

A GENSYN DESIGN FIELDGUIDE

The 10 System Principles

A working guide for groups doing hard things together.



GENSYNDESIGN.COM

START HERE

Overview

Some problems are too big for any one group, department, or community to solve on their own. The work crosses boundaries, and no one is in charge of the whole thing. That's the kind of work these principles are for.

We didn't invent them at a desk. They came out of years of sitting in rooms like yours — in education, early childhood, health, energy, justice, transportation, manufacturing, and more. Different problems, same pattern. The groups that made progress behaved in a handful of consistent ways. The ones that stalled skipped them.

Each of the following ten principles names a truth about how complex systems actually work, and the behavior that truth asks of us. See them as enablers - principles and behaviors that will create an “engine” that drives your group to a new level of collaboration, meaning, and progress.

How to use this guide

Each principle has signs of strength, the cost when it's missing, questions to talk through, and moves you can try in your next meeting. Start where the friction is. If you took the Readiness Check, start with the principles you scored lowest, that's where you can benefit the most.

At-A-Glance

Each principle is a pair: a truth about the system, and the behavior it asks of us.

01	Complexity is a given	→	Humility required
02	The system shapes the outcomes	→	Suspend blame
03	Autonomy works better with alignment	→	Create shared purpose
04	Interdependence is inevitable	→	Value the whole over the parts
05	Connection enables resilience	→	Make collaboration easier
06	Relationships enable long-term impact	→	Build trust
07	Uncertainty enables opportunity	→	Foster new ideas
08	Capability grows through reflection	→	Build a learning culture
09	Strength emerges through coordination	→	Build a team of teams
10	Complex systems change slowly	→	Make system-informed decisions



PRINCIPLE 01

Humility Required

Complexity is a given.

No one in the room holds the whole answer, and no one controls the outcome. That's not a weakness in the group. It's the nature of the work. Humility is the working response — treating other people as the experts on their piece, and holding your best idea loosely enough to change it when the room teaches you something.

WHAT STRONG LOOKS LIKE

- People say “I don't know” out loud, and no one thinks less of them for it.
- Plans change when someone closer to the problem pushes back.
- The loudest expert asks the quietest person what they're seeing.
- The group treats its first answer as a draft, not a verdict.

THE COST WHEN IT'S MISSING

- Certainty runs the meeting, and the people closest to the problem go quiet.
- The plan looks confident and turns out wrong in ways no one felt safe naming.
- Disagreement gets read as disloyalty, so it moves to the hallway.
- The group defends its early answer long after the facts have moved.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Where are we acting certain about something we haven't tested?
- Whose view of this problem are we missing?
- When did we last change a plan because someone corrected us?
- Who in the room has stopped speaking up, and why?
- What would we have to admit we don't know to make real progress?
- Which of our “facts” is actually an assumption?

TRY THIS – FIVE WAYS IN

Meeting design to get the real gaps in the room's understanding on the table before certainty takes over + make sure the quietest, least senior voices get heard before the loudest ones do:

- Before the meeting, invite one person who lives the problem daily but never sits at this table.
- Open by inviting each person - your guest included - to share something they don't understand about the shared problem.
- Have each person name one thing they can't see, before they say what they can.
- Take the room in rounds, and have the most senior person go last, every round.
- Before you decide anything, run one more round: “What would change our minds?”



PRINCIPLE 02

Suspend Blame

The system shapes the outcomes.

Outcomes come from how the system is built — its rules, handoffs, and processes — more than from any one person's effort. Look for where people get stuck, not who to fault. That's what lets people examine the system honestly instead of defending themselves.

WHAT STRONG LOOKS LIKE

- When something breaks, the group asks where the process failed before who dropped it.
- People describe their own mistakes openly, because it's safe to.
- Solutions target the process, handoff, or the rule, not the individual.
- The same problem stops recurring, because the group found its source.

THE COST WHEN IT'S MISSING

- Blame comes first, so people get defensive and cover their tracks.
- The real cause stays hidden.
- People stop reporting problems they can't pin on someone else.
- The group fixes the person, and the flaw returns next month.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- When something goes wrong here, what's our first question — what or who?
- Where do people get stuck for reasons that have nothing to do with effort?
- What would people tell us if they knew they wouldn't be blamed?
- Which failures keep happening, no matter who's in the seat?
- Where has a rule or handoff quietly set people up to fail?
- What do we punish that we should be studying?

TRY THIS — FIVE WAYS IN

- Take a recent failure and map only the steps and handoffs. Look for explanations that don't involve the "who."
- Ask "what made this easy to get wrong?" instead of "who got it wrong?"
- Run a blameless review: no names, just where the work stalled or failed.
- Track one recurring problem back to the rule that produces it.
- Give people a safe way to flag broken processes without owning the blame.



PRINCIPLE 03

Create Shared Purpose

Autonomy works better with alignment.

Independent groups do their best work when they keep their autonomy yet stay aligned with the overall purpose and are aiming for the same thing. The goal is coherence without central control, where each group is acting on its own toward a purpose it helped shape.

WHAT STRONG LOOKS LIKE

- Every group can state the shared purpose in their own words.
- Groups make their own calls yet still pull in the same direction.
- When priorities compete, the shared purpose brings clarity and order.
- New people can easily see how the groups align and work together.

THE COST WHEN IT'S MISSING

- Groups stay busy but drift towards different directions and priorities.
- The group reworks what they are trying to do at every meeting.
- Autonomy turns into too many meetings with no connection.
- People align on paper but act on their own priorities.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Can each group here state our shared purpose without checking a document?
- Where is our purpose too vague to guide a real decision?
- Where are we asking for alignment when we should protect autonomy?
- When two priorities collide, what do we fall back on?
- What are we doing that no longer serves the shared purpose?
- Would our newest member describe our purpose the way we do?

TRY THIS — FIVE WAYS IN

- Ask each group to write the shared purpose in one sentence, alone. Share and reconcile any differences.
- Test a live decision against the purpose before you make it.
- Spell out what each group decides on its own, and any relevant boundaries.
- Post the shared purpose at every meeting, and refer to it often.
- Retire one activity that doesn't serve the purpose anymore.



PRINCIPLE 04

Value the Whole Over the Parts

Interdependence is inevitable.

Every group's choices ripple across the whole system. Work that only looks at one part often impacts another without knowing it. Ask the group to look for value across the system and asks what a decision does three steps out, not just at step one.

WHAT STRONG LOOKS LIKE

- Before deciding, the group asks who else this impacts and brings them in the conversation.
- People flag downstream effects even when it slows their own work.
- Wins get measured across the system, not just in one unit.
- Groups trade a short-term local gain for the whole when it matters.

THE COST WHEN IT'S MISSING

- Each part optimizes itself, and a win in one corner becomes a problem in another.
- Downstream effects show up as surprises no one owns.
- Groups hand their problems sideways and call it solved.
- The system collects local wins and a worse whole.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Who feels the effects of this decision that isn't in the room?
- Where are we solving our problem by handing it to someone else?
- What looks like a win for us but a loss for the whole?
- Three steps downstream, who inherits this choice?
- Where do our metrics reward local wins over system health?
- What would the most affected group say if they were here?

TRY THIS — FIVE WAYS IN

- Before a big call, name the three groups most affected downstream and ask what they'd say.
- Invite one downstream group into the decision, not just the update.
- Add a “who else does this touch?” line to your decision template.
- Trace one recent “win” to its downstream effect. Be honest about it.
- Measure one outcome at the system level, not the unit level.



PRINCIPLE 05

Make Collaboration Easier

Connection enables resilience.

A connected system adapts. When information moves freely and people can reach each other, the group bends under pressure instead of breaking. Someone has to build and tend those channels- the shared documents, the follow-through between meetings that keeps people connected.

WHAT STRONG LOOKS LIKE

- People know where to find what they need, and no one is the bottleneck.
- Information reaches the people who need it without being chased.
- When someone's out, the work keeps moving.
- New connections form without a meeting to authorize them.

THE COST WHEN IT'S MISSING

- Information moves slowly, or through a few gatekeepers.
- The group looks fine until stress hits, then it seizes up.
- Knowledge lives with one person, and disappears when they are gone.
- People rebuild what someone else already figured out.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Where does information get stuck here?
- What would make it easier for people to reach each other?
- What do people have to chase that should just find them?
- Where does knowledge disappear when one person leaves?
- Which handoffs break every time?

TRY THIS — FIVE WAYS IN

- List the last three things delayed waiting on one person or one document. Fix the channel.
- Put shared work where everyone can see it, not in someone's inbox.
- Name a backup for every role that's a single point of failure.
- End meetings by deciding who else needs to know, and how they'll find out.
- Write down one thing that only lives in someone's head.



PRINCIPLE 06

Build Trust

Relationships enable long-term impact.

Durable work rests on trust and mutual respect. It's built through honest communication and partnership where every contribution is valued. Trust takes time, and it has to come before the hard conversations, not after them.

WHAT STRONG LOOKS LIKE

- People raise hard truths in the room, because they trust it's safe to.
- Credit gets shared, and everyone's contribution is named.
- People assume good intent when something goes sideways.
- Commitments made in the room actually hold.

THE COST WHEN IT'S MISSING

- The real talk happens outside of the meeting, and problems fester.
- People protect themselves before they help each other.
- Small slights pile up into stalled work.
- Every disagreement gets read as an attack.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Where are the honest conversations happening - in the room, or after it?
- Whose contribution here goes unrecognized?
- What would it take for people to say the hard thing out loud?
- Where has trust been damaged?
- Who in this group doesn't feel safe yet, and why?
- Do our commitments to each other actually hold?

TRY THIS — FIVE WAYS IN

- Spend the first ten minutes of the meeting on connection, not the agenda.
- Let the group set its own ground rules for how it works together.
- Name each person's contribution out loud, by name.
- Close a loop you left open with someone. Address something that's not settled.
- Ask "what do you need from us to trust this?" and listen.



PRINCIPLE 07

Foster New Ideas

Uncertainty enables opportunity.

Uncertainty is where new answers live. Instead of managing it away, the group makes room for imagination before it narrows toward a decision. Diverge first. Converge later.

WHAT STRONG LOOKS LIKE

- The group explores several possibilities before choosing.
- Small experiments are welcome and failing one of them isn't fatal.
- “What if” gets airtime before “yes, but.”
- People bring half-formed ideas without fear.

THE COST WHEN IT'S MISSING

- Uncertainty feels like a threat, so the group grabs the first safe answer.
- Better options die before anyone hears them.
- Ideas get judged the moment they're spoken.
- The group mistakes moving fast for moving well.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Where are we forcing certainty we don't actually have?
- What have we ruled out before really exploring it?
- What small experiment would teach us something we can't reason our way to?
- Which idea got killed too early to know if it was good?
- Where are we choosing safe over right?
- What would we try if we knew we couldn't fail loudly?

TRY THIS — FIVE WAYS IN

- Give ten minutes to generating options with no judgment allowed. Share and discuss, narrow down list after everyone gets a chance to weigh in.
- Make a bet by running a small, cheap experiment instead of a long debate.
- Separate the “generate” meeting from the “decide” meeting.
- Ask for three options before anyone argues for one.
- Set aside a small budget or slot for trying unproven things.



PRINCIPLE 08

Build a Learning Culture

Capability grows through reflection.

Systems improve through structured reflection, not just motion. The group stops on purpose to ask what's working, learns from beyond its own walls, and pushes what it learns out across the system so the lesson doesn't stay in one room.

WHAT STRONG LOOKS LIKE

- Reflection is built into the work, not squeezed in when there's time.
- Insights and lessons learned are shared the people who need them.
- The group looks outside its own walls for what it's missing.
- People change what they do based on what they learn.

THE COST WHEN IT'S MISSING

- The group never stops to look back, so it repeats what doesn't work.
- Lessons and insights stay trapped with the people who have them.
- The same mistakes get relearned, over and over. And over.
- Reflection gets cut first when things get busy.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- When did we last stop to ask what's working and what isn't?
- What have we learned that never made it past this room?
- Who outside the group could teach us something we're missing?
- What are we still doing out of habit, not evidence?
- Where did we change our mind, and did anyone hear about it?
- What would we do differently if we started this today?

TRY THIS — FIVE WAYS IN

- End your next session with three questions: what worked, what didn't, what we'll change. Send the answers to those who weren't there.
- Schedule reflection before it gets crowded out, not after.
- Bring in one outside voice or example each quarter.
- Keep a running list of lessons and insights where the whole group can see it.
- Pick one habit to drop because the evidence says so.



PRINCIPLE 09

Build a Team of Teams

Strength emerges through coordination.

Strength comes from groups that coordinate side by side, not from everything routing up through one command center. Shared frameworks and tools let independent teams move together without waiting on a single approval.

WHAT STRONG LOOKS LIKE

- Groups coordinate with each other directly, not through one hub.
- The work keeps moving without one person at the center.
- Teams share tools and language, so handoffs are smooth.
- Decisions happen close to the work, inside clear boundaries.

THE COST WHEN IT'S MISSING

- Everything funnels through one point, and the work slows to that pace.
- When the central person is gone, the work stalls.
- Teams reinvent the same wheel in parallel.
- People wait for permission they could have been trusted with.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- What has to route through one person that really shouldn't?
- Where would a shared tool let groups coordinate on their own?
- If our key coordinator vanished for two weeks, what would stop?
- Where are teams solving the same problem separately?
- What decisions could move closer to the work?
- What shared language do we lack that keeps causing friction?

TRY THIS — FIVE WAYS IN

- Find one decision that needs central approval. Give a team a clear boundary and let them make it.
- Connect two teams directly that currently talk only through you.
- Adopt one shared tool or template across groups.
- Name the decisions each team owns outright.
- Set up an easy way for teams to sync without a central meeting.



PRINCIPLE 10

Make System-Informed Decisions

Complex systems change slowly.

Complex systems respond slowly, and often in ways you didn't predict. Quick wins can mislead. So decisions get paced to how the system actually responds, and the group builds ways to watch progress over the long haul.

WHAT STRONG LOOKS LIKE

- The group tracks real progress over time and reads short-term noise for what it is.
- Decisions get paced to the system, not the calendar.
- People hold a multi-year view without losing momentum.
- Course corrections come from evidence, not impatience.

THE COST WHEN IT'S MISSING

- The group chases fast wins and mistakes noise for signal.
- Big calls get made on thin, early evidence.
- Impatience kills efforts that needed more time.
- The group declares victory before the system has moved.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Where are we chasing a quick win that won't hold?
- What are we treating as a result that's really just noise?
- How will we know, a year from now, whether this is working?
- What signals are we watching, and are they the right ones?
- Where is impatience about to cost us?
- What would we need to see to say this is truly working?

TRY THIS — FIVE WAYS IN

- Name one measure you'll watch over the next year, not the next month. Decide now how you'll check it.
- Separate “early noise” from “real signal” before reacting to data.
- Set a realistic horizon for results and share it with the team.
- Build one checkpoint that looks at the trend, not the moment.
- Before reversing course, ask if you've given it enough time.



WHERE TO START

Putting these to work

You don't have to master all ten systems principles to get started. Pick the one where your group feels the most friction and begin there. Talk through the questions. Try a move. Come back next month and pick another. These are conditions you create to enable your team, not boxes you check.

If you want a hand putting them to work - whether it's a team that's stuck, a partnership that's straining, or a challenge no single group can solve - that's the work we do.

Start a conversation.

connect@gensyndesign.com · gensyndesign.com

The 10 System Principles were developed by Gensyn Design through years of facilitation in complex, cross-sector collaborations. © Gensyn Design. All rights reserved.

