

# Building a Change-Ready Organisation

## A strategic approach to bootlegging as an informal mechanism in post-merger change implementation

Mergers and acquisitions (M&A) are often being initiated with the promise of synergy, scalability and a high chance for competitive advantages. Yet many M&A integrations fail to realise their intended value in practice (Koi-Akrofi et al., Weber & Tarba, 2012). This suggests deeper causes beyond structural considerations, therefore requiring a closer look at how change is experienced and implemented within everyday work reality. This research explores 'how formal organizational change efforts interact with informal practices during post-merger integration (PMI), and what this interaction implies for achieving integration goals and anticipated synergies'. Central in this research is the role of 'bootlegging': the unofficial, often invisible practices employees develop to continue operations when formal structures are experienced as too slow, rigid, or incomplete.

An in-depth qualitative case study of a recently merged company, which was formed by two legacy entities with different histories and operational styles, set the contextual base of this research. To understand how the integration unfolded in practice, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees and managers from different hierarchical levels of both entities. Existing literature on change management, M&A, and bootlegging was used to develop an initial framework of organizational, social, human, and cultural factors that influence integrations and change implementations. Unlike many top-down models, this study uses a bottom-up perspective where informal practices are treated as a central analytical dimension to understanding the lived change experiences.

The findings show, that during this period of change, employees faced large leadership distance, fragmented communication, and increasing operational complexity, leading to four reinforcing gaps: a credibility gap between communicated intentions and perceived reality; a synergy gap between promised and realized value; an execution gap between decisions and implementation capacity; and a visibility gap between operational efforts and what higher levels actually acknowledge. In response to unclear expectations, resource constraints, and cultural frictions, employees developed informal workarounds and trust-based information lines to maintain operations. While these bootlegging practices were rational, adaptive responses that allowed operations to continue, they limited knowledge sharing, learning and the realization of M&A synergies.

The framework, which can be found within the thesis report, was iterated to represent a clear bottom-up, human-centered perspective on change experiences and readiness within PMI. It introduces dimensions, such as leadership visibility, system compatibility, psychological safety and voice, and vertical connectivity as key conditions for 'building a change-ready organisation'. This framework was used as a (design) tool in co-creation sessions with employees, translating analytical insights into concrete needs, priorities, and directions for action. The outcomes were defined as strategic design implications, being the base for a strategic plan. The strategic roadmap is supported by a tactical roadmap that specifies stakeholder roles, ways of working and the expected outcomes over time.

This research contributes by explicitly positioning bootlegging as a central mechanism in M&A PMI, presenting how informal practices simultaneously compensate for and reinforce the challenges and shortcomings of formal change efforts. It offers a practical approach for decision-makers to understand and work with these dynamics, moving from a top-down focus to a realistic view on how change is actually experienced and acted upon in post-merger environments.

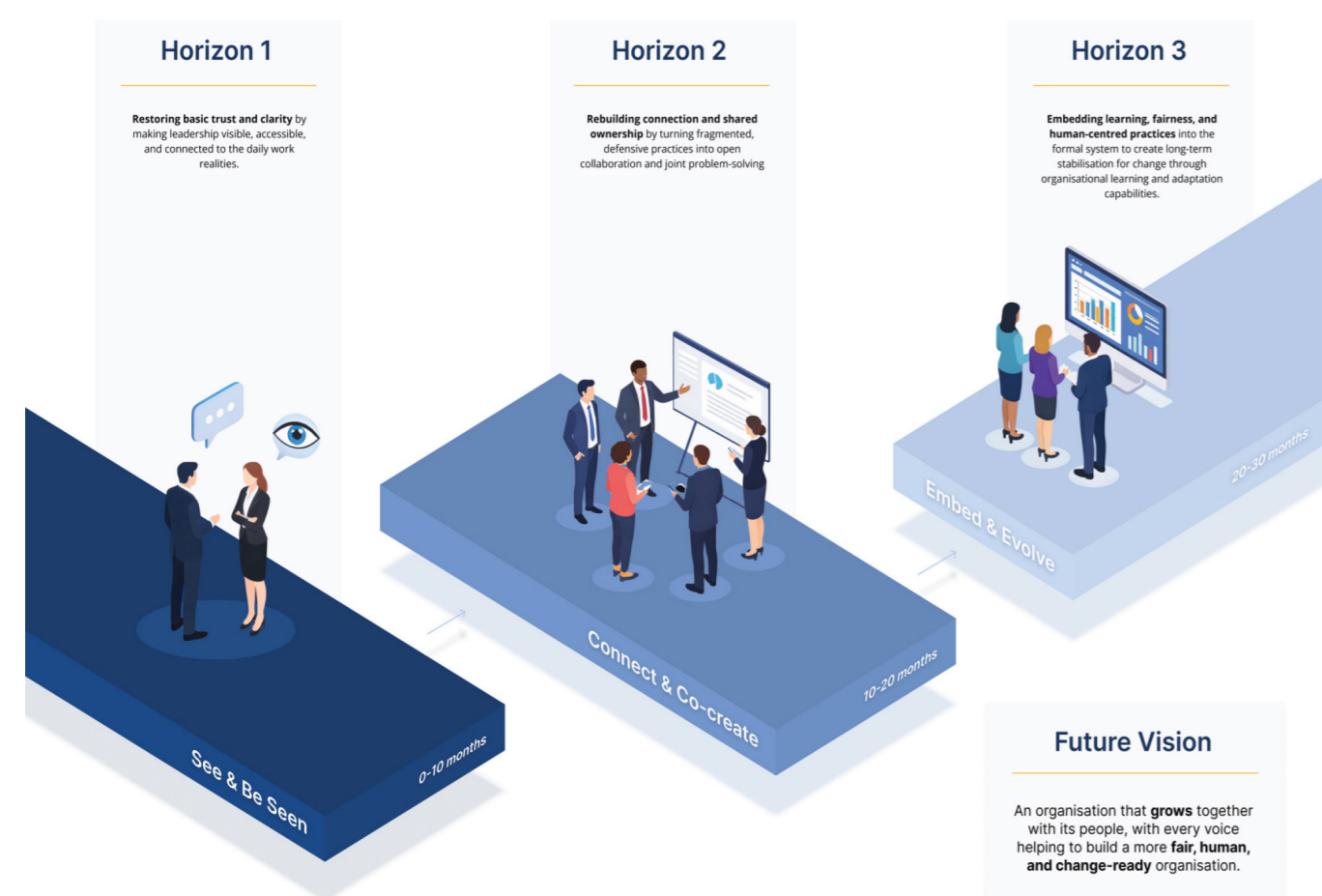


Figure 1. Strategic Roadmap.

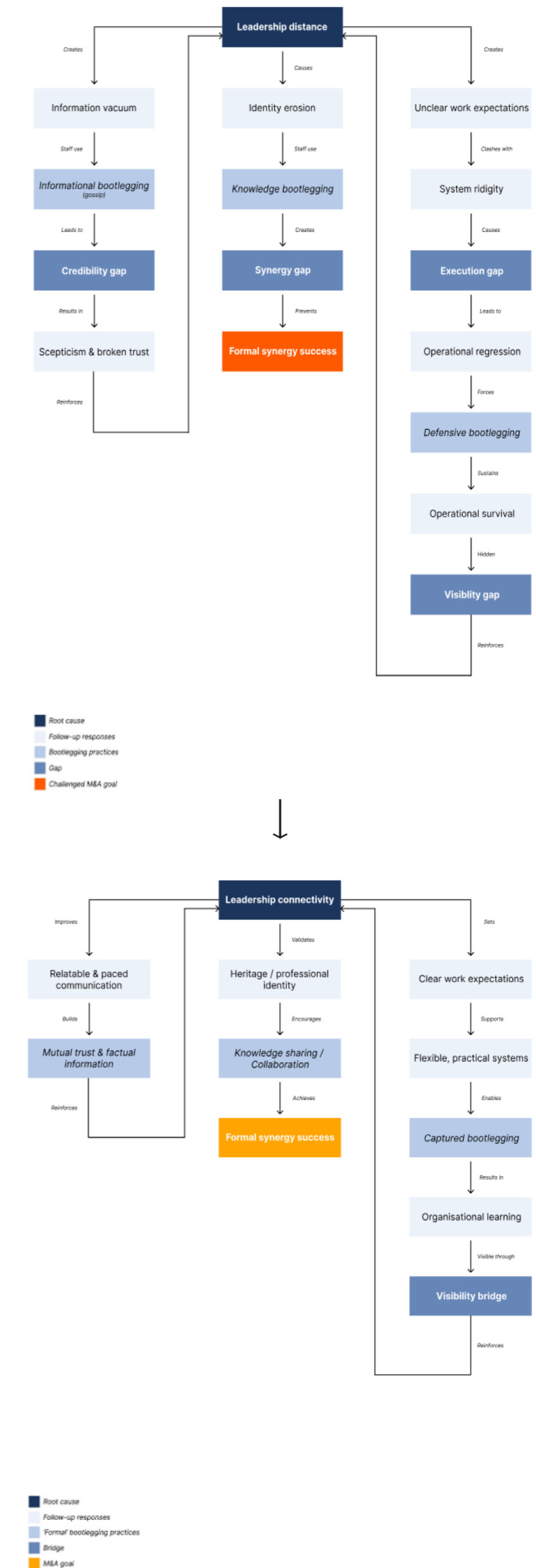


Figure 2. Identified operational root cause response chains.

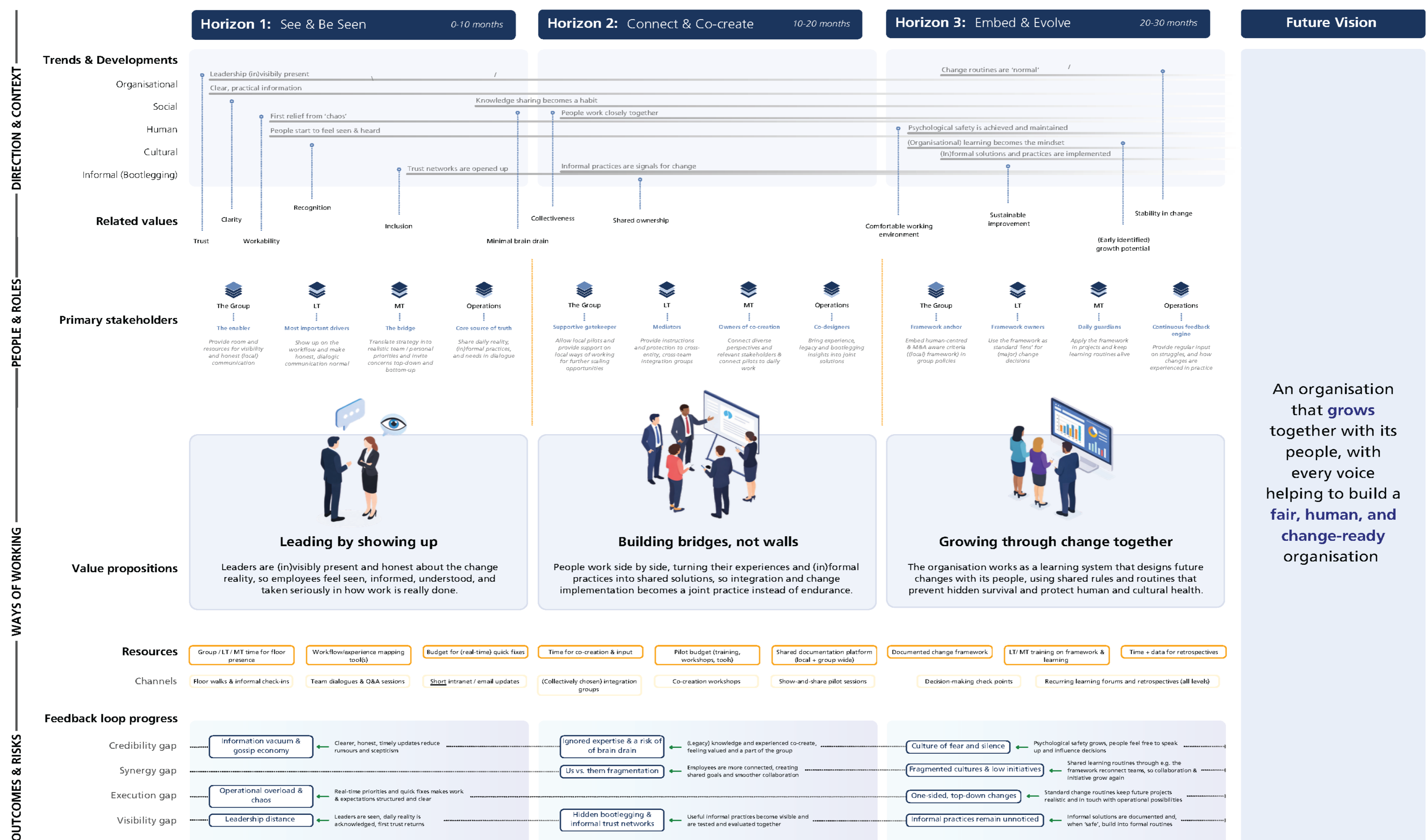


Figure 3. Tactical roadmap.

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