



When Alignment Exists, But Situational Awareness Doesn't

Why well-aligned teams still make bad decisions under pressure

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The Invisible Failure

When everything looks aligned

From the outside, everything looked aligned. Strategy approved. Roles clear. No visible resistance.

And yet, something subtle had already fractured, **before execution began.**

Not strategy. Not intent.
Perception.

Months later, the initiative stalled. Momentum faded. Rework emerged. Confidence quietly eroded.

When asked what went wrong, the answer was familiar

"We were aligned.
Execution failed."

It rarely does.



The decision moment

01

The familiar setting

The decision was made in a familiar setting. A steering committee review. A leadership sync. A go / no-go moment.

03

The silent agreement

Heads nodded. Silence was interpreted as agreement.

02

The efficient discussion

The discussion was efficient. Risks were mentioned. Dependencies acknowledged.

04

The forward motion

The decision moved forward. Not because reality was shared, but because **the moment to question it passed unnoticed.**

What really happened

What the team had was alignment of intent, but a fractured **Decision Layer**.

They agreed on what to do while operating on **different internal pictures of reality**.

Under pressure, perception diverges:

- Operations notices fragility.
- Finance senses exposure.
- Technology sees hidden constraints.
- Leadership feels urgency and momentum.

When time compresses, these perspectives are not integrated. They are collapsed into a single, convenient narrative.

This is not a collaboration failure. It is a **loss of shared situational awareness**.

The business consequence

Decisions made without shared situational awareness rarely fail immediately.

They fail downstream.

Initiatives do not collapse. They stall, fragment, and quietly lose relevance.

Typical patterns include:

- Late-stage rework when hidden assumptions surface
- Innovation projects that "almost work" but never scale
- Teams executing correctly, on incompatible realities

This is the signature of **perceptual failure**, not execution failure.

Alignment is behavioral. Situational awareness is cognitive.

Agreement

Agreement is a meeting outcome. Situational awareness is a shared mental model.

Reality

Teams can agree on action while seeing **fundamentally different realities**.

Under pressure, organizations unconsciously reward:

1

speed over sensemaking

2

consensus over clarity

3

momentum over calibration

The Decision Layer does not fail through conflict. It degrades through **premature closure**.



Executive takeaways

Silence is not alignment. It is often **compressed cognition**.

Teams can agree on action while **seeing different realities**.

Execution problems often begin as **perception breakdowns**.

Under pressure, consensus forms faster than shared understanding.

How to act (before fixing execution)

Before optimizing delivery, leaders should ask



Surface interpretation

Do our teams explicitly surface how they interpret the situation, or only what they propose?



Challenge assumptions

Where do assumptions remain implicit because time does not allow challenge?



Track perspective shifts

At which decision points do perspectives stop updating under pressure?



Test understanding

Do we test alignment by asking for agreement, or by probing understanding?



These questions cannot be answered through alignment meetings, frameworks, or dashboards.

They require environments where **pressure is real enough to distort perception, but safe enough to observe it.**

Closing note

**Teams often discover they
were aligned on action, while
misaligned on what was
actually happening.**

This is the moment where performance is decided.

Not when the decision is made. But in the moment before.