

# How self-organising teams can help you tackle change in the public sector

Expert Training for Government Transformation





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# First and foremost, what is a self-organising team?

At the simplest level, a self-organising team is one that does not depend on or wait for a manager to assign work. The team figure this out for themselves.

Instead, they manage their own work by identifying all the work that needs to be done, prioritising the required tasks, and managing their own timelines based on the information they have.

As a manager, this doesn't make you redundant.

Self-organising teams benefit from some guidance or facilitation to help them manage input from stakeholders and capacity.





# So what are the benefits of working in a self-organising team in local authorities?

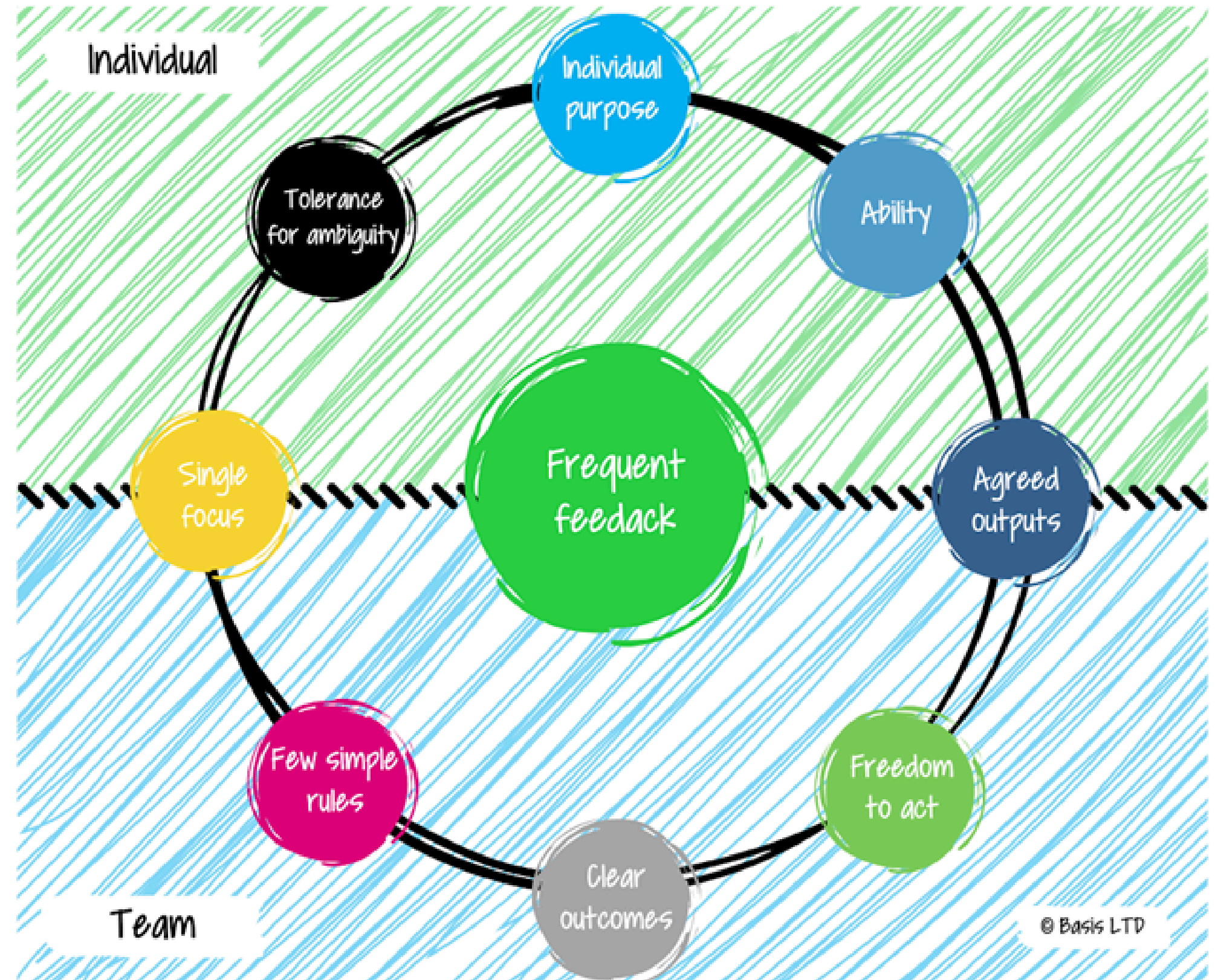
- **Agility:** It is not usually what comes to mind when you think of local authorities, but self-organising teams can quickly adapt to changing circumstances without waiting for approvals from higher authorities. This agility is crucial in addressing complex challenges such as the ones Local Governments face.
- **Better collaboration:** A culture of collaboration and open communication thrives in self-organising teams. Members share ideas, challenge assumptions, and work together to find innovative solutions.
- **Efficient Decision-Making:** They have clear boundaries and within them can make quick decisions, in turn leading to more efficient service delivery.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Self-organising teams align well with the Agile approach. They regularly assess processes, identify areas for improvement, and implement changes to enhance performance.



# What is so unique about self-organising teams?

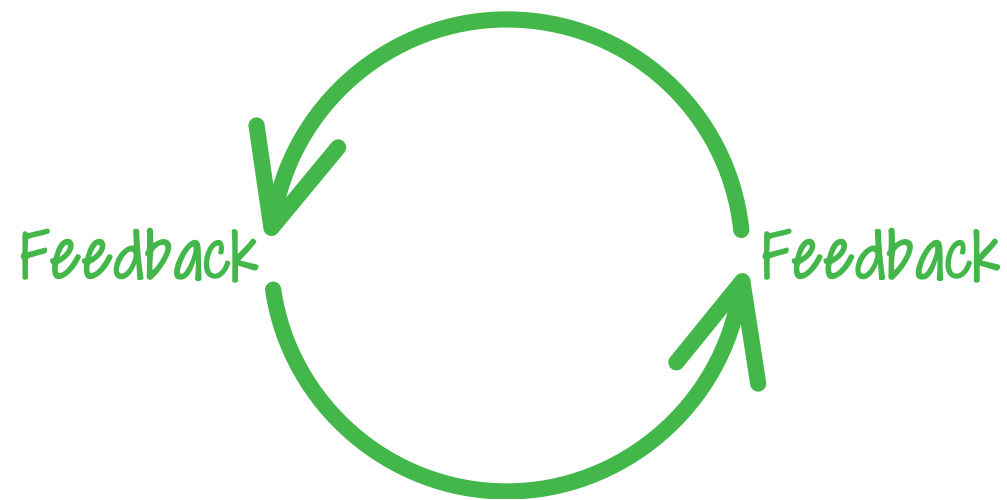
There are **9 attributes** that successful self-organising teams possess. These are outlined in this diagram.

Below, we'll explain these attributes and provide some practical tips that you can use today to kick-start your journey to becoming a self-organising team.



# Attributes that apply both to individuals and teams

## 1. Frequent feedback



Without a manager guiding them, it's easy to lose track.

Regular feedback keeps them aligned, helps them adapt fast, and ensures they're making an impact.

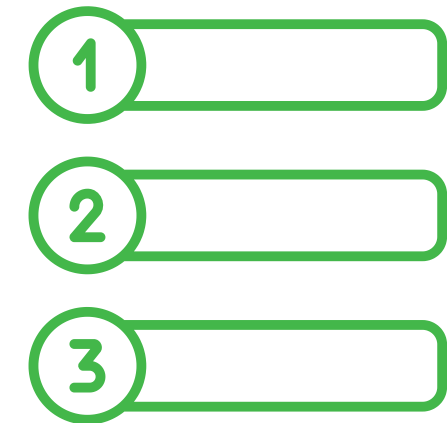
## 2. A single focus



Juggling too many tasks is like trying to spin plates—things start wobbling!

"Context switching" (aka doing too many things at once) slows everything down. Focusing on one thing at a time helps avoid the mental burnout of multitasking.

## 3. Clear individual and team outputs

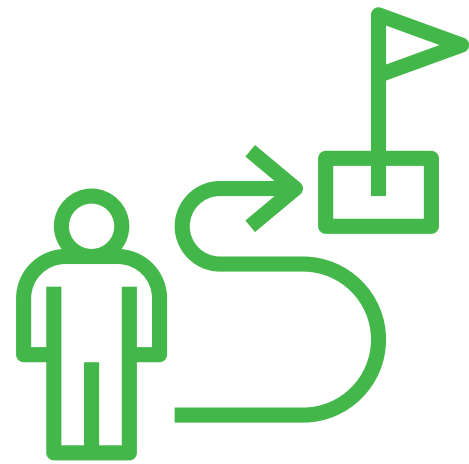


If no one knows what "done" looks like, you'll never know if you're actually making progress.

Teams that talk things through and agree on priorities are like well-oiled machines, smoothly working towards clear, achievable goals.

# Attributes that apply to individuals

## 4. Individual purpose



It's not enough to simply do a job —you've got to believe it matters!

When each team member knows their role and feels it's worthwhile, they can face tough challenges with a sense of pride, asking, "How can I be the hero here?"

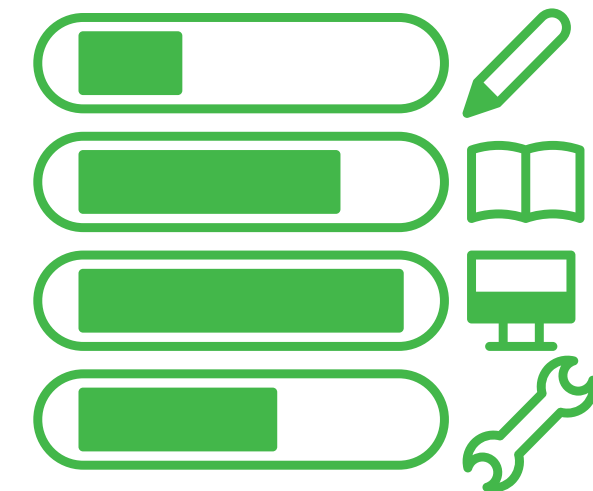
## 5. Coping with ambiguity



Life can be messy, and tackling big problems isn't a straight line.

Complex problems come with uncertainty. Thriving in chaos requires a mindset open to discovery and progress, even without clear answers.

## 6. Ability



The team should have or seek the necessary skills to do the work.

If not, find support or bring in new members temporarily to fill the gap - but make sure they're team players while they're around!





# Attributes that apply to the team

## 7. Clear outcomes



Every team needs a North Star—a big, shining goal that everyone can aim for.

Without it, you'll be wandering around like you're looking for the TV remote that's always gone missing. Clear direction keeps the motivation high.

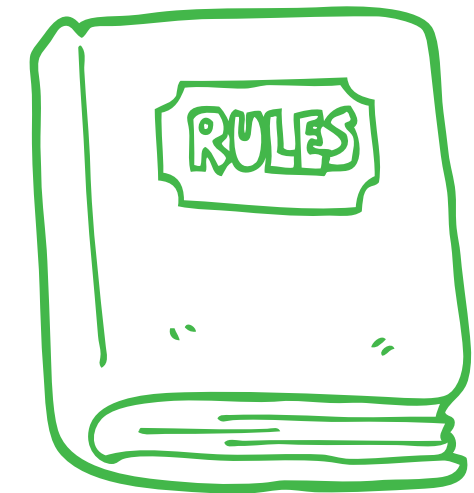
## 8. Freedom to act



Teams need the freedom to experiment and learn.

Give them space to play, make mistakes, and figure out what works. It's like giving them the keys to the playground—just make sure they know the rules.

## 9. Simple rules



A few simple rules keep everyone on track.

The team needs freedom, but they still have to play by some boundaries—whether it's budget limits or decision-making guidelines.



# How can you get started?

Navigating the path towards a more self-organising way of working can be challenging, both for individuals and teams.

Without clear direction, it's easy to feel overwhelmed or unsure of where to focus your efforts.

If any of the following situations sound familiar, we've linked a useful activity you can try with your team to start embodying the 9 attributes of successful self-organising teams.

These exercises are designed to help you strengthen focus, decision-making, and feedback processes, setting your team up for long-term success.



# 1. Are you overwhelmed by competing priorities?



**If you and your team are finding it difficult to manage competing priorities and projects and you have no time for deep work, try our time-management tip.**

We know that it is unlikely that four of your five projects are going to vanish overnight, so finding a way to manage your time effectively will help you make progress at a more consistent rate.

One simple trick to avoid losing time to constant context switching is to ask people to schedule projects for specific times or days and focus solely on this work during that time. This could be a specific day each week, or maybe only a morning. If you're working with people who are on different schedules, working asynchronously can help.

If this seems like too much time, start by carving out some time to focus even if it is just a few hours a week. Over time, this will add up and help you make more progress than you could have without it.

To avoid getting sucked into other people's priorities, turn off email, instant messaging, WhatsApp and whatever other notifications you have pinging on your computer and your phone and work with a single focus on the project at hand.

## 2. Are you unclear on the work's desired outcome?

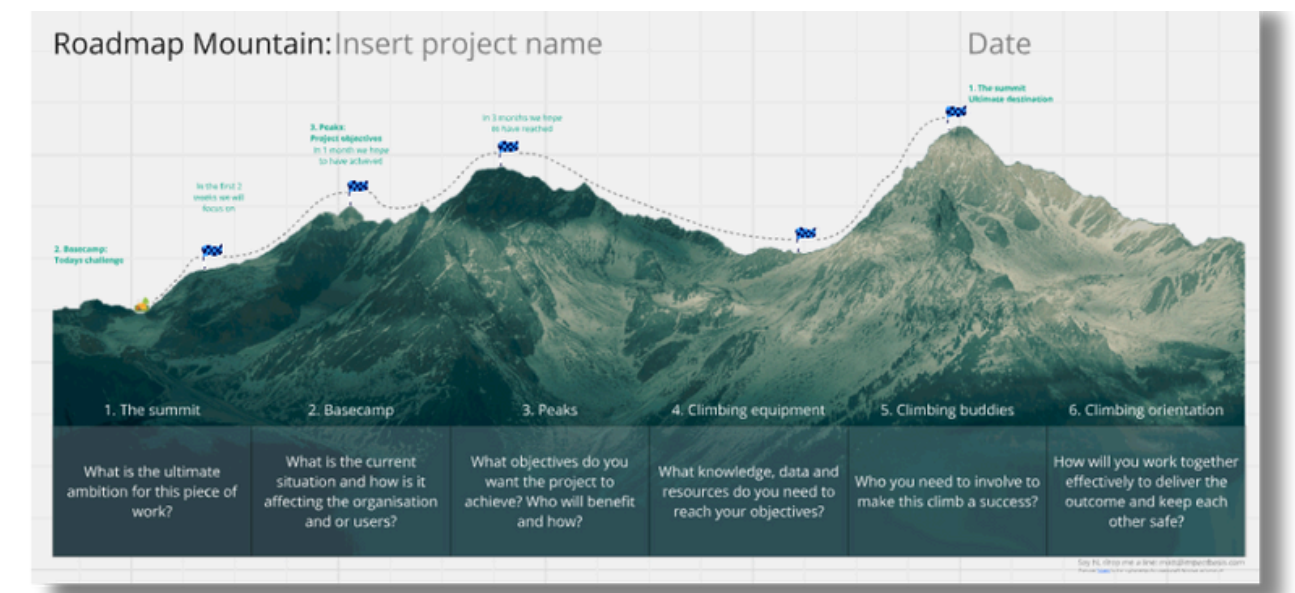
If your team is finding it difficult to make effective decisions about the work and you're unsure of where you're aiming, try our road mapping exercise to help your team set clear outcomes.

It is important that the team is aware of the work's expected outcome. Give time to share the project's purpose and develop a roadmap so that you agree on clear outcomes within the project's constraints.

Roadmaps help to communicate at a high level what chunks of work (and the outcomes they aim to achieve) will be delivered and in which order.

This single source of truth can help provide clarity to team members on expected outcomes.

Our colleague Matt Barnaby has designed a [Miro Template that you can use for free](#), including prompts that will guide you through your first road mapping session.

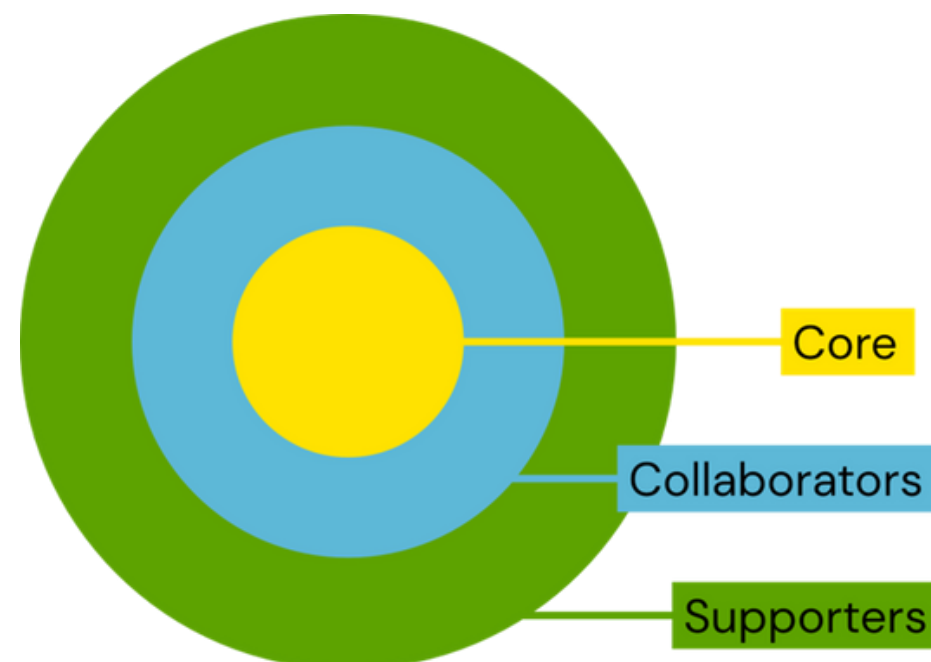


# 3. Unsure about who should be involved?

If you're uncertain about which stakeholders should be involved in a project, or if their type of involvement is unclear, do this exercise with your team.

Joe's blog, '[How to Start a Project Well](#)' mentions using [Emily Webber's Team Onion](#) exercise at the beginning of a project to decide who should be involved in the team.

## Emily Webber's Team Onion



Here's how you can use it...

### Step 1

Who are the 5-9 people we need to deliver the work and who can commit the most time to achieving the common goal?

These people will be your **core team**...

Write their names on post-it notes and place them in the centre of the onion (yellow).

### Step 2

Who are the 4-12 people who can bring specialist information, provide assurance, make decisions or reduce dependencies and blockers?

These people will be your **collaborators**...

Write their names on post-it notes and place them in the second ring of the onion (blue).

### Step 3

Who are the (up to) 30 people who can provide alignment with organisational goals and other parts of the organisation?

These people will be your **supporters**...

Write their names on post-it notes and place them in the outer ring of the onion (green).



# 4. Finding feedback difficult?



If you're struggling to give useful feedback to colleagues, try using this 4-step formula by LeeAnn Renninger to give better feedback. Or, as she describes it, 'brain-friendly' feedback.

From her research, she has developed a formula for giving critical feedback that people can understand and are more likely to act upon.

Watch this 5-minute video where she explains the 4-step formula: [LeeAnn Renninger 'The Secret to Giving Great Feedback'](#)

The key steps include:

1. **The Micro-Yes** – Start by asking a small question to get permission to provide feedback.
2. **Data Point** – Be specific about what needs improvement.
3. **Impact Statement** – Explain the consequences or benefits of the change.
4. **Question** – Encourage a two-way dialogue by asking for their thoughts.

This approach ensures feedback is constructive, actionable, and fosters open communication.

# 5. Struggling to Make Time for Reflection?

**If you and your team don't give each other feedback often and find it difficult to find the time for this, try scheduling 30 minutes once a month to do a retrospective.**

A retrospective is a structured activity where the team comes together to reflect on the lessons they've learned, share feedback and set out areas for improvement so that they can work better together.

Here's a simple retrospective activity you can try with your team.

## The four L's:

### 1. Reflect (10-20 minutes)

Ask team members to write down what they liked, learned, lacked and longed for during a project or about working together over a specific time period.

- **Liked:** Ask team members to identify aspects they enjoyed, found successful, or appreciated during the project/period.
- **Learned:** Focus on new knowledge, insights, or skills gained through the experience.
- **Lacked:** Identify areas where the project fell short, faced challenges, or could have used improvement.
- **Longed For:** What could have been better, or what do they aspire for in future projects?

Encourage participation by having everyone contribute ideas on sticky notes or using the chosen online platform. Once the time is up, put all of the ideas in their groups.

### 2. Discuss and prioritise (20-30 minutes)

- Discuss each category (Liked, Learned, Lacked, Longed For) as a group.
- Look for common themes and patterns across the ideas captured.
- Prioritise the most significant points within each category through voting or group discussion.

### 3. Action items (15 - 20 minutes)

Based on the prioritised points, brainstorm and define concrete action items to:

- Build on the positives identified in "Liked" and "Learned".
- Address the shortcomings identified in "Lacked".
- Pursue the aspirations identified in "Longed For" (as feasible).
- Assign ownership and deadlines for each action item.

Want to learn more about how this works in practice?

Head to our case study, which shows how we worked with Medrwn Môn to help them experiment with becoming a more self-managing organisation.

A thick, yellow, hand-drawn arrow that starts with a wavy, scribbled tail on the left and points towards the right.

[Experimenting with self-managing teams in Medrwn Môn – Basis](#)