



Quarterly Reflections on Leadership

October – December 2025

Team coaching – what matters?

*What
matters
most?*

This QRL is longer than normal, but we hope you find the content fascinating! In this article we report the findings of two separate pieces of research. The first piece of research was a piece of meta-research reading more than 500 articles, book chapters and books on team effectiveness. From that work emerged what we call the TLIM Model for team coaches, comprising 11 themes, areas a team can choose from in service of improving team effectiveness.

We base our team coaching programs around the TLIM Model. Then one day someone asked – which of these themes do leaders think is most important and which do they find most challenging? The second piece of research seeks to answers those questions by speaking to 50 experienced leaders around the world. This second piece of research validated the original research in that all 11 themes were deemed to be at least 76% important by the leaders we spoke to. The most important factors were, as we anticipated, dialogue and trust. Dialogue and trust are intertwined and that relationship is the foundation upon which all other aspects of a team’s effectiveness are based.

The TLIM Model

The 11 themes are shown in figure 1 below.

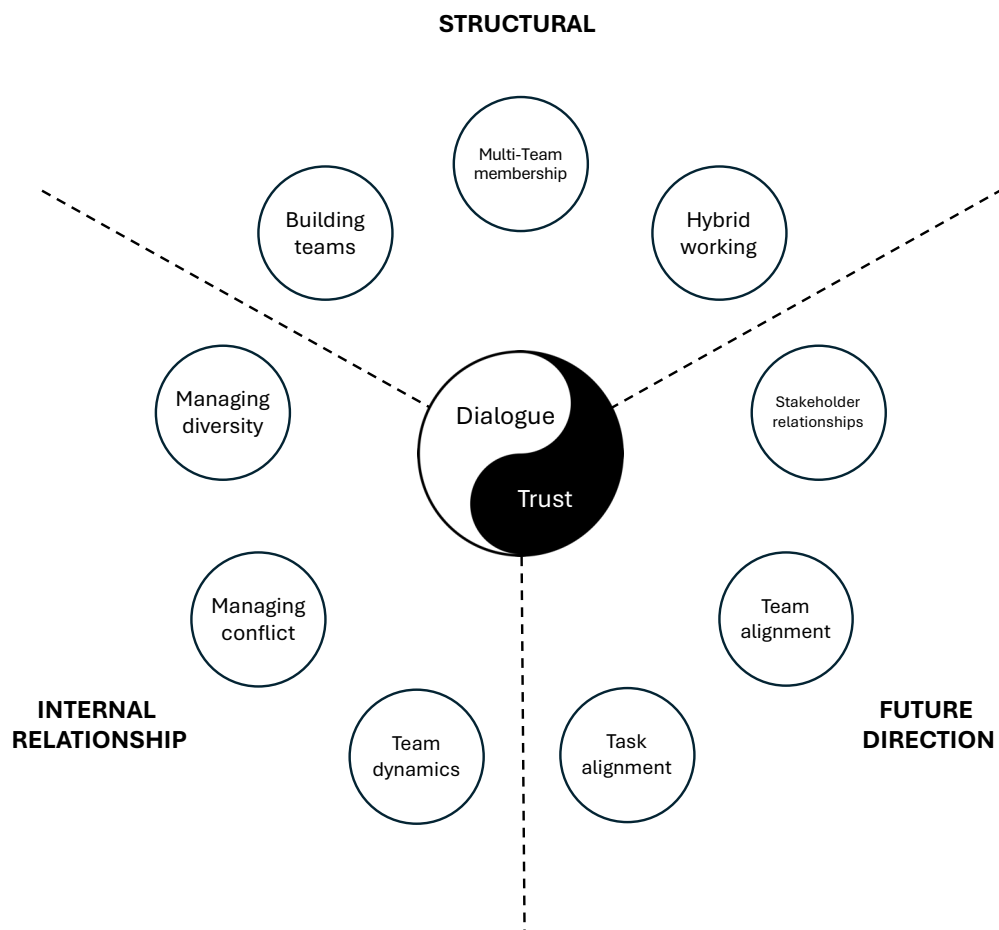


Figure 1: Team effectiveness – 11 themes

At the heart of the model sit **dialogue** and **trust**. From the literature and our own personal experience, we realised that:

- If a team is good at **dialogue**, it is much better equipped to tackle whatever issue it needs to address. Whether that issue is the need to align on common purpose and objectives, or better managing stakeholder relationships, or reviewing its own ways of working.
- Engaging in **dialogue** (listening to each other respectfully and voicing whatever needs to be said without judgment) makes it more likely that **trust** will develop. And the more people in a team **trust** each other, the easier they will find it to engage in **dialogue**.

We loosely divided the other nine themes into three categories:

Future direction

- **Task alignment** is the alignment of team members around the work that needs to be done - vision, purpose, strategy, objectives etc ...
- **Team alignment** is the alignment of team members around rules of engagement; how they will behave with each other and with others. Includes aspects of team culture.
- **Stakeholder relationships** is about understanding who are the team's key stakeholders and how to best manage them. Includes aspects of systemic thinking.

Internal relationships

- **Team dynamics** is about the team noticing and naming their interpersonal dynamics and shifting those dynamics when appropriate, in service of team performance.
- **Managing conflict** is about differentiating between task conflict (good) and relationship conflict (bad) and addressing relationship conflict when it occurs.
- **Managing diversity** is about recognising and leveraging interpersonal differences, whether they be deep-level/invisible (e.g. different beliefs, perspectives, personalities) or surface-level/visible (e.g. age, race, gender).

Structural factors

- **Multi-team membership** is about recognising that some team members belong to other teams too, and setting expectations of those people accordingly.
- **Hybrid working** is about the need to proactively manage certain aspects of team functioning in a virtual environment.
- **Building teams** is about selecting the right people, with the right skills, competences, and teaming behaviours, people who will also best suit the team's broader needs and the organisation's needs.

Some team coaches, especially those new to the discipline, tend to focus on particular domains. If they've been trained to focus primarily on clarifying purpose and objectives, for example, then that's where they'll tend to focus. Or they've been counselled on the importance of understanding the stakeholder perspective. Or if they've spent a lot of time learning about team dynamics. In contrast, those coaches who have been using the TLIM Model find it useful in contracting with the client where best to focus their efforts. Understanding the model and each of these domains makes it more likely the team coach will help the client do the work, where the work will be most productive. The model also acts as a recipe for professional development, directing the coach toward areas they may want to spend most time developing their own knowledge and ability.

But of these 11 topics - which do team leaders think are most important and most challenging? And will they agree that dialogue and trust are of primary importance?

Importance & challenge

We asked 50 leaders to rate each of the 11 themes out of 5 for both importance, and degree of personal challenge. These leaders had:

- On average 20 years of experience of leading teams.
- Led, on average, a biggest team size of 220 people (ranging from 6 as biggest to 3,000 people as biggest)

Overall percentage ratings for importance and challenge are shown below in table 1. Notice first that every theme was rated 76% or more in terms of importance and 60% or more in terms of personal challenge.

	Importance			Challenge	
1	Dialogue	97%	1	Building teams	79%
2	Trust	94%	2	Stakeholder relationships	74%
3	Task alignment	94%	3	Dialogue	71%
4	Stakeholder relationships	93%	4	Managing conflict	70%
5	Building teams	91%	5	Managing diversity	69%
6	Managing diversity	87%	6	Trust	67%
7	Managing conflict	85%	7	Task alignment	66%
8	Team alignment	83%	8	Team alignment	66%
9	Hybrid working	82%	9	Hybrid working	65%
10	Team dynamics	80%	10	Team dynamics	65%
11	Multi-team membership	76%	11	Multi-team membership	60%

Table 1: Importance & challenge – rankings (%)

The importance scores are on average 19% higher than the challenge scores. This difference reflects the deep experience of these leaders, who have become more skilled and capable over time.

Dialogue and trust score as the most important themes, with task alignment and stakeholder relationships close behind. As said before, within the coaching industry today different practitioners emphasise different aspects of team coaching. Hackman & Wageman, for example, directed practitioners to pay special attention task alignmentⁱ. Many coaches pay particular attention to David Kantor's work on team dynamicsⁱⁱ. Peter Hawkins and others, in writing about systems, emphasise the importance of paying attention to the needs of stakeholdersⁱⁱⁱ. This analysis confirms the importance of task alignment and stakeholder relationships. Team dynamics however, ranks lower.

But we ought beware interpreting the data too quickly because there is so much variance in the scores. The data would appear to diminish the importance of multi-team membership for example. But whilst that theme may rate lowest on both rankings there are still leaders and teams who find multi-team management both important and challenging. Each of the 11 themes deserve further exploration. And so we will now look at each of the eleven themes in turn, in order of importance, looking at the distribution of rankings and verbatim comments.

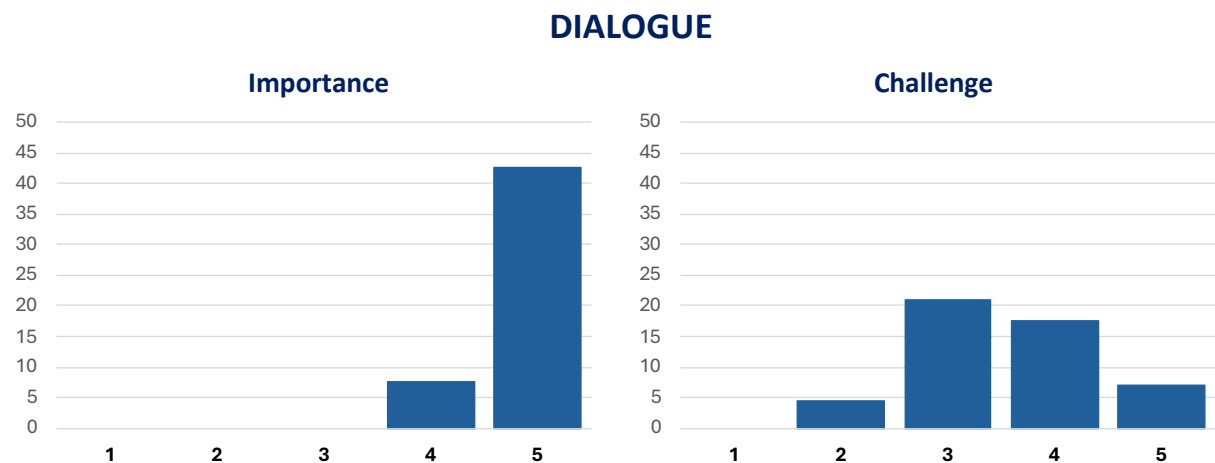


Figure 2: Dialogue – distribution of rankings 1 – 5

Importance 97%

Almost everyone rated dialogue/communication as 100% important. For example:

It comes back to people's willingness to listen, people not being good listeners. Wanting to tell you what they think's happening first and not coming to the environment with an open mind. People need to understand why they're coming to a position. What is it about their background? What is it about their thinking that leads them to that view? It's coming to it with that open mind and being curious.

Challenge 71%

Some leaders said that it's very challenging to help teams get to a place where everyone is communicating effectively:

I call it the rumble in the jungle, the robust discussions. It takes a lot of effort and work to get people to have the robust conversations because they shy away, because people don't want to hurt each other's feelings. If those conversations don't happen, it can cause catastrophic consequences.

There are organisational factors at play:

I think it's quite easy to achieve on a micro level in your own team. I think you can have one team that's communicating really well and that's great, but the organisation doesn't really benefit unless everybody does that. I haven't seen organisations do that really well.

The challenge may be related to the size of the team and newness of the team:

The Gen Y people in our team are quite comfortable having challenging conversations, but Gen Z struggle with that when they first join us, because they view it as conflict and see it as aggressive and tense. We've recruited people slowly, so we've been able to indoctrinate them all individually, so it's not been that challenging, but I could imagine in a bigger organization, where you couldn't be as robust with people, it would be challenging.

If it's a new team, it's going to be more challenging because they're still trying to find their own feet. They're not yet in the mind space to be able to effectively communicate. In a team that's been together for a year or two, I would say it's less challenging. Then it drops right down for a team that's well established. The more established the team is and the more functional the team, the far less challenging it is.

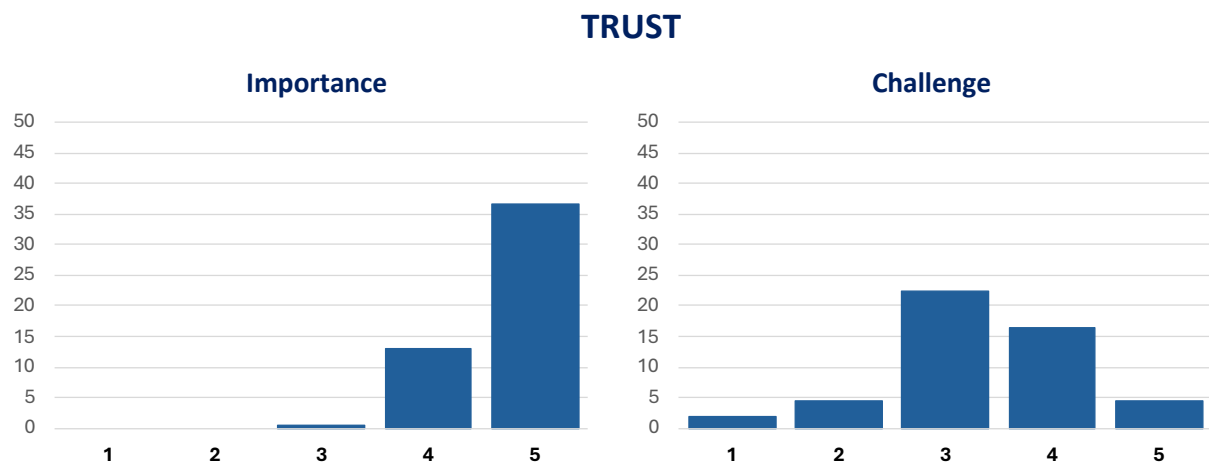


Figure 3: Trust - distribution of rankings 1 – 5

Importance 94%

The importance scores for trust were again very high. For example:

Absence of trust is a killer. When the organization makes promises it doesn't keep, that erodes trust. If you go back on your word, or don't treat the team properly, disrespect them or don't value their efforts. It's easy to say but much harder to achieve.

A few people rated the importance of trust lower, on the basis that not everyone is capable of being trustworthy:

You're never going to get everyone to fully trust in an organization. It's important, but it's not the be-all-and-end-all because some people are just prone to being untrustworthy.

Challenge 67%

Some people said it is both effortful and challenging to cultivate trust in a team, particularly if people are distanced or don't speak the same language:

Trust comes from building the relationship one-to-one. It's talking with your team members about what they're here to do on a day-to-day basis and how we can help them. Team members want to say everything's great when it's potentially not. You need to trust your team and it's challenging.

Frigging challenging. When you're at a distance or not connecting face to face as much as you'd want to be, creating that culture, that safe space with the team when you're almost always online and you've got lots of people who don't speak English as their first language. I think it's incredibly difficult.

Most leaders who rated it lower talked about their personal commitment to demonstrating trustworthy behaviours:

I don't find it that challenging. I'm very transparent and upfront with who I am, what the team needs, what our challenges are. It's 100% important. It's not that challenging because we've been doing it for so long and the bigger the team, the more trust there is, the easier it is to bring new team members along. I give up an awful lot of myself to get that trust.

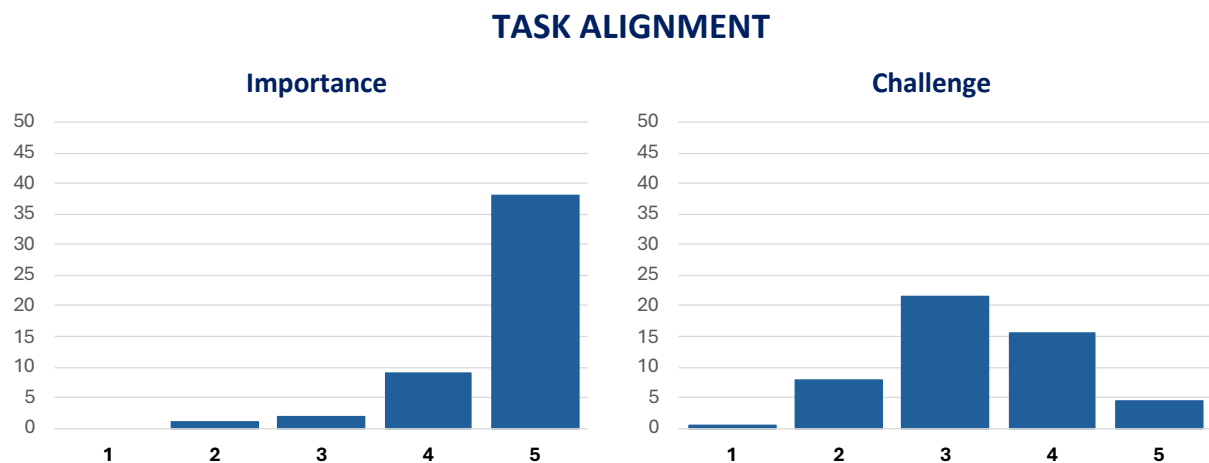


Figure 4: Task alignment - distribution of rankings 1 – 5

Importance 94%

Importance scores for task alignment were almost as high as those for trust:

If you do not have a common purpose, you cannot set clear goals. If you don't have clear goals, you can't possibly begin to figure out whether people have the tools and resources they need to do their job or whether they're supported in their role. Everything ladders back up to common purpose.

A few people rated it less important, some of whose team members don't spend much time working together:

My team is a group of individual contributors rather than a team fighting towards a larger number. I think they're all aligned and we do push towards a common vision, but it's more of a corporate vision rather than a team vision.

Challenge 66%

Whilst rating task alignment as important, people rated it relatively low in terms of challenge. It is most challenging in a big matrix organisation, or if people initially have different mental models as to what is important:

That can be really challenging in a place like where I work because there are so many matrices, lots of swim lanes and siloed behaviours. To bring people along a journey with the same kind of purpose in my current context has been really difficult. In a large organisation, it's almost impossible.

It depends where everyone's starting from. Sometimes it can be easy, and other times it's hard. It requires work to make sure that you're articulating that clear purpose for people so that they understand what they're getting on board with. It depends on the personalities.

Other leaders said it was easier in a small business, or if there is a clear organisational mandate, or in a stable organisation organisation, or in a collaborative culture.

It's really important and not very challenging because we're a small business. Everyone knows the objectives.

In COVID people worked long hours because everyone thought their role was critical. I had 80 people on team calls once or twice a week. Everyone came to the meetings. Everyone knew what we had to do.

We've had three CEOs in 18 months and that has been challenging because we haven't had clear direction. Now that our new strategic plan is defined, now we know what we're doing and it's easier to communicate and get people to understand it too.

I don't find it too hard if you have a collaborative style of working and you're consultative in developing strategies. I can see it being a problem though in other teams, where you don't have that same sort of grounding from the start.

Not everyone has to be on the same page:

No matter what you do, there's going to be people who come in just to get paid. If they don't care about the vision and the mission, then is that really a problem? It depends on what level they are at. As long as they are not detracting from other people believing in the vision.

STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS

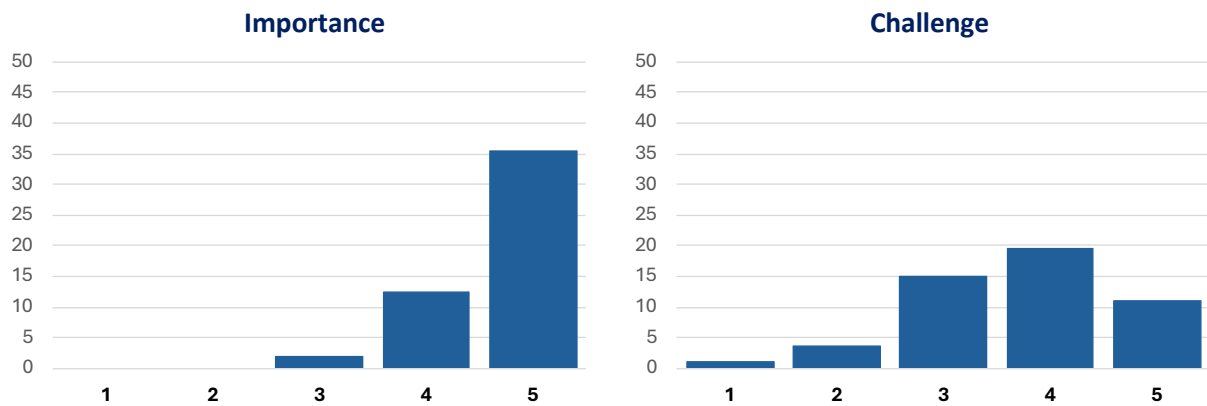


Figure 5: Stakeholder relationships - distribution of rankings 1 – 5

Importance 93%

Stakeholder relationships also rate high in terms of importance. For example:

It's important in a multinational matrix organization because the stakeholders change all the time. They've got very different perspectives. The issues change and it requires constant maintenance and repair. You can't leave it alone, because it'll shift and then you're not where you thought you were.

Where people rated it lower in importance, it was because the organisational culture makes the task easier or because the team leader saw it as an individual task and not a collective team task:

I wouldn't say it's challenging. It comes back to having this fantastic culture here. It's non-hierarchical, and that comes from the Vice-Chancellor down. When you have that as your basis, stakeholder management is easier.

We had a board that was not very good in terms of team dynamics. We had investors. Stakeholders include your customers and partners. We did have a lot around the company that was difficult to manage. We just did what we did, and I was the buffer for all that.

Challenge 74%

Stakeholder management rated as the second most challenging task for leaders:

More difficult than anything else, particularly in my line of work. Really important to understand and manage different relationships and extremely hard to do so, because the internal relationships are often in conflict with themselves and you're stuck in the middle, and their expectations on you can often be very different to your expectations on you.

Those who rated it less challenging again talked about size of organisation and the collective capacity of the team to manage relationships well:

I've worked with a big multinational with big contracts to supply support services to your organization, and if you can't brief them properly, set the ground rules, give them clear direction, they're not going to be able to help your team. That does need to be very well managed. That's not as big a deal in a really small organisation.

If you've got the right people, it's a breeze. If you don't ... you have to have the right recruitment processes such that you're able to motivate and communicate.

BUILDING TEAMS

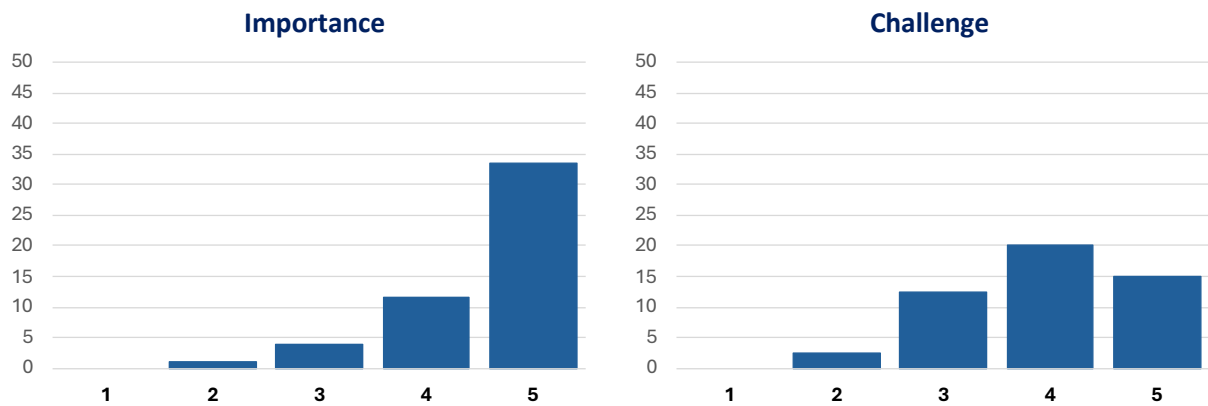


Figure 6: Building teams - distribution of rankings 1 – 5

Importance 91%

Building teams also scored high in terms of importance:

It's mission critical - you live and die by the strength of your team. You need to spend every waking moment thinking about how healthy and productive your team is.

Those who said recruitment and retention are less important generally didn't have the opportunity to pick their own people. These were leaders in government or on boards:

I don't typically have the opportunity to choose my team. And when you can't choose your team, you work a bit extra hard to make sure that people can grow into the areas that you're missing and that people do the things that they're best at.

Challenge 79%

Leaders rated building teams as the *most* challenging task of all. Leaders framed the challenge in terms of market conditions, a general shortage of good people, but also in terms of flawed recruitment processes:

I think anyone can present themselves well, but it's difficult to prove sales acumen, past performance, all that kind of stuff. It's difficult to gauge that in interviews and panels so you have to trust your gut. Even after you think you've made the right choice, they have to settle into the culture and feel like they can perform.

Those who rated the challenge lower did so either because they haven't had the need to recruit recently, or because they put more emphasis on developing the people they have:

I haven't had anyone leave in about four years. If you ask me a year from now, if I had 50% turnover, I might say more challenging.

I don't think there's such a thing as the right people on the team - teams form and develop. You can have some people on the team that aren't very good, but you sometimes have to manage the best way you can. Getting your perfect team is a fanciful notion, because one person moves, and it's no longer a perfect team.

MANAGING DIVERSITY

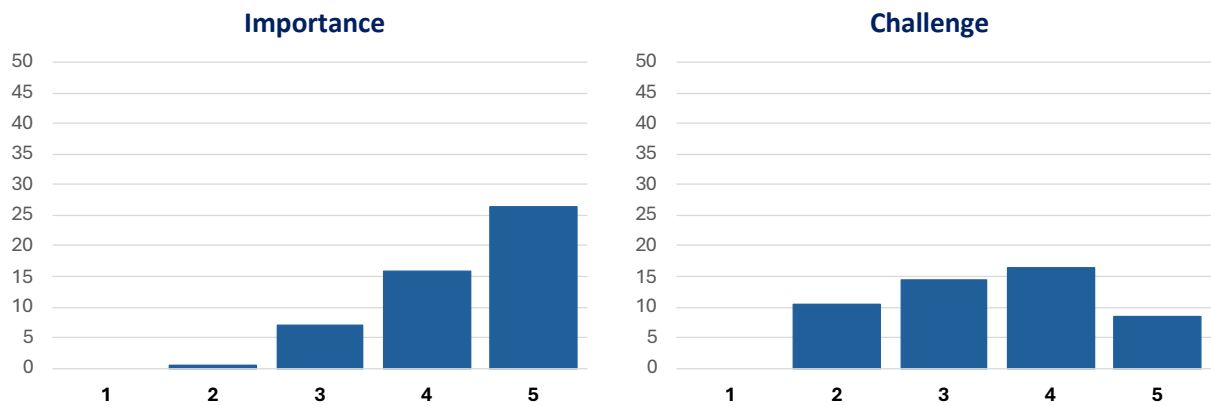


Figure 7: managing diversity - distribution of rankings 1 – 5

Importance 87%

Managing diversity ranked sixth out of the eleven themes. Some people focussed on surface-level/visible aspects of difference. For example:

We have somebody that lives quite far away from campus and due to her age, doesn't want to drive after dark. People start looking over the fence and saying, well, why did they get to do it? Why are rules different for some? It's just incredibly challenging, because it's so personalized.

Others placed more emphasis on deep-level/invisible aspects of difference. For example:

Diversity of thought is really important across the team. You have different qualifications, different personality types. All of that stuff contributes to good decision making. Diversity of a team in terms of what they look like is largely irrelevant. Paying attention only to the visible stuff is counterproductive - it doesn't lead to diversity of thought.

Some people said taking a proactive approach to managing diversity isn't so important:

If the team is sufficiently large, I believe you get a lot of diversity of opinion just anyway.

It's better when you have diversity, but with a few exceptions, you can get around it. For me, it's super easy. Of my 100 people we've got 16 nations represented, all different languages, all different ages and things like that. We really mean it when we talk about a speak up culture. And in health care, I find people are just generally interested in each other as people.

Challenge 69%

The challenge associated with managing diversity ranked fifth. Again, some people talked about surface-level/visible aspects of diversity:

We had 100 females and not one of them in a senior role. And then we got one who was also Aboriginal, and it was - Oh My God! - the challenges they faced. Really, really difficult. When I took on that new branch, I did not have a single female senior leader, and trying to create that is really challenging, to get that acceptance in a strong blue-collar world.

Others focussed more on deep-level/invisible aspects of diversity:

The challenge is getting people with different skill sets and diverse views understanding one another and one another's work. We have a team of smart, quantitative people with PhDs in mathematics and

physics, and a team of people who are very qualitative who have been in markets for the last 30 years. They understand big thematics that are changing around the world. To try and get the two teams or the two sets of diverse views to come up with a common view is a big challenge.

People talked about unconscious bias:

Diversity can be difficult to manage because teams often replicate themselves. Their age, their culture, the sort of industries that they come from. And they do it unconsciously. I always challenge my leaders, and I watch it closely, but it can run away from you quickly.

Those that said it wasn't so challenging said that they were just very aware of the diversity challenge:

It's highly important, but I actually don't find it that challenging. Maybe some of that stems from my experience working on diversity and inclusion committees - I'm really comfortable with that recognition and acknowledging diversity across many facets.

MANAGING CONFLICT

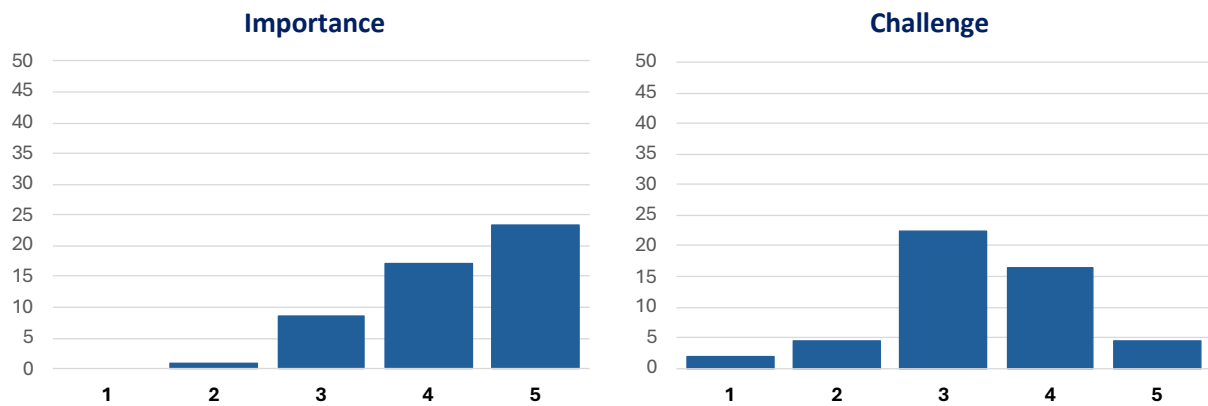


Figure 8: Managing conflict - distribution of rankings 1 – 5

Importance 85%

Managing conflict ranks seventh of the eleven themes in terms of importance:

There is a need to be open and callout conflict when you see it and be comfortable being uncomfortable. I think it's challenging, having that frank and open conversation because sometimes they just don't want to go there. And when you've had that challenging conversation, how do you move on? How do you rebuild that trust?

Those who see it as less important see some degree of relationship conflict as inevitable:

It's inevitable. Sometimes people just need to learn to get more comfortable with it instead of seeing it as a problem to fix. I think it just exists and it should be there if people are openly sharing what they think about things. I think people overmanage it often thinking every little conflict needs resolved. It doesn't.

Challenge 70%

Managing conflict ranked higher in terms of challenge:

People don't want to deal with conflict. They're not equipped to deal with conflict. People find it awkward. Leaders find it awkward. And it would be better just getting people in a room, sorting it out, moving forward.

A bad apple can spoil a jam. It's important the way the way the issue is raised, to make sure that it's received in an open way, not in a confronting way. And that can be challenging because some personalities are not adept at receiving feedback.

Many of those who see conflict as less challenging spoke about having developed their own ability to manage conflict over time:

I'm much better at picking the early warning signs these days and supporting other people to see that and encourage clear and kind conversations with people. I step in and help facilitate that if they need a bit of a hand, really clear on role modelling with teams.

TEAM ALIGNMENT

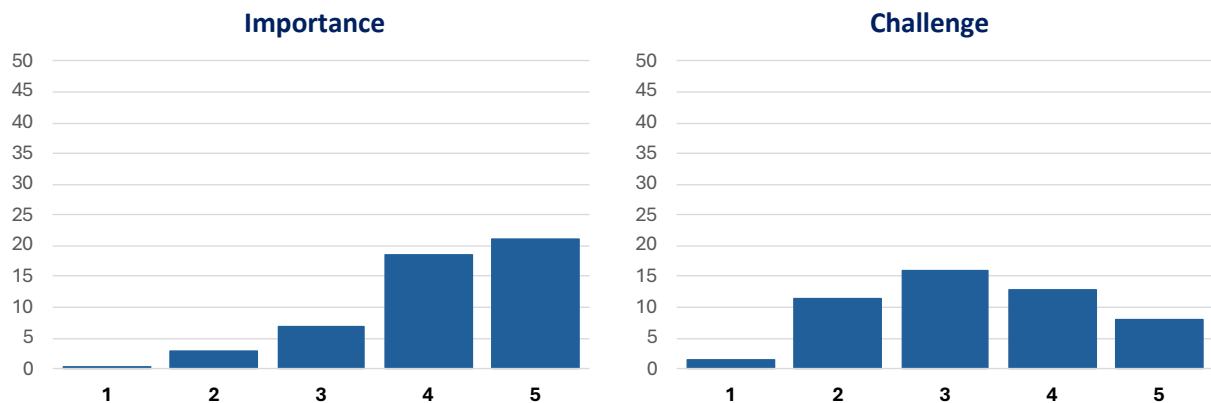


Figure 9: Team alignment - distribution of rankings 1 – 5

Importance 83%

Though team leaders ranked team alignment eighth on the list, still more than 40% of respondents rated it at 100%. People talked about the importance of aligning around behavioural norms and the team holding itself accountable to those norms:

Having some ground rules so that everybody has a common understanding as to the team culture, appropriate behaviours. And to hold each other to account to whatever is agreed. It's super important. We keep each other in check and have regular check ins across all of our different teams.

Those who said it was less important talked about team alignment as an outcome of good communication and good culture.

I think this is a lower importance issue. I think it's an outcome. If you form a team dynamic and a culture that is measured in terms of how it performs, and we are execution focused, then repetition alone is a signal.

Challenge 66%

Many leaders said team alignment was challenging, particularly the accountability piece.

The challenge is getting people to hold each other to account. Nobody's got the guts, unless it's a super safe space, to challenge people. You can do all the team charters you want, but is anyone paying attention to them?

Some said it was less challenging with an established team or within a strong organisational culture:

It's challenging if you've got a new team. When you've got an existing team and new members are coming into it, there are cultures and values and behaviours that already exist in the organisation and the team. New people tend to fit in and comply by default.

Because the whole organisation is speaking the same language around culture it's not challenging to manage. Because there's a commonality there across the entire organisation. You're still going to have outliers, but you've got that foundational baseline of what good culture looks like here

HYBRID WORKING

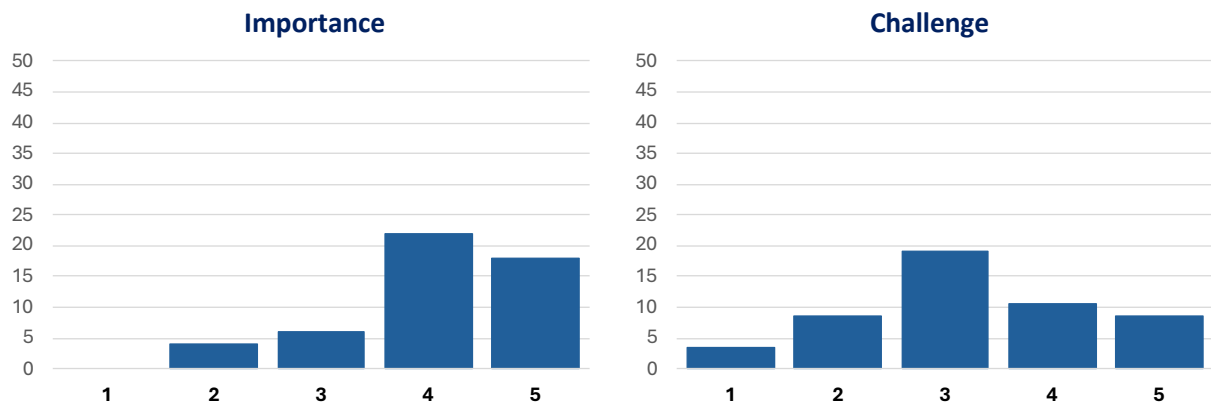


Figure 10: Hybrid working - distribution of rankings 1 – 5

Importance 82%

Many people said that paying special attention to the needs of virtual/hybrid teams is important:

We haven't worked it out yet. We're still working through that and it's going to take some time. And that's why you see a lot of big businesses now forcing people back to the workplace. I don't think that's the answer. My biggest concern is that young people coming through aren't learning that proper work ethic and how it is to be in a team and how you learn from those side conversations by the water cooler. If we don't stay on top of it and if we don't have people checking in with each other or having those side conversations and it just becomes meeting after meeting after meeting, it's going to affect all workplaces long-term.

Other leaders said that people have now adapted to working virtually:

I think people have generally become adaptable to the different ways of working just through the act of going through the whole COVID thing. I think it would be harder if you were trying to talk to someone who didn't go through COVID and try to explain the difference, but we've all done it. And then you have the new generation coming in where they only know this more flexible way of working.

Challenge 65%

Many leaders do find hybrid working challenging:

The kinds of things that an old-fashioned leader would have been used to doing - getting a kick up the arse, being dragged out of a room, pulled aside for a one-on-one, having a quiet water cooler conversation chat, addressing things in a timely way, I think that's bred a different type of leader. It's way more challenging to manage virtual teams because you don't get those same sorts of experiences and opportunities that in-presence teams in a physical environment do.

Those who ranked it lower talked about process and technology:

I think because of the culture of the company and because of what we do (we're tech-base) we embraced it very early during COVID. We know how to do it. Cadence is really important. Accountability, taking notes, making sure that actions are very clear, and followed up, that there's communication before and after, and taking the time either side of the work to be together in virtual calls. It's good have an open space for dialogue and everyone gets to know each other at the same time. We've got a lot better with electronic tools and whiteboards.

TEAM DYNAMICS

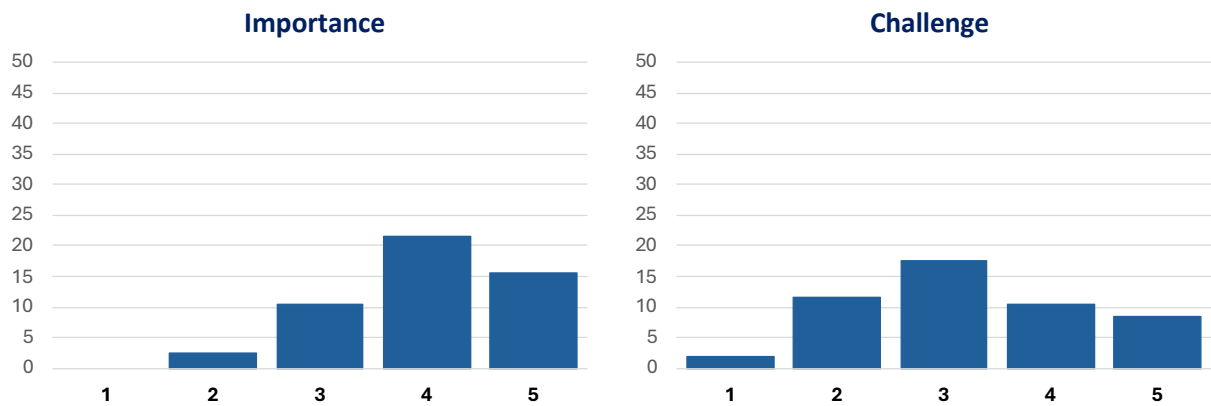


Figure 11: Team dynamics - distribution of rankings 1 – 5

Importance 80%

Team dynamics rated tenth in terms of importance. Some leaders do think team dynamics are important:

I screwed up last Thursday, misread a room, misread a dynamic. The actual dynamics in trying to achieve something as a group, if you can't get the interpersonal spiderweb to connect, it's pulling on the rope in different directions. The team dynamic, who's good at what? How do we respect that? How does that translate into action or lack of action? How do we hold each other accountable?

Some see it as less important:

I'm not a fan of worrying about office politics and influencing behind the scenes. So, I don't put people in my team who are political in their nature. I'm a good old-fashioned roll up the sleeves, get on with it type of a person. And they're the behaviours I expect of my team. So, to a large extent, I have the blinkers because I try not to worry about that or care. If they want to have lots of relationships and chat away and talk to each other about stuff, that's fine by me. I am more task focused.

Challenge 65%

Some leaders find team dynamics challenging:

The fact that you're working in a team, you want to get diverse views from individuals. What you don't want are factions that feel that they have the upper hand, which can happen in the workplace. That's one that gets quite ingrained, particularly among people who have good relationships. How do you then expand the relationship to a broader team?

Those who said it isn't so challenging talked about taking a structured approach and the impact of organizational culture:

We tease out the dynamics. Those people who sit back from the conversation or are pissed off or those people pushing. We make sure that we get onto that as a team. We've gone through a couple of team profile things.

My organization has been really deliberate in its development of its organizational wide culture, and really references this idea that we're not little, countries going to the UN and arguing for our own causes. If the wider team can see that team number one is united, then it removes those factions and infighting. Because we have that foundation to refer to, it makes managing it quite simple.

MULTI-TEAM MEMBERSHIP

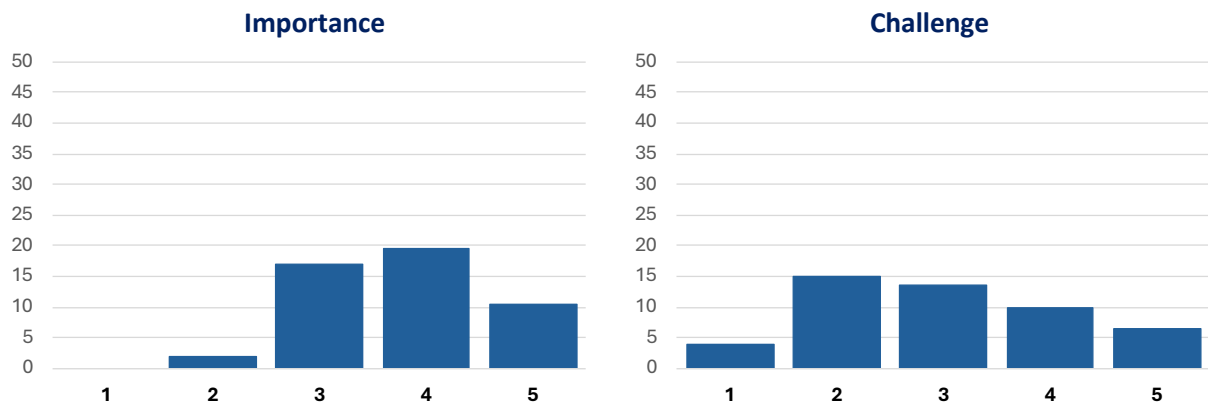


Figure 12: Multi-team membership - distribution of rankings 1 – 5

Importance 76%

Multi-team management was ranked lowest of the 11 themes, but still seen as very important by some leaders, particularly those working in a matrix organisation:

I had this exact scenario yesterday where a team member had been invisible for the last few weeks, but we needed that person to deliver a task. They had been prioritised on so many other things that they hadn't been able to afford the time. Part of the challenge is you don't know what you don't know. So, in the case of this individual, they said they were being tasked with a whole bunch of other things, but there was no clarity that that actually was happening. So there's a prejudice forming around that individual and what they're doing day to day.

In my previous role for a large global corporation, it was a disaster. Everyone was on a different team. Reporting lines were all over the place. You'd spend a lot of time talking about things and people nodded their heads but then went away and did nothing because another taskmaster was telling them to do something else.

If you don't manage that, it will lead to burnout. For people in our organization, it's very prevalent. There are demands coming from everywhere and people just absolutely don't care about other people's workloads. So, you burn your people out. That's what happens.

Others don't see it as important these days, given the advent of good systems, particularly in professional services:

Back in the day it was more of an issue. We have scheduling systems to help us now. Now, with a click on a dashboard, I know where the team is and what they're working on. It tells me how busy they are in reality and how much time they're booking as well.

Challenge 60%

Though this was the least challenging theme overall, some leaders do find multi-team management challenging:

I've got some of my team who are on my team some of the time and some of them might be on five teams. That creates conflict. It's very challenging because of style and cultural differences, and if you can't bring those things together, then you end up with teams not talking to each other. A disaster.

It's challenging because we like to judge. People see others not contributing so much and blame them. Performance would be better if we were putting effort into addressing it or being mindful of it.

Others talked about the benefit of administration and systems, and good culture and acquired skills:

We're all very specialist, but in theory it's very important to make sure that everyone knows where everyone's involved and where their allegiance lies. I would say that for me, that's like not that difficult – it's more of a clerical administrative thing.

In my current job, it's a given and I don't think about it at all. We're all doing it. You're expected to do it. We all understand that at times people aren't around and people are pretty good at managing around it for me and my team.

This is absolutely bread and butter for me. The problems associated with it can be dealt with through clarity and understanding at the start. What is the percentage of this person that I have this person? How long do I have this person to work? What are the tasks they're doing? What else are they doing? And I'm also really clear to the person that they need to manage their time outside the project and let me know if that starts to impact the project. It's important, but it's a fairly standard operating thing.

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CONNECTIONS

Amidst all the verbatims were lots of comments about *connection*, in particular the need for a team to have good dialogue and high levels of trust if they are to successfully address the other nine themes.

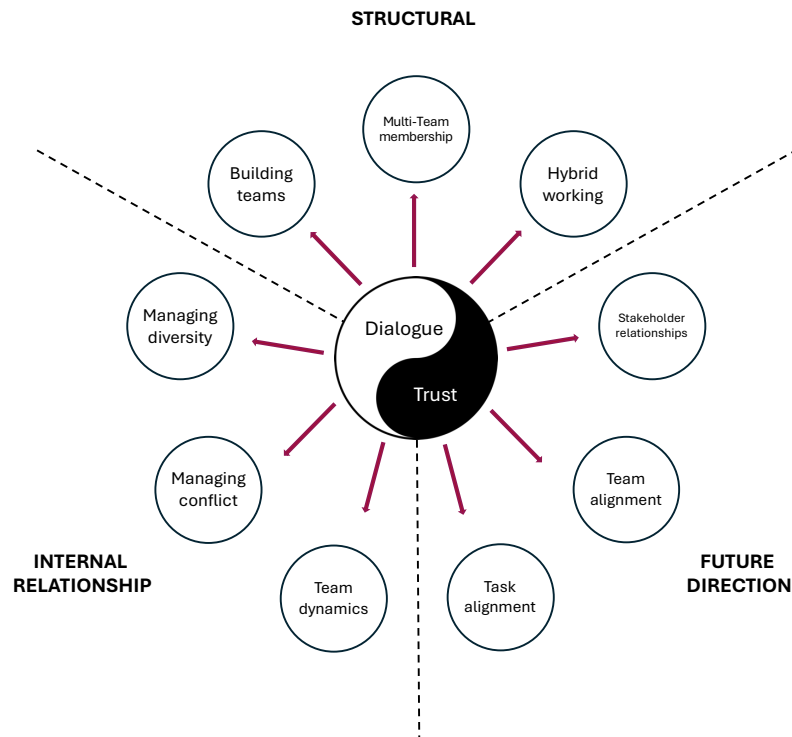


Figure 13: Connections

Some verbatims:

Future direction

Everyone must be aware of what the purpose, vision, objectives and goals are. It's not overly difficult if you communicate the right way. And if people trust that you're going to look after them, and you're going to meet them where they are, they will buy into your direction.

[Team alignment] is just about your willingness as a leader to have a critical conversation. I don't find it very difficult if you've got that psychological safety and trust set.

Stakeholder management can be really difficult without communication, trust and managing conflict.

These verbatims make sense. If a team is to align around purpose, vision, and objectives, then this can only be achieved through people talking with each other, and the more respectful that conversation is, the more likely it is that the team will agree on something that everyone is genuinely aligned with. Similarly with team alignment. If a team is to agree on its behavioural norms, then people must feel free to speak up, even if they aren't confident that others will agree with them. And to hold people to account to those norms requires people to be brave, to give feedback and to challenge. Similarly, there is a difference between asking stakeholders what they want and delivering on that versus negotiating desired outcomes with stakeholders. Negotiation requires the ability to listen and speak up – with respect.

Internal relationships

[Team dynamics] comes back to communication and trust. If I have that, it's not that challenging. You can just ring someone and go, hey, I notice in all these meetings you keep doing this. And they say, oh, you know, and it's fine. You can have that conversation, whereas if you don't have that, it's very challenging because no one wants the feedback.

I've learned the hard way about the importance of openness and directness [in managing conflict]. It hurts to start with, but the quicker you pull off the Band-Aid, the quicker you can move on.

When you're looking at multicultural audiences, communication styles don't always translate. I've always thought of myself as a good communicator, but this recent stuff made me realise I'm not listening to the vagaries of other cultures as much. It's about providing an environment in which people can speak out and people are willing to listen and give them respect.

To breakthrough in any of these domains clearly requires a team to invest in seeking to understand each other, and requires people to be open and transparent about what they are thinking and feeling. Again, the team's capacity to function well in those spaces is directly connected to its capacity to engage in dialogue and co-create a safe holding space.

Structural

I'm working in an environment that's incredibly complicated and everyone's in multi-teams and everyone's got different KPIs. I don't think it's that hard to manage if you have communication and trust.

A third of my team don't live where I live. Half my team aren't in the office the same time as that I'm in. The ability for that distance to cause issues is extremely high and that's going to lead to dysfunction really quickly.

If a team is to work well when team members are dispersed such that most of their time is spent engaging with each other through virtual media, the focus once more is on communication and trust. Indeed, the capacity of the team to engage in dialogue may be challenged a lot more in such circumstances, than it is when the team is co-located. Multi-team membership presents a challenge, a challenge that our leaders said can be overcome through good communication.

The link to building teams may be less obvious, but it is still there, nevertheless. The relationship in this case may be more co-dependent. People inside the organisation must be able to communicate in order to make recruitment decisions and must sometimes trust each other's judgments. And that is more likely to happen if the team is explicitly paying attention to the ability of potential new hires to engage in dialogue, and to build trusting relationships.

Our conclusions

The TLIM Model

The TLIM Model should prove useful to all team coaches, in particular new coaches, helping them to contract more effectively. Many team coach training programs tend to emphasise particular aspects of team functioning, for example task alignment, team dynamics and stakeholder relationships. All these themes are important, but no single theme by itself will equip a practitioner to work more broadly.

Importance and challenge

We think the importance data is marginally more interesting than the challenge data. The challenge numbers represent how challenging particular individuals find these particular topics. The variability in the data tells us that different leaders have their own personal strengths and development areas. The leaders you work with will have their own strengths and development areas.

Task alignment and stakeholder relationships come high up the list, as we might expect. But there are two important points to make here. First, consider the variability in the data. For each of the 11 themes, there are leaders who think that topic is 100% important and 100% challenging. The team coach should be alert to all these topics when working with a specific team. The verbatims give us clues as to what to look for in determining the importance of a particular topic, variables including: culture of the organisation; team size; how long a team has been together; organisation structure, and so on. Second, what the team *initially* think is most important may not be what they *ultimately* think is most important. If we analyse the importance data by category (figure 14) we see that **dialogue** and **trust** are rated most important, followed by the **future direction** themes. Many teams are results focussed and outcome oriented. It isn't surprising then, to see leaders rating those topics as most important. But teams may not always have the awareness or patience, to slow down and explore other areas, areas that will enable them to be more successful. The importance of team dynamics, for example, may only emerge over time. A greater focus on selecting new team members may also help enormously.

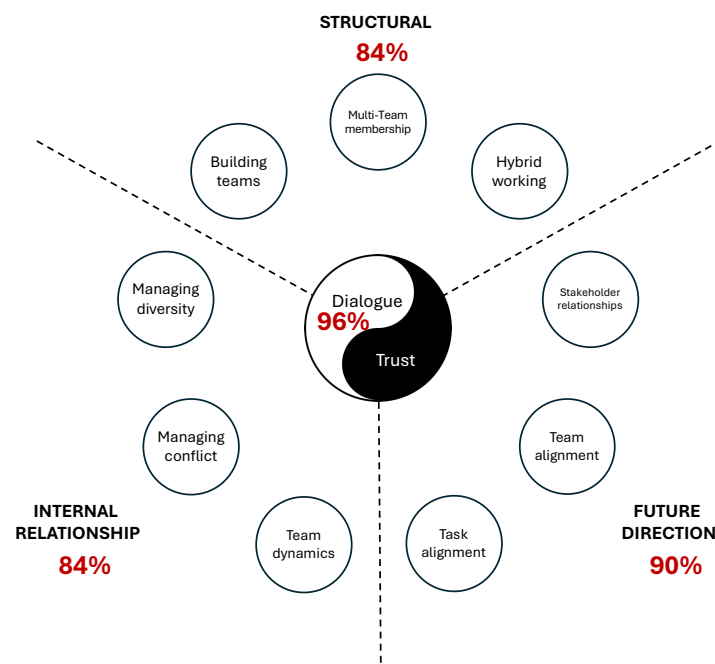


Figure 14: Importance data by category

Dialogue and trust are always important

On the basis of these ratings there appear to be two topics that are important no matter what, that is the team's capacity to engage in dialogue and to cultivate trust. Whilst some teams may not need your help in these domains, because they are already good at dialogue and have already co-created a safe and supportive working environment, dialogue and trust may be the best place where to begin the work with many teams.

Practical takeaways

You will, of course, determine these for yourself, based on your own personal philosophy, purpose, experience, and skills. But here are some questions you may find useful to consider:

1. To what extent is the work you do with clients driven by makes you feel most comfortable and content vs. what may be of most benefit to the teams you work with? How can you become more comfortable and confident with a broader range of topics?
2. How familiar are you, in particular, with the literature around dialogue? To what extent do you practice dialogue as a team coach?
3. How many of these topics currently form part of your scope? Team building, for example, is regarded as in-scope by some team coaches, out-of-scope by others^v.
4. To what extent will you find answers to your questions within the team coaching community? Where else might you need to look? There is a certain amount written about systems and systemic thinking in the team coaching community, for example, but much more to be found in the systems thinking community itself^{iv}. Professional communities can be quite insular.
5. What variables do you need to look out for in any given assignment that may give you some clues as to how you can be most helpful? Team size is one such variable, but what about the broader organisation and its culture? How are some of those variables likely to show up in the team coaching contexts you encounter?

And ...

6. If you are an OD/HR professional, what implications do these findings have for the development of leaders within your organisation?

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Notes

- i Hackman, J. R. & Wageman, R. (2005). A Theory of Team Coaching. *The Academy of Management Review*, 30(2), 269-287
- ii Kantor, D. (2012). *Reading the Room*. Jossey-Bass.
- iii e.g. Hawkins, P. & Turner, E. (2020). *Systemic Coaching*. Routledge
- iv Lawrence, P. (2021). *Coaching Systemically. Five Ways of Thinking About Systems*. Routledge.
- v Some authors suggest that building teams is part of the remit of a team coach (e.g. Peters, J. & Carr. C. (2019). What does 'good' look like? An overview of the research on the effectiveness of team coaching. and Wageman, R. & Lowe, K. (2019). Designing, launching, and coaching teams: the 60-30-10 Rule and its implications for team coaching.) and others don't (e.g. Murphy, C. & Sayer, M. (2019). Standing on the shoulders of the science of team effectiveness: building rigour into your team coaching design). All three articles in the same book - D. Clutterbuck, J. Gannon, S. Hayes, I. Iordanou, K. Lowe & D. Mackie (Eds.), *The Practitioner's Handbook of Team Coaching*, Routledge