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CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAMWORK

Why cross-functional collaboration fails ... and how to fix it

Written By
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Let's face it: cross-functional teams are meant to be the powerhouses of progress. They bring diverse insights together, unlock synergies and push strategy from PowerPoint slides into action. And yet, too often, they stall.



Everyone's busy. Everyone's trying. And still, results fall short.

I've seen it too many times to count. The intent is there, the talent is strong, yet projects drift, decisions stall and team members get increasingly frustrated with the system and with each other. Why? Because while collaboration might look good on paper, it's messy in practice.

So let's talk about what's really going on - and more importantly, what can be done about it.

The focus will be on helping your team achieve around 80% of their key objectives, but doing so 20% faster. And if performance is seriously lagging, we'll target the core 20% of priorities and accelerate those by up to 80%."

THE HIDDEN FRICTION

There are three usual suspects behind cross-functional failure. None of them are new, but they keep cropping up:

1. Misalignment

Everyone cares, they are trying hard, but frequently find themselves heading in the wrong direction. Sales pushes for speed, legal wants safeguards, operations is already halfway down the road while finance is still checking the map.

2. Confusion

Who's doing what? Who owns the decision? And why are we having this same conversation - again? When roles are murky, escalation becomes the norm and decisions get made twice: once prematurely, and once properly.

3. Compromise

When nobody wants to rock the boat, we end up with safe solutions that satisfy no one. Things like shared ownership starts to creep in, momentum quietly fades and before long, frustration builds as the finger-pointing begins. The result? Projects are behind schedule, team members are near burnout trying to recover and you can see the wasted potential. It's sooooo frustrating!

Now, when this happens, most leaders reach for the default fix: "Let's collaborate better." But there's a flaw in that fix.

THE REAL PROBLEM



Here's the crux.

Everyone *thinks* they're aligned. But they're actually operating from different mental models. That is, each have different perceptions formed in their mind as to how the various elements of their collaboration occur. Different assumptions about:

- What success looks like
- Who makes decisions
- When others should be involved
- What "aligned" even means

It's not a people problem. It's not a communication problem. It's a cognition problem. Everyone's using a different map and wondering why they keep tripping over each other or getting lost in an invisible maize.

That's why collaboration often feels like it's going nowhere: because under the surface, people aren't working together. They're just working alongside each other.

So what does great cross-functional teamwork really look like?

THE GOAL: CLARITY + CONNECTEDNESS

In my book *Team Think*, I introduced a simple model around purpose, connectedness and talent. When it comes to cross-functional work, talent usually isn't the issue ... you've already got your best people in the room. The question is: are they working as a team?

Here's a version of the model (**Figure 1**) I've adapted specifically for cross-functional collaboration to help you identify where your teams are currently at.

On one dimension it asks you to consider where on the scale your teams lie from disconnected to connected, fully in sync with each other. The other dimension it asks you to consider is how clear your cross-functional teams are on the purpose of their collaboration AND how clear they are on what their team purpose is in pursuing the cross-functional team's purpose. These two dimensions give you four types of teams operating in cross-functional environments.

The Four Team Types:

- **Fragmented** – Low clarity, low cohesion. Outputs clash. Things fall through cracks.
- **Mechanical** – Process is followed, but without purpose. Work moves, but without momentum.
- **Misaligned** – Shared goals, but disconnected execution. Energy is lost navigating each other.
- **Compelled** – Shared purpose and connected action. Decisions stick. Trade-offs are managed. Progress accelerates.

Your goal? A *compelled* team. One that doesn't just look aligned - they move aligned.

But how do you get there?

You don't enforce alignment. You build it. Together.

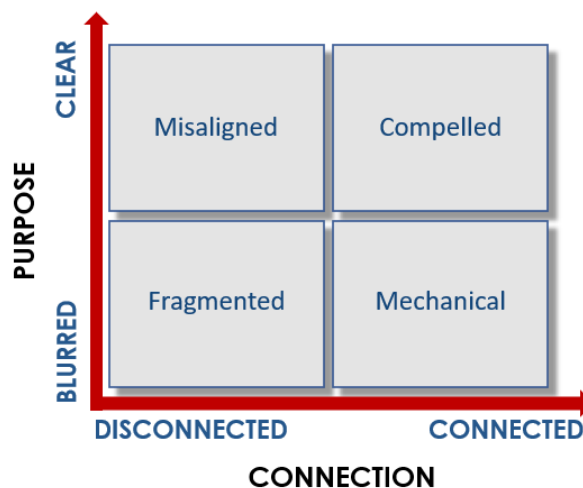


Figure 1: Clarity and Connectedness – What Cross-Functional Success Looks Like

BUILD AN INTELLIGENCE HUB

The best cross-functional teams don't leave alignment to chance. They co-create it. They build what I call an **Intelligence Hub** - a shared mental model that answers the question:

"How are we going to work together, decide together, and deliver together?"

This isn't a template or just another checklist, it's the central nervous system of the team. Here's how you build it:

1. Identify the decisions that matter

Not all of them ... just the biggest ones and those that consistently stall momentum.

2. Map how they really happen

Not the official version, the real one. You'll uncover assumptions fast:

- “I thought we owned that.”
- “I didn't realise you needed to be involved.”
- “We thought legal had the final say.”

These gaps are the root of dysfunction and making them visible is the first fix.

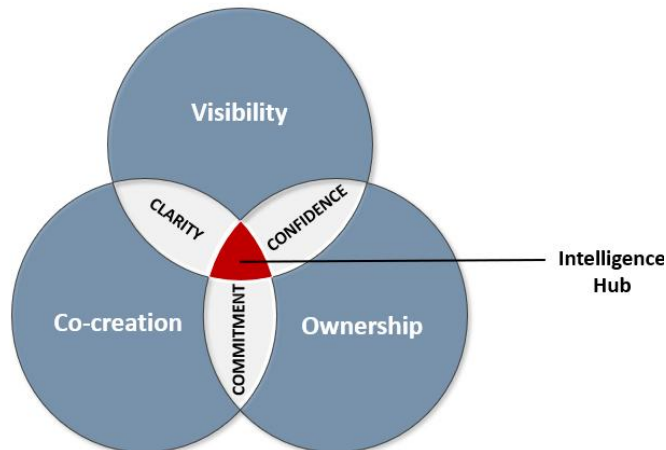


Figure 2: Building an Intelligence Hub – Co-Created Alignment in Action

3. Co-create the model

This part is essential because the mental model is constructed together. When people build things together they take ownership of the end result and even stronger ownership of the elements they were responsible for building. As you or someone else facilitate this process, you are making assumptions visible, turning them into agreements and agreements into action.

This isn't fluffy stuff ... it's backed by solid research. Jefferys et al showed teams with shared mental models perform better¹. It's science.

4. Operationalise the Hub

Make decisions visible by clarifying roles, defining how trade-offs are made, how data is shared and what happens when something breaks.

When teams build the Hub together, they believe in it. And when people believe in the system, they make it work.

¹Jeffery, Arthur B, Maes, Jeanne D, and Bratton-Jeffery, Mary F (2005), 'Improving team decision-making performance with collaborative modelling', Team Performance Management 11, no. ½, pp. 40–50.

SCALING SHARED INTELLIGENCE



This is bigger than one project. The Intelligence Hub is a **core capability** ... something every executive team should champion.

Imagine this:

- Cross-functional teams working from a shared playbook
- Leaders asking better questions: “How are you making decisions?” not just “What’s the update?”
- Less firefighting and more forward momentum.

When shared intelligence becomes the norm, collaboration isn’t exhausting. It becomes business as usual, it’s, *“Just how work gets done around here.”*

FINAL THOUGHTS

Cross-functional teamwork doesn’t fall apart because people aren’t trying. It falls apart because they’re navigating with different maps, and the fix isn’t more meetings or better communication. It’s a shared operating system.

What you need is an Intelligence Hub. An agreed process, devoid of unnecessary red tape that provides a faster route to execution. It’s how you turn the good intentions of cross-functional teams into great performance ... without regret.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

As you know and perhaps appreciate in a different way, team decision making is complex. High performing leaders need to be cognisant of it and lead their team through its complexities and the complex world we operate in. I encourage you to explore more on this topic. Perhaps you might grab a copy of my book *Team Think – How Teams Make Great Decisions* (Amazon Best Seller 2024). Perhaps you will get in touch to have a chat about building high-performance leaders in your organisation.

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