

CORPORATE TABOOS

*Leadership Failures We All See But No One Fixes*

Issue #8

# The Silent Killer of Productivity

— *Vague Leadership and the Drift It Creates:  
Why Leaders Who Think They've Communicated Clearly  
Almost Never Have — and How to Fix It*

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*The newsletter for leaders who prefer honest diagnosis over comfortable denial.*

## The War Story

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The all-hands was only twenty-two minutes long, which was either impressive or alarming depending on how you interpreted what had just been said.

Claire, the VP of Product, had opened with the quarter's theme: 'We're going all-in on growth.' She had said it with the kind of confident simplicity that fills rooms with nodding. She had then outlined three priorities — customer experience, platform scalability, and market expansion — and closed with a call to 'move fast, think big, and stay customer-obsessed.' There was applause. The catering was good.

In the three weeks that followed, five things happened simultaneously and invisibly. The engineering team, interpreting 'platform scalability' as the north star, deprioritized two customer-facing features that had been on the roadmap for two quarters. The customer success team, interpreting 'customer experience' as the mandate, pulled resources from a market research initiative to staff an escalation desk. The sales team, interpreting 'market expansion' as direction, began pursuing three enterprise accounts in a new vertical without aligning with marketing on messaging. Marketing, having heard 'move fast,' launched a brand campaign without looping in product on positioning. And a senior engineer named Marcus spent six days architecting a technical solution to a problem that, when he finally walked Claire through it, she said was 'not really the scalability issue I was thinking of.'

Six days. Three misaligned teams. Two deprioritized roadmap items. One brand campaign that had to be paused. All of it traced back to a twenty-two minute all-hands and a VP who left the room certain she had communicated the direction clearly.

She had spoken. She had not communicated.

***Clarity is not what the leader intends to say. It is what the team is able to act on correctly, independently, in the absence of the leader. Those are very different standards.***

## Name the Failure: The Clarity Illusion

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Vague direction is the most democratically distributed leadership failure in this series — it appears at every level of every organization, in leaders who are otherwise excellent at their jobs. The brilliant jerk is unusual. The micromanager is recognizable but distinct. The leader who fails to set and communicate clear direction is virtually universal, because the failure is structural, not personal.

Here is the structural problem: leaders almost always know what they mean. The knowledge lives inside their heads with full context — the conversations they've had, the strategic debates they've been part of, the assumptions they've absorbed over months of thinking about the

problem. When they communicate, they transmit the conclusion without transmitting the context. The team receives the words. They do not receive the meaning the words were meant to carry.

This is the Clarity Illusion: the leader's subjective experience of having been clear, which is almost always genuine, exists independently of whether actual clarity was achieved. Claire believed she had communicated the direction. In the specific, narrow sense that she had said words at a room of people, she had. In the only sense that matters — that the team could act correctly and consistently without further input — she had not come close.

### The Test of Real Clarity

After you communicate direction, ask three people on your team — independently, without comparing notes — to describe the top priority for the next quarter in one sentence and name the one thing they would deprioritize if forced to choose. If the answers are consistent with each other and with what you intended, you have achieved clarity. If the answers diverge — even slightly — you have experienced the Clarity Illusion. Most leaders who run this test are surprised by how rarely the answers converge.

## Five Ways Leaders Create Drift Without Knowing It

Vague direction doesn't always come from one source. It arrives through several distinct leadership behaviors, each of which feels reasonable from the inside and produces the same outcome: a team that is working hard in subtly different directions.

The Behavior	What the Leader Thinks Is Happening	What the Team Experiences
The Inspiring Vision Speech	"I've shared where we're going — now the team can figure out how to get there. Empowerment."	The vision is evocative and genuinely exciting. No one is sure what to do on Monday morning. The team self-organizes around their best guesses about what the vision requires, which diverge immediately.
The Multiple Priorities Problem	"We have five strategic priorities this year. They're all important. The team can balance them based on context."	When everything is a priority, nothing is. The team allocates time according to individual judgment, urgency, and squeaky-wheel dynamics — not strategic intent.
The Assumed Alignment	"We discussed this at the leadership team level. The message will flow down naturally through each function."	Each function's leader translates the message through their own lens. By the time it reaches individual contributors, the direction has been interpreted, adapted, and filtered through four different mental

The Behavior	What the Leader Thinks Is Happening	What the Team Experiences
		models. The result is four different directions.
The Shifting Emphasis	"I respond to what's happening in the business — I update priorities as things change. That's agility."	The team never knows which version of the direction is current. They begin hedging — doing a little of everything, committing deeply to nothing, waiting for the next shift before fully investing in any initiative.
The One-Way Communication	"I sent the all-hands deck. I sent the follow-up email. I don't know why people aren't aligned — the information is out there."	Information transmitted is not direction absorbed. The team has access to the words. They do not have the shared understanding of what the words require of each of them specifically.

## Why It Persists: The Underrated Difficulty of Real Clarity

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Leaders don't provide vague direction because they're lazy or indifferent. They provide it because genuine clarity is genuinely hard — harder than most leadership development content acknowledges. Here is what makes it difficult:

### Real Clarity Requires Hard Choices the Leader Hasn't Made

Saying 'customer experience, platform scalability, and market expansion are all priorities' is comfortable because it doesn't require choosing between them. Real clarity requires the leader to have decided — internally, explicitly, with conviction — which priority wins when they conflict. That is a hard decision. It means being wrong in a visible way if you pick wrong. Vagueness defers that accountability.

You cannot communicate a priority you haven't truly set. What sounds like a communication failure is often a decision failure one level upstream.

### The Curse of Knowledge

The deeper the leader's expertise and involvement, the harder it is to communicate clearly — because they can no longer accurately simulate what it is like not to know what they know. Claire had been in strategy sessions about market expansion for eight months. When she said 'market expansion,' she had a highly specific definition of which markets, which customers, which approach, and which trade-offs. The team had none of that context and no way to know they were missing it.

The Curse of Knowledge is the technical name for this phenomenon: once you know something, it becomes almost impossible to imagine not knowing it. The expert leader consistently underestimates how much context they're assuming and how little of it their team actually has.

### **Clarity Creates Accountability — Which Leaders Sometimes Avoid**

Vague direction has a hidden benefit for the leader: when outcomes are ambiguous, responsibility for them is also ambiguous. If the priority was 'growth,' both the success and the failure can be attributed to many things. If the priority was 'increase enterprise customer retention by 15% in Q3,' the outcome is measurable and the attribution is clear.

Some leaders — not all, but more than will admit it — remain vague precisely because clarity creates a scoreboard they could lose on. This is the accountability-avoidance we discussed in Issue #1, operating at the direction-setting level rather than the performance management level.

***Vague goals protect the leader from being wrong. Specific goals protect the team from wasting their time. They are not the same thing.***

## **The Direction-Setting Framework: Five Elements of Clarity That Actually Sticks**

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Effective direction-setting is not about communicating more — it's about communicating differently. The following five elements, when all present, produce direction that teams can act on consistently and independently. When any element is missing, drift fills the gap.

### **Element 1: The Single Governing Priority**

Every team, every quarter, needs to be able to answer one question without hesitation: if we could only do one thing that genuinely mattered this period, what would it be? The answer to that question is the governing priority. Everything else is either in support of it or it is a distraction.

Most leaders resist this. 'We have five important things' — yes. But when a conflict arises between two of them, which wins? If the team doesn't know in advance, they'll guess. They'll guess wrong half the time. And half the time, two different team members will guess differently, producing divergent execution on what should be coordinated work.

The governing priority is not the only thing the team does. It is the tiebreaker when the inevitable conflicts arise — the thing that, when resources are constrained or decisions are difficult, tells everyone which way to lean.

**A Useful Forcing Question**

"If the team achieved only one thing this quarter, and everything else fell short, which outcome would make this a successful quarter?" If you can answer that cleanly, you have identified your governing priority. If the answer is 'well, it depends on which things fell short,' you haven't made the decision yet. The team cannot act on 'it depends.'

### Element 2: Success Defined in Advance

Direction without a definition of success is a heading without a destination. The team knows which way they're pointed but not when they've arrived — or how far off course they've drifted.

Defining success in advance requires two things: a measurable outcome and a timeframe. Both are non-negotiable. 'Improve customer satisfaction' is not a definition of success. 'Increase NPS from 34 to 45 by end of Q3' is. The specificity feels uncomfortable — it creates exposure. That discomfort is exactly the point. If the goal isn't specific enough to be wrong, it isn't specific enough to be useful.

✗ Vague Direction	✓ Clear Direction
<i>"Let's really focus on the customer experience this quarter."</i>	"NPS moves from 34 to 42 by September 30. That's the number we're managing toward."
<i>"We need to think about growth."</i>	"We close four new enterprise accounts in the financial services vertical by Q4."
<i>"Platform scalability is a priority."</i>	"The platform handles 10,000 concurrent users with under 200ms latency by end of Q2."
<i>"We should move fast this quarter."</i>	"Every product decision that doesn't require cross-functional alignment is made within 48 hours of being raised."
<i>"Let's be more customer-obsessed."</i>	"Every team lead spends two hours per month in direct customer conversations. We track it. We share what we learn."

### Element 3: The Explicit Trade-Off

Every priority implies a deprioritization. Real clarity names both. When Claire said 'customer experience, platform scalability, and market expansion,' she implied that all three were equal — which is the same as saying none of them was the priority. The team needed to know: when customer experience and scalability conflict, which wins? When market expansion requires resources currently devoted to existing customer retention, what happens?

Naming the trade-off feels uncomfortable because it invites disagreement. 'Are you saying retention doesn't matter?' No — the leader is saying that when retention and expansion genuinely conflict for the same resource, expansion wins this quarter. That is a manageable disagreement. The alternative — not naming it and letting teams discover the conflict at the worst possible moment — is unmanageable.

### How to Name the Trade-Off

"Our governing priority this quarter is enterprise customer retention. That means when there is a genuine conflict between a retention initiative and a new customer acquisition initiative for the same resource, retention wins. I know this will create friction in some places — when that happens, bring it to me rather than deciding independently, and we'll work through it together."

## Element 4: The Cascade Conversation

Direction set at the leadership level reaches individual contributors through a chain of interpretation. Each link in that chain has the potential to add noise, filter signal, or translate the message through a different set of assumptions. The all-hands deck does not replace this chain — it adds one more link to it.

Effective direction-setting requires a cascade conversation: a structured dialogue at each level of the organization where the direction is translated from the abstract to the specific. Not 'here's what the VP said' — but 'here's what the VP said, and here's what it means for the work our team does, and here's the one thing I need each of you to do differently starting Monday.' Each team lead owns their team's version of that translation.

The cascade conversation is not a cascade announcement. The difference is dialogue — space for the team to ask 'what does this mean for X?' and get a real answer, not a promise to follow up.

## Element 5: Visible, Consistent Reinforcement

Direction communicated once is not direction set. It is direction introduced. Humans recalibrate toward whatever their environment is consistently rewarding — and in the absence of consistent reinforcement, they recalibrate toward the urgent, the visible, and the immediately rewarding, which are rarely the strategic priority.

Reinforcement means the direction appears repeatedly, in the leader's language and choices, across every relevant touchpoint:

- In one-on-ones: 'How does what you're working on this week connect to [the governing priority]?'
- In decisions: 'We're going to defer that initiative because it doesn't serve [the governing priority] this quarter.'
- In recognition: 'I want to call out what Marcus did this week — it's exactly the kind of work that moves [the governing priority] forward.'
- In resource allocation: the budget, the headcount, the calendar time — all of them visibly weighted toward the priority that was stated.

When the leader's stated priority and their actual choices are aligned, direction is reinforced. When they diverge — when the stated priority is customer experience and the leader spends every one-on-one talking about pipeline — the team receives the real direction, which is the one embedded in the choices.

## The Alignment Check: How to Know If Your Direction Has Landed

Don't assume clarity. Verify it. The following lightweight practices create a feedback loop that surfaces misalignment before it becomes misexecution.

Practice	How It Works	What It Catches
The One-Sentence Priority Check	At the end of any direction-setting meeting, ask three people to say in one sentence what the team's top priority is for the period. Listen for divergence.	Immediate: surface-level misalignment in the room. If answers differ here, they will differ far more dramatically in execution.
The 'What Would You Deprioritize?' Question	Ask individuals: 'If you had to cut one thing from your plate to focus on the priority, what would it be?' Wrong answers reveal wrong mental models.	Whether the team understands the trade-offs, not just the goal. A team that can't name what they'd cut hasn't truly understood the priority.
The Midpoint Calibration	At the halfway point of any goal period, have each team lead briefly share: 'Here's what we've done toward [the priority], here's what's gotten in the way, here's what we need to adjust.'	Drift that has accumulated in the first half, while there is still time to correct. Most drift is invisible until the end when it's too late.
The Decision Audit	Periodically review the significant decisions made in the last month. Were they consistent with the stated priority? Where they weren't, name it explicitly — without blame — as a recalibration moment.	Whether stated direction and actual decision-making are aligned. This is the real test: not what was said, but what was decided.

## Quick Reference: The Direction-Setting Checklist

Before declaring direction set, verify that all five elements are in place:

Element	The Question to Ask Yourself	Red Flag
Single Governing Priority	If the team could achieve only one thing this period, what is it?	Your answer is more than one thing, or it starts with 'well, it depends...'
Success Defined in Advance	Can I describe success with a number and a date?	Success is described in words like 'better,' 'more,' 'improved,' or 'focused'

Element	The Question to Ask Yourself	Red Flag
Explicit Trade-Off	What does this priority mean we will do less of or later?	You haven't named a trade-off — which means you haven't actually set a priority
Cascade Conversation	Has every team lead translated this direction into specific implications for their team's work?	The direction was communicated via deck or email without structured follow-through dialogue
Visible Reinforcement	Do my decisions, recognition, and resource allocation reflect this priority?	Your stated priority and your actual choices point in different directions

## The Bottom Line

Claire ran the clarity test — the one from the callout box — six weeks after the all-hands, prompted by a consultant who had been brought in to diagnose the team's alignment problems. She asked five team leads to write down the top priority for the quarter in one sentence. She got five different sentences.

She sat with that result for a long time. Not because it surprised her — somewhere beneath the certainty she'd felt walking out of the all-hands, she had known the direction hadn't landed the way she'd intended. What surprised her was how confident she had been that it had. The gap between her subjective experience of having communicated and the objective reality of what had been understood was wider than she thought possible.

She ran a cascade session the following week. Not another all-hands — a series of smaller conversations where each team lead translated the direction into their team's specific terms, named the trade-offs explicitly, and asked their own teams the one-sentence question. The alignment that emerged from those conversations was genuinely different from what had existed after the all-hands. Slower to achieve. Considerably more durable.

The teams that perform at the highest levels are not the ones with the most talented people. They are the ones where every person can, without hesitation, describe what they're trying to achieve, why it matters, and what they'd do if two things they care about pulled in different directions. That clarity doesn't come from a twenty-two minute all-hands. It comes from a leader willing to do the harder, slower, less visible work of actually communicating — not just speaking.

***Direction that everyone nods at but no one can act on consistently is not direction. It's decoration. The only test of clarity is what the team does when you're not in the room.***

**Coming Up in Issue #9**

Promoting Based on Tenure and Politics Instead of Merit — Why Merit-Based Promotion Feels Radical in Most Companies. The 'good soldier' who gets promoted over the high performer who 'ruffles feathers.' The fifteen-year veteran who is advanced on loyalty while the best candidate watches. Next issue: the real cost of political promotion cycles and a practical merit system you can implement without an HR overhaul.

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