The Spiral Breakthrough – A radically different approach to solving society's most complex problems

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Addressing 27,000 children in India at the Kalinga Fellowship, dedicated to combatting human trafficking, gender-based violence, and child marriage.

Executive Summary

Political systems are under pressure, and old methods are failing to produce meaningful change. A new approach to governance is urgently needed – one that fosters collaboration, embraces complexity, and delivers lasting solutions for future generations.

Because no single entity can solve society's biggest problems, governments need to find a way to bring the whole system to come together in a different way. In doing so, they need to inspire radically new thinking, different partnerships and a fresh sense of confidence and hope. This paper explores the need for this and uses a particular methodology to illustrate how it might be done.

The Spiral Breakthrough is a transformative, practical, and scalable methodology designed to tackle society's most complex systemic challenges – from climate change, public health crises, and social inequality, to human trafficking, gender-based violence and refugee integration.

Developed by the Bridge Institute and grounded in over three decades of cross-cultural leadership practice, the Spiral Breakthrough brings together insights from design and systems thinking, collaborative leadership, and agile delivery. It provides a radical new approach to problem-solving – one that embraces complexity, cultivates collaboration, and delivers scalable, lasting change.

The methodology contains four stages:

01 **Identifying Systemic Challenges:** Convening a small, diverse group of experts ('The Ten') to uncover the root causes and define the systemic leverage points.

02 **Building Powerful Coalitions:** Bringing together stakeholders across sectors ('The Hundred') with influence, expertise, and commitment to a shared purpose.

03 **Architecting Breakthrough:** Guiding coalitions through cognitive and emotional transformation to unlock trust, shift mindsets, and foster new insights.

04 **Partnering for Long-Term Impact:** Establishing community Changemakers ('The Million') and agile 'Impact Teams' to create large-scale cultural transformation.

This paper posits that governments alone cannot solve today's multifaceted problems. Instead, it proposes an inclusive, cross-sectoral approach, engaging government, business, civil society, and the communities most impacted by the issues.

Case studies from India, the United Kingdom, and the Philippines demonstrate the Spiral Breakthrough's versatility and impact, and show that radical collaboration and innovative, emotionally intelligent leadership can deliver transformative change on systemic issues that traditional governance and policymaking have repeatedly failed to resolve.

In conclusion, the Spiral Breakthrough offers hope and a practical path forward. It moves beyond consultation into co-creation, and beyond talk into sustained action. It invites governments, institutions, and citizens to stop spectating and to begin co-creating the systemic solutions our world urgently needs.

System Change in Motion: UAE Carbon Roadmap

The Carbon Dioxide Removal Breakthrough Programme in the UAE, creating a roadmap to remove excess carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Introduction and Context

Introduction and Context

We are living in a time of profound uncertainty.

Trust in public institutions is low: in 2025, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer government is distrusted in 17 of the 28 countries measured, and the global average trust in government is below the threshold considered "trust"[1]. Public services are generally exhausted, and there is a growing gap between ambition and delivery. Weakening multilateral cooperation is bringing instability, volatility, and political disruption.

Meanwhile, conflict zones are exposing the shortcomings of governments and institutions in addressing deep-rooted and complex political and ethnic tensions and illustrate the emotional complexity and moral urgency of the challenges we face today. At the same time, we face a deepening climate crisis, rising inequality, and social systems that continue to exclude, exploit, or entrench disadvantage.

Governments around the world are faced with increasingly complex challenges that are vast, interconnected and emotionally charged. The scale and scope of these issues is such that governments are struggling to address these issues meaningfully and deliver solutions that last. There is growing dissatisfaction with traditional governance, with citizens feeling unheard and neglected, which is giving rise to polarisation, populism, and disinformation.

It's clear that conventional political systems, with top-down, expert-led, siloed models, are no longer fit-for-purpose in addressing the pressing issues of our time. Our problems are increasingly complex, but our methods for solving them are stale. Old ways of thinking are not working, and time is running out. We need a new, more dynamic, and fundamentally different kind of leadership – one that leads across differences, builds diverse, cross-sector coalitions, and invites new voices into the process of transformation to drive lasting solutions. Governments cannot solve these problems alone – they must collaborate with business, civil society, and other sectors to create real change.

Most governments are aware they need to find new ways to deliver results. Take the UK's mission-driven focus on national renewal, for example,

1   Edelman Trust Barometer 2025, Global Report: www.edelman.com/trust-barometer

focusing on key areas like growth, public health, net zero, and breaking down barriers to opportunity. Even with a bold vision, the government is struggling to take a radically different approach and turn these ideas into real, systemic change. This is a microcosm of the broader challenge governments face today: they are confronted with inherited problems, resource constraints, and a lack of coordination that makes it difficult to move forward.

It is clear that some of the challenges facing governments today are profoundly complex, hard to resource, and comprise of a myriad of difficult trade-offs. We believe this stems from four key challenges.

Challenges:

- **An Inherited Challenge:**
  Many of the issues governments are faced with today are inherited challenges that are a result of past decisions of previous administrations. This can bring difficult trade-offs between meeting immediate needs and investing in long-term solutions. Governments often feel trapped and limited in their ability to innovate and respond to new crises.

- **A Resource and Capabilities Challenge:**
  Many countries are facing strained public finances and anaemic growth. The current global economic climate, including the new US government implementing increased tariffs globally, exacerbates these difficulties. Additionally, government departments are struggling with low morale and years of underinvestment, which has eroded the dynamic capabilities necessary to effectively manage national-level change.

- **A Complexity and Scale Challenge:**
  Ambitious goals like achieving sustained economic growth ('securing the highest sustained growth in the G7') or overhauling a national healthcare system ('building a health service fit for the future') require substantial changes to large, complex systems. Governments must fundamentally rethink how they operate and adopt new strategies, frameworks, and partnerships that depart from traditional methods.

- **A Pace Challenge:**
  Citizens expect progress to happen quickly, but the challenges governments face are often long-term and systemic. Balancing the pressure to deliver immediate results with the necessity of careful, long-term planning and collaboration makes it difficult for governments to act decisively.

We believe that governments cannot address these challenges with proven approaches from the past. We have identified **three major constraints** that prevent governments from tackling these challenges effectively.

Constraints:

1. Governments Cannot Act Alone:

> ## "Public bodies try to manage everything – but that means they solve little."

– Quote from a delegate at a Future Governance Forum and Bridge Institute Research Event[2]

Leadership in government suffers from a crisis of collaboration, with too much responsibility for broad systemic challenges lying with a single player. The challenges we face, such as of addressing violence in society or catalysing economic growth, can only be solved by building a broad-based multi-sector coalition.   Governments can't solve complex issues alone – they need to engage with business and civil society. But it is hard to truly share accountability if at the same time there is a shared expectation that government has ultimate accountability.

2. Governments Lack Leadership Capacity for Transformational Change:

> ## "The government is full of departmental silos, and they all want their own toys."

– Quote from a delegate at a Future Governance Forum and Bridge Institute Research Event

The crisis of collaboration is also internal. Many government departments are siloed, which prevents them from working together to address large, interconnected challenges. Government missions are often viewed through the lenses of individual departments or people. This lack of cross-departmental leadership hinders systemic change, leaving important problems unsolved.

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2   The Bridge Institute and The Future Governance Forum invited leaders from government, business, academia, and civil society on 6th February 2025 in The Conduit, London, to explore how to bring mission-driven government to life.

3. A Need for Radically Different Thinking:

"Trying to make the NHS [United Kingdom's National Health Service] preventative is a fundamental business model change. It accounts for 14% of GDP and is the biggest employer in Europe. And it was always set up to be curative not preventative. It is the basic rule of change management that an institution like the NHS cannot fix itself. We need to take a wider view of the overall health ecosystem."

– Quote from a delegate at a Future Governance Forum and
Bridge Institute Research Event

The complex issues of today cannot be met in a conventional way. How these problems are approached is constrained by old thinking and traditional methods. Governments need to recognise and embrace new ways of thinking and working, Without a willingness to adopt new paradigms, governments cannot solve these problems.

These constraints make it clear that governments cannot continue with the same approaches that have been used in the past. Traditional debates such as the 'big' vs the 'small' state[3] are rendered irrelevant if we recognise that the state cannot solve complex problems alone. Instead, we need to focus on 'leading with purpose' and 'governing in partnership', with the state coordinating efforts across departments, local and regional government, public services, industries, and civil society, aligning markets with social goals. Government needs to move beyond old models and embrace a new mindset that recognises the interconnectivity of challenges and the need for multi-sectoral collaboration.

To do so requires a radically different type of leadership that brings diverse coalitions together to find and execute transformational solutions. It requires truly acknowledging the complexity of the challenges, conflicting motivations, and the mixed trust levels among stakeholders, and recognising that traditional approaches are not working. This means going well beyond classical methods of consultation and engagement.

While cross-sector meetings or citizens' assemblies may be engaging, they are unlikely to generate radical change. While the motivation to bring people together from across society can bring engaging dialogue and

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3   Big state or big government was traditionally seen as the goal of the political left, believing the state should play a big part in society with high public investment in healthcare, welfare, infrastructure etc. It often involves progressive taxation and high regulation. Small state or small government is traditionally seen as the goal of the political right believing the state should play a limited role and emphasising individual freedom and responsibility.

impactful activity (e.g. the Citizens' Assembly in Ireland[4]), it's unlikely that radical change or disruptive new thinking will emerge. The assumption is that simply bringing people together will create change. Metaphorically, this is like trying to build a rocket out of LEGO.

Instead, by embracing complexity and moving beyond traditional approaches, we can govern in partnership and can unlock new, transformational ways to achieve outcomes that would not otherwise be possible. The challenges and constraints governments face today are profound, but they are not insurmountable. New approaches are emerging around the world.

To explore these, this paper will use a particular methodology, the Spiral Breakthrough, which takes much of this new thinking and turns it into a replicable, scalable methodology for bringing nations together to solve these complex and intractable systemic challenges.

The Spiral Breakthrough:

Developed through over three decades of global practice, the Spiral Breakthrough is a proven tool for building momentum where progress has stalled.

The **Spiral Breakthrough methodology** does not pretend to offer simple solutions. It is a radical, new approach that calls for breaking free from conventional methods through leadership transformation, collaboration and innovative thinking. It offers a practical, structured way to build trust, shared purpose, and collaborative momentum towards lasting, transformative change. By embracing this new, partnership-driven methodology, governments can begin to deliver the lasting, transformative change that is so desperately needed.

This paper proposes a new path forward – one that acknowledges the complexity of today's challenges and focuses on systemic, long-term solutions. One that is led by government but looks beyond government. This is the Spiral Breakthrough.

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4   The most prominent achievement of the citizens assembly of Ireland was its recommendations on abortion which were highly influential in the 2018 referendum in which 66% voted to repeal the eight amendment, legalizing abortion.

The Spiral Breakthrough

The Spiral Breakthrough – Overview

For more than three decades, the Bridge Institute and its founding organisation, Bridge Partnership, have explored collaborative leadership on complex challenges across the globe. Through this, the Spiral Breakthrough methodology was born – developed and tested across diverse settings, from addressing gender-based violence in India to improving refugee integration in the United Kingdom and reimagining healthcare in the Philippines.

The Spiral Breakthrough methodology fuses diverse best practices from systems thinking, design thinking, transformational leadership, collaborative leadership, and agile execution.

04 Partnering for Long-Term Impact
Changemakers unlocking societal progress

03 Architecting Breakthrough
Seeing the world differently; new insights, new possibilities, new leadership

02 Building Powerful Coalitions
All parts of society inspired towards a greater purpose

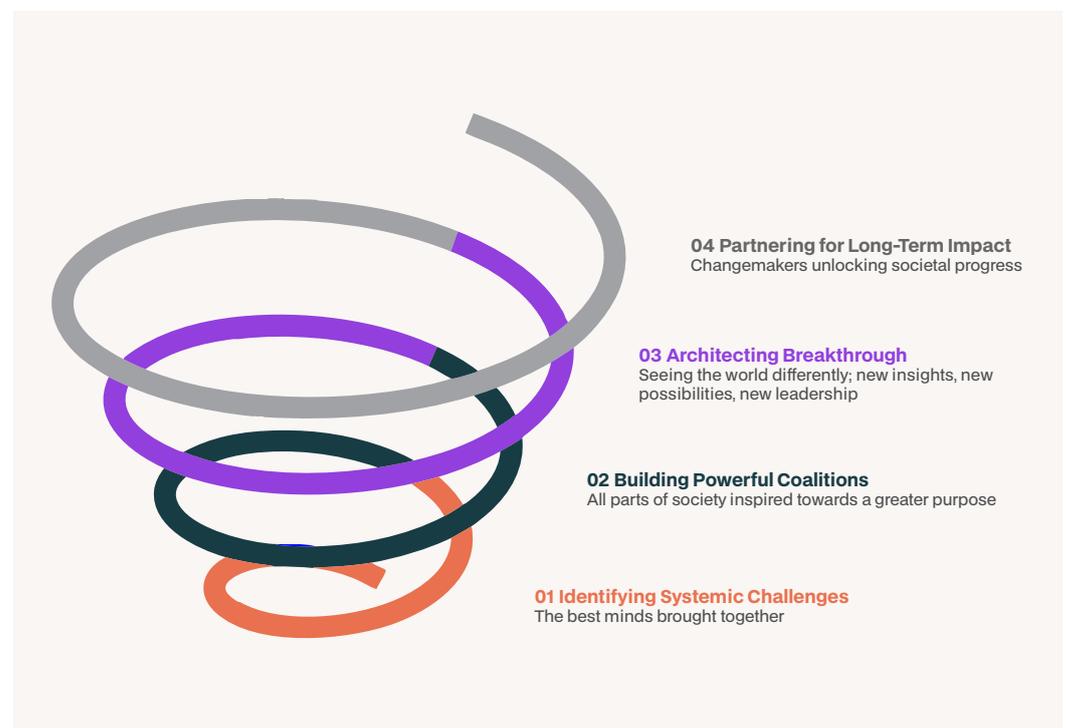**01 Identifying Systemic Challenges**
The best minds brought together

Fig. 1: The Spiral Breakthrough – Four-stage methodology developed by the Bridge Institute

The Spiral Breakthrough provides a radically different way of solving the world's most pressing and complex problems, through a methodology that is simple in structure but deep in process.

There are four stages:

Stage 01: Identifying Systemic Challenges

Uncover interdependencies, incentives and drivers, and identify leverage points to maximise impact.

Stage 02: Building Powerful Coalitions

Bring together critical actors across sectors and power structures, uniting them across a new, shared purpose.

Stage 03: Architecting Breakthrough

The coalitions engage in disruptive and immersive experiences, design and systems thinking, and leadership development to gain new insights and perspectives, enabling them to create innovative solutions and new leadership.

Stage 04: Partnering for Long-Term Impact

Strategy execution, through impact teams and empowering changemakers to deliver sustained impact on the ground.

Each stage combines a **rational process** (solving the technical challenge) with a **cultural and emotional process** (unlocking collaboration, trust, and mindset and behavioural change)

Scaling Systemic Change:
The Ten, The Hundred, The Million

The Spiral Breakthrough operates at three intentionally designed scales of influence, with a different number of people involved at each stage. These structured groups have distinct roles and responsibilities and are embedded across the methodology's four stages.

- **The Ten:** A small, expert group that diagnoses root causes/the system and identifies leverage points (Stage 01). This group has been on the front line of the issue and understands the system deeply and can therefore identify critical areas to unlock progress. The Ten does not have to be a homogenous group but they have to challenge conventional thinking. When compiling The Ten, it's often necessary to persuade brilliant minds that rarely work together to fuse their ideas and shape systemic levers.

- **The Hundred:** A curated, cross-sector coalition of actors with the expertise and influence, insight and ideas, and lived experience to drive collaboration and design (Stages 02 - 03). These (roughly 100) people are connected to a common purpose and will have shared accountability.

- **The Million:** A movement of community-based changemakers (who are often overlooked voices) inspire, activate, and embed sustained change across society (Stage 04).

This tiered structure enables the Spiral Breakthrough to scale impact from insight to action.

The Four Stages

Stage 01: Identifying Systemic Challenges

Stage 01. Identifying Systemic Challenges

To drive real, impactful and sustainable change, we must bring together the best minds and define the systemic points of leverage.

Often, efforts to tackle largescale, complex issues fail when based on a broad or generic brief (e.g. a 'next generation health system' or 'reduce gender-based violence'). Both these statements are excellent missions or ambitions but trying to solve them at this level carries the risk of reiterating broad principles and known issues without solving the fundamental problems behind them.

Consider healthcare, for example. The shift from treatment to prevention is well understood, yet, in the United Kingdom, funding still favours hospitals over community care. The 2024 Darzi report[5] noted that in spite of the NHS strategy to shift budgets to the community, spending on hospitals between 2006 and 2022 went from 47% to 58%. The issue is not the lack of knowledge and insight to move healthcare spending towards prevention – it's how to implement this change while responding to and managing current pressures.

Starting a cross-sector collaboration on the NHS with a broad brief risks repeating past recommendations, such as shifting resources from acute care to prevention. The key question is: **what is stopping the system from changing, and what leverage points can drive real progress?** Without building on existing insights, broad framing can lead to generic, repetitive proposals.

This is why the first step of the Spiral Breakthrough is a focused systemic analysis. By identifying the root causes of inertia and pinpointing key leverage points for progress, we can make real, impactful change – something that broad proposals often miss. This stage is essential before assembling a powerful, cross-sector coalition, ensuring that the diverse expertise and perspectives needed to create bold, disruptive and transformative solutions, are harnessed.

Enter The Ten – a small group of people with deep understanding of the issue, who can identify leverage points and unlock progress. Starting a community partnership without clearly defining the systemic problems can lead to reinventing failed solutions or missing the breakthrough that is needed. Identifying too many people too early, before identifying root causes, increases this risk.

5   https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-investigation-of-the-nhs-in-england

⧉ Recommendation 01: Start Small

Convene a small, diverse group of experts to identify the systemic issues before forming the broader coalition.

🔍 Case Study 01: The Kalinga Fellowship

The Kalinga Fellowship was the origin of the Spiral Breakthrough. It was here that the core methodology was developed, tested, and refined. The Kalinga Fellowship demonstrates how deep insight, shared purpose, and system-wide collaboration can drive large-scale change. While used here to illustrate Stage 01, the Kalinga Fellowship ultimately evolved through all four stages – from system insight to mobilisation of over hundreds of thousands of Changemakers.

The Kalinga Fellowship is a cross-sector coalition set up by the Bridge Institute in India to combat the complex systemic challenges of human trafficking, child marriage and gender-based violence.

- 50 million people worldwide estimated to be living in modern slavery[6]

- 1 in 3 women experience gender-based violence[7]

- 20 % girls born today end up as child brides[8]

Challenge: Gender-based violence, human trafficking, and child marriage.

Approach: A small, diverse group identified child marriage as a root cause that connected multiple systemic harms. This reframing redirected focus and catalysed multi-sector action.

Impact: Over 500,000 commitments to zero tolerance to child marriage; 1,000 child marriages prevented in one state alone; 140,000 youth trained as Changemakers; a cross-sector model across multiple Indian states.

6   International Labour Organization, Walk Free, & International Organization for Migration. (2022). Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage. Geneva: ILO. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/global-estimates-modern-slavery-forced-labour-and-forced-marriage

7   World Health Organization. (2021, March 9). Devastatingly pervasive: 1 in 3 women globally experience violence. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/news/item/09-03-2021-devastatingly-pervasive-1-in-3-women-globally-experience-violence

8   NICEF. (2023, May). Is an End to Child Marriage Within Reach?. Retrieved from https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Is_an_End_to_Child_Marriage_Within_Reach.pdf

Lesson: Getting the problem definition right - and doing so collaboratively - can lead to new accountability, and lasting transformation.

The Power of Diverse Collaboration:

In 2021, hundreds of police officers and Student Police Cadets began travelling by bicycle between villages in the State of Kerala, in India. In each village, they sat and spoke with the community about the devastating impact that child marriage can have on girls, women, and communities. At the end of the discussion, every member of the community signed a pledge to end child marriage in their village. Within a few months, over **500,000 commitments to a zero tolerance to child marriage** was achieved.

Image: The district Head of Police, cycling with Student Police Cadets, to villages to inspire each person to eradicate child marriage in Kerala, 2021

At the beginning of the project, no-one could have predicted the inspiring role of the police and the Student Police Cadets. The Kalinga Fellowship unleashed unexpected and remarkable commitments across the ecosystem, including:

- New employment policies for survivors from corporates.

- Enrolling first responders to notice child marriage, gender-based violence, and human trafficking in action.

- Enrolling 100,000+ students to inspire their communities to eradicate child marriage, gender-based violence and child marriage.

Image:

In the State of Telangana alone, twenty Kalinga Fellows **prevented 1,000 child marriages**, supporting young girls to complete their education. The solutions were generated through a cross-sector collaboration in different states across India, involving police, private sector, state government, non-governmental organisations, educational leaders, civil society representatives and survivors themselves.

The Kalinga Fellowship is an example of the power of cross-sector collaboration in generating solutions that no single group could have shaped, or even envisaged, alone.

The Value of 'The Ten':

It began with a small, curated group of experts from very different backgrounds – police, educators, civil society leaders, and survivors of trafficking. This group exemplified 'The Ten' – working across disciplines and sectors to understand the root, systemic issues of gender-based violence in Odisha, India.

When building The Ten, focus not just on specialists but on identifying key influencers through a power analysis. For the Kalinga Fellowship, involving a senior police leader was crucial for both expertise and the ability to bring the right people (from the police force and beyond) into the coalition.

Through collaborative system mapping and deep listening, The Ten identified child marriage – not trafficking alone – as the most strategic leverage point for lasting change. This insight reframed the problem and aligned stakeholders around a more actionable target.

> "When we realised that child marriage was the entry point to stopping trafficking, everything changed. We could align actors and start moving."
>
> – Fellowship Participant

This foundational moment gave rise to the full Spiral Breakthrough process, and exemplified how The Ten can unlock stuck systems by asking the right questions, together.

From there, a coalition of individuals from government, private sector, non-governmental organisations, and survivors was assembled ('The Hundred'), leading to breakthrough strategies. Immersive sessions challenged assumptions, surfaced powerful stories, and co-created solutions.

Lastly, over 140,000 young people were supported to lead local change efforts and advocate for girls' rights, thus activating 'The Million'.

Identifying Systemic Leverage Points in Practice:

At the Kalinga Fellowship, the small group of experts ('The Ten') identified the following seven systemic points of leverage:

Fig2: The Points of Leverage – the Kalinga Fellowship

During a research trip, the team discovered that in one village alone, every girl by the age of 14 had been trafficked or become a child bride. As the team of experts explored this, they learned that child marriage typically ends girls' education, making them financially dependent and vulnerable to abuse. Research links child marriage to higher rates of gender-based violence and human trafficking. Therefore, reducing child marriage was identified as a key strategy to combat these issues. This became the first of seven systemic points of leverage identified.

Other systemic issues that the team identified ranged from gender equality education in schools, to how private sector organisations can recruit survivors to help them gain financial independence through employment. The Kalinga Fellowship then formed coalitions around each of these seven points of leverage. This approach draws on the thinking of Donella Meadows[9] and Peter Senge[10], who discuss the importance of looking at systems holistically and identifying leverage points for maximum transformational impact. These cause-and-effect relationships may not always be obvious but addressing them preventatively can create significant change. For example, by reducing child marriage, the Kalinga Fellowship helped girls complete their education, entering adulthood with increased confidence and financial independence, thereby greatly reducing their risk of violence or trafficking.

Identifying systemic levers works best with a small group of experts – '**The Ten**' – who understand the problem, its interdependencies, and any previous failures to create change. Consensus is not necessary and forcing it can be counterproductive. Instead, during this stage of the process, encourage open and divergent dialogue, capture different insights and potential root causes, and look for patterns. No single expert needs to define the final output, but each contributes to shaping it.

> "There's a huge distinction between consensus decisions and intelligent decisions, and usually the two are negatively correlated. When we study where the best decisions come from and how the best decisions were made as companies made their shifts from good to great, we were struck by the absence of consensus decisions."

– Jim Collins, Author

9   Meadows, D. H. (1999). Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System. Hartland, VT: Sustainability Institute. Retrieved from https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/

10   Senge, P. M. (1990). The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. New York: Doubleday/Currency.

Stage 02: Building Powerful Coalitions

Stage 02: Building Powerful Coalitions

The world's biggest challenges are deeply systemic. No single entity – government, business, philanthropist, or foundation – can solve them alone. Therefore, for lasting change, we must come together for the long-haul. This is the essence of **'The Hundred'** – the coalition of one hundred individuals from across society, committed to addressing these challenges through collective action and a common purpose.

We increasingly place unrealistic expectations on governments to solve our most pressing societal issues – economic growth, education, healthcare, and security. This generates a lack of agency and is also an impossibility in an interconnected world. No one party alone has the power to change things.

The Spiral Breakthrough flips this belief on its head, advocating for the creation of diverse coalitions with wide-ranging spheres of expertise, influence, and innovation, driven by a shared commitment to solving systemic challenges.

Building the right coalition is a difficult art. It means sifting through the cacophony of voices of those who want to be involved to find those who are most critical to the right solution, and inspiring them to participate – not for self-interest, but for a higher societal purpose. The right coalition is an elegant fusion of expertise, power to drive change, end-user perspectives, and fresh ideas, creating lasting impact.

Our research shows that crafting the right coalition is often misunderstood. While initially it may seem easy to list stakeholders and invite them to a process, forming a group that truly owns, solves and drives outcomes for long-term change is very challenging. Often, invitees lack true buy-in, resource, and accountability to see the solution through, resulting in a talking shop instead of a solution-driven alliance. Additionally, critical perspectives can be overlooked, leading to sub-par solutions.

Common mistakes in coalition-building include:

- **Inviting the wrong people:** While it may seem instinctive to invite a CEO or senior leader of an organisation to participate, these individuals are often not the key drivers of change. Rather than engaging the most senior leader, involve trusted specialists (e.g. those in specific departments such as recruitment or procurement) who truly understand the solutions and can actively move the dial.

- **Narrow thinking:** The best coalitions include emerging voices and new thinking, enabling radical equality and fresh perspectives. They also give voice to those who are forgotten or overlooked.

Success lies in forming **'The Hundred'** – a diverse, committed group with:

- A deep understanding of each systemic lever

- A shared vision and accountability

- A strong willingness to working together for lasting transformation

Case Study 02: The Afghan Refugee Coalition

Image: Fellows of the Afghan Refugee Coalition, 2022

Challenge: Refugees faced systemic barriers to employment, including ambiguity of legal status, and lack of fixed addresses and bank accounts.

Approach: A cross-sector coalition identified employment as a key leverage point. Employers, lawyers, and refugees co-designed solutions, including a tailored recruitment pathway at one of the United Kingdom's biggest employers.

Impact: Refugees accessed meaningful jobs; cross-sector players aligned behind practical change.

Lesson: Purpose-led coalitions that combine influence, expertise, and lived experience can remove structural barriers and deliver innovative, speedy, human-centred breakthroughs.

In August 2021, 20,000 Afghan refugees arrived in the United Kingdom, fleeing Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the allied forces. Most were housed in hotels, without access to work and unable to integrate into British life.

Camden Council took action to support the refugees, forming The Afghan Refugee Coalition. This partnership involved government, private sector, and civil society, and utilised the Spiral Breakthrough methodology to achieve its goals. The Coalition assembled a small team of experts to identify systemic challenges faced by refugees, such as unclear legal status, lack of fixed addresses, and no bank accounts, which hindered their ability to gain employment, and impacted their wellbeing and independence. Additional challenges included access to housing, language skills, and community integration.

Each systemic challenge required specific expertise. For example, the Employment Team included employers, refugees, and lawyers. The employers played a key role in shaping a straightforward process for refugees to secure high-quality roles at organisations such as Tesco. Through the Coalition, the employers brought their passion, insight, and influence, and collaborated with refugees and other key stakeholders to unlock solutions that would otherwise have not been possible.

Forming the Right Team

When assembling the coalition, examine each of the systemic issues identified and, for each one, compile a team of the 10-15 individuals and organisations best able to solve that specific issue. Spend time on this process and, crucially:

1. Look beyond the obvious.

2. Inspire a greater purpose.

3. Seek out underrepresented voices.

1. Look Beyond the Obvious

Our brains learn by forming neural connections. The more times a connection is made, the deeper it becomes. In other words, as time goes on and our knowledge deepens, our neural pathways also deepen – like mature rivers in a deep valley. Expertise is built from these connections, but when our knowledge becomes outdated or irrelevant, the brain must move away from old patterns of thinking. Experts often find it harder to think differently because their deep knowledge is tied to established ways of thinking. Innovation requires stepping outside of those 'rivers of thinking' to see new and different perspectives.

Thus, building effective coalitions requires combining current knowledge and expertise with forward-thinking voices. For example, consulting with venture capitalists or innovators about the innovations they are seeing in a particular sector, and inviting those innovators, can bring a different view that challenges current thinking and offers new solutions.

2. Inspire a Greater Purpose

> "Every stakeholder left their baggage at the door. We stopped representing our organisations and became a team of inspired humans striving to make society a better place."
>
> – Business leader reflecting on a Spiral Breakthrough event in India

The role of the coalition builder is to inspire a greater purpose. This refers to a collective purpose that is larger than any purpose an individual stakeholder might have. When identifying and inviting key people to join the coalition, it is key to ensure that they join with a renewed sense of collective purpose. The cultural priority in coalition building is to inspire all parts of society behind a greater cause.

Coalition builders must broaden individuals' agendas, encouraging and inspiring group members to contribute not just from their own, siloed, viewpoint but from the perspective of a collective effort towards solving a societal issue.

3. Seek out Underrepresented Voices

> "The program was a blessing for me at the time I was a hardliner and orthodox about a particular political idea. This programme and the trainers especially have made me realise that the world exists beyond these self-constructed imaginary walls and every person has a point of view and that is the beauty of this garden."
>
> – Delegate from a Breakthrough Event in a Conflict Zone

Systemic issues often leave certain voices unheard, particularly those from marginalised or overlooked groups. Seeking out and hearing from these underrepresented voices is critical for three reasons:

1. **Moral.** It is simply the right thing to do.

2. **Practical.** These groups offer deep knowledge and lived experience, bringing unique insights and solutions, and know how to engage others in the system.

3. **Emotional.** Hearing from those directly impacted by the issue fosters empathy and creativity.

Incorporating these voices requires trust and relationship-building, ensuring they feel comfortable, safe and valued in the process.

Skills of the Coalition Builder

Effective coalition building requires many different capabilities, including:

- **Access:** A coalition builder must have connections with powerful and influential stakeholders. They may be strong in some areas but not others. For example, local government may be strong in the governmental or civil society space but have limited access to national-level corporate players.

- **The Invitation:** A coalition builder must spend genuine, quality time with individuals, engaging them around a compelling vision to create remarkable change. Through curiosity and listening, they must inspire long-term commitment.

- **Empathy:** Those participants most affected by a system are usually best placed to bring about change; however, they are often unable

to do so due to prejudice, lack of trust, self-interest, or scepticism that their efforts will make a difference. A coalition builder must build trust and empathy between members, encouraging them to believe that change is possible.

Recommendation 02: Invest in finding the right team

Invest substantial time in identifying and assembling the right team for each systemic issue, and ensure you have effective coalition builders. The makeup of the coalition and the mindset of its members are crucial to success. If the wrong people are involved or lack the right mindset, the coalition is likely to fail. Effective coalition builders must assemble the right team, think beyond the obvious in who they invite, inspire shared purpose, and include underrepresented voices.

Stage 03:
Architecting
Breakthrough

Stage 03: Architecting Breakthrough

This stage focuses on shifting perspectives, developing new insights, and fostering new leadership. This is arguably the most important stage of the Spiral Breakthrough – crucial for creating real change, through transforming individuals, their relationships, and their approach to problems. Simply bringing people together is not enough; we need to 'architect breakthrough'. This is achieved through the breakthrough hourglass model, which illustrates the cognitive and emotional transitions a group must go through to achieve breakthrough.

The Breakthrough Hourglass
A methodology for transformative systems change
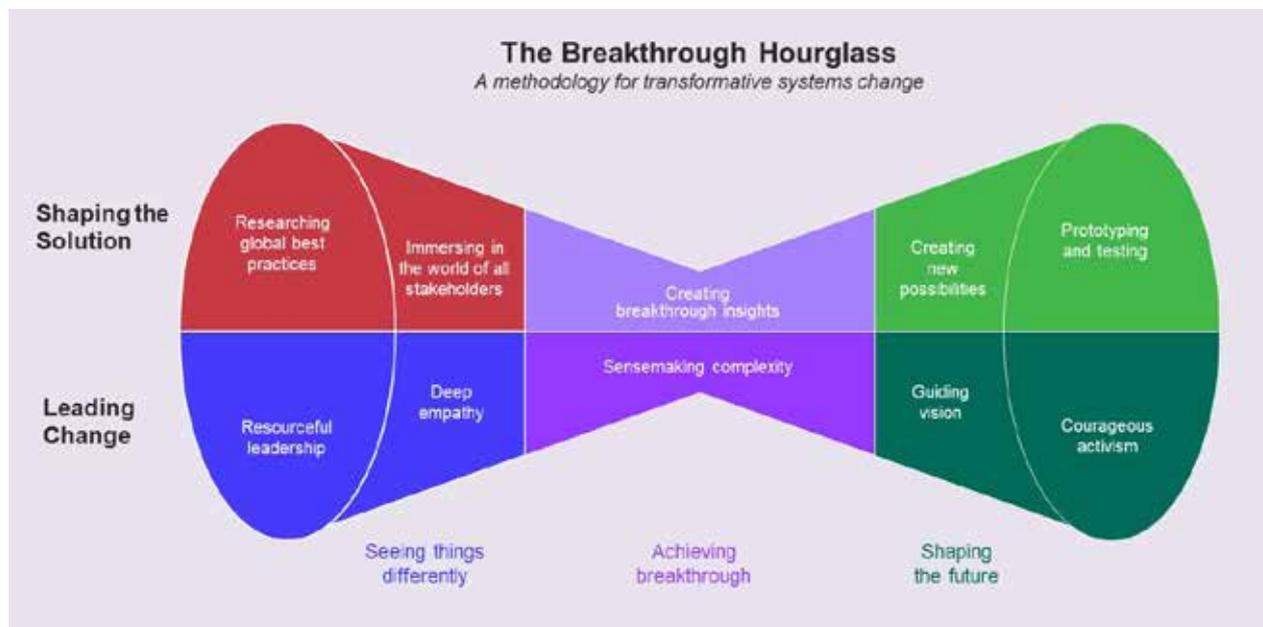
For systemic change to happen, three questions must be solved:

1. Is accountability genuinely shared, or will government still shoulder the responsibility?

2. Can all parties drop deeply held beliefs and be open to change?

3. How do we help people break out of old thinking and find new creative solutions?

1. Is accountability genuinely shared or will the government still shoulder the responsibility?

Governments can easily feel like they are the only ones truly accountable, particularly when coalition partners enter on their own terms and are not accountable for delivering the mission. If this happens, it damages the effectiveness of cross-sector coalitions. In some cases, other parties may take ultimate responsibility; but in most situations it is the government who ends up in this role. Therefore, learning to share accountability is a fundamental challenge that needs to be solved to unlock the full potential and power of mission-driven government.

Progressive governments explicitly take on the biggest challenges of the time (as 'big government' advocates would want), not looking to solve them alone, but by setting direction and engaging cross-sector collaborations where the solution is co-owned ('small government' in action). But for this to work, accountability must be shared.

To genuinely share accountability, we need to challenge old dynamics and build a new level of trust. This requires a fresh culture of leadership across the coalition.

Here are critical steps to building shared accountability in the coalition:

1. **Invest in trust-building:** At the start of the process, have participants share personal stories to break down barriers, and foster vulnerability and trust.

2. **Create a shared vision:** Before diving into solution-building, invest time in aligning the group around a shared vision. This demands a deeply felt, shared understanding of the problem and a collective and aspirational vision of a different future.

3. **Force an accountability conversation:** Clearly define individual accountabilities within each workstream.

4. **Teach collaboration techniques:** Equip groups with collaboration techniques and tools so they can constructively observe and address the dynamics among them.

Building shared accountability also requires a shift at the government level – from being accountable solely for delivery to also being accountable for setting direction and empowering the process, alongside shared accountability for outcomes.

**2. Can all parties drop deeply held beliefs and be open to change?**

In ambitious, multi-stakeholder missions, participants often bring strong views and deeply held beliefs that make them resistant to change. Add to this a group of experts with their own entrenched views. It is clear that the quality of the dialogue and the ultimate solution depends on shifting mindsets and creating openness on all sides.

To exemplify this, consider the following three individuals, who have been part of Spiral Breakthroughs (details altered for anonymity):

- **Person A:** He joins a programme to promote peace in one of the biggest conflict zones in the world. He harbours a deep hatred for the perceived 'occupiers', as his brother was killed by them.

- **Person B:** She joins a programme combatting human trafficking. She was abducted and trafficked as a child and enslaved as a commercial sex worker. She believes her voice does not matter and that she does not deserve to be there.

- **Person C:** He is a climate activist who was invited to a programme on climate action, alongside leaders from the oil and gas industry. He is vehemently opposed to the fossil fuel industry and believes they should not benefit from green initiatives.

All three enter the coalition with strong emotions towards their respective issue, leading to a less resourceful state. The success in the process depends on their ability to shift their mindsets. For **Person A**, it's about letting go of anger and empathising with his 'enemy'. For **Person B**, it's about realising her immense power and capability, and her right to be part of the programme. For **Person C**, it's about finding a new way to engage with oil and gas partners, whose technologies and resources could be key in solving climate change.

A helpful metaphor for this state of mind is the idea of being 'in the box' versus 'out of the box'. When we are 'out of the box', we feel energised, creative, connected, and open to shaping the future. When we are 'in the box' we have a more limited perspective, and are perhaps somewhat resistant, making us less resourceful.
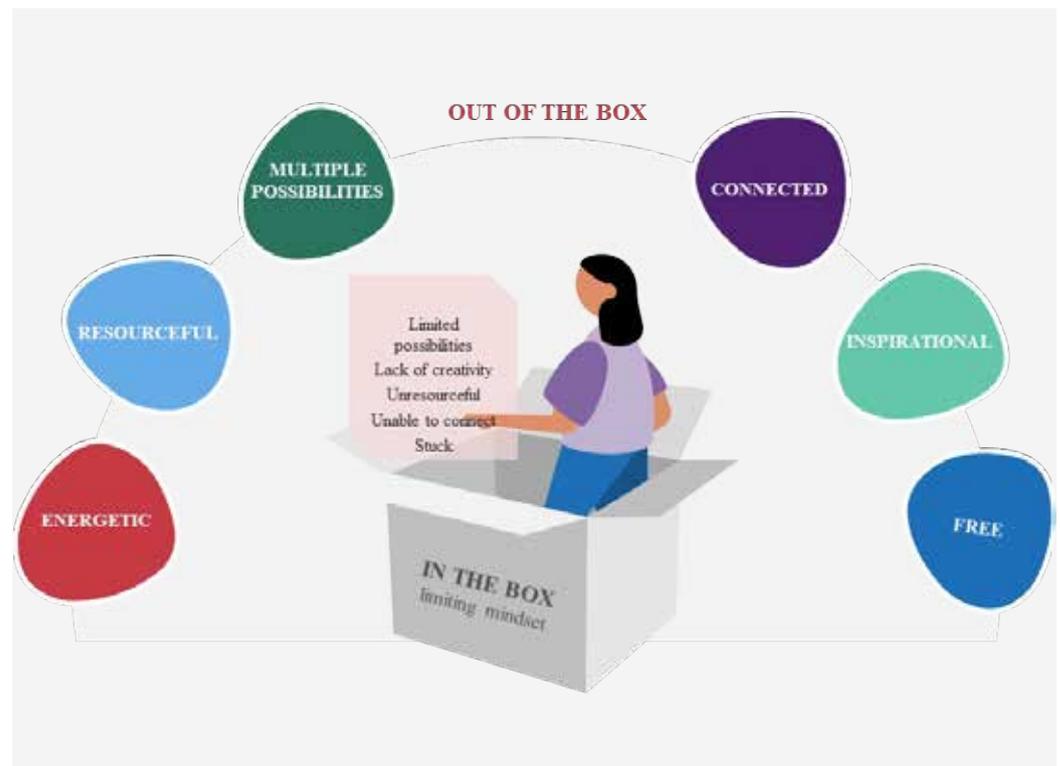
Unless the process helps these individuals (Persons A, B, and C) move 'out of the box', it will fail. It is therefore crucial that it involves more than just rational dialogue and focuses on emotional and relational aspects. Tools and processes to aid participants in doing this should be integrated into the process. Established methods within business, civil society, and government will not change without deliberate effort.

3. How do we help people break out of old thinking and find new creative solutions?

Our natural 'rivers of thinking' – the experience and expertise we have built up and which is stored in our neural pathways – are useful for leveraging our knowledge and experience quickly and effectively. But these pathways can limit us, making it harder it can be to adopt new ways of thinking. To trigger breakthrough thinking, we need to rethink how we design events and facilitate discussion.

🗒 Case Study 03: Healthcare System in The Philippines

In 2023 the Government of the Philippines, under the sponsorship of Vice President Sara Duterte, launched a Spiral Breakthrough to improve the health ecosystem. After identifying systemic issues, 80 members were invited to a three-day breakthrough event. On the first day, no-one was asked for their opinion, and no ideas were generated. The goal was to open people's minds. Experts from around the world, healthcare innovators, and technology shared their stories. Delegates also visited key stakeholders in hospitals, schools, and primary care facilities.

Challenge: A fragmented national healthcare ecosystem.

Approach: A three-day immersive experience, sponsored by the Vice President, brought together 80 cross-sector participants to engage with patients, providers, and international models.

Impact: Breakthrough solutions in healthy living and combatting infectious diseases have been developed, and are currently being focused on, to bring to impact.

Lesson: Immersive spaces that abscond previous assumptions can shift mindsets, dissolve silos, and create the trust needed to reimagine complex systems.

Techniques for Breaking Old Thinking Patterns

Introduce New Stimuli. Expose coalition members to a diverse range of thinking, data and perspectives, through pre-event materials or connecting directly with leaders and experts globally.

User Immersion. Let coalition members experience what it feels like to be an end user. Leading global organisations use this approach in design thinking, enabling teams to step into the end user's shoes and find solutions from their point of view.

Data Transparency. Use a clear and transparent process for coalition members to document quantitative data. We typically use Post-it Notes, each one containing a data-backed point, to focus on facts and not opinions.

Distil Key Insights. Narrow down the data gathered into 2-3 core insights. These are key to breakthrough solutions. Typically, these are written as questions framed as: "How might we…".

Idea Generation. Run structured brainstorming sessions to tap into creativity and build robust, collective ideas.

Future Visioning. Define a long-term, aspirational solution that guides the coalition's mission.

Recommendation 03: Use the Breakthrough Hourglass process to enable genuine breakthroughs

The "Breakthrough Hourglass" process enables breakthroughs in thinking, mindset, relationships, and actions. It helps groups move past old assumptions by taking participants out of their usual contexts and immersing them in new perspectives and experiences. By gathering fresh data and insights through this immersive experience, this method primes participants to think differently and work together to co-create innovative, user-centred solutions that are free of previous assumptions. The approach integrates tools from a number of fields, including design thinking and Otto Scharmer's 'Theory U[11]'.

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11   **Scharmer, C. O. (2007).** Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges. Cambridge, MA: Society for Organizational Learning.

Stage 04: Partnering for Long-Term Impact

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The goal in this stage is to inspire Impact Teams and Changemakers to drive societal progress. There are two key questions to explore:

1. Will the ideas be executed and will the change occur?

2. What if the solution requires broader cultural and behavioural shifts?

1. Will the ideas be executed and will the change occur?

We have all heard of many exciting workshops and meetings with big ideas that fizzle out when it comes to execution. There are many change initiatives that fail, often with too much investment in the initial planning and recommendation phase, and underinvestment in execution and impact.

In a coalition, having established genuine shared accountability, any sense of facing an unsolvable obstacle can undermine the newly built trust and relationships. For successful execution, the team must remain focused on actionable steps rather than reverting to the mindset that "it's the government's responsibility".

One way to ensure effective execution is to use one of the best-known management innovations of recent years – the 'agile' approach. This focuses on short, targeted 'sprints' of activity towards a specific outcome, that allow teams to test initial ideas and adapt and refine as they go. The power should sit in the teams themselves, with government support in the form of clear goals, ensuring teams have the right membership, and specialist expertise and guidance to support on specific barriers such as funding or legislative hurdles.

Teams should be set up with clear vision, goals, and initial experiments, while being encouraged to adapt and refine strategies as they continually learn along the way.

2. What if the solution requires broader cultural and behavioural shifts?

Many solutions cannot succeed unless they inspire widespread changes in public attitudes, often requiring a transformation in cultural norms and inspiring millions – not just hundreds, or

even thousands – of people. This is where the concept of 'The Million' comes into play. We have identified systemic levers with '**The Ten**', formed the coalition with and '**The Hundred**' (who form the coalition), and now, to truly achieve large-scale change, it's essential to inspire and enrol '**The Million**' – Changemakers from within communities.

Referring back to the first case study, the Kalinga Fellowship, in many parts of the world, there are deeply embedded cultural expectations that stigmatise and reject the survivors of gender-based violence and human trafficking. This culture can only be changed if whole communities change their way of thinking. Vitally, this can only be done from within the communities themselves. The Kalinga Fellowship tackled this by successfully recruiting 140,000 Changemakers – young people from villages who were catalysts in their own communities, supporting the overall strategy by engaging with local leaders to influence change.

The key to achieving this widespread cultural change is through an explicit changemaker strategy that includes:

- Actively recruiting large numbers of Changemakers from within communities.

- Providing these Changemakers with:

    o deep awareness of the challenge and its causes, and how to passionately shape solutions.

    o leadership development, so they become resilient, influential, and confident agents of change.

Creating Changemakers is transformative. Many come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and by gaining the skills and confidence to lead change, they become lifelong advocates for transformation – owning, championing and supporting change.

Recommendation 04: A clear, agile execution methodology

Ensure there is a clear, agile execution methodology, which inspires and enables Changemakers at scale. This methodology should combine agile execution principles, ensuring Impact Teams are composed of the right people and that they have access to necessary resources at relevant stages. With the right processes in place, teams can remain agile, meet clear milestones, and achieve impactful change.

Seeding Change: Future Changemakers

Bridge Institute's Young Leader Summit in Singapore
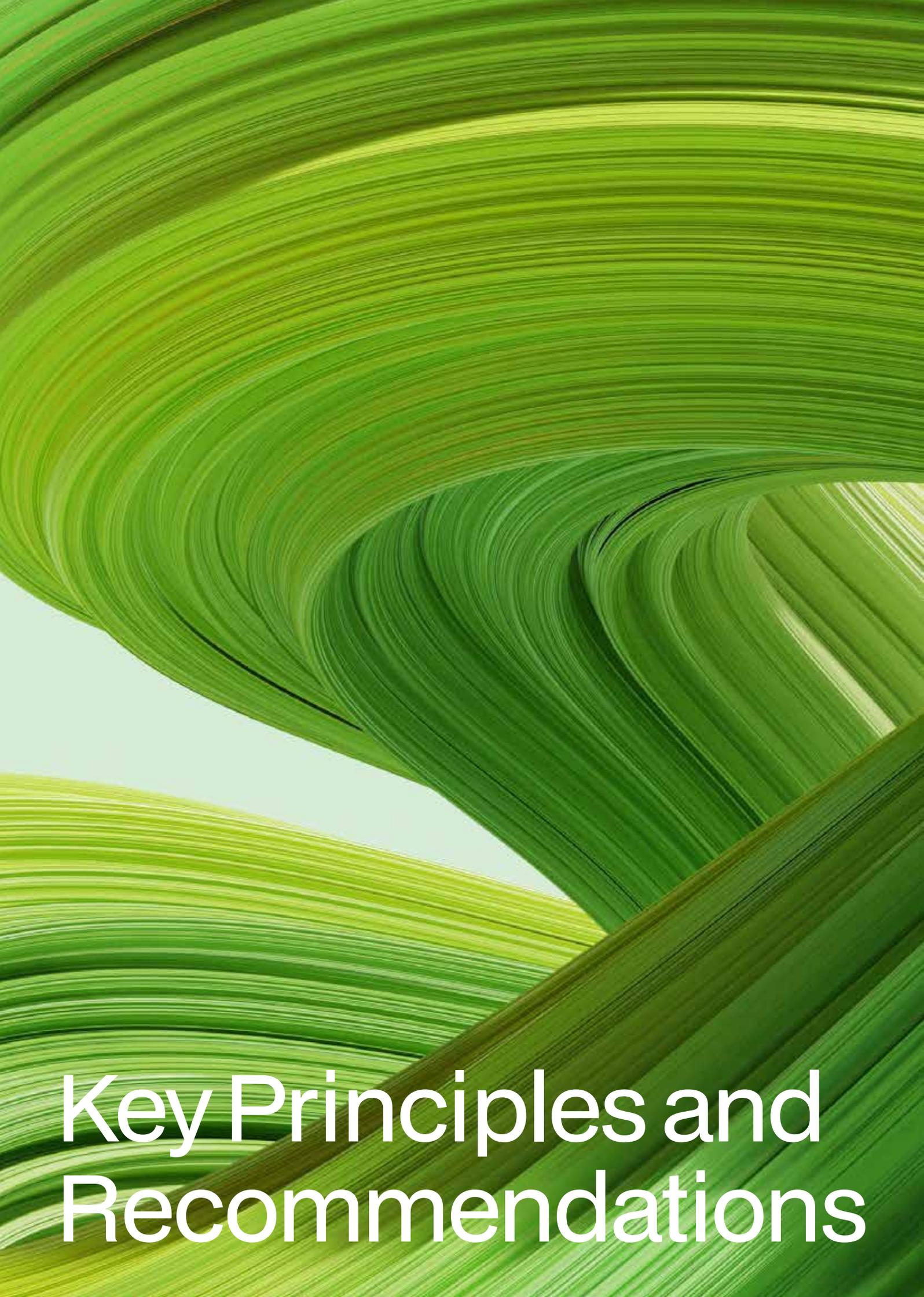
Key Principles and Recommendations

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The Spiral Breakthrough methodology offers a powerful framework for addressing society's most complex and deeply rooted challenges. However, to ensure the success of this transformative approach, it is essential to follow specific strategies that will guide and sustain the collaborative efforts required at each stage. These recommendations provide critical insights for effectively implementing the Spiral Breakthrough, maximizing its impact, and ensuring long-term success.

⬈ 01. Start Small, Think Systemically

Convene a small, diverse group of experts ('The Ten') to analyse and identify the root causes and leverage points of the systemic challenges before engaging in larger-scale collaborations. This step ensures that the coalition works from a clear and informed understanding of the issues at hand, rather than revisiting previously failed solutions.

⬈ 02. Invest in Recruiting a Broad Coalition

Focus on assembling a carefully curated group of experts, influencers, and changemakers who can genuinely contribute to solving the systemic issues. This requires effective coalition builders who can inspire a shared purpose, build trust, and include underrepresented voices. It is essential to include individuals who possess the right mindset for collaboration and innovation.

⬈ 03. Use the Breakthrough Hourglass Process

To achieve genuine breakthroughs in thinking, mindset, and collaboration, employ the "Breakthrough Hourglass" process. This technique helps participants break out of old thinking patterns by exposing them to new perspectives and immersing them in the lived experiences of those most affected by the issue. This approach is crucial for triggering innovative, user-centred solutions.

⬈ 04. Clear, Agile Execution Methodology

After identifying and designing solutions, it is vital to employ an agile methodology for execution. This allows teams to work in sprints, refine strategies continuously, and adapt to emerging challenges. The success of the Spiral Breakthrough depends on ensuring that the execution remains agile, focused, and accountable, with clearly defined goals and measurable outcomes.
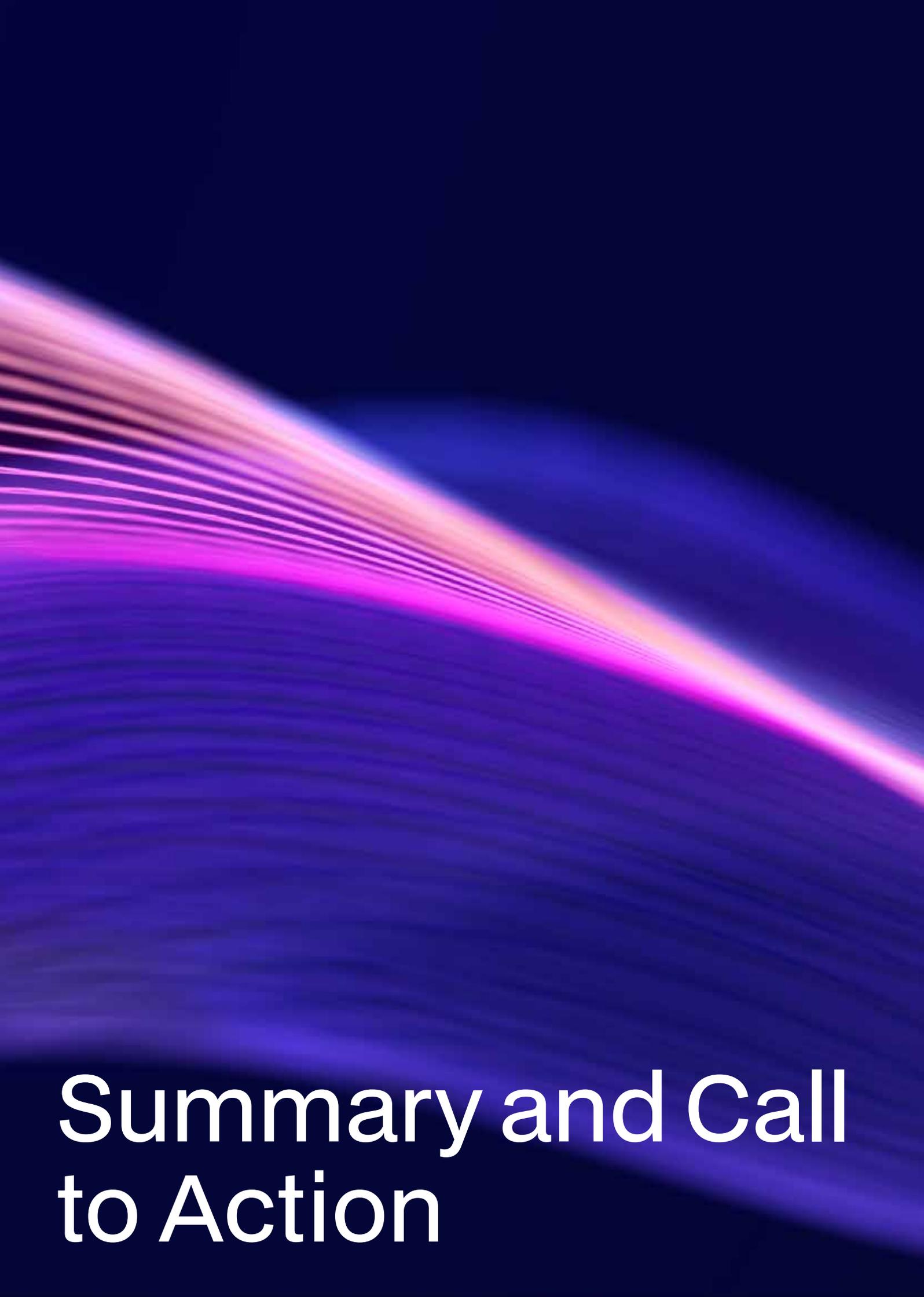
Summary and Call to Action

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We believe that to achieve these breakthroughs, we need a methodology that brings the whole system together. The solutions to today's deeply systemic global challenges are not yet known, and if they were, we would already be implementing them.

The Spiral Breakthrough is an example of such a methodology. It engages all parts of society in shaping our future. It does not offer simple answers. Instead, it offers something more radical and more honest: a process that starts from complexity, invites shared ownership, and unlocks the power of "us".

In doing so, it provides a transformative, scalable approach to solving the world's most entrenched and complex problems. By integrating diverse insights and fostering cross-sector collaboration, it offers a radical yet practical pathway for achieving meaningful and sustainable change. The methodology's four stages guide diverse stakeholders through deep systemic analysis and coalition-building to achieve breakthrough innovation.

Governments, businesses, civil society, and individuals must come together, stop waiting for change to happen, and begin co-creating the solutions we urgently need, and which will drive lasting transformation. By working together with a shared vision and collective accountability, we can tackle the systemic issues that have long been out of reach. The Spiral Breakthrough is our pathway forward to achieve this.

Now is not the time to spectate history from the sidelines. The pen of the future is in our hands.

Acknowledgements

About Bridge Institute

The Bridge Institute is a not-for-profit organisation that brings senior leaders of transnational agencies, government, business, and civil society together to make breakthroughs in thinking and action on the world's most pressing societal challenges. The Bridge Institute believes these most complex challenges can be solved by bringing whole ecosystems together for the long-haul.

In recent years, the Bridge Institute has taken on societal challenges such as peacebuilding, combatting human trafficking, child marriage and gender-based violence, carbon dioxide removal from the atmosphere, health equality, and the refugee crisis. The Bridge Institute is focused on the pressing challenges of our time, as defined by the UN Sustainable Development Goals

For further information, please visit: www.bridge-institute.org

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