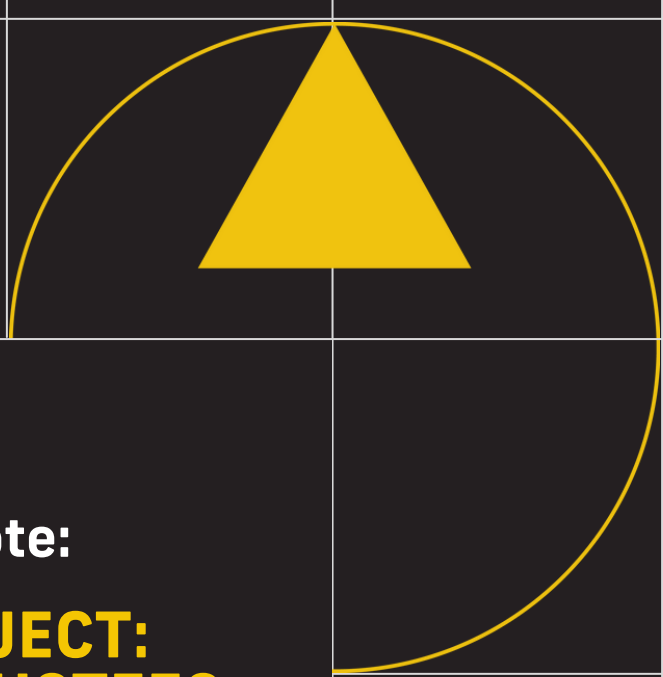
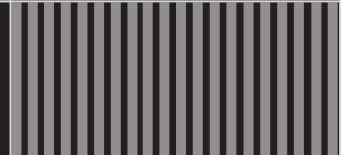
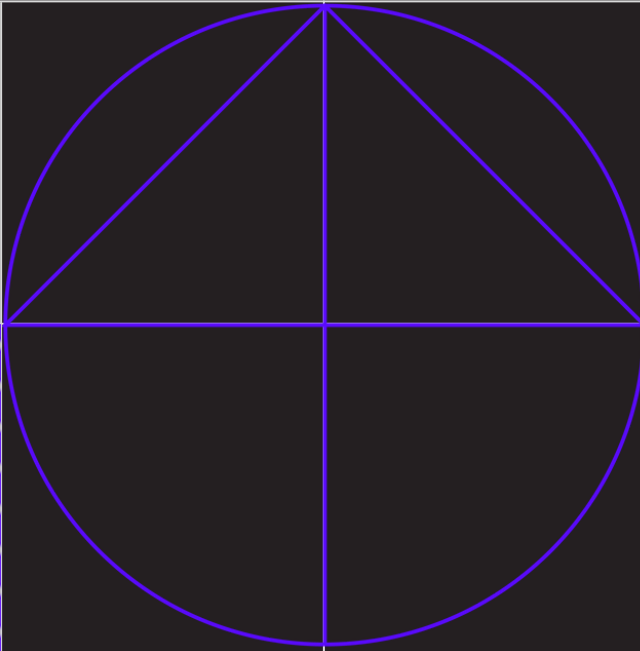
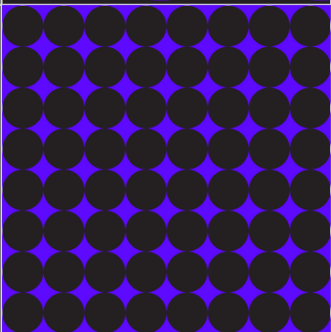
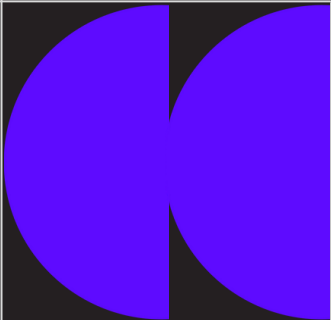


# INNOVATION NORTH



**Session 20 Briefing Note:**

## **THE FRICTION PROJECT: ON SERVING AS TRUSTEES OF OTHERS' TIME**



This session will further explore the Action Space of the Compass and is our penultimate before the final in-person celebration on October 29. Professor Bob Sutton, an organizational psychologist from Stanford, will share his work on frictions in organizations, based on his book with Huggy Rao, [The Friction Project](#).

## What is Friction?

In physics, friction is “the resistance that any body meets with in moving over another body.” Friction has an important role in the world: holding things together. Without it, objects would slip out of our hands. However, the resistance created by friction also slows things down. It’s the reason objects eventually stop when you slide them across a table.

When preparing and planning for systems change, it’s important to consider how friction can be a barrier to change and lock in the status quo. Until you lift frictions, even the best ideas will struggle to get off the ground. For example, many people want to go to the gym or eat better, but are held back, not due to a lack of motivation, but by frictions, such as the gym being too far away or not having time to shop for healthy groceries.

Sutton’s work looks at frictions in organizations. We believe there is an important analogue to systems, but let’s explore his work first.

What does friction look like in organizations? At the organizational level, frictions could come from meetings, paperwork, etc. – basically, anything time-consuming that doesn’t add value to the organization’s activities. In inter-organizational coalition-building, friction could come from what Sutton calls jargon monoxide, or overly complex insider language that nobody can understand.

At the system level, these frictions could come from outdated policies or certification processes that prevent us from moving forward with certain innovations, such as reusing materials that would otherwise be classified as waste.



## Why Systems Get Stuck

Friction holds existing systems in place, for better or worse. The longer a system exists, the more it's perpetuated by things like policies, practices, norms, and mindsets that prevent change. In well-established systems, the strength of these frictions prevents change. If people try to make change without lifting frictions first, the system will push back.

For example, some cities face serious friction when trying to change their car-oriented transportation systems to public transit. The existing infrastructure, funding, and citizens' expectations together act as friction barring change. In those cases, investing in more roads – essentially maintaining the status quo – might get more support than a call for change. These frictions must be lifted before change can happen.



## Lifting Frictions to Make Systems Change

Individuals and organizations all have what Sutton calls a cone of friction. This is “a zone of influence where we can make things easier or harder for others.” In complex systems, there are many intersecting cones of friction. This means that many actors play a role in lifting frictions to unlock systems change.

To change systems, it helps to have actors who can connect the dots between different actors and their cones of friction. As Sutton said on the [Hidden Brain](#) podcast, these connectors “know enough about how each part works to sort of glue the system together and to serve as tour guides for all of us.” In a systems change process, these connectors might be conveners, like a non-governmental organization (NGO), that bring people together to build coalitions for change.

Systems change isn't just about adding new activities; it's also about replacing those that no longer serve us. Sutton's work details two important actions to replace what's keeping the system locked in the status quo: 1) Subtracting what no longer serves our system-level goals, thus lifting frictions; and, 2) Adding good friction, such as processes that slow us down and prevent us from doing things that are bad for the system.

Once we get to know when to lift or add frictions, we can work toward breaking through the inertia that impedes change.

### Lifting Frictions for a Circular Built Environment

In our report, The Circular Built Environment in Canada: A Strategic Framework for Future Action, published by CSA Group, we explain why lifting frictions enables action. Through interviews and workshops with practitioners in the built environment space, we realized there are serious frictions to implementing circular projects, despite the many benefits of circularity (like future-proofing building assets to adapt to new societal needs). For example, a developer wanting to use reclaimed construction wood faces many frictions. These include the absence of systems to alert them when and where salvaged construction wood will be available and the lack of certification frameworks to ensure the wood is safe for reuse. Frictions like these need to be lifted before the developer can act.



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