective at working together, but the real measure of change is whether the organisation begins to experience something different as a result. Are decisions clearer? Are employees hearing a more consistent leadership voice? Is there less political noise travelling through the organisation? Are leaders increasingly acting for the whole rather than protecting individual territories?

That is why I see the Reset as more than an intervention with a group of senior people. The SLT sits at the centre of an organisational ecosystem, and its behaviours have a ripple effect far beyond the room. Change what happens around that table, protect the conditions that allow those changes to take hold, and over time you have the opportunity to change what people experience throughout the organisation.

The Reset starts around the senior table. The measure of it is what changes beyond it.

To find out more about Senior Leadership Team Reset and the Built by Bridge collection, visit insidebridge.com.