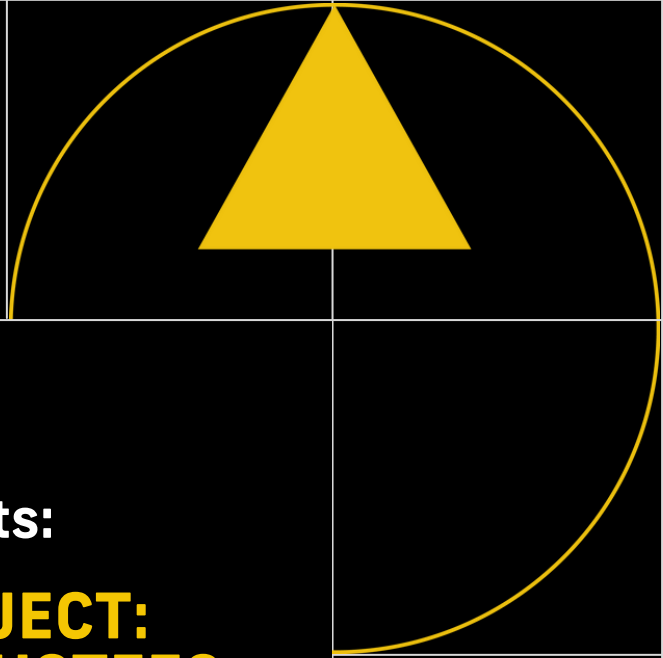
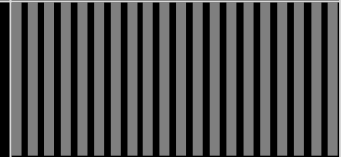
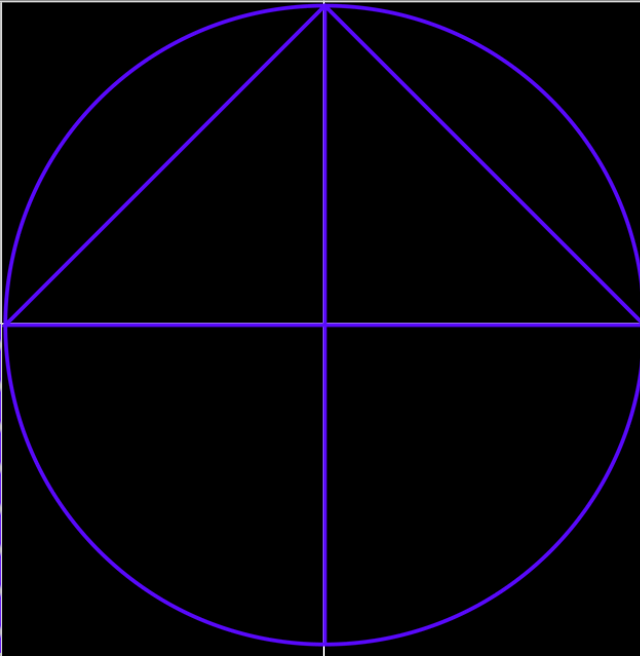
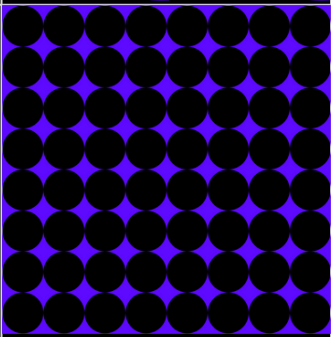
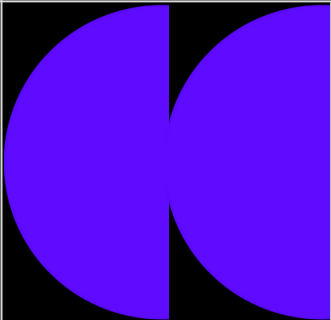
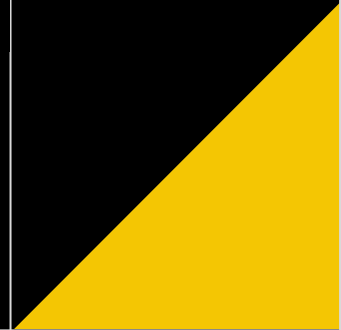


INNOVATION NORTH



Session 20 Key INsights:

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



The Importance of Lifting Frictions

Friction can be a big burden on organizations. Bad friction fuels frustration, despair, and exhaustion. A great deal of time can be unnecessarily wasted because of these bad frictions.

What can we do about it? The main takeaway of Bob's presentation was:

"The best leaders are trustees of others' time, friction fixers with the will and skill to make the right things easier and the wrong things harder for others."

As Bob emphasized, lifting frictions isn't just something that leaders do. We all have a "cone of friction" where we can make things easier or harder for others. The process of lifting frictions can be difficult for those doing it, but it can make a big difference in organizations.

Bob outlined a few key "friction traps" to look out for when trying to become a friction fixer.

Friction Trap #1: Oblivious Leaders

Power and privilege can leave leaders clueless about how their actions impose destructive frictions on others. This can happen, at least in part, because privilege can insulate people from the inconveniences that plague life for less privileged people. Those at the top might not have to deal with the bad systems they may be responsible for creating or upholding.

To mitigate this, Bob advocated for "less transmission, more reception." In other words, to use Bob's colourful example, don't be a hippo with a big mouth and small ears. Listen carefully to those around you, and know when to intervene to lift frictions and when to get out of the way. As Bob said, management is like holding a dove. Hold it too tightly, and you kill it. Hold it too loosely, and it will fly away.

Bob also offered other practical tips, like taking an "add a rule, subtract a rule" approach and trusting people.

Friction Trap #2: Addition Sickness

“Addition sickness” is the tendency to solve problems by adding, rather than subtracting, complexity. This is often rewarded in organizations, where there can be perverse incentives to grow teams and add processes.

The best leaders can be seen as “editors in chief.” Creating simple rules – a callback to our October 2024 Lab session with Kathleen Eisenhardt – can add constraints that make it easier to subtract and harder to add. Bob gave the example of the Google leader that changed its culture of having many rounds of interviews by requiring permission to go beyond round four.

We went into breakout groups to play “the subtraction game,” during which we thought about what unnecessary obstacles in our organizations make it harder for people to do their work. This is something that we could all do periodically outside of the Lab.

The game produced some creative solutions for subtracting frictions, like empowering people to opt out of calls and using automation to reduce human inputs. Though sometimes, efficiency tools can backfire. As Bob said, “Automation in the right hands is a wonderful thing, but in the wrong hands, it imposes friction.”

Friction Trap #3: Jargon Monoxide

“Jargon monoxide” is the friction caused by insider language that Bob characterized as “hollow or impenetrable babble.” This makes it difficult for people to communicate, coordinate, and collaborate.

The solution is to find some way to get rid of the old language and communicate more clearly. Leaders could take their “editor in chief” role literally to delete, simplify, and translate jargon monoxide.

Fiction Trap #4: Fast and Frenzied

The fourth friction trap is knowing when, why, and how to apply good friction when slowing things down will lead to better outcomes. Good frictions can stop things that are unlawful, unethical, or otherwise disadvantageous – like how U.S. bureaucrats used good friction to keep Theranos’ infamously fraudulent blood testing device off of U.S. Army helicopters.

Creating a culture of using good frictions can be supported by asking whether a problem is so complex that the team should slow down and figure it out before acting. It can also be helpful to remember that creative work is inefficient and needs time to unfold. Deep trust on teams that have worked closely together can support this further.



Lifting Frictions for Systems Change

After Bob's session, we debriefed on how lifting frictions can play a role in systems change. Key insights from that discussion include:

- Weighing when to use centralization and decentralization can help lift frictions
- In systems thinking, the complexity can leave us in analysis paralysis, so the ability to reduce our view of systems to only what is most important can be key in moving systems forward
- We often think in terms of novelty, but sometimes great ideas are what we can stop doing – opening the question of how we can reward subtraction in organizations
- There's a danger in only taking up one part of Bob's framework or implementing his advice in isolation, especially since lifting frictions in broader systems requires different awareness than lifting frictions within organizations
- The Compass spaces – especially the Awareness space – can help us identify which frictions are worth growing or shrinking
- The Action space is also where “cones of friction” come in, as we only have agency over certain parts of the system
- We can all become points of friction, so we should be aware of how we affect others' work

Finally, some of the practice partners shared that the session inspired and empowered them to share the importance of subtraction with their organizations.

Bob's Book Recommendations

Along with sharing his insights from his own book with Huggy Rao, Bob also mentioned several books throughout his presentation:



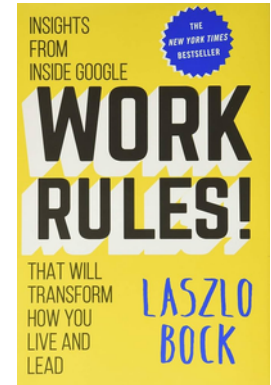
*The Friction Project:
How Smart Leaders Make
the Right Things Easier
and the Wrong Things
Harder*



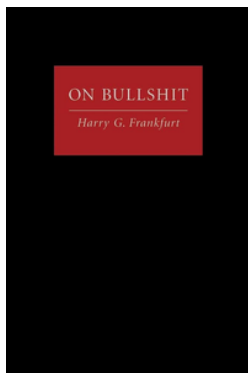
*Subtract: The Untapped
Science of Less*



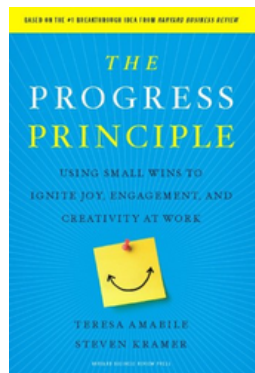
*Simple Rules: How to
Thrive in a Complex World*



*Work Rules!: Insights from
Inside Google That Will
Transform How You Live
and Lead*



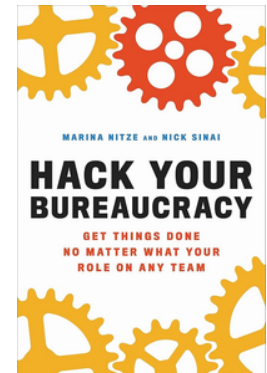
On Bullshit



*The Progress Principle:
Using Small Wins to Ignite
Joy, Engagement, and
Creativity at Work*



*Creativity, Inc.:
Overcoming the Unseen
Forces That Stand in the
Way of True Inspiration*



*Hack Your Bureaucracy:
Get Things Done No
Matter What Your Role on
Any Team*

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