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BONDING AND BRIDGING: EXPANDING WHO 'WE' ARE

Over the past decade or so, my colleagues and I have spent a lot of time talking to people in 32 countries about safety. We have spent time with thousands of operational, technical, specialist, support and managerial staff. It has been a unique opportunity to get an insight into almost every job of work that makes up the world of air traffic management. The different roles and activities fit together like a sort of four-dimensional puzzle. Each of the pieces of the puzzle is a function, somewhere in the lifecycle of the air traffic management system. Having listened to thousands of you in person, and having analysed tens of thousands of completed questionnaires, we know that the most positive or favourable themes concern your perceptions of direct colleagues (including your direct managers). Your trust in your direct colleagues, and your interactions with them, is also the thing that you most often say is most critical to safety.

The relationships, trust and reciprocity (or 'give and take') between people in a social network come together as something called 'social capital'. Think of it as your 'social wealth'. It is what gives you that sense of connectedness, belonging and security. When this refers to a group of like-minded or specially related people – perhaps a profession, a team, or a family – it is called bonding social capital. This bonding is normally for the good. It gives that cozy feeling of 'us'; it looks inwards. In groups with strong bonds, people trust one another, help one another out, and look out for one another. If you are a controller or commercial pilot, it is most obvious in the relationship between you and your immediate colleagues in the Ops room or in the cockpit.

As controllers, you likely know one another – more so if you are on a fixed shift system or work in a small unit. If you were once in a fixed team, but have since become part of a flexible system more akin to a pilot's situation, you may have felt a sense of loss of fellowship or camaraderie that is more associated with a fixed team. Even so, as controllers, and as pilots, you share a profession, and will have confidence in your colleagues by virtue of their training and experience. Of course, you will adjust your trust depending on your experience of working with others. Even across the RT between controllers and pilots, those bonds seem to hold. Issues crop up, but it is rare that controllers spend much time in workshops talking about problems with pilots; there is an affinity.

But, as we have seen in recent years and throughout history, strong bonds within a group can also be for the bad. Faced with what is seen as an external threat, groups can dig in, lock down, and lock out the outsider, becoming isolated and disenfranchised. Even when there is no particular relationship problem, the interface between groups is often where we see safety problems, but also opportunities.

In organisations, we sometimes use the word 'division' to describe these groups, or the word 'department' (which, going back to the Old French departir, means the same: division or separation). It is curious that, when we present our organisations to the world, we often present an organisational chart of divisions (which does little to clarify the purpose, the flow of work, the product or service, or the customer!).



Indeed, when we look at the least favourably scoring items on the EUROCONTROL questionnaire, and when we ask you about your needs, these mostly concern interactions with other departments, or with senior management. Issues tend to sit at the interfaces. They have come up as issues of interaction between groups (most often in the same organisation), in a harder 'process' sense (e.g., involvement in the design of procedures and tools, action and feedback on safety issues, missing or faulty equipment, training) or in a softer 'relationship' sense (e.g., respect, recognition, and all manner of issues of communication). When these issues are not resolved, the effect is two-fold: relationships within groups are fortified, but so are the boundaries around groups. The result? Silo-isation.

Strong bonds within groups of like-minded individuals, professions, or teams, are not enough for a healthy organisation, or society. When you zoom out, what is needed is bridges between groups. This is the second kind of social capital: bridging social capital. This bridging increases trust and reciprocity with 'them'; it looks outwards. The bridges or connections enable us to tap into different perspectives and expertise that we may need to achieve our goals, whatever they are.

The thing is, bonds form quite naturally over time within like-minded groups. You work alongside each other. You go to coffee together. Maybe you meet outside of work. As you get to know one another through day-to-day exchanges, trust grows.

Bridges, on the other hand, need to be built. They don't build themselves. Contact between different groups is often not routine, and so you see less of each other. You also have different characteristics and different ways of seeing the world, so more effort is needed to build bridges.

Somehow, we need to make the boundaries around our various professions, departments and locations softer and more permeable, and build bridges between them. Organisations can help or hinder this bridge-building. The design of buildings and facilities, the conduct of formal and informal gatherings, the design of projects, the communication; these may separate groups, or bring them together. Similarly, we as individuals can help or hinder bridge-building. The invitations we send to informal gatherings, the associations and unions we form, who we choose to eat and drink with; these connections will reinforce or disrupt silos. We can all show up to help build bridges.

With Issue 26 of HindSight we hope to give some inspiration and ideas for collaboration across many interfaces, within and between organisations. It is a natural counterpart to Issue 25, on Work-as-Imagined and Work-as-Done. Collaboration helps to bring the two into better alignment.

We should cherish our bonds, but more bridges are needed to allow bonds to grow between groups. This is the only way to expand who 'we' are, and to improve safety at the interfaces.

Enjoy reading HindSight! 