BRIDGEPOINT COACHING & STRATEGY GROUP

The Gap Is Behavioral. The Fix Is Structural.

Closing the Gap Between Intention and Action

Dean Miles · Founder and President, Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group · November 7, 2026

Opening

You can know what to do, want to do it, and still leave it undone.

That does not automatically mean you need more insight. Or more motivation. Before making it another test of your character, ask a different question: What has changed around the thing you keep meaning to do?

Who knows about it? What have you stopped doing to make room? Who can challenge the explanation you give when another week passes?

If the answer is nobody and nothing, you may be asking a stronger intention to do the work of an unchanged arrangement.

Intention can feel like progress. You name the problem. Have the conversation. Decide this time will be different. There is relief in finally knowing what you intend to do.

Then Tuesday arrives. The calendar is still full. The competing commitments are still there. The decision remains private. Nothing around the intention requires you to meet it differently.

> **The intention changed. The conditions did not.**

The gap is behavioral. The fix is structural.

Start with who you let in. Not who will applaud the ambition. Who can question it, help you see what you are avoiding, and ask what happened after the enthusiasm passes? That person needs permission to hear something other than your polished explanation.

Then build limits. If everything else keeps its place, where will this commitment fit? What will you decline, reduce, or stop? What is the first action small enough to fit an actual Tuesday, rather than the imaginary week when nobody needs anything from you?

A smaller first move does not require a smaller ambition. It requires an honest account of the day in which the ambition has to become behavior.

Then examine how you regulate yourself within those conditions. What happened? What needs to change? What story are you repeating about what the difficulty means?

Hard is information, not a verdict. It may tell you to practice, ask for help, change the conditions, or reconsider the goal. Reflection helps you distinguish those responses. Simply resolving to push harder does not.

This is not an argument that personal responsibility disappears. Changing who you let in and what you permit to consume your time are acts of responsibility.

It is an argument against leaving everything in place and expecting a more determined version of yourself to produce a different result.

The work is not finished when you understand the gap. It begins when you change what keeps it open.

1. What the gap is asking for

Start with one stalled intention. Some actions need authority, a resource, recovery, or a better decision. A reasoned pause may be the right response. Inspect those conditions before treating the delay as a failure of resolve.

A related Bridgepoint paper, *Conditions Set Culture*, asks how organizational conditions grow culture. This paper starts closer to the ground. It asks what arrangement surrounds one consequential intention that keeps waiting: the people who can tell the truth about it, the limits that give it room, and the reflection that keeps it honest after the first surge of resolve.

Knowing, feeling, and the will to act

An older psychological tradition calls this the trilogy of mind: cognition, affect, and conation. Cognition concerns knowing and thinking. Affect concerns feeling and emotional evaluation. Conation concerns goal-directed willing and striving: choosing a course, making a commitment, beginning, and sustaining the effort. These are interacting aspects of mental life, not separate compartments. Conation gives us language for the work between an intention and its enactment. It does not reduce that work to willpower. A commitment still has to meet the people, competing demands, and limits of an actual day. That is why the conditions around action belong in the conversation, alongside what a person knows and feels (Hilgard, 1980).

EVIDENCE NOTE · INTENTION, BEHAVIOR, AND CONDITIONS

Interventions that strengthen intentions also change behavior, but the average behavioral change is smaller than the change in intention (Webb & Sheeran, 2006). Stronger intentions help. They do not guarantee commensurate action. Behavior-change frameworks also remind us that capability, opportunity, and motivation interact; opportunity includes the social and physical conditions that make an action possible (Michie, van Stralen, & West, 2011). Those findings support a practical move: inspect the arrangement before asking the same person for more force.

Begin by examining who is involved, then the limits around the work, then how you regulate yourself within those conditions. This is a practical search order. If permission, a skill, or a stop decision is the immediate obstacle, address it. Reflection remains part of the work throughout.

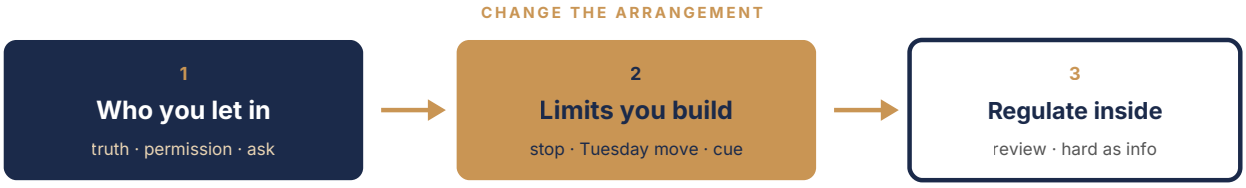


Figure 1. A practical search order. Start with who can tell the truth and what must change around the intention. Build limits that make room for a Tuesday-sized next move. Review and adjust within those conditions.

2. Who you let in

Before you rewrite the plan, name the circle.

Who already knows this intention by its real name, not its polite version? Who has standing to ask, a week from now, whether anything observable happened? Whose approval, authority, or resource actually decides whether the move can proceed? And who only applauds the ambition, which is a different service?

Selection here is not collecting cheerleaders. It is deciding who can hear an unpolished account: what you are avoiding, what you tried, what failed, and what you are tempted to explain away. That person needs permission to challenge the explanation, not only to support the identity you prefer.

Access matters as much as encouragement. If the consequential conversation requires a decision owner, a budget holder, or a partner with veto power, those people belong in the arrangement. Leaving them outside and hoping private resolve will substitute for their involvement is how intentions stay private and untouched.

Coachability is often situational. People open differently under different conditions, and sometimes only after a costly miss makes the old arrangement impossible to defend. Waiting for a permanent personality upgrade before changing who is close enough to see the work is another way to protect the stall. The practical question is nearer: for this intention, who is in, and what are they allowed to ask?

A framework can help organize the questions. It cannot listen to your answer, challenge the explanation, or return next week to ask what changed.

That is work you do with another person. The relationship gives the questions somewhere to continue.

3. Limits that fit a Tuesday

Once the circle is clearer, build limits. Not more goals. Limits.

If everything else keeps its place, the new commitment has nowhere to live. Name what you will decline, reduce, delay, or stop. If the calendar is already full, the tradeoff is part of the intention, not a later inconvenience. If competing wishes are waiting for a quieter week, the intention may stay waiting with them.

Then name a first action small enough for an actual Tuesday. Not the imaginary week when nobody needs anything from you. A recognizable next move you could complete and later point to as evidence that something changed. Linking that move to a situation you will actually encounter helps: if situation X occurs, then I will do Y (Gollwitzer, 1999). The cue must be real. The response must be feasible. “Sometime this week” is not a cue. “Before I leave Friday’s operating review” can be.

A smaller first move does not shrink the ambition. It tells the truth about the day in which the ambition has to become behavior. One protected action that fits the day beats an inspiring plan that only fits a life you do not have.

Limits also include the story you repeat about yourself and the work. The sentence you use when the week slips (“I am not a details person,” “They will not listen,” “After this crunch”) can become a soft ceiling. Sometimes the plan is fine and the sentence is what needs to change. Examine the story alongside the real constraints. Do not use a new narrative to deny missing authority, missing skill, or a harmful condition. And do not use a real constraint as cover for a story that keeps you unavailable to the move you say you want.

Structural work is broader than calendar management. Decision rights, incentives, conflicting expectations, physical access, and permission to act or to stop can all block enactment. Check them. Change the ones that are yours to change. Escalate or renegotiate the ones that are not. Pushing harder on an impossible task is not responsibility. It is motion without direction.

4. Regulate inside the conditions

After people and limits are in view, examine how you regulate yourself inside them.

What happened since you named the intention? What evidence would show the useful difference began? What needs to change in the next attempt? What story are you telling about what the difficulty means?

Hard is information, not a verdict. Difficulty may tell you to practice, ask for help, change a condition, adjust the pace, or reconsider the goal. Reflection is how you distinguish those responses from a blanket decision to push harder. One warning sign is arriving at a review unable to explain where the weeks went. Two plain questions help: Did I do what I said I would do? Of the things I did, how related were they to the purpose I claimed?

Consistency beats intensity here. A brief, repeatable review protects the intention better than an occasional surge of resolve. Recording something closer to the intended difference than a count of meetings helps; progress monitoring is a supported self-regulation technique, with the strongest experimental evidence coming largely from health goals, so leadership use requires judgment (Harkin et al., 2016). Prefer a confidential check-in you choose over a coercive scoreboard. Visibility without consent is not support.

Not every delay is weakness. A reasoned pause has a reason and, where appropriate, a review condition. An indefinitely renewed intention with nobody watching and nothing displaced is a different arrangement. When you review, ask both: Did I avoid the action, or did I make a better decision about whether it still deserves to be done?

5. When the finish line moves

Even a closed gap reopens. Reaching a goal is not a permanent discipline victory. The arrangement that carried you to one finish line deserves another look before the next.

When you hit a target, or abandon one, reset three things: **Target** (what exactly are we now aiming at?), **Tempo** (what pace and cadence can we sustain?), and **Tribe** (who is in for this next stretch, and what are they allowed to ask?). New finish lines need new clarity on all three. Otherwise the old circle, the old unbounded calendar, and the old private resolve quietly return, and the gap opens again under a new label.

The questions change as the work changes. A person who can tell you the truth can help you examine the next commitment without pretending that the last success settled it.

6. Change what keeps it open

Return to the intention you can already name.

Who knows about it now who did not before? What will you stop or reduce so it has room? What Tuesday-sized move will you protect? Who will ask what happened, and when?

If those answers are still nobody and nothing, you still have an intention. You do not yet have a structural change.

Understanding the gap is useful. Changing the arrangement that keeps it open is the work.

About Dean Miles

Dean Miles is Founder and President of Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group. He has spent 13,000 hours in coaching conversations with 245 leaders. He is a Certified Professional Co-Active Coach (CPCC), holds an M.A. in Executive Leadership completed with high distinction, and is a PhD candidate in Organization and Management.

Direction. Not just motion.

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Working tool: Change the arrangement

Use this page to change who is involved, what has room, and how you will review one stalled intention.

1. THE INTENTION

What consequential move am I committing to, and what useful difference should it make?

2. WHO I LET IN

Who knows this by its real name:

Who can challenge my explanation and ask what happened:

Whose approval, authority, or resource actually matters:

Permission I am giving them to hear an unpolished account:

3. LIMITS I WILL BUILD

What I will decline, reduce, delay, or stop:

First action small enough for an actual Tuesday:

Recognizable cue (if/when ____, I will ____):

Story I tend to repeat when this slips, and what I will say instead:

Access, decision rights, incentives, or conflicting expectations still blocking this:

4. REFLECTION INSIDE THOSE CONDITIONS

Evidence I will record (closer to the difference than activity):

Review date and who asks:

If it is hard, what information might that be (practice / help / change conditions / reconsider):

Continue / adjust / restart / pause / stop if:

5. NEXT FINISH LINE

If this goal is reached or released, my next Target / Tempo / Tribe:

Hard is information, not a verdict.

Direction. Not just motion.

Notes

1. The people-then-limits-then-self-regulation order is Dean Miles's practical coaching emphasis for inspecting a stalled intention. It is not presented as a validated universal intervention sequence or a causal finding from dissertation research.
2. Hilgard (1980) traces the modern classification of cognition, affection, and conation to eighteenth-century German psychology and later Scottish, British, and American use. Moses Mendelssohn (1755) is credited with an early clear statement of understanding, feeling, and will. Hilgard cautions against reading that exact modern triad back into ancient writers. Used here as a brief supporting lens, not a complete theory of mind or a claim that Aristotle authored the classification.
3. Webb and Sheeran (2006): 47 experimental tests; intention difference d = 0.66, 95% CI [0.51, 0.82]; behavior difference d = 0.36, 95% CI [0.22, 0.50]. Standardized mean differences, not percentages. Largely health-related behaviors. Intentions mattered; average behavioral change was smaller.
4. Michie, van Stralen, and West (2011) describe capability, opportunity, and motivation as interacting conditions for behavior (COM-B). Opportunity includes physical and social context. The model assigns no fixed priority among individual, group, or environmental changes. Used here only to support checking conditions before defaulting to effort.
5. Gollwitzer (1999) reviews implementation intentions: linking a specified situation to a specified response. Benefits depend on goal commitment, a recognizable cue, and a feasible response.
6. Harkin et al. (2016): progress-monitoring interventions associated with better goal attainment on average (d = 0.40); nearly all included goals were health-related. Leadership application requires judgment. Confidential, voluntary support preferred over coercive visibility.
7. Target / Tempo / Tribe is Dean Miles's working prompt for resetting aim, pace, and circle when a finish line is reached or released.
8. *Conditions Set Culture* (Bridgepoint) addresses organizational conditions and culture. This paper addresses the arrangement around one personal or leadership intention. Related family of thinking; different unit of analysis.

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