

5 Signals Your Leadership Team May Be Underperforming

But a collection of high-performing individuals does not automatically create a high-performing leadership team.

Mike Jackson

Head of UKEE, CorporateDNA

Having had the enormous privilege of conducting senior leadership workshops for our diverse CorporateDNA clients across the US, Europe, Middle East and APAC, a small set of recurring patterns are showing up again and again.

Not everywhere. And rarely because the individuals around the table lack capability. In fact, many of the teams we work with are made up of exceptionally talented, experienced leaders.

But a collection of high-performing individuals does not automatically create a high-performing leadership team.

These are not universal truths. They are signals that, when present, tend to limit a team's ability to perform collectively at its best.

SIGNAL 01

Identity

There is often plenty of clarity around individual roles, functional responsibilities and business targets but much less clarity around the identity of the leadership team itself.

THE QUESTIONS

Who are we as a team?

What do we collectively stand for?

What are we here to achieve that we cannot achieve individually?

And how do we want to be experienced by the wider organisation?

Without that shared identity, leaders naturally retreat towards the areas where they have the greatest expertise, authority and accountability.

The result can be a group of strong functional leaders sitting around the same table rather than a genuinely collective leadership team.

The strongest teams we see have a clear sense of their collective purpose and recognise that their impact is measured not only by the performance of their own function, but by the performance of the enterprise.

SIGNAL 02

Rhythm

Every leadership team develops a rhythm but it is not always an intentional one.

Misalignment can exist between the GM and the team, and within the team itself, around pace, style, decision-making, communication and expectations.

THE QUESTIONS

When do we need alignment?
When is consultation useful?
When does consultation become over-consultation?
When should we challenge?
Who owns the decision?
When do we simply need to move?

Without clarity, people hesitate or compensate. Meetings become updates rather than decision forums. Conversations happen outside the room to secure alignment before the real conversation. Issues are escalated that could have been resolved lower down.

Effective leadership teams deliberately design their operating rhythm: how they meet, decide, communicate, escalate and hold one another accountable.

“It sounds operational. In reality, it is deeply behavioural.”

SIGNAL 03**Enterprise Mindset**

This is perhaps one of the most consistent patterns we encounter.

Leaders have usually reached the executive table because they are excellent at leading their function. Yet joining a leadership team requires something different: the ability to step beyond that functional expertise and take shared ownership for the whole enterprise.

That means being curious about areas outside your remit. Challenging decisions beyond your function. Supporting choices that may disadvantage your own area but benefit the wider organisation.

And, critically, resisting the temptation to represent your function to the leadership team rather than representing the leadership team back into your function.

Enterprise leadership means asking a different question:

ASK

“What is the right outcome for the organisation?”

rather than:

NOT

“What is the right outcome for my function?”

The highest-value leadership teams recognise that once they enter the room, they are collectively accountable for the whole business.

SIGNAL 04**Safety**

Many teams tell us they have high levels of trust and often they do.

“But trust and psychological safety are not quite the same thing.”

People can genuinely like, respect and trust one another while still avoiding the conversations that matter most.

Dissenting or unfinished thinking may be withheld. Difficult feedback is softened. People wait to see where the senior leader lands before contributing. A decision appears aligned in the room, only for concerns to emerge afterwards.

Not always because people are fearful.

Sometimes conformity, efficiency, hierarchy or harmony simply feel easier in the moment.

Culture matters here too. The way challenge, hierarchy, disagreement and feedback are experienced can vary enormously across geographies and organisations. The destination (open, constructive dialogue) may be similar, but the entry point can be very different.

The strongest teams create an environment where high care and high challenge coexist: where disagreement is not interpreted as disloyalty and where the debate happens in the room, not afterwards.

SIGNAL 05**Decision Velocity**

We increasingly see teams where the challenge is not decision quality but decision velocity.

Highly capable leaders can understandably want more evidence, more consultation and greater certainty before committing.

But complex organisations rarely offer perfect information.

Momentum slows as teams seek universal alignment, wait for additional data or continue discussing decisions where there is already enough information to move.

Sometimes this is compounded by unclear decision rights: who recommends, who contributes, who decides and, once the decision has been made, who owns execution?

The strongest teams distinguish between decisions that genuinely require deep alignment and those where speed is more valuable than additional certainty.

“They debate hard, decide clearly and then move together. Alignment does not always mean agreement.”

BENEATH THE SIGNALS

The deeper internal dynamics

Across teams, these five signals are often influenced, rather than solely driven, by deeper internal dynamics:

- Caution about exposing dysfunction
- Sensitivity to reputation or role boundaries
- Concern about impact on relationships or career paths
- Uncertainty about how conflict will be received
- Functional loyalties that outweigh enterprise ownership
- Cultural norms around hierarchy, consensus and challenge
- Lack of clarity around accountability and decision rights
- A tendency to prioritise harmony over productive tension

THE BIGGEST INSIGHT

From insight to observable behaviour

And this leads to perhaps the biggest insight from our work.

The challenge for leadership teams is rarely about learning another leadership competency.

Most senior leaders already know what good leadership looks like.

The harder work is creating the conditions in which they can consistently practise it together particularly when the stakes are high, the information is incomplete and the pressure is on.

That means moving beyond insight towards observable behaviour.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

How will we challenge each other differently?

How will we make decisions faster?

What conversations will we stop avoiding?

What will “enterprise before function” actually look like on Monday morning?

And what habits will ensure that the commitments made in a workshop survive contact with the real world?

Because ultimately, high-performing leadership teams aren't defined by what they agree in the room.

They are defined by what they repeatedly do when they leave it.

When teams address these invisible barriers and turn new intentions into new habits the future becomes a very different game.