

The Seven Dysfunctions of Leaders & Executive Teams:

Addressing and Overcoming Common Challenges

Date: August 8th, 2025

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Introduction

Leadership is often portrayed as a journey—one marked by triumphs, failures, and moments of self-discovery. Yet, at the heart of every executive team's success or failure lies a series of fundamental challenges that shape the course of their leadership. These challenges, if left unchecked, can turn into dysfunctions that weaken the team's ability to lead effectively. Let us step into the reality of executive leadership and explore the seven dysfunctions that can either derail or strengthen an organization's future.



The First Dysfunction: Self-Ignorance

A leader stands at the helm of a thriving organization, making decisions that shape its destiny. Yet, without true self-awareness, even the most brilliant strategist can falter. Understanding oneself is as critical as understanding the external world. Leaders who lack self-knowledge risk making poor decisions, losing the respect of their peers, and failing to adapt in times of crisis.

Self-ignorance manifests in many ways—blind spots in leadership style, an inability to recognize personal biases, and resistance to feedback. Leaders who do not actively seek to understand their strengths and weaknesses often struggle to gain the trust of their teams. Without self-awareness, a leader's vision becomes blurred, and their ability to inspire, align, and empower others is compromised.

The most effective leaders embrace self-discovery as a continuous journey. They actively seek feedback, reflect on their decisions, and remain open to growth. They encourage their teams to do the same, creating a culture where self-awareness is valued as much as strategic execution. A team that understands itself can navigate complexity with confidence, fostering trust, alignment, and resilience in the face of challenges.

Reflection:

- What are my core strengths, and where do I lack self-awareness?
- What about our team?
- What are our team's guiding principles?
- Does our team encourage personal development?
- Are we, as a team, aware of our collective biases?
- Do I create an environment where my team members feel safe to challenge my perspectives? Are we open to challenge as a leadership team?
- How do I ensure that my self-perception aligns with how others see me?
- Are we aligned as a team in our self-assessment?

The Second Dysfunction: Isolation

Leadership can be a lonely place, but it should never be an isolated one. Executives who operate within their own bubble—surrounded by like-minded voices—miss critical perspectives. Without a diverse network, they risk making decisions based on incomplete or biased information, leading to stagnation.

Breaking free from isolation means engaging with a broader network, seeking fresh perspectives, and embracing a culture of collaboration. The most effective leaders understand that the power of a team is greater than the sum of its parts.

Reflection:

- Who do I engage with most?
- Is our leadership team diverse enough?
- Do I balance personal ambition with generosity?
- Does our team cultivate shared success?
- Are we actively connecting with a diverse set of external stakeholders to challenge our perspectives and uncover new opportunities?

The Third Dysfunction: Impaired Communication

Great leadership is not just about what we say—it is about what is understood. Many executive teams struggle to communicate effectively, leading to confusion, inefficiency, and misalignment. Poor communication does not just erode credibility—it slows execution and fosters mistrust.

Miscommunication can take many forms: failing to convey a clear strategy, telling the wrong stories, engaging with the wrong audiences, or using ineffective channels. Leaders must be intentional about what they communicate, ensuring their message aligns with the organizations' goals. Just as crucial is whom they communicate with—whether it is employees, investors, clients, or external stakeholders—each audience requires a tailored approach.

A high-performing executive team adapts its messaging depending on context, using the right stories and the most effective channels to inspire action. They ensure alignment internally while making a compelling case externally. Clear, strategic communication is not just a tool—it is a leadership imperative.

Reflection:

- What key messages define my leadership?
- Do they align with our organizations' vision?
- What stories do we tell to inspire and engage?
- Are they relevant and impactful?
- Are we reaching the right people with our communication?
- Are we considering the right stakeholders?
- How well do we adapt our messaging and channels depending on our audience?
- Do we communicate in a way that fosters clarity, cohesion, and trust?

The Fourth Dysfunction: Lack of Vision

A ship without a compass drifts aimlessly, and so does an organization without a clear vision. Without strategic direction, teams lose motivation, disengage, and resist change. Leaders must inspire commitment by articulating a compelling future.

Reflection:

- What is my personal vision for leadership?
- What is our collective vision as a team?
- How does our team set the tone for the organization?
- Are we facilitating agility and adaptability in times of change?

The Fifth Dysfunction: Dispersion

The modern executive team faces endless demands. Priorities pile up, resources stretch thin, and teams find themselves pulled in multiple directions. This dispersion leads to inefficiency, burnout, and loss of focus. When everything is a priority, nothing truly is. Failing to make clear decisions on what to focus on results in reactive leadership, wasted effort, and diluted impact. Strategy is as much about choosing what to say no to as it is about deciding what to pursue.

High-performing leaders maintain strategic clarity. They prioritize effectively, ensuring that every effort is aligned with the organizations' long-term success. They manage trade-offs with discipline, ensuring that energy is channeled into what truly matters.

Reflection:

- Am I prioritizing effectively?
- Are we aligned as a team on strategic priorities?
- How do we manage tensions and competing priorities?
- Are we disciplined in saying no to initiatives that dilute our focus?
- Do we all have the same elevator pitch and an aligned standpoint when it comes to priorities?

The Sixth Dysfunction: Mistrust

Trust is the foundation of any successful leadership team. Without it, alignment fractures, silos form, and execution suffers. Mistrust operates at multiple levels—within individuals, among team members, with direct reports, and between the leadership team and key stakeholders such as the board, shareholders, and society at large.

When mistrust exists within a leadership team, collaboration becomes strained, people hesitate to take risks, and accountability weakens. Externally, a leadership team that lacks trust with its organization, board, or key stakeholders will struggle to drive long-term strategic success.

Strong leaders cultivate trust at every level. They build personal credibility, foster mutual respect among peers, and ensure open, honest communication with direct reports. Beyond the team, they actively strengthen trust with shareholders, employees, and broader society by demonstrating integrity, consistency, and transparency.

Reflection:

- Do I embody trustworthiness as a leader?
- Do my actions align with my words?
- Do we have mutual trust within our leadership team?
- How do we cultivate a safe environment for open dialogue?
- Are we fostering trust with our direct reports?
- How do we ensure they feel valued and heard?
- How do we build trust with external stakeholders such as the board, investors, and broader society?

The Seventh Dysfunction: Exhaustion

Leadership is not a sprint—it is a marathon. Yet, many executive teams operate at an unsustainable pace, pushing themselves and their organizations to the brink of burnout. When exhaustion takes hold, leaders lose their edge, teams disengage, and talent walks away. The most successful leaders build for the long term by investing in sustainability—both for themselves and their teams.

Sustainable success requires a commitment to talent development. Leaders must not only deliver results today but also build the next generation of leaders who will carry the organization forward. This means mentoring, coaching, and creating a culture where learning and growth are as valued as performance.

Equally important is fostering a culture of regeneration. High-performing executive teams set the tone by encouraging healthy habits, promoting work-life balance, and ensuring that moments of intense focus are balanced with opportunities for rest and reflection. When regeneration becomes a core part of the organizational culture, teams are more resilient, innovative, and capable of sustained high performance.

Reflection:

- How do I manage my energy and resilience?
- How does our team foster sustainable performance?
- Do we invest in developing the next generation of leaders?
- Are we building a culture where talent thrives?
- What habits and norms do we promote to encourage regeneration and prevent burnout?
- Are we leading by example in fostering a work environment that balances ambition with sustainability?

A Growth Plan for the Future

Addressing these dysfunctions is not an individual task—it is a collective effort. High-performing executive teams prioritize self-awareness, trust, clear communication, and alignment to drive sustainable success. Leaders who take these challenges seriously will not only strengthen their teams but also shape the future of their organizations.

Reflection:

- **Personal Development:** What steps will you take to grow as a leader? How will you ensure continuous self-improvement?
- **Team Development:** How will our team evolve to overcome future challenges, specifically by proactively addressing the *seven dysfunctions of a team*? What concrete actions will we take to reinforce trust, collaboration, and strategic alignment, and thereby directly counteract these dysfunctions?
- **Collective Impact:** How can we, as an executive team, elevate our leadership influence beyond our organization—impacting our industry, communities, and broader stakeholders?

By embracing these questions and weaving them into daily leadership practice, executives can create teams that are not just functional but truly exceptional.