

The Bridge Builders' Handbook

A guide to thinking like a mediator and
building bridges in your community

Contents

An introduction to Bridge Building

5 principles of Bridge Building

- Difference is strength
- Disagreement is potential
- Avoid enemy thinking
- Search for shared goals
- Give it time

6 steps of Bridge Building

- Take stock of the last year (look inwards)
- Survey your landscape (look outwards)
- Establish your foundations
- Build the span
- Reach out to another group
- Shape your shared keystone


About this handbook

Our aim is to help you to think like a Bridge Builder; to find ways to solve problems, strengthen relationships and build more connected communities.

This guide will:

- Help you to recognise and celebrate the power and impact of the bridges you have already built and the connections you have already made
- Help to identify where your connections are strong, where they could be stronger and where the relationship you have with different groups is under strain, or yet to be made
- Give you some practical ideas, some ways of working and some guiding principles on how to make positive and meaningful connections with different groups

Lots has been written about Bridge Building in an academic sense. This handbook seeks to translate that knowledge into practical action; a series of simple steps that anyone can follow to tend to their bridges and build new ones.



**An introduction to
Bridge Building**

Building Bridges: Closer together and further apart

In the early days of lockdown, our communities achieved an extraordinary amount. We shopped for one another, lent each other things, entertained our kids with window ledge surprises. We met people we have never met before and we gained an insight into how others live down the road.

We built thousands of little bridges which connected us outside of our usual bubbles. These bridges are powerful things - they're the infrastructure of new friendships and, in aggregate, the engineering of stronger, more resilient communities.

But as time went on, the connective tissue that held us together became tired and started to break down. The bridges between us became weaker, and the gaps between us became wider. What was co-operation started to become competition once again.

Patience has worn thin, trust has become suspicion, and instead of building bridges, we've started to build walls.

It's been a tough time and we have all been under strain. Many have experienced tragedy and trauma and everyone has experienced everyday annoyances. Understandably, we have all become thinner skinned and quicker to anger.

Why Build Bridges?

We know that a community with lots of destructive conflict is not a nice place to be. We feel unsafe, unseen and uncomfortable. We use our resources to build walls. We believe that there is a better way.

Instead of building walls, we could be building bridges. Instead of avoiding each other and pulling away, we could be reaching out.

We know that a connected community feels friendlier, a connected community is safer and a connected community performs better.

We believe that the only way to achieve this is to start with the local. We saw, in the early lockdowns, the collective impact of millions of individuals choosing to reach out, help out and build bridges.

We dream about how much better all our lives would be if we placed positive relationships at the centre of our thinking and doing and embraced disagreement as an opportunity, rather than a threat.

We accept that trying to achieve this change can feel scary and difficult.

We think there's a way forward.

Why do we mean by building bridges?

At its simplest level this is about making the decision to reach out to someone you don't already know well, offering to help out, and - by spending time together and helping each other - making friends.

Building any bridge between people in our communities is a good thing, but some bridges are harder to build than others.

Difference and disagreement are a fact of life, and sometimes they can prevent us from forming positive connections, and even draw us into harmful conflict.

When we talk about building bridges in this handbook, we're talking about making connections with a group or community that we suspect is "not like us" (policy people describe this as an "outgroup").


Building a bridge with a group like this involves using the insight created by difference, and the energy created by disagreement to understand each other better, find areas of common interest and start working together to solve problems both groups share.

These bridges form relationships that cross divides.


Who can be a Bridge Builder?

We hope that anyone who reads this handbook will find it interesting and that it will encourage them to think about difference and disagreement in a new way.

We suspect that this toolkit will be particularly useful if you are:




Part of a group in a community where people aren't getting on with each other




Someone who is good at making introductions and connections within the community (a "Community Weaver")




Working in an organisation that supports community infrastructure, like a CVS




Part of a new community support group that wants to link better with others who have similar aims and challenges



Working in a voluntary organisation or a charity wanting to connect with other local groups



Working for a Local Authority or the Police with a role to reduce tension and promote cohesion



5 principles of Bridge Building

5 principles of Bridge Building

**Difference is
strength**

**Disagreement
is potential**

**Avoid enemy
thinking**

**Search for
shared goals**

Give it time



Difference is strength

Solid bridges need strong foundations - a strong sense of who we are, how we do things and what we stand for. A strong community includes people who think, act and look differently to us.

Often when seeking to build bridges with others we jump straight into searching for commonality and shy away from what makes us different.

But having a clear and strong identity is important to our sense of belonging, and is an essential foundation for any bridge building work.

We must not try to flatten what makes us different, but instead see it as a source of strength.

Exploring our foundations and understanding what makes us different is an essential starting point.



Disagreement is potential

Disagreement or conflict is commonly seen as something that is negative, and sadly it often plays out that way. When we think of conflict we often think of destructive consequences; shouting, violence, hurt and revenge. We see conflict as something that emerges from two or more parties thinking they have incompatible goals.

But there is another way of thinking about conflict; as bringing different groups together around things they both care about.

If we look beyond the simple thinking of winning or losing, we use our differing perspectives to understand the problem better, and explore what could be achieved if we combined our resources to achieve a goal that meets both our needs. Initial disagreement then becomes a powerful catalyst for growth.

Channeled in the right direction, disagreement can create the energy for positive change.

All too often the way we think and communicate harms our relationships and prevents us from harnessing the potential of disagreement. We call this 'enemy thinking'.

The top 5 traps of enemy thinking are:

- **Judgement:** Drawing conclusions about who or what is good/ bad/ right/ wrong
- **Labels:** Any thought that starts I am/ you are/ they are (followed by a label)
- **Blame:** Trying to find out whose fault it is
- **No choice:** Thinking there is no choice: "I can't/ I have to/ I must"
- **Demand:** Forcing a decision. Using open or hidden threats to get your way

To counter enemy thinking, we can do two things:

1. **Setting intentions:** Being clear our intention is about improving the quality of connection we have with the "other" group, rather than drawing conclusions or making decisions
2. **Being curious about the "other" group;** seeking to increase our understanding about what is important to "them" by asking questions like "can you tell me about some of your experiences that have led you to think about this issue in this way?"



Avoid enemy
thinking



Search for shared goals

So, if we have moved beyond “enemy thinking” (thinking that restricts the outcome of our disagreement to winning and losing - or both losing), how should we think?

We should commit to only searching for “legitimate goals”: the things we both want that do not harm the other group.

In searching for legitimate goals, we need to ask “and / both” questions. These are questions that seek solutions that work for both groups.

So instead of asking ‘How can we keep that group out so the park is safer for my children?’, we ask, ‘How can we make the park safer for all our children, and accessible to other members of the community?’

And/both questions demand creative thinking, so be ready to get creative!



Give it time

Transforming our community takes time.

It requires us to keep aware of two things at once: where we want to go, and where we are now.

It's about accepting that the exact route is uncertain. It's a bit like having a compass but not a map.

It is not all about the quality of the journey, or all about the destination, it is both, and we cannot achieve one without the other.

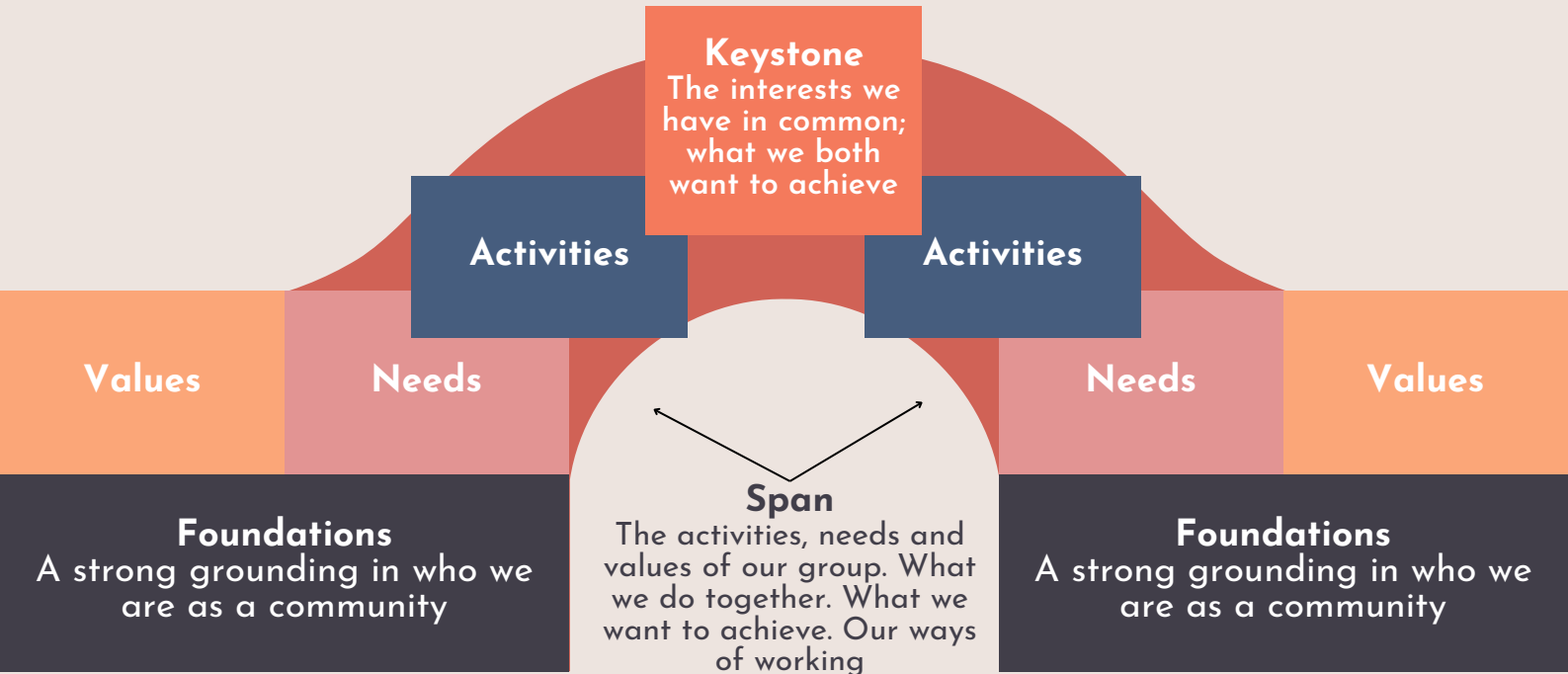
It won't all go to plan and that's ok. Keep talking to each other, be open to surprises.

Give it time. Be kind to yourself. Embrace a bit of mess. Put your bi-focals on, keeping sight of the goal, but being attentive and responsive to the everyday "happenings".



6 steps of Bridge Building

What are the components of a bridge?



6 steps of Bridge Building

1.

Take stock
of the last
few years

2.

Survey your
landscape

3.

Establish
your
foundations

4.

Build the
span

5.

Reach out
to the other
group

6.

Shape your
shared
keystone

A huge amount has changed over the past few years. We can only move forwards by looking back to understand where we've been, what we've achieved, and what there is to build on.

WHAT

The first step in Bridge Building is to take stock of the past few years; to say thanks for the moments of kindness, the acts of neighbourliness, and the difference that they've made.

There has been a lot of pain, anxiety and fear but also moments of light and rays of hope. Capturing the positives gives us hope for a brighter future.

HOW

Invite others in your neighbourhood or your group to share photos of the acts of kindness they've been thankful for. Get them to caption those photos then share them somewhere everyone can enjoy them - perhaps a Facebook page, a Whatsapp group, a community board in a public space. Or perhaps invite everyone to share their Spirit of Lockdown.

1.

Take stock of
the last few
years

Strong communities are made up of lots of strong bridges. Surveying your landscape, finding the weak links and building in those areas is an important next step.

2.

Survey your landscape

WHAT

Mapping the relationships between different groups in your community will help you to see where bridges are weak, strong and non-existent. This will help you to prioritise areas in which to build new bridges, or tend to ones in need of repair.

HOW

With others in your group, map where bridges have been built and where new ones could be constructed. Identify the prominent fractures and fissions within your local area.

Ask yourself and your group:

- Which groups have good relationships with each other?
- Which groups aren't in contact with each other?
- Which groups experience tension, disagreement or conflict?
- Why is building bridges important to our group?

3.

Establish your foundations

Bridges aren't made by starting in the middle; you need strong foundations to start any build. This means working with your group to reflect on what makes you you.

WHAT

Establishing strong foundations means working with me and mine to reflect on what's important to us, what our positive future looks like, what our struggles are and the characteristics of how we do things round here (culture).

This needs to happen on both sides of the bridge so, if possible, partner with a community connector on the other side of the bridge you're trying to build and lay the foundations simultaneously.

HOW

Ask your group:

- What is our story, our roots?
- What's important to us?
- What struggles do we face?
- When we think of the future, what does a community we would like to be a part of look like? What needs to change for that to happen?
- What are we proud of?
- When we laugh at ourselves, what do we laugh about?



4.

Build the span

Drawing out the activities, needs and values of your group will help move you to find commonalities and areas for collaboration with the group you're seeking to connect with

WHAT

A span is made of 3 main types of material that we then weld together:

1. Activities: All of the activities we do
2. Needs: The needs we are trying to meet through these activities
3. Values: The values that guide how we work together

HOW

With your group:

- Make a list of all the activities that you, as a group, are involved with (things like litter picking and shopping for shielders)
- Make a list of all of the needs you are trying to meet by doing these activities
- Make a list of the values you try to stick to when you are together

Tip: Refer back to what you did in steps 1 & 3

Now that you have strong foundations in place and have begun to build your span, try to make contact with the group you're hoping to connect with

WHAT

Go back to the map you created in step 2. Identify groups who you think might be trying to achieve similar things, or those you most want to make connection with and reach out to them.

HOW

Does anyone know anyone who is friends with someone in the other group? Do you know anyone from the council or CVS who you think would be excited to help make contact and start discussions?

If so, talk to them about what you have been doing and ask them if the other group would be interested to hear more, follow steps 1-4 in the handbook, and meet to explore shared activities, values, needs and networks.

5.

Reach out to
the other
group

Finally, work with the other group to identify a common goal that you can work towards together. This goal will act as the keystone that completes the bridge

WHAT

The keystone is the brick in the middle of the bridge that is neither yours nor theirs - it's the thing that we both rest on. Find the commonalities that the two groups share and figure out how you can work together towards a common goal.

Tip: Before you meet ask yourselves; What was new/surprising about their foundation story? What would we like to know more about? Comparing our values, what will be important to bear in mind when we meet?

HOW

When you meet, ask yourselves:

- What connects us with each other? What are the needs we're both trying to meet? The values we both share?
- How could we achieve our shared goals together? Are there others from our combined relationships map we could get to help?
- How are we going to work best with each other when we encounter problems?





Building bridges can be challenging work. We'd be glad to walk alongside you and to connect you with others on this journey.

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