

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR LEADERS

The Leader's Guide to Understanding Team Dynamics

Why teams struggle, what drives the friction beneath the surface, and what to do about it — for leaders, managers, HR and L&D professionals.

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Why teams struggle.

Most teams don't struggle because the people in them lack talent. They struggle because people misunderstand each other.

It's a pattern that shows up everywhere. A team full of capable, experienced people — and yet decisions stall, meetings feel unproductive, and the same friction resurfaces meeting after meeting.

The instinctive response is usually to look at capability. Maybe the team needs new skills. Maybe it needs a new process. Maybe it needs different people.

But in most cases, the real issue sits somewhere else entirely: in how the team communicates, makes decisions, and handles disagreement.

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Instead of asking "what skills are missing?", the more useful question is often "what's getting in the way of the skills we already have?"

Teams are made up of people with genuinely different ways of thinking, communicating and making decisions. Left unexamined, those differences create friction. Understood properly, they become a genuine source of strength.

This guide walks through the most common patterns behind team friction, and gives you practical questions and frameworks to work through them with your own team.

Understanding behavioural differences.

Every team is a mix of different working styles — and most friction comes from those differences going unrecognised, not from anyone doing anything wrong.

Some people in your team naturally move fast and want decisions made quickly. Others want time to think before committing to anything. Some communicate directly; others prefer to build context first. Some are energised by people and ideas; others by structure and detail.

None of these are better or worse. They're simply different preferences — and most workplace friction comes from people assuming everyone else operates the way they do.

● **Decisive & Direct**

Wants pace, clarity and results. Can find slower, more deliberate colleagues frustrating.

● **Enthusiastic & Social**

Wants connection and energy. Can find overly structured environments draining.

● **Supportive & Steady**

Wants harmony and consideration. Can find fast-paced conflict uncomfortable.

● **Analytical & Precise**

Wants accuracy and detail. Can find rushed decisions risky and uncomfortable.

When a leader understands these patterns — in themselves and their team — friction starts to make sense. It stops feeling personal and starts feeling like something that can actually be worked with.

Communication preferences.

Most communication breakdowns aren't about the words being used. They're about mismatched expectations of how a conversation should go.

Consider how differently two people might experience the same meeting. One person wants to get straight to the decision. Another wants to talk through the context first. Neither is wrong — but if neither understands the other's preference, the conversation will feel frustrating for both of them.

What helps direct communicators

Get to the point quickly. Lead with the conclusion, then explain the reasoning if asked.

What helps reflective communicators

Give context and time. Share information in advance where possible, rather than expecting an instant response.

A useful exercise for any leader is to notice your own default communication style, and then notice where it clashes with members of your team. Often, simply naming the difference — "I think we might be approaching this differently" — is enough to defuse tension that would otherwise build silently.

WORTH TRYING

Before your next difficult conversation, ask yourself: does this person need the headline first, or the context first? Adjusting your approach to fit their preference — rather than your own — often changes the whole tone of the exchange.

Trust and psychological safety.

When Google studied what makes teams effective, the single strongest predictor of performance wasn't talent, seniority or experience. It was psychological safety.

Psychological safety means people believe they can speak up, challenge an idea, admit a mistake, or ask a difficult question without being dismissed or punished for it. It doesn't mean avoiding challenge — it means people can challenge each other productively.

Without it, something quieter happens. People stop raising concerns early. They wait for someone more senior to speak first. They agree in the room and disagree in the corridor afterwards.

WHAT ERODES TRUST

Leaders who react defensively to challenge, who punish honesty about mistakes, or who are inconsistent between what they say and what they reward — all of these quietly teach a team what's actually safe to say.

The good news is that trust and psychological safety are built through consistent, repeatable behaviour rather than one grand gesture. Small moments — how a leader responds to a mistake, whether feedback flows in both directions, whether disagreement is welcomed — accumulate into a team's overall sense of safety.

It's also worth remembering that different team members will need different things to feel safe. Some need to be asked directly for their view. Others need space to think before contributing. Building safety often means adapting how you invite people in, rather than using one approach for everyone.

Common team friction points.

Most recurring team problems fall into a handful of recognisable patterns. Naming the pattern is often the first step to addressing it.

Pace mismatches

One part of the team wants to move quickly; another wants more time to think things through properly.

Unclear decision rights

Nobody is quite sure who actually has the final say, so decisions get revisited repeatedly.

Avoided conflict

Disagreement happens in private conversations rather than openly, so issues never get fully resolved.

Mismatched expectations

Different team members have a different understanding of what "good" looks like for the same piece of work.

Communication style clashes

Directness reads as harshness to some, while caution reads as a lack of confidence to others.

Uneven participation

The same few voices dominate every meeting, while others stay quiet — not from lack of insight, but from how the conversation is structured.

Most of these patterns aren't really about poor intent. They're about a team that hasn't yet developed a shared language for recognising and discussing how it actually works.

Feedback conversations.

Feedback fails far more often because of how it's delivered than because of what's being said.

Many leaders avoid feedback conversations altogether, worried about how they'll land. Others give feedback in a way that works for them, without considering how it will be received by someone with a different style.

A naturally direct leader might give feedback bluntly, intending it as helpful and efficient — but a colleague who values relationship and tone may experience it as harsh or careless. A naturally cautious leader might soften feedback so much that the message gets lost entirely.

A MORE USEFUL APPROACH

Before giving feedback, consider not just what you want to say, but how this particular person is likely to receive it. The same message, delivered with awareness of the other person's preferences, lands very differently.

It also helps to separate observation from interpretation. "You were quiet in that meeting" is an observation. "You didn't care about that meeting" is an interpretation — and often an inaccurate one. Starting with observable behaviour, rather than assumed intent, makes feedback conversations considerably less defensive.

Questions every leader should ask.

The right question, asked at the right moment, often does more for a team than any amount of process or structure.

What does this person need from me to do their best work?

Where might my communication style be landing differently than I intend?

What's not being said in this room that probably should be?

Are we solving the right problem, or just the one that's easiest to name?

Who hasn't spoken yet, and why?

What would this person say about this situation if they felt completely safe to be honest?

These questions aren't designed to produce instant answers. They're designed to slow down the moment just enough to notice what's actually happening beneath the surface of a conversation or decision.

Team dynamic diagnostic questions.

If you want a clearer picture of how your team is really functioning, these questions are a useful starting point — for yourself, or as the basis of a team conversation.

Do people feel comfortable disagreeing with me in front of others?

When something goes wrong, does the team focus on learning or on blame?

Do decisions made in meetings actually stick afterwards?

Is feedback flowing in both directions, or only from the top down?

Does everyone in the team understand how decisions actually get made?

Are quieter team members getting genuine space to contribute, or just being talked over?

If I left the room, would the conversation change? If so, why?

You don't need perfect answers to these questions. The value is in asking them honestly, and noticing where the answers make you uncomfortable — that discomfort usually points towards exactly where the most useful work lies.

How Insights Discovery supports team effectiveness.

Many of the patterns covered in this guide become much easier to work with once a team has a shared, non-judgemental language for talking about behaviour.

This is where tools such as Insights Discovery can be genuinely useful. Rather than relying on vague descriptions like "difficult" or "too direct" or "disengaged", a shared framework gives teams a more precise and less personal way to describe what's actually happening.

Instead of "they're too blunt", a team might say "they're leading with a fast-paced, direct energy — let's make sure we're clear and efficient with them." Instead of "they never speak up", a team might recognise that a colleague processes information more slowly and benefits from being asked directly, rather than expected to jump into open discussion.

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REPORTED SAVINGS, INDEED CASE STUDY²

1. According to Insights' own ROI impact study. 2. Indeed's internal case study on embedding Insights Discovery into onboarding and development.

None of this replaces good leadership. But it gives teams a practical, shared vocabulary — one that turns abstract frustration into something specific enough to actually work with.

NEXT STEPS

Where to go from here.

If any of this resonated with how your team currently operates, the next step is usually a conversation — not a programme. Here are a few ways we can help.

Insights Discovery Team Workshops

A facilitated half-day or full-day session to give your team a shared language for communication and dynamics. adaptandconnect.co.uk/insights-discovery/workshops

Profile Debriefs

A one-to-one session to help an individual properly understand their own Insights Discovery profile. adaptandconnect.co.uk/insights-discovery/profile-debriefs

Start a Conversation

Not sure what your team needs yet? Get in touch and we'll talk it through. adaptandconnect.co.uk/contact