

Turning Strategy into Action

How Dr Nevelle Bower's experience and doctoral inquiry inform practical organisational change

A practitioner-based account of why strategy gets stuck — and how leaders can create the conditions for delivery

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Grounded in senior executive practice, doctoral inquiry and practical organisational change.

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1. Executive summary

Dr Nevelle Bower's consultancy focus is grounded in a rare combination of senior executive experience, doctoral research and practical responsibility for organisational change. His work centres on a problem many SME leaders recognise: strategy may be clear on paper, but the real challenge is helping people understand it, own it and turn it into everyday action.

The central argument is practical. Strategy gets stuck not only because the plan is weak or because people lack effort, but because everyday organisational life is shaped by the conversations people avoid, the routines they repeat, the loyalties they protect and the assumptions that feel too familiar to question. The formal strategy may appear clear while the lived organisation continues to run according to older habits and stories.

Dr Bower's doctoral inquiry connects lived CEO practice with three bodies of work that help explain this challenge. Chris Argyris shows how people protect themselves from embarrassment or threat and, in doing so, block learning. Graham Curtis shows how groups can unintentionally preserve familiar patterns of power, belonging and exclusion. Steve Hearsom's No Silver Bullet warns against the fantasy that complex business and human problems can be solved by a single model, framework or heroic intervention. Dr Bower brings these insights into practical leadership by asking how the way a leader shows up affects the space available for others to speak honestly, think clearly, engage positively and act with ownership.

Core insight

Dr Bower's distinctive value lies in helping SME leaders turn strategy into action by making the gap between official strategy and lived reality discussable, then building the conversations, structures and routines that make change deliverable.

2. Dr Bower's doctoral inquiry and practitioner experience

Dr Bower's thesis, *Emerging from disengagement: a first-person inquiry (with others) into how the way I show up as a male leader affects the spaces I create for change and my own ability to engage*, is a practitioner inquiry into leadership, identity, disengagement, narrative, artful method and organisational change. It begins from the lived experience of a CEO who had become increasingly aware that control, certainty and performance can sometimes stand in the way of real engagement.

The inquiry explores how leaders create or restrict the conditions for change through the way they speak, listen, hold authority, handle uncertainty and make space for others. It is concerned with the space between strategy and day-to-day organisational life: where plans meet habits, where stated intentions meet informal routines, and where people decide whether it is safe to speak, contribute and take responsibility.

A distinctive strength of the thesis is that it is grounded in senior executive experience rather than abstract leadership theory alone. It treats leadership not simply as a set of competencies, but as a relational practice shaped by history, identity, responsibility, anxiety, power and expectation. This makes the research relevant to real businesses, where strategy is not delivered by a document; it is lived through people, conversations, routines, decisions and the everyday behaviour leaders make possible.

For prospective clients, the doctoral contribution is useful in four practical ways:

1. Engagement is not always positive: A person can look active, productive and committed while being driven mainly by anxiety, necessity, fear of failure or relief. This helps explain why a business can appear busy and hardworking while still lacking genuine ownership, energy and forward movement.
2. Organisations live inside inherited narratives: People often perform stories about leadership, loyalty, success and control that they did not consciously choose. Dr Bower's canal-and-river metaphor is useful here: organisations can become channelled by familiar structures, while change requires enough freedom to notice other routes and possibilities.
3. Reflection can be a serious business method: Structured conversation, metaphor, photography, walking, storytelling and practical inquiry can help people say what is otherwise difficult to say. These are not decorative techniques; they are practical ways of making sense of complexity before turning insight into action.
4. The leader changes the space by changing participation: When a leader notices and changes their own defensive pattern, the conversation around them can change too. This is central to the consultancy value: leaders may not control people, but they can create better spaces for people to think, speak and act.

3. Connection with Argyris: defensive routines and blocked learning

Argyris's work on defensive routines is one of the clearest links to Dr Bower's consultancy focus. In client terms, defensive routines are the habits that help people protect themselves from embarrassment, threat or loss of face, while also preventing the organisation from learning what it needs to learn.

In practical business language, this is what happens when people avoid the real issue, soften the message, protect a colleague, defend a department, hide uncertainty, over-control the narrative or treat silence as agreement. The organisation may keep functioning, but the truth needed for improvement remains just out of reach.

Dr Bower's inquiry adds a lived leadership dimension to this theory. It asks not only how defensive routines block learning, but what kind of leadership identity is being defended. In the thesis, the defended self is shaped by leadership expectation, masculinity, working-class

inheritance, fatherhood, responsibility and the fear of losing a familiar story of competence and control.

A production-management example from the inquiry shows the theory in action. Faced with missed targets, contradictory accounts and frustration, the familiar pattern would have been to move quickly into battle, control and blame. Instead, the leader pauses, notices the trigger, and creates a more reflective conversation. The leadership act is not passivity; it is changing the quality of the conversation so that learning becomes possible.

Practice implication

Many SMEs do not fail to implement strategy because people lack intelligence or effort. They struggle when defensive routines protect people from saying what is actually happening. A consultant working from this perspective looks for the avoided conversations, face-saving performances and places where people are protecting themselves from embarrassment or exposure.

4. Connection with Curtis: functional collusion, shame and exclusion

Curtis's work on functional collusion is useful because it explains how groups maintain familiar patterns without necessarily planning to do so. Collusion is not always a conspiracy. It can be ordinary, relational and functional: people participate because the pattern keeps the group going, protects belonging, reduces emotional risk and avoids the discomfort of naming what is really happening.

This connects closely with Dr Bower's work on silence, inherited narratives, conformity and organisational performance. In business settings, silence is rarely neutral. It can preserve loyalty, protect identity, avoid shame and keep people included. The price is that important truths remain unspoken and repeated problems continue to look like isolated events rather than patterns.

This is why a simple instruction to 'be more open' is often inadequate. Openness may threaten the very conditions that have allowed people to belong. Dr Bower's use of photography and other reflective methods is significant because a third object can make it safer for people to speak indirectly, metaphorically and honestly before moving into practical action.

Practice implication

In an SME, collusion may appear as agreement in meetings, polite silence, vague commitment, loyalty to the founder, avoidance of underperformance, or repeated acceptance that 'this is just how things are done here.' The useful question is not simply 'who is resisting?' but 'what does this pattern protect, and what would become possible if it could be named safely?'

5. Connection with Hearsun: no silver bullets and the myth of fixability

Steve Hearsun's No Silver Bullet adds a valuable warning for consulting and leadership. Organisations often want difficult problems to be solved by a single model, programme, technology, framework or charismatic intervention. Consultants can be tempted to sell that certainty because it is commercially attractive, especially when leaders are under pressure and want movement quickly.

Dr Bower's work is compatible with this critique. The thesis is sceptical of strategy and leadership narratives that imply control, certainty and linear execution. A polished strategy document can become its own kind of silver bullet if it creates the impression that the organisation has been made controllable simply because it has been described.

The deeper point is that the search for silver bullets is meaningful. Leaders often want them because complexity creates anxiety. Teams may collude with them because simple answers feel safer than difficult conversations. Dr Bower's PhD develops this further through the paradox of organisational control: in complex organisations, the more tightly a leader tries to control reality, the more the plan itself can begin to control the leader.

Dr Bower's alternative is disciplined inquiry, better conversation, practical structure and changed leadership participation. It does not promise instant certainty. It helps leaders work with the real organisation so people can understand what is happening, own the work and move strategy into delivery.

Ethical practice implication

The offer should not become a new silver bullet called storytelling or turning strategy into action. Its strength lies in being a disciplined, practical and human process for helping leaders and teams face the realities that quick fixes usually avoid.

6. Integrated view: why strategy gets stuck

Taken together, Argyris, Curtis, Hearsun and Dr Bower's doctoral work can be understood as four connected ways of explaining why strategy often fails to become lived practice.

Thinker / work	Primary focus	What it helps reveal	Practical relevance for SME leaders
Argyris	Defensive routines and blocked learning	Why people avoid the truth that would allow learning	Helps identify the avoided conversations that keep strategy stuck
Curtis	Functional collusion, shame and exclusion	Why groups preserve familiar patterns even when those patterns no longer help	Helps leaders understand silence, loyalty and agreement as possible warning signs
Hearsun	No silver bullets and the myth of fixability	Why leaders and consultants are drawn to quick fixes for complex realities	Keeps the work honest: no universal cure, just practical inquiry and disciplined delivery
Dr Bower's PhD	Leadership presence, story and practical change	How the way a leader shows up shapes what others feel able to say and do	Turns these insights into a grounded method for helping SMEs make strategy real

The integrated message is commercially useful and intellectually grounded. Argyris explains why people do not learn from what is happening. Curtis explains why groups preserve familiar patterns. Hearsun explains why leaders and consultants are attracted to simplified answers. Dr Bower's work shows, from lived CEO practice, how a leader can begin to change the space by changing their own participation in the pattern.

7. Consultancy focus: turning strategy into action

Turning strategy into action is the clearest expression of Dr Bower's consultancy focus. It is active, accessible and recognisable to SME leaders because it speaks directly to a familiar problem: leaders often have plans, ambitions and strategic intentions, but need help making them real in day-to-day organisational practice.

The focus sits around the gap between official strategy and lived organisational reality. In many organisations, strategy exists as a formal narrative while daily work continues according to older stories, loyalties, habits, fears and assumptions. The value of the work is not simply helping leaders produce better plans; it is helping them understand why action has not already happened, then creating the conversations, routines and structures that allow action to follow.

Consultancy proposition

Helping SME leaders turn strategy into action by uncovering what is really happening beneath the surface, then creating the conversations, structures and routines that allow people to understand, own and deliver what needs to happen.

This proposition avoids the silver-bullet trap. It does not promise a universal model or an off-the-shelf cure. It promises careful, practical work with the real organisation so that strategy becomes something people can understand, own and deliver.

8. A practical method for SME leaders

Dr Bower's PhD can be translated into a clear consultancy method without losing its depth. The method keeps the language practical, but it remains grounded in the thesis: hear the stated strategy, understand the lived story, surface the stuck patterns, create safer dialogue, then convert shared understanding into action.

Stage	Purpose	Practical focus
1. Clarify the stated direction	Understand the strategy, ambition or change requirement	What is the owner, CEO or leadership team trying to achieve, and why does it matter now?
2. Hear the lived reality	Understand how the organisation is actually experienced	What do managers and employees say is really happening day to day?
3. Surface the stuck patterns	Identify the routines, silences and loyalties that keep change from moving	Where are people avoiding embarrassment, protecting status, preserving comfort or sustaining old ways of working?
4. Create safer dialogue	Make difficult issues discussable without immediate defensiveness	Use structured conversation, metaphor, reflection, storytelling and practical inquiry to help people speak more honestly.
5. Build the delivery system	Turn shared understanding into practical action	Apply operating rhythms, role clarity, KPIs, lean management, AI adoption, due diligence, sale-readiness, product management or marketing processes as appropriate.
6. Leave stronger capability	Avoid consultant dependency and strengthen the client organisation	Help the organisation develop better conversations, better habits and better ways of noticing when it is slipping back into old patterns.

The key discipline is that conventional tools should follow inquiry rather than replace it. Lean management, operating rhythms, role clarity, KPIs, AI adoption, due diligence preparation, sale-readiness, product management and marketing processes can all be highly useful, but only when they are connected to the organisation's lived reality rather than imposed as abstract solutions. In this sense, the work is not soft instead of practical; it is practical because it begins with what people are actually experiencing.

9. Practical boundaries and risks

There are four practical boundaries that help keep the offer clear and credible.

1. Keep the language practical: The work is theoretically rich, but most clients will first recognise business problems such as stalled strategy, unclear accountability, repeated

underperformance, poor communication, leadership overload, growth pains, AI adoption challenges, sale-readiness issues or teams avoiding difficult conversations.

2. Avoid appearing anti-strategy: The work does not argue that strategy is unnecessary. It argues that strategy alone does not create change. The offer should help leaders connect strategic intent with lived organisational practice.
3. Avoid turning storytelling into another silver bullet: Storytelling is powerful only when it is connected to action, structure, accountability and changed practice. Otherwise, it risks becoming another attractive but shallow intervention.
4. Keep the work organisational and practical: Although the research deals with identity, emotion and shame, the consultancy offer should remain focused on helping businesses act more effectively through better leadership, better conversations, clearer structures and improved implementation.

10. Conclusion

Dr Bower's doctoral work provides a strong foundation for a distinctive consultancy position. Argyris provides the language of defensive routines and blocked learning. Curtis provides the language of collusion, shame and exclusion. Hearsun provides the critique of quick fixes and the organisational fantasy of the silver bullet. Dr Bower brings these concerns into first-person executive practice and shows how they appear in the real work of leading an organisation.

This creates a credible bridge between academic depth and practical business support. Dr Bower is not positioned simply as an external adviser bringing another model to an organisation. He is a CEO-practitioner who has lived the difficulty of control, disengagement, defensive leadership and strategy-as-performance from the inside, and who has developed a practical way of helping other leaders work more honestly with similar patterns.

Final positioning statement

Strategy made real: helping SME leaders turn strategy into action through better conversations, clearer structures and practical routines that help people understand, own and deliver change.

This approach resists the temptation to offer a simple answer. In the spirit of Hearsun, it refuses the silver bullet. Instead, it offers something more demanding and more credible: a practical, human, inquiry-led way of working with the real complexity of organisational change so that strategy can become shared understanding, ownership and delivery.

11. Key sources

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