

# Coaching Team $\alpha$

**Beating the benchmark:** a playbook for coaching executive leadership teams navigating complex change and rapid growth with a systemic, commercially-focused approach.

*How to support teams at the top of the organisation to outperform the benchmark during periods of complex change and rapid growth.*

## INTRODUCTION

### The Case for Team Alpha

**For organisations navigating periods of complex change and rapid growth, the performance of their top teams is the single biggest determinant of success or failure.**

If the leadership team aligns as a focused and cohesive unit, the business accelerates. If not, momentum stalls.

**The potential cost of misalignment can be measured in the millions.**

Faced with this pressure, organisations quite naturally turn to leadership development. They invest in workshops, offsites, and programmes. Effort is expended.

Yet despite the hours, the spend and the good intentions, very little of it creates any meaningful shift. Performance lifts for a moment; but underlying issues ultimately return, the team slips back into old patterns and the system wins.

### Creating Team Alpha ( $\alpha$ )

In investing, **alpha** is the return you generate above the benchmark. For leadership teams in high-growth, often PE-backed organisations, the demand for “team alpha” ( $\alpha$ ) is equally urgent.

Investors and boards expect the leadership team to drive the business to outperform its industry, not merely match it.

**Yet too often, leadership team development is treated as a low-priority side project, rather than as a core commercial lever within the initiatives.**

This playbook offers a different frame, drawing on years of coaching leaders and leadership teams through transformative change and rapid growth in fintech, biopharma, professional services and expertise-led businesses – all contexts where alignment, accountability and commercial outcomes are not aspirational but *existential*.

From that hard-earned experience, what I've found is that leadership team development repeatedly fails in the same ways. Not because people are lacking or the intent is absent. But because of 6 costly and predictable mistakes we consistently make.

Each, on its own, limits performance. Together, they guarantee even the best-conceived programmes fall short of what the organisation actually needs.

**Here are those 6 mistakes and what to do instead.**

**MISTAKE 1**

# We don't put enough emphasis on achieving commercially valuable business results.

Anecdotally, most will cite psychological safety, trust and belonging as the bedrock of an effective team. But formal research and hard-earned experience tells us nothing unites a team like a common mission, shared goals and a collective focus on business results.

Too often, team purpose is presumed known and understood, goals are unilaterally set, and there's only a passing mention made of performance metrics.

The biggest opportunities for performance and growth (and the probable cause of issues) are then assumed to lie within the team's psychological safety, its processes, and its interrelationships. Consequently, traditional team development has focused here, first.

It's not hard to see why.

The development agenda defaults to what it knows: how the team works together, how decisions get

made, how conflict gets managed, how trust gets built.

These are legitimate and important conversations, for sure. But they are not the conversations that spark meaningful change.

Commercial accountability conversations are.

They are exposing in a way that process conversations are not. They surface misalignment about direction. They reveal disagreements about priority, contribution and individual performance that nobody has been willing to name. They put the team's shared purpose – and each member's commitment to it – directly in the room.

Facilitators avoid these especially tough conversations. Leaders defer them. And the difficult-but-necessary work – the commercially grounding, behaviourally demanding conversations about what this team is and what it's here to deliver – never quite makes it to the top of the agenda.

Only 10% of CEOs believe their leadership development initiatives have a clear business impact.

— DDI Global Leadership Forecast

What I've found, repeatedly, is that the only place to start is with commercial results.

Challenging the team with why it exists, and which business objectives and key metrics will serve as indicators of progress, is singularly the most impactful set of conversations that leads to elevated team performance and potential.

Instead of decoupling leadership from business outcomes, anchor all development work in the team's commercial strategy. Align learning objectives with real metrics: revenue, EBITDA, customer retention, market share. Make the team

accountable for applying new ways of working to hit those targets.

Soft topics don't disappear entirely. They're reframed as crucial enablers for delivering results. And the more "human" side is not ignored but positioned as an enabler of the business mission.

Programmes designed this way create clarity, urgency, and buy-in. The team knows why they're learning, what they're aiming for, and how they'll know if it's working.

Above all, this approach delivers the commercial results that sustain the change and unite the team.

## COACHING PROMPTS

1. What difference would it make if you were to treat leadership development not as a side initiative, but as a key strategic lever?
2. Where are you currently investing in team development without a clear link to business impact? And what opportunities are you missing as a result?
3. What commercial outcomes currently feel out of reach that would become achievable if leadership development were directly tied to those goals?

## MISTAKE 2

# We pretend we're measuring ROI yet fail to capture and action what really matters.

Every organisation wants to know whether their leadership or team development programme was worth it. It's the question that promises to unlock budget, justify spend and reassure sponsors.

But in chasing that justification, we often create what I call **ROI Theatre**: an elaborate performance of measurement that looks impressive, yet tells us very little about what actually changed, what worked or what to do next.

ROI Theatre is seductive because it feels responsible. We produce tidy reports, pull participation stats, quote a few favourable comments and convert them into a notional "value" figure. The exercise soothes

the system: it proves something happened and that we were diligent. But what it rarely does is generate insight that drives better decisions.

In reality, most ROI efforts fail because they ask the wrong question.

When we start by asking "Was it worth it?" the best we can produce is a retrospective verdict. The real power of evaluation lies in asking: "What do we want to learn? And what will we then do with that information?"

That question shifts the purpose of measurement from justification to insight.

### Our EPE Framework.

Evaluating Programme Effectiveness (EPE): 5 questions that replace ROI Theatre.

1. What has been achieved? What has changed?
2. What is the value to the business: now and into the future?
3. What has been preserved and protected?
4. To what extent will the benefits sustain and compound?
5. What decisions does this insight now inform?

Done well, evaluation doesn't sit in a spreadsheet or a closing report. It becomes part of the team's operating rhythm, baked into goal setting, reviews and retrospectives. Metrics become dynamic feedback loops that help the team learn faster, adapt quicker and stay accountable to what matters most.

The cost of getting this wrong is high.

When we settle for ROI Theatre, we lose the benefit of our own learning. Programmes become isolated events. Momentum fades. The next investment starts from scratch.

All this leads to systemic cynicism: "we've done this before and nothing changed." Teams disengage, sponsors lose faith and the development initiative becomes discretionary rather than strategic.

But if we build measurement into the DNA of the work – into the team, the programme and the system itself – evaluation becomes a source of competitive advantage that embeds confidence among senior leadership as progress becomes visible. With this approach, development initiatives take their rightful place as serious, strategic investments.

## COACHING PROMPTS

4. What evidence would convince you and your stakeholders that the programme has made a meaningful difference?
5. What data could you collect regularly that would help you learn faster and decide smarter?
6. How can measurement become a habit inside your team rather than an afterthought at the end?

## MISTAKE 3

# We treat teams as a group of individuals rather than coaching the team as a system.

Leadership teams underperform not because they lack talent, but because they are underleveraged. Traditional leadership team development exacerbates this limitation by:

- failing to coach the team as a team;
- failing to support the team to make the successful transition from working group to real team; and
- intervening at the wrong leverage points of the resultant system.

Each of these transitions is a strategic shift that requires far more than team-building exercises and shared values statements. It demands a deliberate focus on shared purpose, mutual accountability, and the invisible dynamics that define how the team actually functions.

For those who support the transition, it means seeing the team both as a team and as part of a system, with its own structure, rules, feedback loops, and leverage points.

Teams that perceive themselves as a Real Team are 2.4x more effective in delivering business goals and 3.1x more collaborative.

— DDI Global Leadership Forecast

At its heart, this mistake is driven by:

1. our cultural bias toward individual achievement and performance;
2. institutional systems that measure and reward individuals rather than teams; and
3. a general confusion between the concept of high-performing individuals and a high-performing team.

Add to this the reluctance we all feel to giving too much of ourselves to the collective and it's no wonder teams remain underleveraged:

- threat to our individualism;
- increased vulnerability from interdependence;
- shared risk and reward; and
- an increased likelihood of conflict.

## Coaching the team as a system

Work with the team as an entity in its own right, not just the sum of its members.

**Help them choose to become a team:** a far more emotional choice than a structural or logistic one. This means stepping into interdependence, where success and failure are shared, conflict is worked through rather than avoided, and personal agendas take a back seat to collective accountability.

**Coach the system.** Intervene at the right leverage points.

**Do the deep work on the wider context,** helping the team navigate the unpredictable, non-linear dynamics that shape their reality.

When we coach the team as a system, performance gains are exponential. Misalignment disappears. Conversations sharpen. Execution accelerates. And as Patrick Lencioni argues in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*:

**“Teamwork becomes the ultimate competitive advantage.”**

For businesses navigating rapid growth or a complex transformation, the difference between working group and real team is the difference between scraping the benchmark and breaking through it.

### COACHING PROMPTS

7. In what ways is your team operating as a group rather than a real team? And what is the cost of that distinction to the business?
8. What are you, the team, and the wider system tolerating, avoiding, or even rewarding that reinforces individual performance over collective responsibility?
9. What commercial and cultural outcomes become achievable when the team choose to operate as a single, aligned system?

## MISTAKE 4

# We underestimate how powerfully the entrenched system resists change.

How often is it that we see a leadership team emerge from our carefully crafted development programme full of insight, new commitment, and the best of intentions, only for it all to have slipped away 3 months later?

The team returns to a system far stronger than we like to acknowledge, whose structure shapes behaviour more than we'd care to admit. The rhythms, habits, power dynamics, and unspoken norms act like gravity, constantly pulling team behaviours back into old patterns.

Without deliberate, sustained effort to change not just the team but the system around it, even the best intervention is reduced to a temporary, cosmetic fix.

This isn't about blaming the team, its leaders or its coaches. It's about recognising that complex human systems – shaped by structures, incentives, routines and competing priorities – are built to preserve the status quo.

Only 30% of transformation efforts succeed over time – a figure that has remained stagnant for years.

— Losing from day one: Why even successful transformations fall short (McKinsey, 2021)

**To succeed in this kind of transformation, we must think and act systemically.**

Below are 3 governing principles and 6 specific leverage points where meaningful change actually takes root.

## 3 key principles. 6 acupuncture points.

### 3 key principles.

1. **The team is the defining unit of change.** No individual, not even the CEO, carries enough influence to shift the system alone.
2. **System performance is driven by how elements interrelate,** not by the elements themselves. Lasting transformation happens only when we disrupt and improve the interconnections (relationships) between team members. Coaching for trust, alignment and honest feedback is a direct intervention in the system's structure.
3. **Effective change depends on intervening at the right leverage points.** Small, well-placed interventions produce outsized impact. Choose wisely. Act with precision.

### The 6 Acupuncture Points *in the system.*

1. The beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes that created the system.
2. The primary aims of the system and how they show up in priorities and decisions.
3. The rules of the system and how we keep to them.

4. The hidden incentives shaping behaviour and outcomes.
5. The information flows that drive clarity and action.
6. The distances between cause and effect, and the system's ability to respond.

**Work at these 6 points and change takes root.  
Work elsewhere, and you are most likely just buying time.**

The acupuncture point metaphor is intentional. Like acupuncture, the most effective interventions are not the largest or most obvious. They are the precise, well-targeted interventions applied at *exactly* the right location in the system.

## COACHING PROMPTS

10. At a systems level, which elements of the organisation are currently most likely to pull the team back into old patterns, no matter what change you try to make?
11. As a team, which dysfunctions in the system are you ignoring, tolerating, or avoiding? And what is the cost of that denial?
12. Which of the 6 acupuncture points, if addressed immediately, would give your leadership team the greatest chance of creating lasting systemic change?

## MISTAKE 5

# We treat the programme as the finish line and overlook the work of embedding change.

Almost all business projects leave behind something tangible. A new finance system. A factory upgrade. A refreshed website. And once delivered, nobody would ever allow those outputs to simply die on the vine, even when the project runs late or over budget.

Transformational growth projects are different. Their core deliverables – the new mindsets, attitudes and behaviours that are the critical enablers of growth – are far less tangible than a newly installed system. As such, they are far more fragile, dependent on strategic and systemic support to properly embed within the business.

Largely because they are so unseen, these deliverables *are* allowed to die on the vine – in spite of the critical role they play in making transformational change successful.

Our mistake is assuming the team workshops and learning programmes are the whole thing. We overlook the need for a separate, deliberate stream of work that builds the scaffolding critical to embedding and sustaining new attitudes and behaviours into everyday business operation.

It's easy to see how organisations slip into this thinking. And why providers collude with it.

We all enjoy the satisfaction of a clean end date. To call something "done" and move on, rather than trouble ourselves with the difficult, largely open-ended work of embedding change. So, it becomes convenient to assume that once delivered, teams will simply keep it going without explicit support.

They won't.

Without this critical support, insights and decisions never make it beyond the flipchart.

New mindsets and behaviours decay, usually within weeks. Limiting cultural norms reassert themselves because nothing in the daily environment demands new ways of working. And more systemically

damaging, leaders lose credibility for sponsoring initiatives that do not succeed.

As a result, the organisation develops a systemic cynicism toward future change. "Why bother? It won't last."

But this is not a project to be delivered. It's a system to be integrated.

**There are two parts to transforming this dynamic.**

1. Knowing where to intervene in the system: the 6 acupuncture points of Mistake # 4.
2. Installing the counter-systems that hardwire new attitudes and behaviours into the organisation's DNA.

## Performance Integration Architecture 7 elements

1. **Ongoing coaching (individual and group)** to deepen and apply learning in real work.
2. **Structured group work** that challenges entrenched norms and assumptions.
3. **Assets and artefacts** that anchor new habits and make new behaviours the default.
4. **Systems and structures** that make new ways of working inevitable.
5. **Accountability mechanisms**: e.g. peer commitments, progress tracking, transparent reporting.
6. **Adapted rhythms**: e.g. meetings, decision gates, reporting cycles that require new behaviours.
7. **Designed compounding**: e.g. measuring and celebrating early wins as fuel for deeper adoption.

With this scaffolding in place, behaviour change sustains because the environment rewards the new, while quietly discouraging the old. Peer accountability replaces top-down reminders. Key meetings, decision moments and collaborations become consistent with the team's shared performance goals. Programme gains compound rather than decay.

## COACHING PROMPTS

13. Given your transformation goals, what "scaffolding" would most decisively lock in new ways of working and stop regression in its tracks?
14. To sustain the change, where does your team still rely on willpower, memory or goodwill, rather than systems, structures and artefacts?
15. Which single integration mechanism, if embedded now, would most decisively lock in the new ways of working?

## MISTAKE 6

# We neglect to build the performance coaching culture that embeds change and keeps it alive.

### People change drives organisational change.

That simple truth is what separates change programmes that deliver lasting results from those that run excellent programmes, produce genuine shifts at the top and *still* find themselves, 12 months on, asking why the business hasn't moved with them.

The answer is almost always the same. The leadership team programme, to all intents and purposes, did its work. But the system wasn't primed to receive it.

As change conditions go, aligning an executive leadership team, intervening at the right acupuncture points in the system and installing the integration scaffolding are certainly necessary. But they're not sufficient.

Sustainable, commercially meaningful change doesn't happen inside a well-conceived strategy or a well-executed team development programme.

It comes to life in the thousands of moments each week where managers meet their people. In a one-to-one. In a team meeting. In the corridor conversation that takes 3 minutes and shapes someone's next 3 weeks.

The gap between strategic intent and day-to-day execution is almost always a management moment that wasn't met with the skill, confidence or clarity it needed.

### 3 things have to be true in those moments for the change to hold.

1. **The manager needs to know the direction:** the mission, the OKRs, the shared performance goals and the standards the organisation has committed to.
2. **They need to offer challenge and stretch:** to raise the performance bar and tap people's full potential without adding to the uncertainty and sense of overwhelm people are already feeling.

3. **They need the skill and the will to give candid performance feedback:** including having the tough conversations that most managers, under pressure, find reasons to defer.

When any combination of these 3 crucial elements is absent, strategy will remain at the top of the organisation, and our change will stall.

If you want performance to shift, your managers are the leverage point.

Your managers have more touchpoints with your people than anyone else, setting the standard, inspiring great performance, and modelling personal ownership and responsibility through hundreds of small-but-critical interactions, every day.

When those management moments are consistently met with conversational skill, constructive challenge and a coaching mindset, your people are better able to think, take ownership, and lean into their full potential, even when the pressure is on.

And *that* will create the shift we're looking for.

This, then, is our sixth and final mistake: overlooking the need for a performance coaching culture shift that will embed the change and keep it alive.

"Performance coaching culture" isn't a platitude. It's an answer to the question: how do we cultivate an environment of sustained excellence without compounding the uncertainty, fatigue and pressure that people are already navigating?

### Achieving that requires 2 conditions working in concert:

1. **The executive and senior leadership team must lead from the front.** That means not just modelling the new behaviours, but actively cascading the mission, the priorities and the performance standards downward with enough clarity, consistency and conviction that the management tier can carry them forward

with confidence. Delegation only works when what you're delegating into is ready to receive it.

2. **The management tier must be equipped.** Not just informed. Not just inspired. Equipped, with practical, repeatable frameworks for the

conversations that matter most: translating strategy into meaningful goals; giving candid feedback without demoralising; stretching top performers without burning them out; addressing underperformance early and with confidence; and holding people accountable in ways that build ownership and confidence.

Building this culture is not a separate workstream. It runs alongside the team coaching programme, from the start.

In practice, this means working deliberately during the programme to build the habits, language and agreements that sustain the culture beyond the programme's work.

It means helping the executive team ask powerful questions of each other: as the norm, not the exception.

It means creating explicit agreements around giving, getting and soliciting feedback, so that the standards hold in every meeting and conversation, ongoing.

When a genuine performance coaching culture takes hold, something changes in the system's relationship with itself. Difficult conversations happen earlier, not later. Misalignment is surfaced in the room rather than in the corridor. Strategy lands in the management moments that used to let it slip. And the gains from the work compound rather than decay because the environment now actively reinforces them.

This is not the end of the programme. It is the beginning of something more valuable: an organisation that generates its own momentum – bought in, built in and self-sustaining.

## COACHING PROMPTS

16. What does performance look like right now across your management tier? And what would need to shift to sustain the change you want to make?
17. In which management interactions is the gap between strategic intent and day-to-day execution most visible? And who's accountable for closing it?
18. What would your managers need in mindset, skill and confidence, to stretch their people, hold standards and have the difficult conversations, consistently?

## CONCLUSION

## Above the Benchmark

### 6 mistakes. 6 opportunities.

Not one of the problems described in this playbook is unique to your organisation. Every leadership team I have worked with has encountered all of them, usually several at once. That is by no means a criticism. It is an honest reflection of how complex the work of leadership team transformation actually is.

What separates the teams that achieve lasting alpha from those that merely hit the industry benchmark is not talent, intent or investment. It's the decision to approach this work with rigour, systemic thinking and the commercial discipline it deserves.

That means anchoring development in tangible business outcomes. Measuring what *actually* matters. Coaching the team as a team. Respecting

the power of the system. Building the scaffolding that makes change stick. And cultivating the performance coaching culture that keeps the work alive long after the engagement ends.

This is the work I do with executive and senior leadership teams navigating complex change and rapid growth. It's not off-the-shelf. It's not generic. And it doesn't aim for the benchmark. Alpha demands more.

If you recognise your team in these pages and this approach resonates, I'd welcome a conversation and an honest exploration of what's working, what isn't, and what your leadership team might achieve if we approached this differently.

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**Dan Beverly** is an executive coach and leadership team specialist with over 15 years' experience coaching leaders and leadership teams through complex change and rapid growth.

Working across fintech, biopharma, professional services and expertise-led businesses, Dan coaches executive and senior leadership teams to strengthen alignment, deepen cohesion and deliver above-benchmark commercial results.

His approach is not a set of off-the-shelf frameworks, but systemic, commercially grounded and built around the specific challenges of the organisation. Every engagement is designed around the business context, the team's dynamics and the organisation's priority commercial outcomes, ensuring the work delivers meaningful change.

If you'd like to discuss your team's challenges and explore what this work could look like for your organisation, get in touch at <https://danbeverly.com/contact>.

