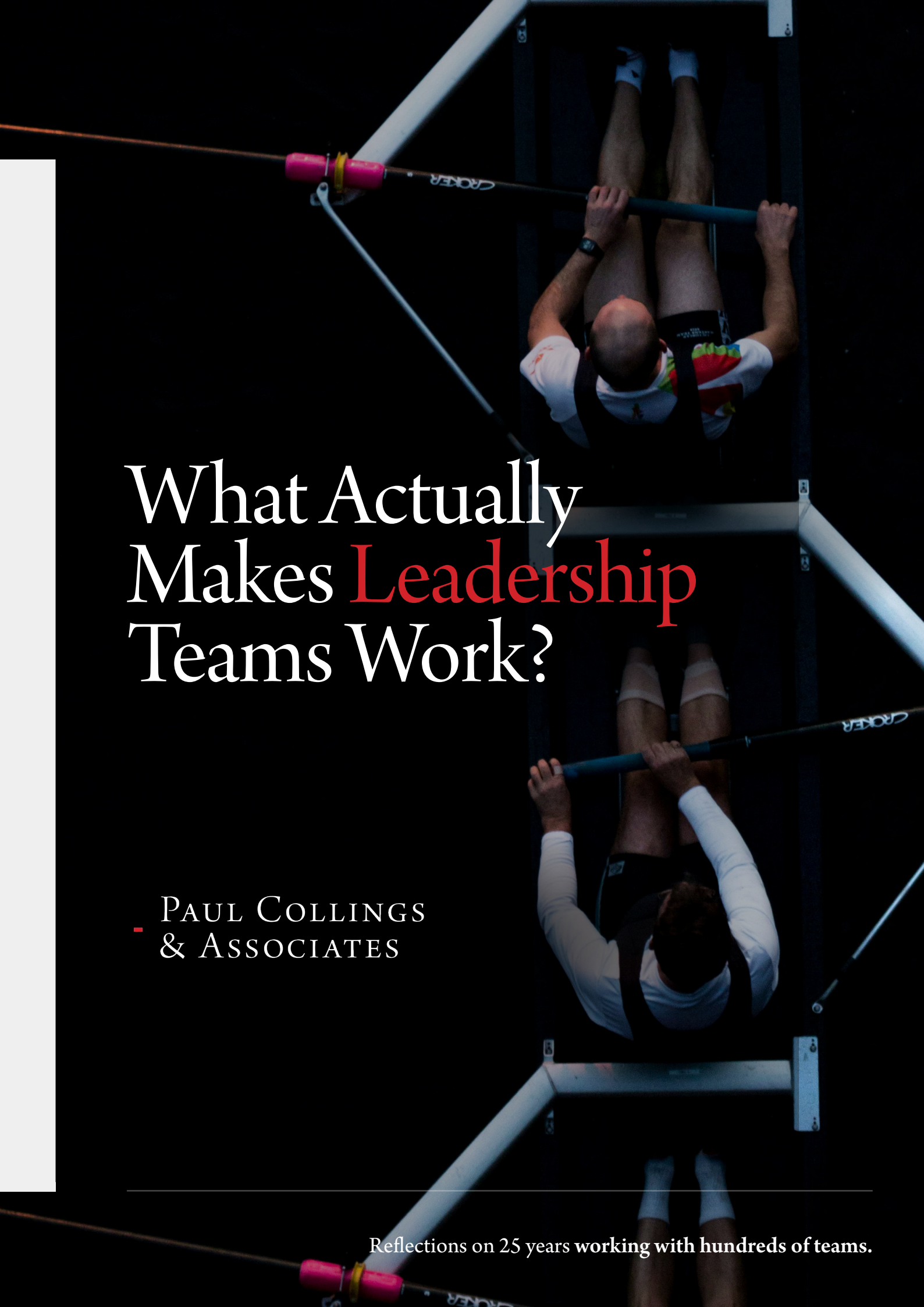


A top-down view of two people rowing on a Concept2 rowing machine. The person in the foreground is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and a black vest, while the person in the background is wearing a white t-shirt with a colorful graphic and a black vest. Both are holding the blue handlebars and have their feet secured in the footpeds. The machine's frame is white, and the background is dark.

What Actually Makes **Leadership** Teams Work?

PAUL COLLINGS
& ASSOCIATES

Reflections on 25 years working with hundreds of teams.

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Introduction & Overview

Over the past 25 years I've worked with hundreds of leadership teams in big corporates and professional service firms. As you would hope (!) I've learnt some things about what drives team performance. I've distilled it into five drivers. Two work differently from the rest.

Here's how the five break down.

Two threshold conditions. Three performance drivers.

Two threshold conditions – necessary but not differentiating:

- Right setup: The right people, a real mandate, and enough structure to function
- Good leadership: The leader doesn't have to be perfect - just engaged, reasonably self-aware, free of significant derailers, and focused on creating the conditions for the team to thrive

Three performance drivers – what actually differentiates high performance teams:

- Clear and energising direction: Where are we going and why does it matter?
- Trust and cohesion: Can we work together honestly and collaboratively to get there?
- Learning and adaptability: Can we learn fast enough to stay competitive as conditions change?

Some of this will be familiar. The three performance drivers echo work I've drawn on for years — McKinsey's Direction/Interaction/Renewal framework from the early 2000s, and Hackman's research on the conditions for team effectiveness. If you've been in a workshop with me, you've probably seen versions of this thinking. What I've added — and what I think changes how you use it — is the distinction between threshold conditions and performance drivers. Not everything matters equally, and knowing which is which changes where you focus.

Right Setup: Good Enough Is Good Enough

Here's the key word: enough.

Not perfect. Not optimal. Enough to create a foundation that lets the real performance work happen — and critically, enough that it doesn't undermine everything else.

What sits under Right Setup?

Five things need to be good enough:

- The right people with the right skills in the right roles
- A real mandate — genuine authority and resources to deliver
- Sufficient role clarity so people aren't tripping over each other
- Basic operating rhythm — meetings that work, decisions that get made and stuck to
- Incentives that don't actively undermine collective effort

Where teams go wrong

I've watched teams diagnose a 'collaboration issue' and then spend weeks — sometimes months — trying to solve it by perfecting their RASCI charts and getting the governance architecture just right.

Meanwhile the actual collaboration problem sits untouched and often spirals.

Here's what can work better: get in a room, give everyone a marker and a flip chart, and have each person write up their understanding of their own responsibilities. Then have the conversation — where are the gaps, where are the overlaps, what needs to be resolved?

That exercise, done well, takes half a day. It's good enough. And it frees the team to focus on what's actually driving the collaboration difficulty — which almost always lives in the territory of trust and cohesion. That's a performance driver, not a setup problem. Treating it as a setup problem is where the months get lost.

I've also worked with teams that talk passionately about collective success while every individual in the room is primarily incentivised to hit their own number. The "one team" culture they're aspiring to is being quietly undermined by the reward architecture they're sitting inside. Again — it doesn't need to be perfect, just coherent enough not to pull people apart.

The trap

Too much time on threshold conditions. Not enough on performance drivers.

I see this regularly. Teams — and their consultants — over-invest in structure, process and role definition because it feels productive and it's relatively comfortable work. Getting the org chart right. Refining the governance framework. Another round of role clarity sessions.

But if the team's real issues are about direction, trust or adaptability, no amount of structural refinement will move the needle.

Get the setup good enough. Then do the harder work.

Good Leadership (Part 1 of 2): Gardener, Not Hero

Of course, great leadership is better than good leadership — but in my experience, teams can achieve high performance with a leader who's good enough. Truth is, no leader is perfect. We all come with quirks and blind spots. The question for this threshold condition isn't whether a leader is exceptional, it's whether they clear two critical bars. First, Bar 1.

Bar 1: Is the leader focused on the team's success — or their own?

There's a principle in permaculture I keep coming back to in my leadership work: The gardener's job is to create the optimum conditions for what they want to thrive. The leader's primary job is exactly this — not to be the hero plant, but to be the gardener who shapes and nurtures the team environment.

It sounds straightforward. In practice it's harder than it looks because the alternative is deeply seductive.

Too many leaders, often without realising it, are playing a different game. Impressing the boss. Looking good in the room. Staying close to the work they were promoted for because that's where their confidence lives. Positioning themselves for the next role.

None of this is malicious. It's human. But it points the energy in the wrong direction — away from the team and toward the self.

Here's the paradox: the leaders who focus hardest on their own visibility and advancement tend to get less of both over time. The ones who quietly invest in creating the conditions for their team to thrive — who make their people look good, who remove obstacles, who build capability rather than dependency — tend to be the ones people remember and follow.

The gardener doesn't get the glory. The garden does. And that, eventually, reflects back.

So the first bar for Good Leadership isn't about skill or style or personality. It's about orientation. Is the leader trying to be the hero plant or the gardener?

Good Leadership (Part 2 of 2): Clearing the Bar

Key question: is the leader reasonably self-aware and free of significant derailers?

What do I mean by self-awareness?

I think about it in two dimensions: Structural Self Awareness: knowing your patterns — your quirks, strengths, the ways your good intent can undermine itself, and In-the-Moment Self Awareness: catching yourself in real time before the damage lands. Both matter. The first tells you what to watch out for, the second is the ability to notice and exercise choice.

What do I mean by significant derailers?

Habitual patterns that undermine trust, squash motivation, or impede execution. Not occasional bad days, we all have them — persistent, patterned behaviours the leader often can't see clearly in themselves.

Two examples I've encountered up close:

A leader whose analytical background had hardwired a belief that speed and perfection were what mattered. As a leader: constant criticism, growing frustration, increasingly doing the work themselves. Burnout followed, blamed on an incompetent team. Those who stayed hunkered down — narrowing scope, staying small. The leader's drive for perfection was producing the very mediocrity they feared most.

A very different leader, similar outcome. Unconsciously addicted to harmony — deeply uncomfortable with conflict, compelled to keep everyone happy. Decisions delayed, compromised, or quietly reversed when someone pushed back. Warm meetings. A rudderless team. Nice 'vibes but they missed a crucial delivery.

Different patterns. Similar result. The team couldn't perform because the leader had

a behavioural pattern that undermined the team's performance, and they didn't have the self-awareness to notice and adjust.

The threshold

You don't need a perfect leader. You need one who is oriented toward the team rather than themselves — and who isn't running a pattern that undermines everything else.

Get those two things right and the three performance drivers have a genuine chance to do their work.

Clear and Energising Direction: The Light on the Hill

The questions this driver answers are deceptively simple: where are we going, how will we get there, and why does it matter?

What does ‘clear’ mean?

Think of it as the light on the hill. Not a values statement. Not an annual strategy deck that lives on the shared drive. A direction vivid enough that people can see it from where they’re standing and orient themselves toward it.

Clear direction confronts the real strategic situation — the opportunity in front of the business, or the challenge that has to be met head-on. It says how the team will get there, particularly in relation to customers and competitors. And it connects all the way down — from the hill to the ground beneath your feet — through specific initiatives, targets and plans that map and monitor execution.

The best directions I’ve seen tend to be pithy, memorable, slightly provocative. “Fix the core, then focus on growth.” “Own the market by building what others can’t match.” That kind of clarity isn’t simplistic — it’s hard strategic thinking distilled into something a team can actually carry. A useful test: can every member of your team articulate the direction — and their own contribution to it — in a sentence or two, in their own words? If so, you have something real.

What does ‘energising’ mean?

This is where direction becomes more than a plan — and where most leadership teams underinvest.

Energising direction provides meaning and purpose that people feel personally connected to. It matters. They care. There’s a shared sense of what that success will look and feel like, vivid enough to hold the team together when pressure mounts and resources tighten.

But energising direction isn’t just an emotional quality — it shows up in how the team operates day to day. The real test is whether the direction is live: present in the room, not sitting in the document on the shelf. Shaping daily decisions, priorities, accountabilities, and the conversations the team actually has. When someone

proposes a new initiative, does the team instinctively ask “does this serve our strategy?” If so, the direction is doing its job.

A simple exercise I use with teams — five questions to bring your light on the hill to life:

1. What will it look like when we’re succeeding at the highest level?
2. Who benefits most — and what changes for them?
3. What would our customers say about us if we got this right?
4. What would we be proud to have built or achieved?
5. What makes this worth showing up for?

That last question is the one that cuts through. It connects organisational direction to individual motivation — and that connection is where ‘energising’ actually lives.

The combination

Clear without energising is a plan people execute dutifully. Energising without clear is inspiration without traction. The teams that sustain high performance tend to have both — a direction sharp enough to govern decisions and meaningful enough to generate genuine commitment.

Trust and Cohesion:

Head Trust, Heart Trust

The key question: can we work together honestly and collaboratively?

Ask any senior leadership team what makes teams perform and Trust is one of the first things people name. We all know it matters. Here's what converts knowing into something real.

Head Trust and Heart Trust

Head Trust is about reliability, credibility, and competence. People generally don't become senior leaders without it. Necessary, but not what differentiates great teams from good ones.

Heart Trust is harder to build and slower to develop — and is the differentiator. It's what determines whether a team can do the genuinely difficult work together.

Without it, teams perform alignment rather than the real thing. Agreement in the room, reservations in the corridor. Professionally pleasant, never fully honest.

With Heart Trust, something different becomes possible. People ask the questions they'd normally self-censor. They challenge ideas to improve them rather than to win. They reach out to a colleague who's struggling. They have the conversations everyone's been avoiding — which, in my experience, are almost always the ones that most need to happen. When teams are working on genuinely complex problems (and if that's not what senior leadership teams are doing, they're probably working on the wrong things!) the quality of thinking that emerges from real openness is what's needed.

How to build it

The key is creating the conditions for people to connect at a human-to-human level — beyond the professional and transactional.

This happens when people are willing to lower the professional front we all put up and be real: about how they're feeling, their lives beyond work, the challenges they've faced and what they've learned from them.

The leader's role here is pivotal. When a leader is brave enough to show their own humanity — to admit uncertainty, to share something of their own struggle — it sets the field for the team. It signals: this is how we're going to be together. That permission, once given, changes what's possible.

In workshops I create structured opportunities for this — calibrated to where the team sits on trust, with permission to go only as deep as feels right. The goal isn't forced vulnerability. It's creating enough safety that real connection becomes possible.

And cohesion?

Cohesion is what happens when Heart Trust combines with the right conditions for communication and collaboration — covered in Post 2 on Right Setup. Trust without structure is warm but ineffective. Structure without trust is efficient but brittle. Both together is where teams become genuinely cohesive.

Learning and Adaptability: Staying Competitive in a Changing World

Change might be the only thing we can rely on.

This idea has been around since the time of Heraclitus and the Buddha and yet leadership teams routinely get caught chasing short term targets while missing disruptive trends building on the periphery.

The key question: can we learn fast enough to stay competitive as conditions change?

Why this is harder than it sounds

In a world of constant and accelerating change, it is necessary but not sufficient to have a good strategy and a high-trust team.

Teams that navigate the reality of constant change well share two habits: they keep a weather eye on the external environment, and they regularly turn that same scrutiny inward on themselves.

External scanning means tracking the factors most likely to reshape your competitive situation: consumer trends, technology shifts, competitive moves. Not passively, but with clear ownership - specific team members responsible for keeping an eye on critical domains and bringing what they see into the team's conversations.

Internal reflection means periodically stepping off the operational treadmill and asking more adaptive questions: Are we sustaining the trust and cohesion we've built? Are there early warning signs of drift or dysfunction? What's working well that we should do more of?

In my experience, few leadership teams dedicate enough time to either, and the consequences tend to arrive as surprises that, in hindsight, were visible all along.

What this looks like in practice

- Monthly or quarterly scheduled time for big-picture thinking, environment scanning, and reflection on team dynamics — protected, not sacrificed when operational pressure builds
- Regular retrospectives on significant initiatives to extract learning
- Clear individual accountability for monitoring critical external factors, with explicit encouragement to challenge the team's assumptions
- A commitment to real decisions and action, not just interesting conversations

Navigating uncertainty

Learning and adaptability require more than process. Teams must be willing to work with uncertainty rather than avoid or ignore it. The teams that do this best do the analysis they can, make the best call, implement fast — and stay genuinely open and ready to adapt to what they learn along the way.

This is where the other two performance drivers become critical. Clear and Energising Direction stops uncertainty from becoming paralysis. Trust and Cohesion creates the safety to say “this isn’t working” before it becomes a crisis. The three drivers reinforce each other.

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