



Case Study

From Fragmented to Functioning: *Transforming a Senior Leadership Team in Public Service*

Background

In November 2023, the senior leader of a public service department engaged in executive leadership coaching and development to address challenges. The engagement began with an emotional intelligence assessment and focused coaching process centered on leadership behavior, self-awareness, communication, and organizational impact.

A critical factor in the success of this engagement was the leader's willingness to fully and personally engage in the development process. The senior leader demonstrated openness, vulnerability, accountability, and a willingness to change long-standing leadership habits and approaches. This was foundational to the broader transformation that followed.

As trust in the process grew, the leader recognized the need to expand development efforts to the department's 16-member senior leadership team.

In October 2024, the team completed the first *Teams That Work* assessment based on the six characteristics of high performing teams.

Initial Assessment Findings

The initial assessment revealed a leadership team experiencing significant internal dysfunction despite a shared commitment to the organization's mission.

While some areas related to purpose and operational clarity showed moderate strength, the assessment identified substantial challenges involving:

- Trust
- Communication
- Psychological Safety
- Accountability
- Unresolved Conflict
- Peer Relationships

The team's lowest scoring category was in their willingness and ability to manage conflict.

Key findings included:

- Team members did not feel safe asking difficult questions,
- Frustrations and concerns were often not openly discussed,
- Many team members believed colleagues talked "behind each other's backs", and
- Past conflict was negatively impacting current team performance.



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The assessment also revealed concerns involving honest communication, shared accountability, inconsistent follow-through, and uneven perceptions of mutual respect.

Importantly, these findings were not treated as evidence of failure, but rather as a clear and actionable diagnosis of the team's current culture and dynamics.

Leadership Development Intervention

In February 2025, the leadership team participated in a facilitated debrief of the assessment results followed by two days of intensive leadership and team development work.

The development experience focused on:

- Behavior Styles
- Emotional Intelligence
- Team Dynamics
- Old Leadership vs. New Leadership
- Fully Functional Relationships
- Triangulation
- Frame of Reference
- Attentive Listening
- Asking Effective Questions
- Positive Language
- Reflective Communication
- Internal vs. External Dynamics
- Expectations and Accountability

The work was intentionally practical and discussion-based rather than theoretical. Team members were encouraged to examine not only the organizational systems, but also their own interpersonal behaviors and contributions to team dysfunction.

A major emphasis was placed on direct communication, reducing triangulation, increasing accountability, and building psychologically safe dialogue.

Action Planning and Operational Integration

Following the development session, the team created a formal action plan designed to translate learning into operational behavior changes. The plan addressed three major themes:

1. Respect

The team committed to:

1. Reinforcing organizational core values,
2. Creating formal expectations around civility and respect,
3. Improving internal communication, and
4. Increasing recognition of employee contributions.



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Specific actions included reviving an employee awards committee and creating clearer systems for recognizing both sworn and non-sworn employees.

2. Reducing Triangulation

The team made an explicit commitment to reducing indirect communication and promoting direct, constructive conversations. Leaders agreed to:

1. Avoid engaging in triangulation,
2. Encourage difficult conversations, and
3. Continue developing skills related to conflict navigation and feedback.

3. Accountability

The accountability portion of the action plan focused on creating clearer behavioral expectations within the leadership team. The team established expectations involving:

1. Responsiveness to communication,
2. Meeting preparedness,
3. Speaking up when disrespect was experienced,
4. Project tracking, and
5. Peer accountability.

One of the most significant developments was the team's stated goal of building "full-full" relationships in which team members actively invited accountability from one another rather than avoiding it.

Continued Reinforcement and Organizational Expansion

In October 2025, additional leadership development sessions were conducted with the senior leadership team and the next level of organizational leaders. The sessions reinforced prior learning while expanding development efforts deeper into the organization. Topics included behavior styles, communication skills, accountability, and expectation-setting.

In January 2026, the senior leadership team completed a third *Teams That Work* assessment.

Results were reviewed with the team in March 2026 alongside additional development work focused on:

- Interviewing Skills,
- Coaching Skills, and
- Advanced Behavior Style Application.

Measurable Results

The follow-up assessments demonstrated substantial improvement across each of the six characteristics.



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The team's strongest gains occurred in areas that were initially among the weakest:

- Honest communication,
- Conflict management,
- Psychological safety, and
- Accountability.

Notable areas of improvement included:

- Greater willingness to ask difficult questions,
- Reduced impact of unresolved conflict,
- Increased recognition of one another's strengths and contributions,
- Stronger alignment around team purpose, and
- Greater clarity regarding accountability and expectations.

The most dramatic area of positive change occurred within the conflict category, which had originally been the team's weakest area.

Equally important, these were not isolated to survey scores alone. The leadership team implemented structural and behavioral changes that reinforced the desired culture through:

- Revised meeting practices,
- Accountability systems,
- Recognition structures, and
- Communication expectations.

Key Lessons

1. Leadership Transformation Begins with the Leader

The most important factor in the engagement's success was the willingness of the senior leader to engage personally in development and behavioral change.

Organizational culture rarely changes if the leader remains defensive, disengaged, or unwilling to change and grow.

2. Psychological Safety Precedes Accountability

Teams struggle to hold one another accountable when trust is low and difficult conversations feel unsafe.

As the team developed greater trust and openness, accountability became more constructive and less threatening.

3. Conflict Avoidance Carries Organizational Costs

The initial assessment demonstrated how unresolved conflict and indirect communication negatively impacted collaboration, trust, and team effectiveness.



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The team's focus on developing conflict-management skills resulted in a substantially stronger perception of its ability to address difficult issues directly and productively.

4. Sustainable Change Requires Operational Reinforcement

The team's progress accelerated when development concepts were translated into:

- Formal expectations,
- Operational systems,
- Meeting structures, and
- Observable behavioral commitments.

The work moved beyond awareness into sustained behavioral practice.

Conclusion

Over approximately 1.5 years, this 16-member public service leadership team demonstrated significant cultural and operational improvement through:

- Leadership Development,
- Emotional Intelligence work,
- Team Assessment,
- Facilitated Dialogue,
- Accountability Structures, and
- Ongoing Reinforcement.

The case illustrates that meaningful organizational transformation is possible when leaders are willing to:

1. Examine their leadership honestly and be open to discovering their blind spots.
2. Engage directly with challenging situations and dynamics.
3. Develop higher levels of emotional intelligence.
4. Intentionally build healthier patterns of communication, accountability, and trust.

Most importantly, the engagement demonstrated that measurable improvement in team effectiveness is achievable even in high-pressure public service environments where conflict, stress, and operational demands are constant realities.

While all progress and performance improvement ultimately belonged to the leadership team, it was supported by a structured development process that included assessment, coaching, facilitated learning, and practical application. The Effectiveness Institute tools and frameworks provided a common language and roadmap that helped guide the team's growth over time.