

C-SUITE INSIGHTS



Beyond the Plateau

Moving Senior Teams From Effective
to High-Performing





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FOREWORD

The success of a senior team has a way of settling into habit. Strong results can validate how they operate, and over time, no one questions leadership behaviors or asks where the team needs to evolve. This report calls that a plateau: capable teams mistaking staying level for staying ahead.

Left unaddressed, a plateau can turn into something more serious. Adaptation slows, opportunities get missed, and teams can mistake today's success for evidence that tomorrow will look the same.

What strikes me most is how ordinary the gap between belief and behavior looks from the inside. A team can value accountability, yet leave ownership unclear. Difficult conversations move into side channels even on teams that pride themselves on candor. Strong results get celebrated without anyone examining the behaviors behind them. These gaps can show up on well-functioning teams, which is why they're so easy to miss.

The good news is these gaps aren't permanent. Senior teams can reshape the patterns that limit their effectiveness and

build what it takes to move past the plateau. But only if someone is willing to point to the patterns directly.

This report draws on research, together with our experience working alongside senior teams, to offer a clear place to start. It doesn't provide a checklist to work through, but we hope it changes what you pay attention to. What a senior team becomes is, in the end, a reflection of how it's led. As markets, technology, and expectations continue to shift, the real test isn't whether a team is effective today, but whether it's becoming what tomorrow requires.

Lisa Cavanaugh, MS
Chief Strategy Officer
Center for Creative Leadership



Executive Summary

Success can strand a senior team, even while they're making strong decisions and delivering results. When they stop pushing for the next level, while demands keep changing, they leave themselves stuck on a plateau: high enough to feel like progress, flat enough to feel safe.

There's risk there. A team can be effective without being high-performing, and mistake one for the other. Our research finds that how teams operate today strongly predicts how they will operate a year from now, unless something disrupts that pattern on purpose. In practice, we see the same pattern. Left alone, senior teams don't drift upward toward high performance. They stay on the plateau while competitors and expectations keep climbing.

Often, there's a layer team members need to examine: familiar habits that aren't questioned, conflict left unaddressed, and assumptions about what their effectiveness means.

We set out to understand what separates senior teams that keep climbing from those that settle in. Drawing on a meta-analysis that synthesized data of more than 11,000 teams, and paired with what we see firsthand working alongside these senior teams, we believe there's a predictable way off the plateau.

This report lays out where senior teams tend to get stuck and what it takes to get moving again. It provides a small number of specific places to focus, based on evidence of what works.

SENIOR TEAM PLATEAUS DON'T END ON THEIR OWN

A team must spot the plateau, choose the next climb, and take the first step.

What got a senior team to the plateau won't get them climbing again; that takes deliberate action.



3 Key Insights

1 Shifting how a team thinks means little until it shows up in a behavior the team sustains.

A shift in mindset must be connected to a specific behavior everyone can see. Teams should pick one practice, such as accountability, and reinforce it consistently, rather than trying to change every behavior at once or to focus only on mindsets.

2 Conflict is a dynamic that likely won't resolve unless someone addresses it.

Many team dynamics fade with time. Conflict is different. Left alone, it persists with avoidance and side conversations. Senior teams should address it directly before it settles into the status quo of how the team operates.

3 Every result is an input into what a team does next, not only a measure of what's been accomplished.

Teams often treat effectiveness as something that happens to them, then react. But how a team responds to a result, good or bad, shapes what they do next. High-performing senior teams examine that response on purpose, rather than letting habit or blame decide it for them.

WHAT SUSTAINS THE ASCENT

Don't settle on your team's plateau. Chart the next journey.

Senior teams change. New members join, challenges shift, and behaviors that once worked start to slip. Our 3 insights require ongoing reinforcement and the discipline to notice when a team is settling into comfort on the plateau. Teams keep ascending through sustained attention and development, applied over time.



01



INSIGHT 1

Shifting how a team thinks means little until it shows up in a behavior the team sustains.

A team can talk for months about what it wants to become without changing anything. New mindsets should be clearly anchored to specific behaviors. Behavior is where a team can directly choose to change, and it's a strong predictor of how members subsequently think, feel, and perform.

Linking mindsets with behaviors might sound obvious, but senior teams still overlook the latter step. They express wanting to feel more aligned without ever changing what they do. Our research says they're both closely linked.

From our meta-analysis

The behaviors and processes of a team were closely tied to how team members felt or thought. For example, putting more effective processes in place to support behaviors predicted higher levels of motivation in teams. Behavior can also be the more direct place to start. A team can agree to try something new, experiment with the process, see what happens in behavior, and then reiterate.

From our experience

Individual and collective accountability is vital for reinforcing team behaviors. In a review of 12 senior-team engagements through our Organizational Leadership practice, every team identified accountability as a challenge. The pattern was consistent: decisions get made, but ownership stays unclear, so issues drift and the team keeps circling back to what they already discussed. Senior teams called for sharper accountability norms, defined next steps, transparent communication, and systems for closing the loop.

Formal team agreements are one solution to create behavior change. Our Executive Team Agreement Model (see [page 8](#)) helps formally articulate how team members are going to work together, what roles each will play, what processes they will use, and who will be accountable for decisions.

“Accountability is not always clear as to who owns what, which leads to things being dropped or not prioritized.”

—CCL Client



3 Elements of Our Executive Team Agreement Model

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITIES

What are we as a team responsible for contributing or accomplishing?

DECISION-MAKING

What decisions do we make collectively? What process do we use? How do we handle conflict or differences of opinion?

NORMS & BEHAVIORS

What behaviors do we want all members to demonstrate? What creates psychological safety?

One Team in Practice

A privately-owned engineering company was experiencing rapid growth, with plans to double its revenue and workforce within 5 years. However, growth was quickly outpacing its leadership capabilities and operational infrastructure, creating strain for the organization.

To address these challenges, the CEO saw a clear need to break down silos within his leadership team and require them to work as collective enterprise leaders in service of a “one company” strategy. But change was slow. Leaders still focused on their own business goals at the expense of the overall organization. While the mindset of “one company” was the desired outcome, the actions of the leadership team were mired in the status quo, keeping them from making the climb to higher team performance.

The CEO’s answer was to work with CCL and his executive team to clearly define their collective responsibilities as enterprise

leaders and how they would hold themselves accountable for delivering organizational outcomes. The key was outlining specific expectations and behaviors that were required of all executive team members. For example, the team developed a set of 12 leadership responsibilities for managing the business, which included activities such as managing financial stewardship and performance, investing in leadership development and succession planning, driving operational excellence, and promoting a values-based culture. Each of these responsibilities was accompanied by defined behaviors and a clear process for tracking progress.

The result was a more empowered, connected, and accountable leadership team capable of driving change and growing the business with greater impact.



How To Begin

Zero in on a behavior and a process that supports it. A concrete process, such as how the team tracks commitments, works better as a starting point.

Accountability is a reasonable place to start. Define what follow-through looks like, assign clear owners, and close the loop in every meeting.

Expect trust and motivation to follow the behavior change, not precede it. A senior team doesn't need full buy-in before they try something new. They need to agree to try it.

“Sharpening accountability and closing the loop on commitments would significantly improve overall executive team effectiveness.”

—CCL Client



02



INSIGHT 2

Conflict is a dynamic that likely won't resolve unless someone addresses it.

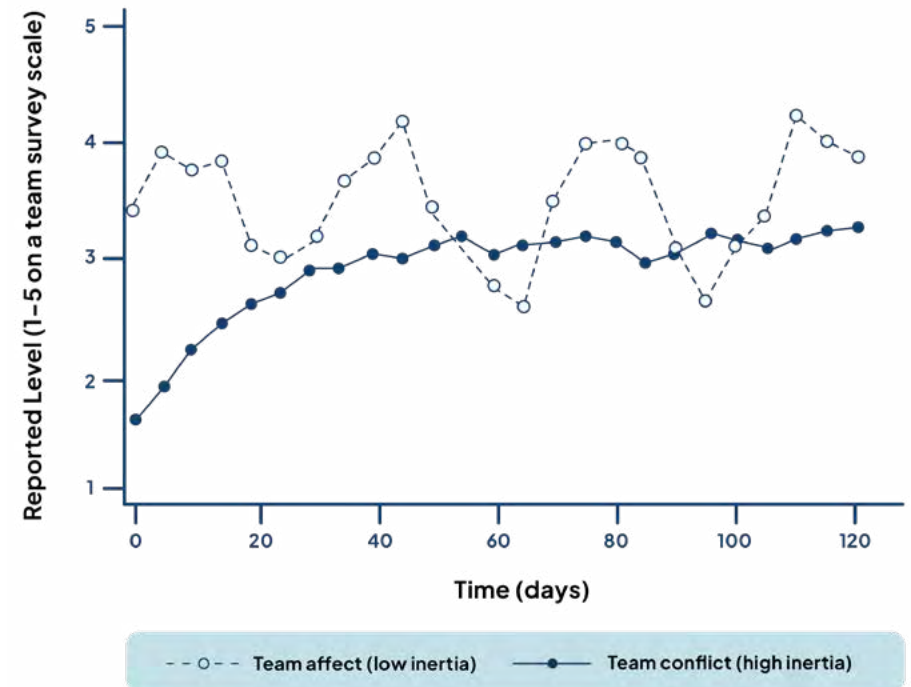
Most team dynamics ease with time, but conflict is different. Left alone, it doesn't fade. It derails into avoidance or side conversations, and it can stall a senior team's development until someone moves it deliberately.

From our meta-analysis

Conflict is the team dynamic most resistant to change. It shows the strongest persistence and left unaddressed, it can halt a team's development. This stands in contrast to how a team feels day to day; dynamics such as shared mood or a sense of identity shifted far more readily in the same data. Knowing which dynamics are more likely to plateau and resist change is important: a senior team can find quick wins in the dynamics that move, but conflict needs to be addressed directly for long-term performance.

"We don't have a lot of open conflict. We have a fair amount of quiet conflict, which is actually worse. I would prefer open conflict. There are a lot of things that happen outside of the meeting — conflict avoidance behavior. A really high-performing team is able to go deep in a safe environment."
—CCL Client

TYPICAL DYNAMICS FOR TEAM CONFLICT & AFFECT



From our experience

Nearly all senior teams in our review identified constructive conflict and direct communication as an issue. Teams described a pattern of excessive politeness: avoiding difficult conversations when together, then routing disagreement through side channels when apart. This can suppress the productive friction that leads to better decisions.



One Team in Practice

A top-tier financial services organization with a strong client base and market reputation was looking to strengthen its leadership position in a fast-changing and competitive business environment. To keep pace, the organization had to become nimbler and more adaptive as an enterprise and work across multiple fronts to drive change, including leveraging new technology and AI across the business. This required the leadership team to collaborate at a much deeper level than it had previously.

The challenge, however, was that the team was still operating as a group of individual leaders rather than as a collective team. One noticeable characteristic was an atmosphere of excessive politeness — or “quiet conflict” as one member put it — in which there was little overt conflict in meetings, but where issues were often raised afterward in one-on-one or hallway conversations.

When teams default to false harmony versus open dialogue, they

fail to practice the type of direct communication and candid feedback that builds high team performance. In this case, the team was so careful to avoid conflict with other members that they failed to raise difficult topics that were essential to learning from one another, addressing mistakes, and moving the business forward.

To respond to this issue, the CEO partnered with CCL to address the communication and operating norms of the team through a series of facilitated development sessions. A centerpiece of the team’s work together was building the necessary trust, psychological safety, and dialogue skills to have open, honest conversations as a leadership team.

This made a real difference: It allowed the team to openly discuss and resolve a critical business decision that had been a source of friction within the group for several months. By being more intentional and proactive in addressing conflict, the team was able to move off the plateau and climb toward higher performance as a collective leadership team.

How To Begin

Identify what causes conflict.

It can start with one person’s performance, a clash between 2 leaders, or the collective team. The specific cause determines how to address it. Not every conflict belongs in a full team conversation.

When it’s a team-level issue, **address it with the team.** Build the skill of direct, candid dialogue so disagreement stops spilling over into side channels afterward.

Build the follow-through. Once a disagreement is aired, decide what’s going to be different going forward, otherwise the same conflict resurfaces at the next meeting.

03



INSIGHT 3

Every result is an input into what a team does next, not only a measure of what's been accomplished.

Teams tend to treat effectiveness as something that happens to them, then react to it. But wins and losses don't just measure a team. They feed back into them, becoming inputs that help a team push to a new level of effectiveness and avoid plateauing.

From our meta-analysis

Effectiveness was a powerful predictor of later team dynamics, often as strong as how a team felt or behaved beforehand. Strong initial effectiveness predicted higher team affect (whether team members feel safe, trusted, connected, and energized), higher motivation, and lower conflict well into the future, a self-reinforcing loop. The same pattern runs in reverse: when effectiveness drops, those dynamics can spiral downward just as readily.

From our experience

We've heard firsthand how missing performance targets can sap morale. In these moments, senior teams need to actively manage the feedback loop and think about what their effectiveness is telling them. Managing how the team makes sense of its wins and losses is more important than tracking the scoreboard alone.



For example, senior teams often come to us after getting low engagement scores across their leadership group. That negative result becomes the input that pushes the team to examine how it's operating, rather than something to note and move past.



One Team in Practice

A small innovative energy technology company with a mission to deliver clean, reliable, and low-cost energy was experiencing rapid growth as an organization. The organization prided itself on operating like a startup in a publicly traded company, and the leadership team wanted to maintain the unique vision, values, and entrepreneurial spirit of the culture.

One of the key challenges facing the team was how they were showing up to the organization. Their most recent engagement survey results indicated a lack of trust in leadership, with the biggest gap in how well senior leaders were modeling the behaviors they expected from others in the organization. This was difficult feedback to hear, and the team responded defensively at first. But after some consideration, they decided to move forward with a leadership development initiative to build their individual and collective leadership capabilities.

Partnering with the CEO and CHRO, CCL designed an approach that started with a [360-degree assessment](#) and coaching process followed by a series of executive team development sessions. The objective was not only to develop better individual leaders but also to help the team collaboratively define their desired leadership culture and behaviors. The result was an initiative that transformed how the executive team worked together and led the organization, both individually and collectively, to build engagement and shape the culture.

How To Begin

Treat effectiveness as a signal, not just an outcome. A dip in engagement scores or a missed target is information about how the team is operating, not simply a scoreboard.

Actively frame wins and losses. Don't let a single bad quarter define the team, and don't let a win excuse dynamics that still need attention.

Install a reset. Give the team a specific ritual for processing a result and moving on, before it starts shaping how the team behaves next.

What Sustains the Ascent

**Don't settle on your team's plateau.
Chart the next journey.**

This report points to 3 places to focus: commit to one behavior without exception, address conflict before it hardens into avoidance, and treat effectiveness as a signal rather than only an outcome. Each interrupts a different part of the same pattern that keeps senior teams stuck.

Why these 3 work together

Treated separately, these are 3 good habits. Treated as a system, they're what propels a team off its plateau.

Our research and our work with senior teams point to the same pattern, from different directions. When trust erodes, direct communication gets harder. When communication breaks down, teams avoid conflict instead of working through it. Avoided conflict leads to unclear decisions. Unclear decisions create accountability gaps. And accountability gaps keep a team stuck in operational crisis, with no time left for the strategic work they need to do.

Left in place, that becomes a team's default way of operating, not a difficult stretch it will grow out of. It's a cycle that won't resolve itself. It repeats until it's interrupted.

Sustained effort makes change last

These aren't separate items to check off. These moves are linked together, and no summit comes on the first push. A team that commits to one behavior creates a real source of accountability. A team that addresses conflict early keeps decisions from stalling. A team that treats effectiveness as a signal catches the early signs of sliding back before the cycle takes hold again.

That's also why none of this holds after a single offsite meeting, no matter how good the day was. Our meta-analysis found that team dynamics revert to prior levels without sustained effort strong enough to overcome a team's natural pull back to where they started. The research directs attention to regular checkpoints, at roughly 10, 40, and 80 days, to see whether a change is taking hold rather than assuming one good conversation settled it. Teams can also use those checkpoints as a reflective practice, stepping back together to ask where they stand, how it's going, and where they're headed.



A team can fix their accountability problem and still get stuck if they never address conflict. They can get better at conflict and still stall if they ignore what their results are telling them. Real progress means climbing with all 3 in mind, not fixing one part and walking away.

What this takes from a senior leader

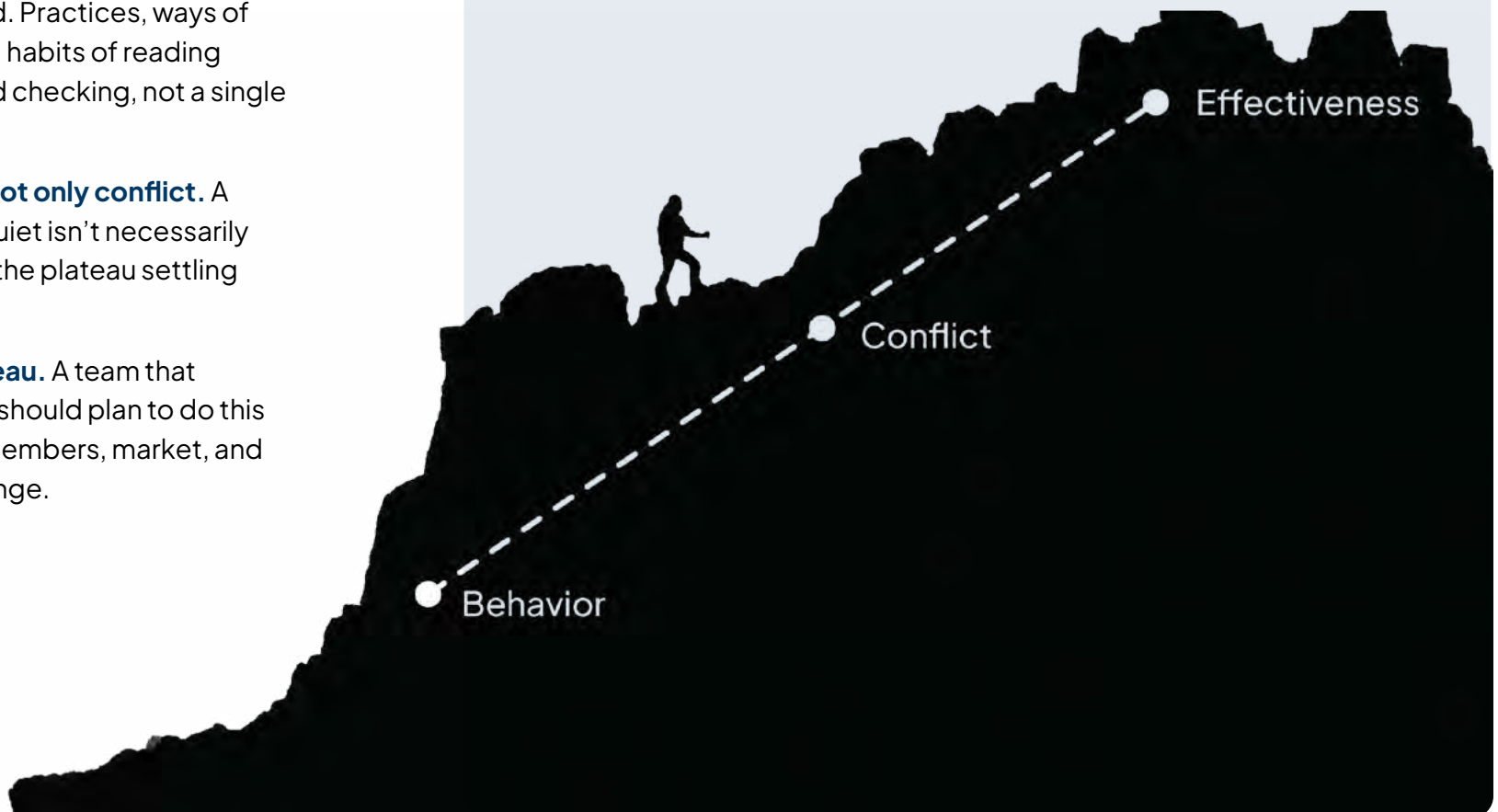
Revisit, don't only launch. Make regular time for the team to ask where it stands and where it's headed. Practices, ways of handling conflict, and habits of reading effectiveness all need checking, not a single introduction.

Watch for comfort, not only conflict. A team that has gone quiet isn't necessarily fine. Comfort can be the plateau settling back in.

Expect the next plateau. A team that breaks through once should plan to do this again, as their team members, market, and work continue to change.

3 POINTS, 1 CLIMB

Each point supports the others.
Progress on 1 carries the other 2 further up the slope.



Your Senior Team's Next Climb Starts Here

Knowing where a senior team gets stuck is only half the equation. Turning that knowledge into behavior that holds, at the executive level, takes sustained partnership.

Our Organizational Leadership practice works directly with senior teams on exactly what is highlighted in this report: building specific behaviors the team holds to, addressing conflict before it hardens, and turning performance into a signal the team acts on. It's the same evidence base behind this report, applied to your team.

[Explore Executive Team Development](#)

Related Resources:

SOLUTIONS:

[Organizational Leadership](#)

RESEARCH:

[A Meta-Analysis of the Dynamism of Emergent States and Team Processes](#)

[Climbing to Peak Team Effectiveness with CCL's Team Vantage™ Assessment](#)

[Build High-Performing Teams With Our Team Effectiveness Framework](#)

C-SUITE REPORTS:

[The Entangled Organization: Leading When Crises Converge](#)

[Trends for Global Leadership: C-Suite Insights on What Comes Next](#)



About the Research

This report is based on our research and experience, including:

Meta-analysis of team dynamics research

This includes a synthesis of over 3,000 statistical relationships drawn from longitudinal studies representing more than 11,000 teams, modeling how team dynamics persist and change over time. [The research](#) was conducted with Drs. Brent Reed, Andrew Knoblich, Elizabeth Clayton, Karoline Summerville, Scott Tonidandel, and George Banks.

Experts in our Organizational Leadership practice

This expertise is reflected in both hands-on experience as well as what we've heard directly from clients as part of our own assessment and discovery work. We also conducted a thematic analysis of development-area responses across 12 senior leadership teams, organized into strategic focus, collective approach, and team interaction.



Key Contributors



Mark Holt, PhD

Organizational Leadership Practitioner

Mark partners with client organizations to design and facilitate strategic change initiatives that leverage the power of collective leadership. With over 30 years of experience in leadership, team, and organization development, his areas of expertise include executive team development, leadership development strategy, culture transformation and renewal, and organizational change. Before joining CCL, Mark served on the faculties at Marquette University and the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, where he taught courses in small group communication, organizational communication, communication consulting, and corporate social responsibility.



Andy Loignon, PhD

Senior Research Scientist

Andy transforms organizational challenges into actionable solutions using rigorous social science. He brings disciplined analytical and methodological expertise to topics of leadership and team effectiveness, bridging the gap between academic research and real-world application. He led the development of our HiFi Conversation Analytics™, an AI-enabled assessment that provides evidence-based behavioral feedback to drive leader development. Before joining CCL, Andy worked in both consulting and leading research institutions, where he honed his ability to translate complex research findings into practical insights. His research has won awards at top national conferences, been published in several of the Financial Times' Top 50 journals, and been featured in popular media outlets.





At the Center for Creative Leadership, we believe the most powerful force in any organization is its people. For nearly 60 years, we've helped build leaders and the leadership ecosystems around them, converting potential into a measurable performance advantage for organizations worldwide.

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