



THRIVE CHECK · ELEVATE LABS

Why Your Best People Keep Leaving, And It Isn't Because They Stopped Caring About Kids

BRIGHTPATH LEARNING

Prepared by Elevate Labs · Sample report

Prepared for Jen, Amil, and the Brightpath leadership team. Brightpath Learning is a fictional organization; this sample shows the structure and depth of a Thrive Check final report. Findings reflect a confidential survey of 14 staff and leaders, six weeks of leadership observation prompts, a facilitated debrief with the leadership team, and follow-up conversations with the sponsor.

AT A GLANCE

The report on one page

Brightpath has lost about a third of its staff in a year, including a lot of the people it could least afford to lose. The culture is mission-driven, fast, and deeply committed. Underneath it is one fact that explains the departures better than pay or flexibility does: no piece of work feels finished until Amil has seen it. That is a natural result of how the company was built, and it can be fixed.

What we found

Symptom. The best people keep leaving: half of partnerships in six weeks, the three strongest product managers and two senior engineers, four of nine in customer success, two more looking. The official story is pay and flexibility. The staff story is that nobody is sure whose direction to follow or when their work is done.

Connected. Every decision is provisional until Amil has seen it. That produces the rest: work finished at 3pm and revisited at 11pm, three answers to one roadmap question, people working to be the one Amil sees first, two trusted colleagues who translate his intent for everyone else, a product direction that changes faster than customer success can explain it, and long hours as the way to show you care.

Diagnosis. Brightpath has grown past the point where one person's judgment can be the finish line for every decision, and the vision that guides the company, which lives mostly in Amil's head, has not yet been written down in a form other people can apply on their own.

Origin. A founder whose story built the company and whose standard made it good. A leadership team hired to build structure before anyone worked out what authority they would have. Two early colleagues who could read Amil without being told, which worked at 12 people and does not scale to 45. And a mission so strong that questioning the pace can feel like questioning the kids.

What the leadership team said

The room recognized “three answers to one question” right away and named late-night roadmap changes as the habit that costs the most. Amil questioned the burnout finding, and agreed that he had noticed the competition for his attention. His closing line was the diagnosis in his own words: “I don’t know how to let go of decisions when I can see the right answer.”

What to do

Now, as habits

- Say what done looks like before work starts, in writing
- Hold roadmap decisions until the morning
- A one-line why for every change of direction
- Leaders name the hours they are not working
- An 80% or 99% target on every assignment; an 80 does not get reopened
- Bring Marcus into product questions before they reach Amil

Before and after the Head of People is in seat

- Hire for this diagnosis: a JD built around decision rights, founder partnership, and recognition design, not HR administration
- Decision rights written down by domain, including what Amil keeps
- A vision and product-principles document, co-written with the people who already know how to read him
- A visible shape for the roles Nadia and Lara already play
- A quarterly roadmap customer success can repeat to districts

Over the next year

- Founder development as the central track: Wayfinder 360s, executive coaching, a repeat Thrive Check at twelve months
- Recognize sustainable outcomes alongside heroic ones
- A leadership team Amil can trust to run the company for a week

1 WHY YOU CAME TO US

“We’re losing people faster than we can bring them in, and at this rate we won’t have a product to sell in six months.”

— Jen, Chief Operating Officer, intake conversation

Brightpath came to us because retention is becoming untenable. A third of the staff left in a year, and the people leaving were the ones the company was counting on to carry it through the next stage. Jen is hiring a Head of People, and she wanted that person pointed in the right direction from day one, so that the first thing they build is the thing that lets Brightpath keep scaling.

Amil’s read going in was that the team’s standard and his own were not yet the same thing, and that the gap was showing up as rework. The data says he is right about the gap. The fix is not more effort from the team. It is making his standard something people can see before they start.

2 WHAT WE FOUND

Over twelve weeks we looked at how work actually happens at Brightpath: how decisions get made, how feedback flows, who sets the standard, and what people do under pressure.

STEP 1

Symptom

The best people keep leaving, and the official reasons do not explain it.

In twelve months Brightpath lost its Head of Partnerships and four of his eight people within six weeks; three of its five most senior product managers and two senior engineers, all to later-stage companies; and four of nine in customer success, mostly mid-tenure implementation leads. Two current staff told the survey they are actively looking.

Exit interviews say compensation and remote flexibility, and those are real. But eleven of fourteen respondents described, in their own words, not knowing whose direction to follow or when their work was finished. The people who left were not the weakest performers. Several were the strongest, and they went to places where they could see work through to the end.

STEP 2

Connected

No piece of work feels finished until Amil has seen it. Most of what follows comes from that.

Nine of eleven said people push through exhaustion to show commitment, and most said it happens often or always. The written answers explained why: work finished in the afternoon gets looked at again late at night, when Amil reviews it, so people keep going until then. Seven of nine said decisions get announced before the people affected are consulted.

Three things grow out of that:

- **Competing for attention.** Being the one Amil sees first is how work gets approved. Six of nine named competing for credit, and nobody meant it as a criticism of their colleagues.
- **Two translators.** Nadia and Lara can read what Amil means, and they can tell him when he is wrong; both disagree with him regularly and often win. It also means the org chart bends around them: engineers go to Lara before Marcus, and a third of Nadia's week goes to interpreting Amil for other teams.
- **A roadmap customer success cannot repeat.** Product direction changes faster than the people facing districts can explain it, so they have stopped promising dates.

Amil welcomes disagreement, challenges, and feedback, particularly from people who have shown they can deliver. But with expectations unclear, delivering means producing what Amil had in mind, which means the only people who can earn his trust are the ones who can read him. Nadia and Lara knew him before Brightpath. Marcus did not, and nine months in he has had no visible standard to hit and, with engineers routing around him, no track record to show.

Over all of it sits the mission. "The kids can't wait" is Amil's line and it is true. It has also, without anyone intending it, become the sentence that makes it hard to say you are tired.

STEP 3

Diagnosis

Brightpath has grown past the point where one person's judgment can be the finish line for every decision, and the vision that guides the company has not yet been written down in a form other people can apply on their own.

Amil is the finish line for too many decisions for a company of 45. Delegating has not worked, because the standard behind his judgment has never been written down, and people cannot make the call he would make if they cannot see what he is checking for.

The survey shows why the standard was never written. Purpose is first by a wide margin, Growth is second, and Steady is last, with ten of fourteen people naming Purpose as their own dominant reflex. That is what people love about Brightpath, and it is also the profile least likely to write anything down. Purpose cultures treat the mission as the plan. Growth cultures treat process as drag. Steady, the reflex that writes the standard down so it outlives the person who set it, is the one nobody here leads with. At 12 people the standard had a person attached to it. At 45, half of them remote, the whole company is working around the gap.

The shadows in the data are that gap under pressure. When done is wherever Amil says it is, staying online until he has looked is sensible, and the mission makes it feel right (Purpose). When his approval is the finish line, being seen first is how work gets through (Growth). Two reflexes, one missing standard.

STEP 4

Origin

A story that built the company, a standard that made it good, and a team that arrived before the structure caught up.

None of this is anyone's fault. Amil's story, the Google engineer who went to teach and watched his students fall behind peers who had tutors, is why the company exists and why people join. For three years his judgment on every decision was the right model: he was the product, the vision, and the quality bar. Nadia and Lara had worked with him before and could read his intent without being told, so written direction was never needed and the two of them became invaluable.

Then the company grew: ten districts, a \$5M round, 45 people. A leadership team came in from larger companies to build structure, before anyone had worked out which decisions would move to them. Approval still ran through Amil, translation still ran through Nadia and Lara, and the new leaders found their titles came with responsibility but not yet authority. Several of the strongest decided they could not do the job they were hired for, and left.

Amil is extraordinarily responsive, open to feedback, and moves at a pace few people can sustain. He has never led an organization he could not personally touch, and he has deliberately surrounded himself with people who disagree with him. What he has not yet seen is that as long as his standard stays in his head, the only people who can earn the right to disagree are the ones who can read it. Growth brought him more decisions and more people with no way to show him what they could do.

3 WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

Three tracks. **Aspirin** is habits, most of them Amil's: no budget, nothing that waits for the Head of People. **Surgery** is the structural work that gives people a finish line they can see, owned by the Head of People's first six months with Jen and Amil. **Immune system** is the founder and leadership development that keeps this from happening again at 90 people.

One principle runs through all three. The goal is not to slow Brightpath down or take Amil out of the product. It is to make his standard something other people can meet without him in the room.

Take the Aspirin HABITS TO START NOW

These cost nothing and start Monday. Each one is specific enough that you will know within two weeks whether it is happening.

1

Say what done looks like before the work starts, in writing.

What to do: For anything Amil will review, he writes two or three sentences up front: what good looks like, what he will check for, what he does not need to see. One clarifying question allowed. After that, meeting the written bar means done.

Who: Amil for anything he reviews; Marcus, Nadia, and the Head of Learning Design for their teams.

What good looks like: "That meets the bar you wrote" holds. Late-night revisions drop within a month.

2

Hold roadmap decisions until the morning.

What to do: Amil works when he works. But direction changes, priority changes, and reversals go into a queue and get discussed at the next morning's standup with the person who owns the work, not in Slack overnight.

Who: Amil. Jen holds the line.

What good looks like: Engineers wake up to the roadmap they went to bed with. Customer success hears about changes from leadership, not from engineers.

3

Every change of direction comes with a one-line why.

What to do: When Amil changes someone's decision, he tells them why. "I changed X because Y." Thirty seconds, and it teaches the standard faster than anything else on this list.

Who: Amil first, then every leader.

What good looks like: People start predicting the change before it happens. Within two months the changes get rarer because people are making the call Amil would have made.

4**Name the hours you are not working.**

What to do: Each leader, Amil included, says at the next all-hands when they are offline and that they expect the same from their team. Amil says plainly that his hours are his choice, not the standard. Then the leaders actually go offline.

Who: Every leader. Amil first.

What good looks like: *The team channel at 10pm goes quiet.*

5**Put a quality target on every assignment: 80% or 99%.**

What to do: Say which it is when work is handed off. “This needs to be 80%, get it done and move on” or “this needs to be 99%, it’s going in front of a superintendent.” Never 100%: the gap between 99 and 100 is subjective, and chasing it is where the late nights come from. The rule that makes this work here is that an 80 does not get reopened by Amil. If he would have done something differently, that is a note for next time, not a revision tonight. A 99 is where his review belongs, and everyone knows going in that it is coming.

Who: Every leader. Amil most of all, because the target only means something if he honors it.

What good looks like: *People ask “is this an 80 or a 99?” before starting. Amil’s reviews go to the work that warrants them.*

6**Bring Marcus into product questions before they reach Amil.**

What to do: Lara and Amil agree that when an engineering question has a product dimension, Marcus hears it first. Lara’s judgment is one of the company’s best assets, and this is about the route, not about her. Marcus knows the agreement exists.

Who: Amil and Lara, by agreement.

What good looks like: *Marcus is in the loop before product decisions are made, not after, and can do the job he was hired for.*

Get the Surgery

THE HEAD OF PEOPLE'S FIRST SIX MONTHS

These turn the habits into a system. The first one is Jen's and happens before the hire. The rest belong to the Head of People, with Jen and Amil as owners.

1

Hire the Head of People for this diagnosis, not for HR administration.

Why this matters: The job description is the biggest lever in this report. A Head of People hired to run benefits, compliance, and recruiting will do those well and leave the decision model where it is. The person Brightpath needs will spend most of their first year on the four items below, and on being the second voice in the room with Amil that Jen has said she needs.

Put in the JD:

- **Responsibilities:** own the decision-rights and vision-document work, from design through adoption; design recognition, visibility, and advancement so they reward decisions that hold and work finished on the first pass; build onboarding that teaches the standard in the first month; run exit and stay conversations and report the pattern, not the anecdotes; develop the managers, most of whom are new to managing.
- **Experience:** has been the people leader in a founder-led company through the 30-to-100 stage, and can say what the founder had to let go of; org design and change work, not only HR operations; credible with engineers and product people, which in practice means having worked somewhere technical.
- **Disposition:** disagrees with a founder in private and backs the decision in public; can earn Amil's trust the way it is actually earned here, by delivering visibly and early.
- **Screen for:** a time they told a CEO something the CEO did not want to hear, and what happened next. How they would know, six months in, whether the finish line had moved.
- **Do not optimize for:** large-company HR polish with no founder in the story.
- **Involve Amil:** he meets the finalists; afterward Jen asks him which one he would trust to tell him he was wrong. Then give that person something real to deliver in month one.

Elevate Labs can help: Reviewing the JD and interview plan against these findings; sitting in on finalist conversations.

2

Write down who decides what, including what Amil keeps.

Why this matters: "Three answers to one question" is a decision-rights problem more than a communication one. A leadership team hired to own domains can only own them once it is clear which decisions have moved to them and which the founder keeps.

Direction: One page per domain: product, engineering, partnerships, customer success, learning design, operations. Who decides, who is consulted, who is informed, and which specific decisions Amil keeps. Be honest about the last column. A short, real list of founder decisions is worth more than a long, aspirational list of delegated ones.

Elevate Labs can help: Designing and facilitating the decision-rights work, including the conversation about which decisions Amil is ready to hand over and which he is not yet.

3**Write the vision down so more people can read it.**

Why this matters: The vision is real and lives mostly in one place. Nadia and Lara can read it. Everyone else is guessing, and the people who guess wrong see their work revised. Writing it down also lets people earn Amil's trust by meeting a standard on the merits instead of guessing it, which is how the circle of people he will take an argument from gets bigger than the circle who can read his mind.

Direction: A vision and product-principles document Amil co-writes with Nadia, Marcus, and the Head of Learning Design. Not a mission statement: principles, with examples of decisions made each way. The test is whether a new PM could use it to make a call Amil would agree with. When Amil changes something, ask whether the document would have predicted it. If not, the document grows.

Elevate Labs can help: Structuring and facilitating the drafting sessions so the document captures how Amil actually decides, which is often different from how anyone, including Amil, would describe it.

4**Give the roles Nadia and Lara already play a visible shape.**

Why this matters: Translating the founder's intent is work the company depends on. It is valuable and it is invisible, which means proximity to Amil has quietly become the real org chart. Neither of them asked for that, and both may see the dynamic better than anyone.

Direction: Nadia's translation role becomes explicit, with a mandate the leadership team can see and a boundary around it. A job, not a favor. Lara's path to Amil becomes a standing technical review with Marcus in the room, so her judgment reaches product decisions through the Head of Product rather than around him. Neither is a demotion.

5**Commit to a quarterly roadmap that customer success can repeat.**

Why this matters: Customer success lost four of nine in a year because they could not give districts a straight answer. Direction should be allowed to change. The problem is that it changes without a rhythm, and the people facing customers find out last.

Direction: A written quarterly commitment customer success is allowed to promise. Changes inside the quarter go through Nadia before they are made, not after.

Build the Immune System

6 TO 12 MONTHS OUT

This track is about the founder and the team around him, and it is the most important work in this report.

1

Founder development as the central track.

Why this matters: Amil managed small product teams at Google and then built a company around his own judgment. He has never led an organization he could not personally touch, and Brightpath is now that organization. He welcomes challenge from people who have proven they can deliver, and the way people prove it today is by matching what was in his head, which rewards reading him over doing the work well. A company of 45 cannot wait for everyone to learn to read him, and the people most worth listening to are often the ones who will not. This changes with honest individual feedback, a coach who knows founders, and time.

Direction: A Wayfinder 360 for Amil and each leadership team member, so the gap between intent and effect is measured per person rather than argued about in the abstract. Executive coaching for Amil with two linked focuses: separating his standard from his presence, and letting people earn his trust by doing good work against a standard they can see. Repeat the Thrive Check at twelve months, timed to the Head of People's first year.

Elevate Labs can help: Wayfinder 360s, executive coaching for Amil, the repeat Thrive Check.

2

Recognize the sustainable outcome alongside the heroic one.

Why this matters: What gets praised here is the heroic save: the all-nighter that shipped the pilot, the person still online when Amil was. The mission makes the heroics feel right, and sometimes they are. The data says they are also part of why people leave.

Direction: Map what actually gets recognized today against what the organization needs more of: decisions made without escalation, work finished on the first pass, direction that holds for a quarter, people who go offline and come back. Then redesign the non-financial incentives so the two lists match.

Elevate Labs can help: An incentive mapping engagement with the leadership team.

3

A leadership team Amil can trust to run the company for a week.

Why this matters: This is the test of everything above, and Amil deserves it. If he cannot take a real week away and come back to a company that made decisions and shipped work, the finish line has not moved far enough.

Direction: Pick the week in advance. Tell the company. Write down what the leadership team may decide in his absence (the decision-rights document in action). Afterward, review what got escalated anyway and why. Repeat a quarter later.

4 WORKING WITH ELEVATE LABS

The Thrive Check surfaces the diagnosis and points at the prescription. Changing how a founder-led company makes decisions, consistently and visibly over time, is where most organizations want support. Executive sessions are sequenced for after the Head of People is in seat, so that person owns them rather than inherits them.

Three Ways to Continue · *suggested bundles, not a ladder*

GOOD

Quick Wins + Support

- Wayfinder 360 for Amil, with coaching debrief
- Executive workshop, 1 hour: Psychological Safety on a Founder-Led Team
- All-staff workshop: Prioritization, or What Done Looks Like (included in the Thrive Check)

Best for: giving Amil an honest individual picture before the Head of People starts

BETTER

Recommended Path

★ **RECOMMENDED**

- Everything in Good
- Wayfinder 360 for the full leadership team
- Executive coaching for Amil, six months
- Consulting engagement: Decision Rights and Vision Document

Best for: treating the condition, which is the decision model, not the symptoms

BEST

Full Partnership

- Everything in Better
- Consulting engagement: Incentive Mapping
- Executive half-day: Delegation and Decision Rights, the Working Session
- Repeat Thrive Check, one year in

Best for: building a leadership team that carries the company with the founder, not around him

Or choose individually. Every item above is available on its own, and these bundles draw from a much longer list of workshops, executive sessions, and consulting engagements. The full menu is at elevatelabs.biz.

Our recommendation for Brightpath

Better, and the order matters: Amil's Wayfinder first, because everything else depends on him seeing what the people around him see. Then coaching alongside the decision-rights work, so the structural change and the personal change happen together. If you take only one thing from this list, take the Wayfinder for Amil. Let's sequence the rest against the Head of People's start date rather than guess at it here.

To talk through next steps, contact Katie Sheketoff at katie@elevatelabs.biz or book a call at calendly.com/katie-elevatelabs.

5 WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

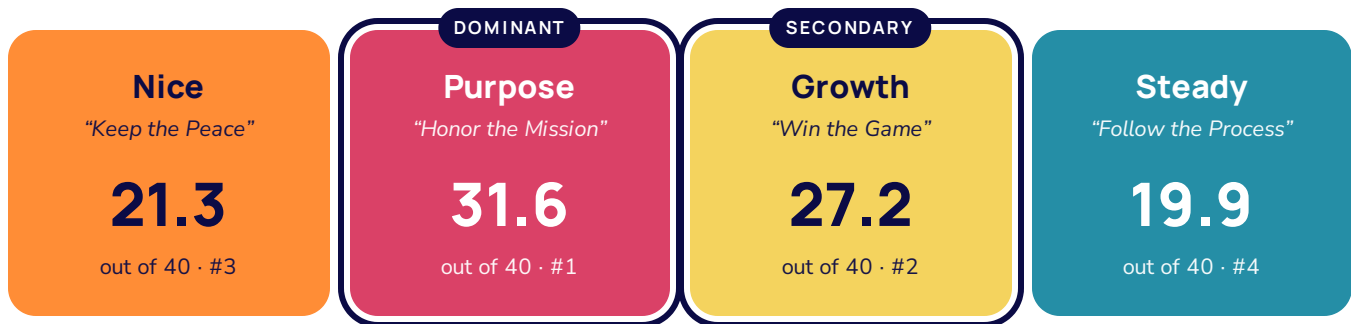
Full findings for reference

The complete picture behind Section 2, for when you want the evidence behind a recommendation or are building the case for change with your leadership team or board.

Your Culture Profile

Fourteen of forty-five staff completed the survey: five leaders, four managers, five individual contributors. Purpose scored highest by a wide margin, with Growth second, Nice third, and Steady a distant fourth. Ten of fourteen named Purpose as their own dominant reflex; nobody named Steady. Leadership and staff scored almost identically, so the shadow side is shared too. Everyone here agrees on the values. The disagreement is about whether the pace is producing the mission or wearing out the people who serve it.

Two notes on the numbers. Fourteen of forty-five is a solid sample for this size, but the people who left in the last year are not in it, and their answers would likely have been sharper. Two respondents said they are actively looking; their answers are among the most specific in the dataset.



Nice, "Keep the Peace." Values relationships, care, and harmony; feedback is given gently and people rally around each other. Under pressure, candor gives way to gossip, conflict is avoided to protect relationships, and hard decisions wait.

Growth, "Win the Game." Values results and momentum; decisions are made fast and close to the work. Under pressure, decisiveness turns performative, feedback gets weaponized, and high performers are excused from the standards everyone else keeps.

Purpose, "Honor the Mission." Values meaning and impact; decisions anchor in values and people take real responsibility for outcomes. Under pressure, the mission is used to shut down dissent and burnout becomes the price of commitment.

Steady, "Follow the Process." Values predictability and clear structure; procedures guide decisions and change is approached carefully. Under pressure, hierarchy outranks expertise and processes are kept even when they no longer fit.

The Patterns That Showed Up Most

The behaviors your team named most often: the unwritten rules shaping how work actually gets done. “Who named it” is how many selected the behavior out of those shown it.

Behavior	Who named it	How often
People push through exhaustion to show they are committed	9 of 11	Often / Always
Decisions are driven by urgency rather than what is sustainable	8 of 11	Often
Decisions get announced before the people affected are consulted	7 of 9	Often
Being tired or hesitant gets read as not caring enough	7 of 11	Often
People compete for credit, visibility, or ownership	6 of 9	Often
Feedback feels like a judgment of the person, not the work	5 of 11	Sometimes / Often
Problems travel up to leadership instead of getting solved where they start	4 of 6	Often
Some people are held to different expectations than others	2 of 9	Often

What People Said

Three open-ended questions. Responses are anonymous: no names, no roles specific enough to identify anyone.

What would you change, if you could say it honestly?

The thing people most want to say is that they do not know when they are done. Three described finishing work and revisiting it after a late-night review. Four described getting different direction from their manager, a senior colleague, and Amil in the same week, and choosing Amil’s. Two said the hardest thing to say here is that caring about the kids is not a plan. The leadership version is quieter: being hired to own something and having it decided elsewhere is hard to sustain.

“I have had three different answers to the same roadmap question in one week, from my manager, from a senior engineer, and from Amil in a 1am Slack. I built the one Amil said.”

— Individual contributor

"I'm not working late because I'm behind. I'm working late because the work I did at 3pm will get looked at again at 11pm anyway."

— Manager

"The hardest thing to say here is that caring about the kids is not a substitute for a plan."

— Leadership

What's working, and worth protecting?

Nearly everyone named the same things: the mission and who it is for, high-need kids rather than the kids who can pay; the willingness to move fast and change course; the caliber of the people; and Amil himself, whose story is why most of them are here. This is the asset the rest of the report is trying to protect. It is also why the problems have lasted: nobody wants to tell a founder they admire that the thing that built the company needs to change shape.

"I came here to build the thing I wish I'd had at fourteen. I still believe in it more than anything I've ever worked on."

— Individual contributor

"Amil is the most inspiring person I have ever worked for. That is both the best and the hardest thing about this job."

— Manager

"We built something that works for the kids nobody else was building for. I don't want to lose that by trying to make this place calmer."

— Leadership

What your leadership team said in the debrief

The leadership team recognized the "three answers" and late-night roadmap findings right away. Amil questioned the burnout finding and the room worked through it together. A few lines, attributed by role only:

"I work more hours than anyone here. My first reaction, honestly, was that if the work were right the first time, nobody would have to."

— Founder, early in the session

"I think the hard part is that nobody knows what 'right the first time' means until you've seen it."

— Senior leader

"I spend a third of my week translating what Amil means for other teams. I'm glad to do it. I'd rather it didn't need doing."

— Senior leader

"I go straight to Amil because it's faster. Hearing this, I can see what that does to the people in between."

— Senior leader

"I do respond to whoever reaches me first. I hadn't connected that to what it teaches everyone else."

— Founder, later in the session

"I don't know how to let go of decisions when I can see the right answer."

— Founder, closing

"Tell us what done looks like before we start, not after."

— The room's closing answer

Culture doesn't change because you want it to be different.

It changes because leaders choose to behave differently, consistently, visibly, over time.