THRIVING TOGETHER

Diagnosing Friction to Unlock Team Potential

> *Across workshops, webinars, and facilitation labs, one theme is clear: teams often feel friction long before they can pinpoint it.*
>
> *This invisible tension shows up as low engagement, missed outcomes, and wasted effort, but it can be addressed.*
>
> *Small, intentional actions, combined with the right collaboration tools, can shift teams from frustration to flow, improving clarity, trust, and overall performance.*
>
> *- Allan Ryan, Executive Director*
> *Hargraves Institute*

Snapshot

For more than a year, we've asked leaders, managers, team members, and practitioners across sectors one simple question: **What's your biggest workplace challenge?**

Their stories reveal what helps teams work - and what gets in the way.

From these conversations, five clear patterns of friction emerged. They aren't dramatic failures or headline-grabbing crises. They're the small, persistent issues that quietly slow progress, sap energy, and chip away at trust.

The Patterns

1. Leadership **capability** and trust gaps.
2. Lack of **clarity** in roles, expectations, and priorities.
3. Collaboration **barriers** across boundaries.
4. Culture and psychological **safety** concerns.
5. Overload, resource **constraints**, and capability gaps.

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Introduction

Over the past year, we've listened as more than 60 contributors - from front-line staff to team leaders, senior leaders, and executives - shared their everyday workplace challenges. Their stories show what actually makes teams work, and where they often stumble.

Our aim was simple. We wanted to go beyond theory to understand the everyday problems teams face and highlight practical tools that help people take action, moving from friction to flow.

As we looked across these stories, the patterns of friction became clear. Understanding them reveals where leaders can make the biggest difference and how a people-first approach, combined with uncommon tools, can shift behaviour for lasting impact.

Why is this report different?

What sets this report apart is its focus on real experiences behind these issues. It:

- **Uses friction as a lens** to connect small challenges to culture and performance.
- Prioritises **mindset before method**, vital for collaboration. Treats trust, collaboration, and innovation as connected systems.
- Provides **practical tools and frameworks** to embed habits into everyday practice, designed to be used and reused as contexts change.
- **Focuses on mid-level leaders** as the key leverage point.

Practical Actions for Leaders

Leaders can take practical steps to address friction. For example:

- Diagnose friction with the Friction to Flow Assessment.
- Understand your collaboration mindset with the Collaboration Assessment Tool.
- Build trust using the Team Collaboration Qtool in Working Better Together.
- Strengthen innovation using the Innovation Mindset Framework.
- Embed tools and habits to shift your team from friction to flow, with Thriving Teams.

> *Our engagement survey showed our team scored lower than the organisation's average. What do I do?*

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The Patterns: Top Five Points of Friction

1. Leadership Capability and Trust Gaps

Leaders are seen as inconsistent, unavailable, inexperienced, or misaligned with values. When leaders don't actively listen to the whole team, trust, psychological safety, and engagement suffer. People may hold back ideas, hesitate to speak up, and feel less connected or confident in their role.

> *"I've been in my role for 2 months but haven't had any onboarding, so I'm struggling with high uncertainty and unknown expectations."*

2. Lack of Clarity in Roles, Expectations, and Priorities

Unclear roles and shifting expectations leave teams unsure where to start or how to juggle priorities. A messy beginning often leads to misalignment, wasted effort, missed opportunities and strained relationships.

> *"When everything feels important, how do you figure out where to start, and actually get everyone to agree?"*

3. Collaboration Barriers Across Boundaries

Cross-team work continues to frustrate people. Silos, remote work challenges, and cross-team dependencies slow progress and cause friction. Without shared understanding, innovation stalls and delivery suffers.

> *"Trusting colleagues from across the business to prioritise the business, not just their own agenda."*

4. Culture and Psychological Safety Concerns

Fear of speaking up, exclusion, and lack of recognition affect well-being and team cohesion. When people don't feel valued or safe, collaboration and creativity are constrained.

> *"No clarity regarding roles, scared to stand up and speak up. People stay quiet because they fear being on the hit list."*

5. Overload, Resource Constraints, and Capability Gaps

Understaffing, shifting priorities, limited skills and digital noise contribute to burnout, stress, and rework. Teams struggle to maintain performance and deliver outcomes without targeted support.

> *"We're constantly under-resourced and understaffed, yet the importance of our work and demands keep increasing."*

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Insights for Leaders

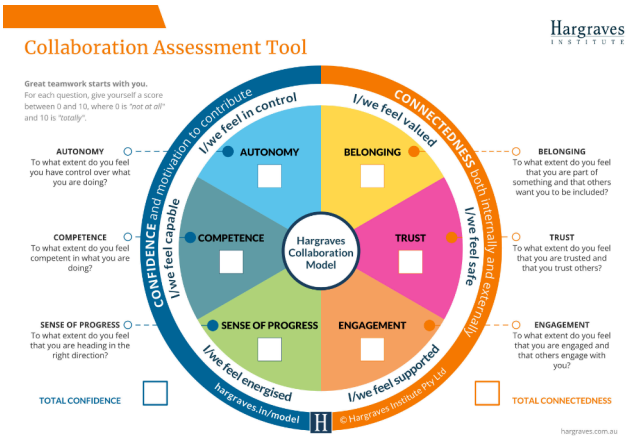
Insight 1: Collaboration starts with mindset, not method

Most collaboration issues aren't caused by process. They're caused by people showing up with different expectations, assumptions, and levels of willingness. When collaboration breaks down, leaders often add more meetings or rules to fix the symptoms, but these fail if willingness, expectations, and definitions of success aren't aligned first.

Why it matters: Misaligned collaboration slows decisions and heightens frustration.

What it impacts: Cross-functional work, delivery speed, innovation, and team climate.

We recommend: Collaboration Assessment Tool, which helps teams surface expectations and reduce predictable breakdowns.



Collaboration Assessment Tool

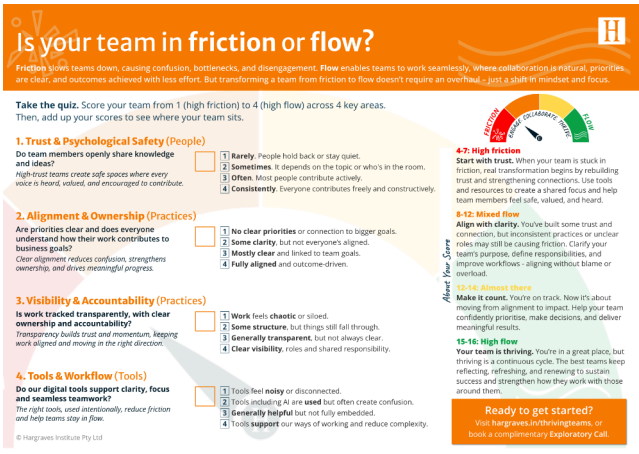
Insight 2: Leaders need a clear picture of friction before creating flow

Teams often feel friction - bottlenecks, confusion, slow progress - but cannot pinpoint the cause. Leaders may respond with new initiatives or more resources without understanding which issue actually needs attention.

Why it matters: Acting on symptoms wastes time, leaving small issues to escalate.

What it impacts: Performance, clarity, confidence, project momentum, and leader credibility.

We recommend: Friction to Flow Assessment, which helps leaders identify sources of friction and where effort is being lost.



Friction to Flow Assessment

Insights for Leaders

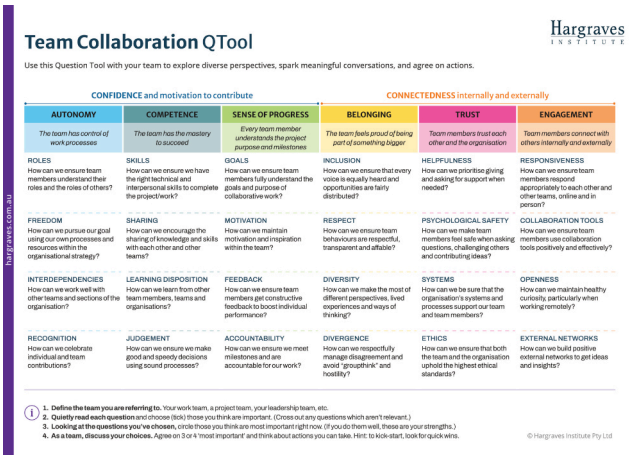
Insight 3: Trust grows through deliberate conversation and consistent behaviour

Trust isn't a vibe. It is shaped by behaviours over time—keeping promises, making expectations clear, and following through consistently. Leaders often assume trust is "high" or "low" without understanding why. Friction can build quietly, and people may sense it before they can articulate it. Building trust means creating an environment where team members feel safe to speak up.

Why it matters: Low trust slows decisions and keeps people guarded.

What it impacts: Psychological safety, accountability, honest discussions, and team performance.

We recommend: The Team Collaboration QTool (see: Working Better Together), which helps teams make expectations visible and build trust through shared commitments.



Team Collaboration QTool

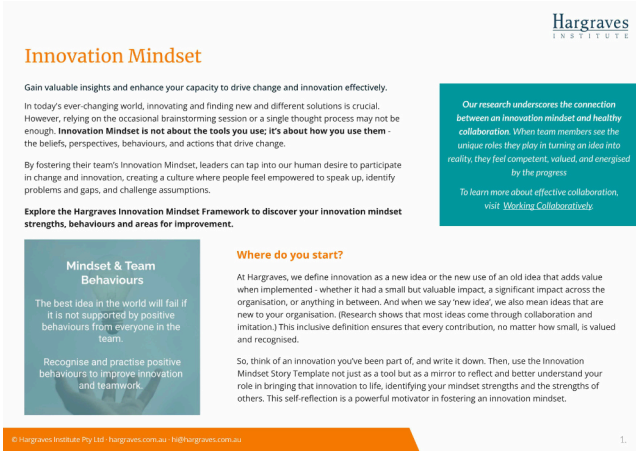
Insight 4: Innovation needs psychological safety and permission to experiment

Innovation is a behaviour, not one-off event. It thrives when people feel safe to test ideas, share concerns and challenge assumptions. If they feel ignored, judged or rushed, they disengage creatively and stick to what they know.

Why it matters: Without psychological safety, adaptation slows, opportunities are missed and talent disengages.

What it impacts: Problem-solving, customer experience, culture, and change readiness.

We recommend: Innovation Mindset Framework, which cultivates habits that support curiosity,experimentation, and learning.



Innovation Mindset Framework

Insights for Leaders

Insight 5: Culture shifts when habits change, not when events run

Training sessions create awareness but rarely change behaviour on their own. Without embedding, the tools and routines that support cultural behaviours are forgotten, and old habits return. Teams need practical, repeatable tools and practices that gradually shift culture and sustain it.

Why it matters: Without reinforcement, learning is forgotten, frustration grows, and culture efforts stall.

What it impacts: Engagement, trust, alignment, relationships, and long-term performance.

We recommend: Thriving Teams, which helps leaders embed tools and habits that build clarity, trust, and alignment through everyday practice.

Thriving Teams

Additional Recommendations for Leaders

- **Start right:**
  Align on purpose, roles, expectations, and success criteria at project outset.
- **Ask better questions:**
  Use questions that create clarity, connection, and reflection.
- **Embed micro-habits:**
  Weekly check-ins or “what worked well” reflections strengthen collaboration and trust.
- **Support leaders in diagnosing friction and embedding tools:**
  Safety is the precondition for collaboration and innovation.
- **Address capability gaps early:**
  Diagnose strengths and issues before they escalate into cultural problems.

If you can sense that something isn’t quite right in your team,
but you can’t quite pinpoint it, you’re not alone.
Let’s chat.

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Leadership Lens: Applying Insights by Level

Insight/Tool	Team Leaders	Mid-Level Leaders	Senior Leaders
Collaboration Mindset (Collaboration Assessment Tool)	Align team behaviours, build shared agreements	Coordinate cross-functional teams	Set collaboration standards across business units
Friction Diagnosis (Friction-to-Flow Assessment)	Identify bottlenecks in the daily workflow	Align team and program priorities	Influence organisational processes and policies
Trust (Team Collaboration QTool)	Build psychological safety within the team	Connect teams and departments	Shape culture and reinforce organisational values
Innovation (Innovation Mindset Framework)	Encourage idea sharing in the team	Foster experimentation in multiple teams	Embed innovation as a strategic capability
Embedding Habits (Thriving Teams: DIY, facilitated, train-the-trainer)	Embed practical tools and routines to build clarity, trust and alignment	Align team behaviours and strengthen relationships across teams	Champion consistent cultural practices and sustain alignment across the organisation

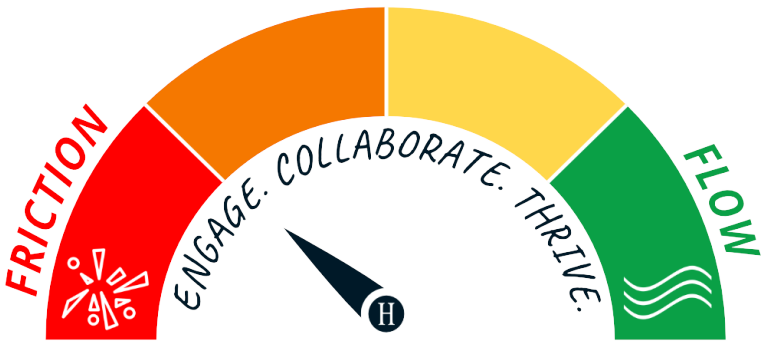
Summary: Thriving Together

For 20 years, we've helped leaders and teams understand what really drives performance - and what quietly gets in the way. These small, everyday challenges (frictions) can compound over time, but once addressed, teams can regain their momentum and thrive. That's flow.

What does Flow look like?

Flow shapes how people work together. Clear priorities, honest conversations, shared expectations, and everyday innovation. It's not magic.

It's the result of deliberate conversations, aligned mindsets, and habits that stick.



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How We Collected the Data

Over the past 12 to 18 months, we've gathered insights from multiple sources to understand real workplace challenges.

When downloading tools or previews of our book, *Uncommon Tools for Common Workplace Problems*, we invited people to tell us (in confidence) about their workplace challenge. In return, we emailed them a tool or idea to help them get started - because we know getting started is often the hardest part.

What's your common workplace problem?

Tell us about it, and we'll share a tool or insight to help you get started, too.

In addition, during various activities and conversations, individuals were invited to share their workplace challenges openly or confidentially.

The result is an ever-expanding collection of workplace realities across sectors, roles, and organisational contexts.

> *I've worked hard to support my team, but a recent senior management decision has had a significant impact on culture and trust. I feel like I'm back to square one, and it's a struggle to keep the team motivated.*

About Hargraves Institute

Hi, we're Hargraves Institute. We empower leaders and teams through Uncommon Tools and a People-First Approach. Backed by research and 20 years of experience, our approach draws on four key pillars of innovation: individuals, processes, ideas, and collaboration.

Real change happens when teams embed habits into their everyday work. That's why we don't just deliver solutions—we equip leaders and teams with practical tools, skills and frameworks to create lasting impact, building engagement, solving real problems, and helping you work better together in practice, not just theory.

Making change happen since 2006.

We'll help you unlock performance through Uncommon Tools and a People-First Approach.

Get in touch with Allan
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