

# 10 clues to tell if your team needs help

This piece is written with top leadership teams in mind but also applies to other leadership teams in an organisation.

1. **The actions taken are not consistent with the decisions made.** Plans are agreed, but subsequent actions are inconsistent with those plans. This problem shows the inclination of teams to focus on getting on with their own 'work' without fully considering the assumptions, criteria, and rationales behind their joint plan. This may be the most important clue as it indicates that the team isn't truly aligned with a common mission. Team members may be nodding when the team leader proffers a vision, but don't have a shared view of how to execute against that vision.
2. **Lack of results.** Clearly the most obvious of clues but often ignored for too long. This is where the leaders may be delivering results in their individual areas but the added performance that comes from an effective team is absent. Collaborations are not happening across organisational boundaries. The team are not coming up with creative solutions for their common challenges. Joint initiatives are failing. They're still doing lots of 'stuff' but not doing the *right* stuff together.

*At one well-known energy company, the five executives of a top team were asked to list the company's 10 highest priorities. Alarming, they listed a total of 23 priorities; only 2 appeared on every executive's list and only 7 on the lists of more than three members; indeed 13 of the 23 priorities appeared on only one list. In other cases, the team doesn't agree about how performance should be assessed, who the company's top performers are, or how to motivate the organisation to achieve its stated objectives. Source: McKinsey Quarterly*

3. **Decision 'Boomerangs'.** The team are ineffective at making decisions, either postponing them or making decisions that are not subsequently acted upon. They become 'decision boomerangs' that keep coming back repeatedly and stay on the agenda for long periods, sometimes disappearing completely, without ever getting actioned.
4. **Commitments not kept.** The team agrees on a joint plan but upon leaving the meeting they revert to their own agendas. These team members have only one 'first team' in mind and that is their own functional team. They don't have enough buy-in and commitment to make the leadership team their first team. The behaviour that will be absent here is that of team members holding each other to account.
5. **Lack of strategic focus.** 'Conversations about the colour of the paint in the canteen'. Top teams without a common direction spend more time on business as usual and on the tactical rather than on seeking out and doing the work *only they can do as a team* — work that is critical to the organisation and where only the leadership team address the challenge. The team are likely to be immersed in too much irrelevant detail.



6. **'Griping' about the team leader or other colleagues outside the meeting.** This passive-aggressive behaviour is a strong clue that there is not enough trust for positive conflict and challenge to safely occur in the team setting. This is one symptom that will nearly always need an external intervention.
7. **Conflict remains unresolved.** Either certain individuals clash on a nearly continual basis 'in session' or they give up interacting fully in team meetings. They stay silent then work against their 'opponent' outside of the team setting. There is an unproductive atmosphere whenever these individuals are involved in the conversation.
8. **Dysfunctional behaviour.** Often termed dysfunctional but the result is destructive. An example would be the public humiliation of team members. Any behaviour like this creates fear and defensiveness and ruins any chance of effective dialogue and collaboration.
9. **Being too internally focused.** Teams fail when they don't pay attention to all of their stakeholder networks. For top teams, there is a need to pay attention to information from outside their companies and industries. When used quickly, this externally sourced information can influence key strategic and organisational decisions. Without a process for reflecting on this external data, a team is unlikely to have the required strategic focus.
10. **No learning activities.** Learning truly is the engine of team performance. The less time the team spends focused on learning together, the less chance they have of becoming a high performing team. A process example of learning together might be the After Action Review (AAR).

Revan's Law: "For an organisation to survive, its rate of learning must be at least equal to the rate of change in its external environment."

### **Why team coaching in particular?**

Ruth Wageman and J. Richard Hackman are recognised as some of the pre-eminent experts and researchers into senior leadership team performance. They state that competent team coaching is one of the three enablers to outstanding team performance.

### **To quote:**

"Senior leadership teams, like other teams, need expert help in learning how to become better at working together over time..... (leadership) teams do not improve markedly even if all of their members receive individual coaching to develop their personal abilities"