

Turning fragile trust into shared behaviour

Four organisations were learning to operate as one partnership. Trust was growing, but different cultures, expectations and ways of working could still create friction. The challenge was turning goodwill into a shared understanding of how people would work together when things became difficult.

THE SITUATION

The Staffordshire Drug and Alcohol Treatment and Recovery System (STaRS) brings together four organisations with distinct identities, responsibilities and operating cultures.

Since mobilisation in April 2024, the partnership had made considerable progress. Partnership away days had taken place, 13 partnership principles had been agreed, contact between organisations had increased and STaRS was beginning to present a stronger shared identity externally.

Conversations were also becoming more open and authentic. But leaders described the partnership as “fragile, but with foundations of trust.”

The next stage wasn't simply about strengthening relationships. STaRS needed to turn its emerging partnership culture into something people could recognise and practise in the everyday - particularly when there was pressure, disagreement or uncertainty.

THE FRICTION

Difference wasn't the problem.

The four organisations brought different professional traditions, governance arrangements and approaches to communication, decision-making and service delivery. Those differences were legitimate and, in many cases, valuable.

The friction came when expectations remained unspoken. The same behaviour could be interpreted differently by different partners. Some relationships were stronger than others. Historical narratives still influenced how situations were understood, while operational relationships had not always developed at the same pace as those between senior leaders.

At times, direct challenge could become personal. At others, difficult conversations could be avoided, allowing frustration to build.

The answer wasn't to remove difference or create a single organisational culture. It was to make those differences discussable and create greater clarity about how people would work together across them.

Not all friction is bad. The important question is what teams and partnerships do with it.

THE FOCUS

Rather than beginning by writing another set of partnership values, we created the conditions for STaRS to define the behaviours it needed for itself.

AQR designed and facilitated a full-day culture and behaviour alignment session, supported by scoping conversations and careful preparation.

We deliberately began with what was already working. Participants identified moments when the partnership had been at its best and explored the behaviours and conditions that had made those successes possible.

From there, mixed-organisation groups examined their different cultures, unseen pressures and potential sources of misunderstanding. A gallery walk and structured dialogue helped people explore friction at a behavioural and systemic level rather than allowing the conversation to become about personalities.

Our role was to provide enough structure for difficult conversations to happen without prescribing where those conversations should end. As the group's thinking developed, we reflected their language back, challenged

ambiguity and tested whether the behaviours being proposed were sufficiently clear and observable to be useful in practice.

The partnership agreed six shared commitments:

- communicate openly, honestly and thoughtfully, speaking to partners before escalating
- develop curiosity about the whole system while respecting people's capacity and time
- celebrate success and outcomes across the partnership
- pursue meaningful change, welcome innovation and remain receptive to feedback
- value people's experience, respect different needs and recognise vulnerability as a strength
- separate the system issue from the person

The group also identified early warning signs that the partnership might be drifting away from those commitments and practical ways of resetting relationships before tensions escalated.

Better conversations create better teams. And in a partnership, those conversations matter even more because people have to collaborate without the simplicity of belonging to the same organisation.

THE DIFFERENCE

The result wasn't simply a successful away day.

STaRS left with a practical framework for describing, discussing and measuring the culture it wanted to create.

The six commitments were subsequently converted into a questionnaire for paid staff, volunteers and other contributors across the partnership.

Ninety-six people responded.

The findings provided evidence about where the behaviours were already being experienced positively and made areas requiring further attention more visible, including communication, role clarity and celebrating success.

Instead of relying solely on assumptions or individual experiences, partnership leaders now had shared evidence around which to have conversations about culture.

The findings also informed thinking about locality-based culture days across six localities alongside actions at system level.

Importantly, the difficult dynamics that existed before the session weren't ignored - but neither were they allowed to dominate it. People relaxed, contributed openly and worked together. Sensitive conversations were handled without amplifying existing tensions, and the work continued after the facilitated session.

The partnership was still described as "healthy but fragile." That matters. This wasn't a story about magically removing every tension between four different organisations. It was about giving people a better way of working with those tensions.

STaRS now had:

- shared language for how partners should work together
- six observable behavioural commitments
- greater permission to discuss cultural differences and friction
- early warning signs for when relationships were beginning to drift
- practical ways to reset when difficulties emerged
- workforce evidence against which partnership culture could be discussed
- a mechanism for measuring progress over time
- a foundation for further culture work at locality and system level

The partnership hadn't eliminated friction. It had become better equipped to recognise it, talk about it and respond before it became something more damaging.

IN THEIR WORDS

"Anthony created a psychologically safe and trusted environment, which was evident in the contributions people made and the conversations that emerged throughout the day. It was potentially a tricky session because of some of the existing tensions and dynamics in the room, but those tensions were not stoked - quite the opposite. People relaxed and worked together.

Anthony managed the sensitive discussions appropriately and discreetly, without making the process feel stunted or unnatural. He was very respectful of people's views and language, while helping us rephrase and sharpen our ideas.

He created a clear framework for us to work within, but the content was driven by the group. There was no sense that he was guiding us towards a particular position; he kept us focused while facilitating the generation of our own thoughts and ideas.

It was the right format. We ended up with a practical product that we could take forward, and the whole process felt collegiate."

Jon Shorrock, Partnership Lead, Staffordshire Drug and Alcohol System

THE AQR WAY

Find the friction. Focus on what matters. Measure the difference.

High-performing partnerships don't depend on everyone thinking or behaving in the same way.

They depend on people being able to understand their differences, surface friction and have the conversations that stop those differences becoming barriers to performance.

STaRS didn't need another set of values. It needed to turn good intentions into observable behaviours - and then create a way of understanding whether those behaviours were actually being experienced across the partnership.

Better conversations create better teams. Not all friction is bad.

01 SURFACE

Make cultural differences and friction discussable.

02 AGREE

Turn expectations into observable shared behaviours.

03 MEASURE

Use workforce evidence to strengthen partnership culture.