

Why Your Leadership Team Might Be Rowing in Opposite Directions

Misalignment at the executive level is the most common reason strategic plans fail. Here's how to spot it before it shows up in the numbers.

Picture a boat with eight rowers. Each one is strong, experienced, and pulling as hard as they can. But if they're not in sync, the boat doesn't move faster—it zigzags, stalls, or worse, capsizes. This is what happens inside a lot of leadership teams. Everyone is working hard. Almost no one is asking whether they're working toward the same thing.

Misalignment rarely announces itself. It doesn't show up as an argument in a board meeting or a blowup between the CEO and CFO. It shows up quietly, in the gap between what leaders say in a room and what they do once they're back at their desks. By the time it surfaces in revenue or retention numbers, it's already been costing the company for months.

The Strategy Everyone “Agreed” To

Most executive teams can recite the strategic plan. Fewer can explain it the same way twice.

Ask your CMO and your VP of Sales to describe the company's top priority for the quarter, and you'll often get two different answers—not because one of them wasn't paying attention, but because “agreement” in a strategy meeting is frequently just polite silence. Nobody objected, so the plan passed. That's not the same as everyone believing in it, understanding it, or being willing to make trade-offs for it.

This is the first place to look for misalignment: not in the plan itself, but in how differently each leader translates it into their own function's priorities.

Four Signs Your Team Is Rowing in Different Directions

Trade-offs get made in isolation. When priorities conflict—and they always do—each leader should be making the same call about what wins. If Sales is quietly prioritizing short-term bookings while Product is heads-down on a long-term platform bet, and neither has discussed it with the other, that's not two good strategies. That's misalignment wearing a business-casual outfit.

Meetings produce nods, not commitments. Alignment isn't consensus in the room. It's specific enough that people can disagree with it once they're back at their desks—and don't. If your leadership meetings end with nods and vague enthusiasm rather than clear, examinable commitments, you likely have agreement on the words and disagreement on the meaning.

Functional goals don't ladder up cleanly. Pull the individual goals of every executive and lay them side by side. If you can't trace a straight line from each one back to the same three or four company priorities, your team isn't unified—it's a set of well-run departments that happen to share a logo.

Bad news travels slowly, or not at all. Misaligned teams tend to protect their own turf. Leaders sit on information that might complicate someone else's plan or reframe a miss in terms favorable to their function. When leaders are more focused on managing how their part looks than on the shared outcome, alignment has already broken down—you just haven't measured it yet.

Why This Is So Easy to Miss

Executives are, almost by definition, good at looking competent. Strong leaders can run their function well even while pulling in a slightly different direction than the rest of the team. That competence masks the problem. The dashboards look fine. Each department hits its own targets. It's only when you look at the company-level outcome—the thing all those individual efforts were supposed to add up to—that the gap becomes visible. And by then, quarters have passed.

There's also a social cost to naming misalignment out loud. Pointing out that the team isn't actually aligned can feel like an accusation, so it often goes unsaid until a plan visibly fails and someone has to explain why.

Catching It Early

The good news is that misalignment leaves tracks well before it shows up in performance. A few practices make it visible sooner:

Write the strategy down in a single page, in plain language, and have every executive independently explain what it means for their function. The variance between those answers is your alignment score.

Make trade-offs explicit and public. When Sales and Product disagree about what matters more this quarter, that disagreement should happen in a room with both of them in it—not in two separate roadmaps that quietly contradict each other.

Revisit alignment on a cadence, not just at the annual offsite. Priorities drift in small increments. A quarterly gut-check catches drift while it's still cheap to correct.

And treat disagreement as data, not a failure of leadership. A team that argues about priorities in the open is in much better shape than one that nods along and diverges in private.

Strategic plans rarely fail because they were the wrong plans. They fail because the people responsible for executing them were never quite rowing together. The earliest warning sign isn't in your quarterly numbers—it's in whether your leadership team can describe the same priority the same way, on the same day, without checking notes.

Interested in learning more? Click the link the book a Discovery Call or the link to take the Discover Assessment today!

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