

Fifteen Seconds

On self-interest, shared standards, and why we save our collaboration for emergencies.

I was waiting to cross the road the other day. Traffic was finally starting to clear — one car through, then two more from opposite directions, then a truck. The usual pause where a dozen people stand on the kerb and wait for the gap.

Except one woman didn't. She stepped out anyway. The two cars stopped for her. The truck stopped for her. And the rest of us waited a little longer while she crossed, so that she could save herself ten, maybe fifteen seconds.

On its own, it's nothing. A small piece of impatience, not worth a second thought. But that fifteen seconds stuck with me, because it's the same instinct that sits underneath a great many of the problems we don't seem able to solve. One person's small, immediate payoff, taken at a slightly larger cost to everyone else — and multiplied across a whole system until it becomes the way things are.

— The Comfort of the Silo

Most of the time, the instinct shows up more quietly than stepping into traffic. It shows up as *not my problem. As someone else will deal with that.*

There was a clip going round recently — a tourist casually dropping litter, and when someone asked him why, he said the quiet part out loud: they pay people to clean this up, so why should I? It's an ugly answer, but it's an honest one, and it's the same fifteen-second logic. Take the small convenience for yourself. Let the cost land on someone else, or on everyone, thinly spread so that no single person can quite object.

We build whole organisations around that instinct without noticing. Proprietary systems, closed formats, things that only work if you stay inside the walls. It's why your Apple charger won't help the person next to you with an Android phone. And it's everywhere in my own sector. A school talks to a provider, and that provider has its own curriculum, its own standards, its own risk assessment format, its own way of aligning — or not aligning — with whatever external framework it has chosen. Talk to the next provider and it's all different again.

There is almost no consistency. We broadly agree on which problems need fixing. We just each come at them from our own corner — solving them in isolation, or quietly hoping someone else will solve them for us. So the honest question is: what is actually stopping us from solving them together?

— The Edge We Think We're Protecting

The usual answer is competitive advantage. In the energy debate you'd call it self-interest — politicians lobbied by the firms that fund them, structurally unable to act for the common good. In a provider market it's gentler, but it rhymes. Everyone is hunting for their USP, the thing that makes them the obvious choice.

But it's worth asking whether that hunt actually shrinks the market it's meant to win. Because if every provider is different, then every school that changes provider has to relearn the whole system from scratch — new formats, new paperwork, new assumptions. Going through that rigmarole is a real cost, and a real deterrent. Faced with it, people stick with what they know. The very thing meant to be an edge becomes a wall around a smaller room.

Think of a street with six restaurants, all serving steak of the same grade. Nobody wins on the meat; the meat is a given. They win on the cooking and the service — and wherever the customer sits down, they eat well. A simpler, more consistent baseline across a sector works the same way. It doesn't flatten competition. It widens the door, brings more people in, and then leaves you to compete on the thing that should have decided it all along: how well you actually do the work.

— Whose Convenience Are We Building For?

Underneath all of this is a question about who the system is really designed to serve. At what point do we make the process, the paperwork, the whole experience easier for the person at the base — the participant, the school, the end user — rather than for the tip of the pyramid?

Most systems are quietly built for the tip. They protect the provider's differentiation, the provider's way of doing things, the provider's convenience. The base adapts. Turn that pyramid the right way up — streamline the thing for the people it's supposed to be for — and counter-intuitively, the tip does better too. More people can take part. The market grows. And your advantage, again, becomes the quality of what you deliver rather than the awkwardness of leaving you.

— We Already Know We Can Do It

Here's the frustrating part: we've proved we can collaborate when we decide to. When the pandemic hit, providers across the sector banded together almost overnight. They lobbied government, shared what they knew, spoke with something close to one voice — all to keep the outdoor industry alive through a genuine threat to its survival. It worked, in the way these things work, because the need was undeniable and immediate.

Then the threat lifted, and the collaboration quietly went with it. But only the *appearance* of the need disappeared. The need itself is exactly where it was. We are perfectly capable of working together. We simply reserve it for emergencies, as though it were a fire extinguisher rather than a way of operating.

— What Waiting Costs

And there is a real cost to reserving it for emergencies, because the pattern of this industry, again and again, is that something terrible happens and *then* the rules arrive. When four teenagers drowned on a school sea-kayaking trip at Lyme Bay in 1993, the outrage ended decades of self-regulation in Britain and made statutory licensing of activity centres law. When six students and their teacher drowned canyoning in a New Zealand gorge in 2008, after their centre pressed on despite a heavy-rain warning, the review that followed ran to nearly two hundred recommendations. The regulation that comes afterward is almost always sound in intent. It is rarely written by the people who understand how programmes actually work.

You can watch the same logic unfolding right now in Texas. On the Fourth of July weekend in 2025, catastrophic flooding tore through the Hill Country and killed more than a hundred people, among them twenty-seven girls at a single summer camp on the Guadalupe River. The bereaved parents campaigned, hard, and within weeks the state passed sweeping new camp-safety laws — much of it foundational risk management that any good operator would recognise: written emergency plans, posted and lit evacuation routes, weather-alert radios, restrictions on building in the floodplain. But one provision required every licensed camp to install fibre-optic internet plus a separate backup connection — and, as the Texas Tribune and KXAN reported, the legislators who wrote it already knew that many camps simply could not comply. A preliminary survey found more than 170 camps without access to fibre, with the true figure likely higher. Rules written to protect children may now close the remote programmes that are hardest to reach and, arguably, do the most good.

That is what waiting costs. Every one of these tragedies was, in hindsight, foreseeable — and every time, the response came afterwards, from the outside, shaped by people who weren't in the room. When the state writes the rules after the fact, it writes them bluntly, because it has to and because we left it to them. In Hong Kong, the government is already moving: strengthening hiking-safety measures, running public-awareness campaigns, publicly identifying the high-risk locations where the most serious accidents happen. History suggests where that leads if the sector doesn't get there first.

— The Same Thing, One Canyon Wide

You can watch the whole argument play out in miniature. We've got WhatsApp groups now, trying to coordinate when two of us might end up at the same venue. And even so, this came up on programme just this week: an entirely foreseeable clash between two groups at the same location, at the same time. It didn't need to happen — a single conversation beforehand would have sorted it. And when it did happen, some of the responses left a lot to be desired.

Resolving it needed two ordinary things. The first was flexibility — enough range on the part of the staff to come up with an alternative: stagger the groups, adjust the plan, do something different. The second was simply the willingness to do it. One group crossed over, introduced themselves, tried to talk. The other planted its feet: we're here, this is what we're doing, you deal with it.

You can put that down to a training gap, or to plain bad manners. But I think there's often something underneath it that's harder to fix — a kind of institutional arrogance, baked in over years at some of the more established outfits. *We were here first. This is how it's done.* Not even hostility, most of the time. Just a brick wall where flexibility and adaptation ought to be.

That wall is the fifteen seconds again. My plan, my group, my convenience — held onto at a cost to everyone else on the water that day, and to the participants who came for an experience and got a standoff instead.

Practical Takeaways

- 1

Notice the fifteen-second trade — when you protect a small convenience of your own at a diffuse cost to everyone else, name it for what it is. It rarely feels like selfishness in the moment.
- 2

Interrogate your USP — ask honestly whether what makes you *different* is also what makes you *harder to choose*. Differentiation that raises the switching cost can quietly shrink your own market.
- 3

Design for the base, not the tip — look at your processes and paperwork and ask who they're actually built to serve. Streamlining for the end user tends to grow the whole market, not just their experience.
- 4

Don't wait for the crisis — collaboration reserved for emergencies is a warning sign, not a virtue. The need is there in the calm; that's the cheapest time to act on it.
- 5

Have the conversation first — most foreseeable clashes are resolved by a two-minute exchange nobody wanted to initiate. Flexibility is a skill; the willingness to use it is a choice.
- We collaborate to survive, and then we stop. The organisations that go furthest are the ones that collaborate to make things better — before anyone forces them to.*