

B L A C K F O X S T R A T E G Y

THE STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE TEAM DIAGNOSTIC

*A Self-Assessment for
CEOs and Executive Directors*

Five patterns that kill strategy before it starts.
See which ones are running your team.

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New Science. Ancient Wisdom. Better Business.



Why This Matters

You have smart, capable people around your leadership table. You have a strategy. You may even have a plan everyone agreed to. So why does execution keep stalling in ways nobody can quite explain?

Because strategy doesn't fail in the market first. It fails in the space between your senior leaders—in the assumptions never surfaced, the trust never tested, the hard conversations that didn't happen, and the patterns everyone can feel but nobody names.

Research from HBR and Workpath found that executives report feeling 82% aligned on strategy—but actual measured alignment sits at just 23%. That fourfold gap is where strategic performance suffers first. Not in the plan. In the room where the plan is supposed to come alive. And the cost isn't abstract. McKinsey's research shows that organizations with aligned, effective top teams are nearly twice as likely to achieve above-median financial performance and grow 2.5 times faster than peers. The inverse is equally true: when your team isn't functioning as a team, every strategic initiative pays the price.

This diagnostic is designed to surface what's actually happening inside your leadership team. It examines five patterns I encounter most often in my work with CEOs and executive directors—patterns that persist in plain sight, with talented people at the table, for years. Not because anyone is failing. Because the causes run deeper than most leaders suspect, and they come from places most consultants never look.

The score is not the end goal. It's perspective. What you can see, you can address. What you can't, runs the show without your permission.

Answer honestly. There's no grade here—only clarity.

How to Use This Assessment

For each of the five patterns, you'll find a description of the dynamic, a set of diagnostic statements, and reflection questions. The diagnostic statements tell you *where* the pattern lives in your team. The reflection questions start to tell you *why*.

Rate each diagnostic statement on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means you strongly disagree and 5 means you strongly agree. Don't overthink it—your first instinct is usually the most honest one.

A note on honesty: This assessment is only as useful as you are truthful. The most common mistake leaders make in self-assessment is answering based on what they intend or aspire to



rather than what actually exists today. Rate the current state. Aspiration is important—but it's not the same as reality, and confusing the two is how blind spots form.

Consider doing this with your team. This diagnostic is designed for individual reflection, but its power multiplies when leadership teams complete it independently and then compare notes. The places where perceptions diverge are almost always the places where the most important work needs to happen.

Before You Start

Before you dive into the five patterns, take a moment to ground yourself. Write down what brought you here. What's your gut telling you about how your leadership team is functioning? What are you trying to solve?

Don't overthink it. Your instinct is usually the most honest signal you have.



P A T T E R N O N E

Performative Consensus

Your team agrees in the room—then scatters.

Meetings end with apparent consensus. Heads nod. Action items get assigned. And then execution fractures—not dramatically, but quietly. Priorities drift. Interpretations diverge. Three months later you’re asking why progress stalled, and no one can point to the moment it went sideways.

The cause isn’t inattention. It’s a cognitive phenomenon called the **False Consensus Effect**—the tendency to overestimate how much others share your interpretation. When a CEO shares a strategic direction and the room doesn’t push back, the CEO walks out believing alignment was achieved. But silence isn’t agreement. It’s often uncertainty that didn’t feel safe enough to speak.

Most teams operate as though understanding is synonymous with agreement, and agreement is synonymous with commitment. Those are three different things. Without the discipline to surface and test each one, what you get is performative consensus. It looks like alignment. It functions like fragmentation.

Diagnostic Statements

	1	2	3	4	5
	<i>Disagree</i>				<i>Agree</i>
When our leadership team makes a strategic decision, each person explicitly states their position—not just their assent.	<input type="radio"/>				
If I asked each member of our leadership team to independently list our top three strategic priorities in order, I’m confident the lists would match.	<input type="radio"/>				
Our team has a clear process for distinguishing between understanding a direction, agreeing with it, and committing to execute it.	<input type="radio"/>				
When execution diverges from what was discussed, the team notices quickly and addresses it directly.	<input type="radio"/>				
After major decisions, someone is responsible for confirming that everyone’s interpretation of what was decided—and what it means for their area—actually aligns.	<input type="radio"/>				
We regularly test alignment rather than assume it. Disagreement surfaces in the room, not in the hallway afterward.	<input type="radio"/>				



Reading Your Performative Consensus Score

25–30: Alignment is tested, not assumed. Your team has the discipline to surface disagreement before it fragments execution. Protect this—it's rare.

18–24: Consensus feels real in the room, but you may be discovering misalignment during execution rather than preventing it. The gap between what's agreed and what's understood is worth examining.

12–17: Agreement is being inferred from silence. Priorities likely mean different things to different people, and the team doesn't have a reliable mechanism for catching that before it costs you.

6–11: Strategic alignment is largely performative. The team may leave meetings believing they're on the same page when they're not even reading the same book. This is where strategy fractures first.

Reflect

When was the last time your leadership team independently documented their understanding of strategic priorities—and compared notes? What would happen if you tried that exercise tomorrow?

Think about a recent initiative that stalled or drifted. Can you trace the breakdown to a moment where alignment was assumed rather than confirmed?

How does your team handle the moment when someone says "I thought we agreed to something different"? Is that moment safe, or does it carry a cost?

Jot down your thoughts below.



P A T T E R N T W O

Avoidance Culture

Nobody says the hard thing.

Trust is thin enough that your senior leaders self-edit, sidestep, and avoid the strategic conversations that actually matter. McKinsey found that 65% of executives reported poor dialogue at the top—withholding vital information, suppressing critical opinions, or accepting questionable strategies out of fear of retaliation. Not incompetent people. Fearful ones.

There's a cognitive bias at work here called the **Ostrich Effect**—the tendency to avoid negative information entirely. When combined with the social dynamics of a senior team, it doesn't just mean people ignore bad news. It means the system itself develops an immune response to hard truths. Over time, avoidance becomes the culture. Nobody votes to suppress honesty. It just becomes the unspoken norm—the path of least personal risk.

Here's what's rarely connected to this dynamic: **risk appetite**. Most teams apply risk tolerance thinking to financial decisions and market entry. Almost no one applies it to the conversation itself. What's your team's appetite for truth? When a senior leader suppresses a critical concern because the personal risk of raising it is too high, that's a risk appetite failure—operating at the most consequential level of the organization.

Diagnostic Statements

	1	2	3	4	5
	<i>Disagree</i>				<i>Agree</i>
Senior leaders on our team regularly raise concerns or objections about strategic direction—even when it challenges the prevailing view.	<input type="radio"/>				
When someone shares a dissenting opinion in a leadership meeting, it's treated as valuable input rather than resistance or disloyalty.	<input type="radio"/>				
Our team has explicitly discussed its tolerance for candor—how much uncomfortable truth the system can handle.	<input type="radio"/>				
I can name a recent instance where a leader changed their position because the team's dialogue genuinely shifted their thinking.	<input type="radio"/>				
Information flows upward as freely as it flows downward. Bad news reaches the leadership table without being filtered or softened.	<input type="radio"/>				
Our team addresses interpersonal friction directly when it affects strategic execution, rather than working around it.	<input type="radio"/>				



Reading Your Avoidance Culture Score

25–30: Your team has built a culture where candor is safe and expected. This is the foundation of sound strategic decision-making. It doesn't mean conflict is comfortable—it means it's productive.

18–24: Honesty exists but may be uneven—some topics are open, others stay underground. Watch for the conversations that consistently don't happen. Those are the ones costing you most.

12–17: Self-editing is the norm. Leaders are calculating personal risk before raising concerns, and the system is rewarding that silence. Strategic decisions are being made with incomplete information.

6–11: Avoidance has become the operating culture. The hard conversations aren't happening, and the team may not even recognize what's being lost. This is a strategic vulnerability hiding in plain sight.

Reflect

Is there a topic your leadership team consistently avoids—something everyone knows matters but nobody brings up? What is it, and why does it stay underground?

Think about the last time a significant strategic concern was raised. How was it received? What happened to the person who raised it?

How would your team's direct reports describe the culture of honesty at the top? Would their answer match yours?

Jot down your thoughts below.



P A T T E R N T H R E E

Structural Misdiagnosis

You keep solving the wrong problem.

You redesign strategy. Restructure teams. Bring in new talent. Launch transformation initiatives. And twelve months later, you’re looking at the same stalled outcomes wearing different clothes. The real issue—the unexamined dynamics between the people already at the table—never gets addressed.

There’s a name for why this happens: the **Einstellung Effect**. It’s the tendency to default to a familiar solution even when a better one exists. In organizational life, that familiar solution is almost always structural—reorg the chart, replace the underperformer, hire a consultant to write a new plan. Structure is tangible. It feels decisive. But if the problem is relational, structural fixes just move the same dysfunction into a new org chart.

Organizations are not machines you can re-engineer by rearranging the parts. They are living, complex adaptive systems—and in living systems, the quality of the connections between the parts matters more than the arrangement of the parts themselves. When the relationships between senior leaders are marked by shallow trust, untested assumptions, and unresolved friction, no amount of structural redesign will produce different results.

Diagnostic Statements

	1	2	3	4	5
	<i>Disagree</i>				<i>Agree</i>
When a strategic initiative underperforms, our team examines its own dynamics and decision-making process—not just the plan or the market.	<input type="radio"/>				
In the past three years, our organization has addressed a performance problem by changing how the leadership team functions rather than changing the structure or the people.	<input type="radio"/>				
Our team recognizes the difference between a structural problem and a relational one, and responds accordingly.	<input type="radio"/>				
When the same challenge resurfaces after a reorganization or leadership change, we ask what’s driving the recurrence rather than attempting another structural fix.	<input type="radio"/>				
We invest in understanding how our leadership team operates under pressure with the same rigor we apply to market analysis or financial planning.	<input type="radio"/>				



	1	2	3	4	5
	<i>Disagree</i>				<i>Agree</i>
Our team’s approach to strategic challenges starts with the question “What dynamics are producing this outcome?” before jumping to solutions.	<input type="radio"/>				

Reading Your Structural Misdiagnosis Score

25–30: Your team looks at relational dynamics as a primary diagnostic lens. This systems-aware approach prevents the costly cycle of structural fixes that don’t address root causes.

18–24: There’s awareness that team dynamics matter, but the default response to underperformance may still be structural. Examine whether your team reaches for relational diagnostics only after structural fixes have failed.

12–17: The instinct to fix structure is strong. Reorganizations, role changes, and new hires are likely the primary response to strategic challenges, while team functioning goes unexamined.

6–11: Your organization is likely cycling through structural interventions without addressing the underlying team dynamics. This is one of the most expensive patterns to leave unresolved—because every fix feels decisive while changing nothing fundamental.

Reflect

Think about the last major reorganization or leadership replacement. Did the underlying dynamic change, or did it find new ways to express itself?

If you set aside every structural explanation for your team’s challenges—org design, talent gaps, market conditions—and looked only at how the people at the table relate to each other under pressure, what would you see?

What would it take for your leadership team to accept that the issue might not be the strategy or the structure—but the way the team itself operates?

Jot down your thoughts below.



P A T T E R N F O U R

Transition Fragility

Every leadership change resets the clock.

A key leader leaves. A new one arrives. Someone gets promoted into the C-suite. And the team goes back to square one—not on the strategy itself, but on the relational foundation required to execute it. The tentative trust-building. The quiet power shifts. Months pass before the team finds its footing again, and by then the strategy has drifted or been quietly rewritten to fit the new dynamic.

This is happening with increasing frequency. Gartner found that 56% of C-suite executives are likely to leave their current role within two years—and that the most tenured executives are often the first to go. You're not just losing people. You're losing the organizational memory, relational capital, and strategic context that took years to build.

The reason this keeps resetting the clock is that most teams have no shared understanding to build on. There's no codified awareness of how the team operates—how each member thinks, communicates, handles stress, or engages with conflict. When that knowledge exists only in informal, unspoken dynamics, it leaves with every departure. And the cost compounds: DHR Global found that when a C-suite executive departs, 55% of employees question whether the organization's mission is worth believing in.

Diagnostic Statements

	1	2	3	4	5
	<i>Disagree</i>				<i>Agree</i>
Our team has a shared language for how each member thinks, communicates, and operates under pressure—documented and accessible, not just intuitively understood.	<input type="radio"/>				
When a new leader joins the executive team, the onboarding process includes how this particular team functions together—not just the role and the strategy.	<input type="radio"/>				
Leadership transitions are treated as team events requiring collective adjustment, not individual events the team is expected to absorb.	<input type="radio"/>				
Our team's relational foundation—trust patterns, communication norms, decision-making dynamics—would survive if two senior leaders turned over in the same year.	<input type="radio"/>				
We have intentional processes for preserving institutional knowledge and relational capital when a leader departs.	<input type="radio"/>				



	1	2	3	4	5
	<i>Disagree</i>				<i>Agree</i>
The team's capacity to execute strategy does not depend on any single individual's presence, relationships, or institutional memory.	○	○	○	○	○

Reading Your Transition Fragility Score

25–30: Your team has built relational infrastructure that survives individual transitions. This is a significant strategic asset—and it's extraordinarily uncommon.

18–24: Some infrastructure exists, but transitions still create meaningful disruption. The team likely recovers, but the cost in lost momentum and strategic drift may be higher than you realize.

12–17: Leadership transitions reset the team's relational clock significantly. Trust, communication patterns, and strategic context must be rebuilt from scratch each time—creating recurring windows of vulnerability.

6–11: The team's cohesion depends almost entirely on the informal dynamics between current members. Any significant leadership change will produce months of strategic drift while the team recalibrates. This is a structural fragility, not a people problem.

Reflect

Think about the last time a senior leader joined or left your team. How long did it take to recalibrate? Did the team fully recover, or did it quietly settle into a different—and possibly lesser—version of itself?

If a new executive joined your team tomorrow, what would they receive beyond an org chart, a strategy deck, and a set of KPIs? Is there anything that tells them how this team actually works together?

How much institutional knowledge, relational capital, and strategic context would your team lose if your two most tenured leaders left within six months of each other?

Jot down your thoughts below.



P A T T E R N F I V E

Cascading Dysfunction

The team's dysfunction is now the organization's culture.

This is the one that should keep you up at night. Whatever is unresolved at the leadership table doesn't stay at the leadership table. It replicates in every division, every department, every team meeting below you. The patterns you tolerate at the top become the patterns everyone else lives with.

There's an ancient principle that captures this with striking precision: *as above, so below. As within, so without.* What shows up at one level of a system shows up at every level. This maps perfectly to what complexity science confirms about organizational behavior. In complex adaptive systems, patterns are fractal—they repeat at every scale. If your executive team operates in silos, your departments will too. If trust is fragile at the top, it will be thin everywhere else.

Gartner's research puts a number to this: just over half of top team members say they have a clear sense of how priorities fit together. That drops to fewer than one-third among direct reports, and plummets to 16% for frontline supervisors. Clarity doesn't just degrade. It disintegrates. And the less clarity there is at the top, the less there is everywhere else.

Diagnostic Statements

	1	2	3	4	5
	<i>Disagree</i>				<i>Agree</i>
The operational challenges in our middle management and frontline teams do not mirror the dynamics of our leadership team.	<input type="radio"/>				
Our organization's stated values—collaboration, transparency, accountability—are lived at the leadership table with the same consistency we expect from everyone else.	<input type="radio"/>				
Strategic clarity holds as it moves through the organization. Frontline supervisors could articulate our priorities with reasonable accuracy.	<input type="radio"/>				
When we see dysfunction in the broader organization—silos, conflict avoidance, unclear priorities—we examine whether the pattern originates at the leadership level before looking elsewhere.	<input type="radio"/>				
Our leadership team models the culture we want, rather than expecting culture change from others while operating differently ourselves.	<input type="radio"/>				



	1	2	3	4	5
	<i>Disagree</i>				<i>Agree</i>
Employees at all levels would describe the culture the same way our leadership team does.	<input type="radio"/>				

Reading Your Cascading Dysfunction Score

25–30: Your leadership team is modeling the culture it expects. This is where strategic performance becomes self-reinforcing—the patterns at the top produce the patterns everywhere else, and both are healthy.

18–24: The leadership team’s best qualities are likely reflected in the organization, but so are its blind spots. Look for the places where organizational challenges mirror unresolved team dynamics.

12–17: Leadership team patterns are replicating through the organization in ways that undermine strategic execution. The culture you’re experiencing isn’t something happening to you—it’s something flowing from you.

6–11: The organization’s culture is a reflection of unresolved leadership team dysfunction. This has moved beyond a team development need into a strategic performance crisis—because you cannot fix the culture without first addressing the team that’s creating it.

Reflect

Look at the biggest operational challenges surfacing in your organization right now. Do any of them mirror dynamics that exist—even subtly—within your leadership team?

If your leadership team avoids conflict, where else in the organization do you see conflict avoidance? What is it costing?

How would your mid-level managers describe the culture at the top? Would their description match your leadership team’s self-assessment?

Jot down your thoughts below.



Your Results: Reading the Patterns

Transfer your section scores below. The individual scores matter, but the pattern across all five tells the real story.

Pattern	Your Score	Range
1. Performative Consensus	/30	6 – 30
2. Avoidance Culture	/30	6 – 30
3. Structural Misdiagnosis	/30	6 – 30
4. Transition Fragility	/30	6 – 30
5. Cascading Dysfunction	/30	6 – 30

What the Patterns Reveal

Individual pattern scores tell you where specific dynamics are at work. But the relationship between scores is where the strategic intelligence lives. These five patterns don't operate independently. They're interconnected—and the connections matter as much as the individual findings.

Multiple low scores (6–17 across three or more patterns). This is the most important finding. False consensus feeds avoidance. Avoidance feeds misdiagnosis. Misdiagnosis leads to structural fixes that don't address the real issue. Every leadership transition makes all of it worse because there's no relational foundation to hold the team steady through change. And the compounding dysfunction cascades, becoming the organization's operating culture. If you're seeing low scores across multiple patterns, you're looking at a system, not a list of separate problems.

Low Patterns 1 and 2, higher elsewhere. Consensus and candor are the foundation. If these are weak, the other scores may be artificially inflated—because the team isn't surfacing the information needed to assess the rest honestly. Start here.

Low Pattern 4 with stable team. If your team hasn't experienced recent turnover but still scores low on transition fragility, you're sitting on a time bomb. The infrastructure gaps are invisible because they haven't been tested. They will be.

Low Pattern 5 with higher team-level scores. If your leadership team rates itself well on consensus, candor, and relational dynamics but the broader organization shows cascading dysfunction, there's a perception gap. The team may be experiencing its own dynamics differently than the rest of the organization does. This is worth investigating with external data.

Consistently mid-range scores (18–24 across most patterns). This is the most deceptive pattern. Nothing looks broken. But nothing is truly strong, either. Teams in this range



tend to feel stuck—competent but not thriving. The risk is complacency. The opportunity is that focused investment in any one pattern can shift the entire system.

The team isn't adjacent to the strategy. The team is the strategy's operating system. If the operating system is compromised, nothing you run on it will perform as designed.

The Strategy Connection

In my work with Essential Strategy, the four dimensions—Purpose, Growth, Evolution, and Equilibrium—are designed to be held and managed by a team, not an individual. Every pattern in this diagnostic directly impacts your team's capacity to execute across those dimensions.

Purpose must be internally compelling across the leadership team, not just in the CEO's vision. When Pattern One is operating—when consensus is performative and alignment is assumed—purpose fractures into as many interpretations as there are people in the room.

Growth must be matched by the team's collective capacity to learn and adapt. When Pattern Three is active—when the team keeps reaching for structural fixes instead of examining its own dynamics—that adaptive capacity never develops.

Evolution requires the team to anticipate changing needs together, which demands the kind of candid dialogue that Patterns Two and Five make impossible when left unaddressed. If nobody says the hard thing at the top, nobody will say it anywhere—and the organization loses its ability to see what's coming.

And **Equilibrium**—the dynamic balancing act that keeps Purpose, Growth, and Evolution in productive tension—falls apart entirely in a team that can't hold honest conversation about tradeoffs. Equilibrium requires the courage to deprioritize. To say no. To challenge a peer's strategic bet. That only happens in teams that have invested in relational capacity as deliberately as they've invested in strategic planning.

If this assessment surfaced imbalances you hadn't named before, the companion question worth sitting with is: how healthy is the strategy this team is carrying? The **Strategy Design Diagnostic** assesses organizational health across Purpose, Growth, Evolution, and Equilibrium—the strategic dimensions that this team performance diagnostic sits underneath. Together, they provide a complete picture: the health of the strategy and the health of the team that carries it.



Strategy doesn't fail in one dramatic moment. It fails in the accumulation of dynamics that nobody named.

What's Next

You now have something most leadership teams never develop: an honest picture of the relational patterns driving—or undermining—your strategic performance. That awareness alone changes how you lead. Here's what you can do with it.

Name the pattern. That's not a small thing. Most of these dynamics persist precisely because no one calls them what they are. Acknowledging that your team's alignment is assumed rather than tested, that avoidance has become habitual, that you keep reaching for structural fixes when the issue is relational—that's not weakness. That's the first act of leadership.

Share this with your team. Not as a judgment—as a conversation starter. Have each person complete the assessment independently and compare scores. The patterns this diagnostic reveals are rarely a surprise to the people living inside the organization. They've felt it. They just haven't had language for it.

Pick one pattern. You don't fix everything at once. Identify the pattern that's most active and ask: what would it take to move this score meaningfully in the next six months? That's your highest-leverage investment in strategic performance.

Build the infrastructure. Not another offsite. Not a personality quiz that lives in a drawer. Real, evidence-based tools that give your team a shared language for how each person thinks, communicates, and operates—especially under pressure. And a sustained commitment to using that awareness as a strategic asset, not a one-time event.

If this assessment confirmed what you've been sensing—or revealed something you hadn't seen—and you want to go deeper, that's exactly what CEO Strategy Coaching & Team Performance is built for. Not coaching as therapy. Not coaching as a remedial exercise. Coaching as strategic infrastructure—an ongoing investment in the relational capacity that makes strategy executable. It sits inside the strategy, not alongside it.

Reach out at erin@erinsedor.com or visit ErinSedor.com. Let's talk about what's possible.



Erin Sedor is a CEO Strategy Coach and executive advisor with 30+ years helping organizations build strategy that works—by building the teams that carry it. She is the creator



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