

Why Smart Leaders Create Dumb Teams

By Dr. Michael E Nagel



You hired the best. Your leadership team is stacked with smart, accomplished, ambitious A-players - people with a record of proving themselves over and over. Yet somehow, when they come together, the collective capacity drops rather than multiply.

Maybe it shows up as dysfunction: decisions stall, initiatives languish, innovations don't scale, issues stack up, simple coordination becomes impossibly complex. Or maybe things are working fine - good results, hitting targets - but you know there's a higher gear you're not reaching. A level of collective performance or impact that would change everything.

How do smart leaders create dumb teams? How do they waste world-class talent?

It's not because you hired wrong. Nor is it because your teammates aren't trying. And it's definitely not because you need another team-building exercise.

The answer is both simpler and more profound than most leaders realize. And once you see it, you can't unsee it.



THE PARADOX

Here's what the pattern looks like in real life:

Team meetings are report-outs - deeper issues are rarely discussed; decisions that reshape patterns toward breakthrough don't get made. Talented people show up but don't share their actual thinking - they wait, watching for which way the wind is blowing. Information is property. It gets protected rather than shared because knowledge is power and maybe even competitive advantage. Strategic initiatives launch with fanfare but stall in coordination and may get killed before they are finished.

As one talented leader remarked - "Our team operates more like a swim team than a soccer team. Everyone stays in their lane" (optimizing their individual/functional performance). In reality, breakthrough requires the pattern of collaboration, anticipatory positioning, and real-time adjustment of soccer - not the parallel excellence of swimming.

Individual brilliance doesn't translate to collective breakthrough. In fact, it often creates the opposite: talented people competing for resources, recognition, and influence rather than collaborating toward shared outcomes. Each person optimizes their domain while the collective promise - the very reason you invested in assembling world-class talent - never materializes. The real breakthroughs you built the team to achieve don't happen.

You've probably tried to fix this. Better communication protocols. Clearer accountability structures. Team-building offsites. Maybe coaching for key players. These interventions help at the margins, but the core pattern persists.

"Our team operates more like a swim team than a soccer team. Everyone stays in their lane."

If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. And more importantly, you're not crazy.

This isn't a talent problem. It's not a communication problem. It's not even a culture problem, exactly.

It's a map of reality problem. Most leaders are working with an incomplete understanding of what actually drives collective breakthrough.

THE AGENCY TRAP

So, what's creating this pattern?

Most leaders over-index on personal agency - individual capability and effort. The logic seems sound:

- Hire brilliant people with proven track records
- Give them clear goals and meaningful work
- Hold them accountable for results
- Reward high performance
- Better individual / functional performance = better collective results

This approach works beautifully for individual contribution roles. But when it becomes the primary lens for building collective breakthrough capability, it creates what I call the agency trap.

Here's what happens: When you focus mainly on individual capability and contribution, individual excellence actually begins to create collective dysfunction. Smart people start withholding or competing rather than collaborating because:

- Information becomes competitive advantage. Sharing what you know dilutes your value, so people hold back insights.
- Recognition is scarce. If there are only so many promotions or bonuses or strategic assignments, your colleague's win becomes your loss.
- Turf matters. Protecting your domain and expanding your influence becomes more important than optimizing the collective.
- Individual metrics trump collective outcomes. People do what gets measured and rewarded - which is almost always individual performance.

The result? You get exactly what you optimized for: brilliant individual performers operating in parallel. What you don't get is collective breakthrough - which requires genuine collaboration, shared intelligence, coordinated action, and people willing to subordinate individual optimization to collective possibility.

This is the paradox: The very thing that makes your people excellent individually or functionally prevents them from being excellent collectively.



You're not missing better people. You're missing a complete understanding of what creates breakthrough. And that understanding starts with recognizing that *individual agency* - as essential as it is - is only one of five causal forces that determine whether teams achieve breakthrough.



THE FIVE FORCES OF BREAKTHROUGH INTELLIGENCE (BIQ)

Most education hasn't equipped us to see a fundamental truth: there is a deeper reality at work. Everything causal is not tangible. Much of what determines breakthrough is intangible - invisible dynamics that shape outcomes as powerfully as the tangible things we can see and measure. Reality operates through five causal forces, not just one (individual agency). Most teams attend to the tangible while missing intangible forces that are causally active. Collective breakthrough requires engaging all five. Here's what most teams miss:

1. **BREAKTHROUGH FUTURE** A desirable yet seemingly impossible future reality that mobilizes collective energy and calls forth something new from your collective.

Not just a strategic plan or vision statement. A shared picture of breakthrough that genuinely excites and aligns your team - one that pulls energy toward collective possibility rather than individual agendas.

The gap: Most teams have corporate strategy to loosely coordinates individual / functional agendas. People know the goals but aren't genuinely mobilized by a collective future.

The question: Does your team have a breakthrough future that creates energizing collective pull, or just goals to hit?

2. **SOCIAL STRUCTURE** The formal and informal mechanisms that shape behavior and enable or constrain breakthrough.

Organizational charts and processes – but not just these things. This invisible architecture shapes how work actually gets done – such as strategies, goals, roles, norms, institutionalized patterns, agendas and decision rights.

The gap: Most structures were designed for current operations, not collective breakthrough. They reinforce silos, role optimization and past organizational needs.

The question: Do your structures enable collective breakthrough or prevent it?



3. **AGENCY** The capacity of individuals and collectives to reflect together and act intentionally. This isn't just the sum of individual capabilities.

Not just the sum of individual capabilities. The time and orientation to think as a collective, make sense of reality together, and act with coordinated intention - not just share updates to each other.

The gap: Most teams have strong individual capability but weak collective capability. Meetings are information exchanges, not substantive and meaningful collective dialogues that forge aligned action.

The question: Can your team truly think and flourish together, or are they better at flying solo and sharing updates?

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4. ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT The situational factors and environmental conditions surrounding your work.

Market pressures, competitive dynamics, organizational life cycle stage, prevailing political dynamic, stakeholder expectations. Organizations are open systems. This means context isn't just background - it's causally active, either supporting or undermining breakthrough.

The gap: Most teams see context selectively - aware of some factors, missing others and treating some as fixed. They don't actively work with contextual forces.

The question: Are you working with your context, fighting against it, or blind to it?



5. PROVIDENCE Openness to transcendent guidance and resources beyond human control.

Recognition that reality is larger than human or structural effort alone. Accessing wisdom, timing, opportunity, and insight that can't be manufactured through pure human agency.

The gap: Most teams operate from human effort alone, missing psychological and material resources that could accelerate breakthrough.



The question: Are you open to and accessing providential resources - beyond what you can control?

Most teams excel at one force – individual agency. They're weak or blind to the other four. This imbalance doesn't just limit results. It actively creates dysfunction.



WHAT IS THE COST?

When teams put individual agency ahead of collective agency, while neglecting the other four forces, three predictable patterns emerge:

OVERWHELMED Permanent upheaval. Complexity multiplies faster than your ability to manage it. Talented people work harder but fall further behind. Transformation strategies launch with excitement, but most underdeliver - compounding losses and psychological exhaustion. The team leadership burden becomes consuming.

FRAGMENTED Information protection and turf behavior. Solo stars oriented to and competing for recognition - rather than united by and collaborating toward breakthrough. Despite massive talent investments, the team underperforms. Individual excellence creates collective dysfunction. The promise you imagined when you assembled this world-class team never materializes.

STAGNANT Despite brilliant individual leaders and relentless effort, the team can't transform outdated systems and patterns. You know what needs to change but lack the collective capability to change legacy structures and ways of working. As complexity increases and markets shift, you don't have the breakthrough intelligence to redesign patterns. Competitors who figured out collective performance pull ahead while you stay stuck.

The deep fear beneath all three: watching capability go to waste. You've invested in world-class talent. You're committed. They're committed. Yet the collective breakthroughs you built the team to achieve remain out of reach.

Your brilliant team isn't broken. Your approach is incomplete.

***The collective breakthroughs
you've built your brilliant team to
achieve remain out of reach .***

A DIFFERENT PATH

Your biggest breakthroughs won't emerge by trying harder at what you're already doing or from chasing what's urgent. They come from working with reality as it actually operates - not as we wish it would.

That means working with all five forces:

Frame a breakthrough future that mobilizes collective energy and creates genuine alignment - not just goals people tolerate but a future they're genuinely pulled toward and operate from.

Develop collective agency - the capability to reflect and function as a synergistic collective, not just as talented individuals sharing a conference room.

Design social structures that enable your next breakthrough, rather than reinforce past ways of working - structures that create new collaboration patterns rather than reinforce silos.

Work with your context rather than ignore it - understanding which forces support breakthrough and which undermine it, then proactively shape what you can.

Open to providence - accessing transcendent resources - both psychological and material - that are available beyond what human effort alone can manufacture.

DEVELOP BREAKTHROUGH INTELLIGENCE

This is breakthrough intelligence (BIQ): The capability to see hidden causal forces and patterns more clearly and work with all five to achieve stackable breakthrough moments.

Not just optimizing operations. Not just strategic planning. Not just individual development. But engaging all five forces - the dimensions that determine whether teams flourish together.

Your team has the talent. What they need is the complete map and the ability to navigate it – equipping them to overcome fragmentation, find pathways to the breakthrough they seek, and become the transformative unit you envisioned when you assembled them.

Smart leaders don't create dumb teams on purpose. They create them by working with an incomplete map of reality - focusing on individual agency while neglecting the other four forces that determine collective breakthrough.

Ready to develop BIQ capability?

- Download the Team Breakthrough Diagnostic to identify which patterns are keeping your team stuck [\[link\]](#)
- Take the BIQ Scorecard to assess your team's balance across the five forces [\[link\]](#)
- Go deeper by reading the book Flourishing Together [\[link\]](#)

***Your brilliant team isn't broken.
You're working with partial
vision.***



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Michael E Nagel

Dr. Michael E. Nagel is a researcher-practitioner in organizational science who developed Breakthrough Intelligence (BIQ) - the missing science that explains how organizations achieve extraordinary collective results. While emotional and cognitive intelligence focus on individuals, BIQ reveals the hidden dynamics that drive collective organizational capability - the missing piece that explains why smart teams often plateau and how breakthrough organizations consistently exceed expectations. He is author of *Flourishing Together: What Actually Drives Breakthrough?*

Over 25 years working with hundreds of organizations from Fortune 500 corporations to social enterprises, his research has identified the hidden causal dynamics that separate high-performing collectives from those that remain stuck.

His research journey began with an unexpected teenage experience: transforming a potential parking lot confrontation between rival football teams into genuine connection. This moment sparked his signature question - **“What are people capable of relative to the context they find themselves in?”** - driving years of investigation that he later formalized through doctoral research at the University of Manchester (DBA). This rigorous inquiry has continued to evolve through ongoing work with organizations across all performance levels.

Dr. Nagel founded Collective Breakthroughs and VERITAS Strategic Management Services to continue advancing organizational science through BIQ research and to translate these insights into practical methods that reveal and unlock the hidden dynamics traditional approaches miss - the invisible forces that determine whether collectives achieve exponential results or remain trapped in incremental outcomes.

As one of the few researcher-practitioners with continuing access to diverse organizations and teams, Dr. Nagel's work is bidirectional: real-world engagement generates new research insights, which in turn inform evolving practice. His research focuses on the moments that matter most in organizational life: when collectives must unlock exponential possibilities to achieve strategic transformations, generate pathways that scale, and navigate major change.

Through keynotes, organizational interventions, and collaborative inquiry with leadership teams, he continues to investigate and apply BIQ science in settings where talented teams and organizations work to move beyond individual excellence toward their full collective potential.

Leaders demonstrating breakthrough intelligence consistently achieve results others thought impossible.

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Collective Breakthroughs

Unlock power to achieve what's next

Collective Breakthroughs advances Breakthrough Intelligence (BIQ) - the missing science that explains why some collectives achieve exponential results while others plateau despite exceptional talent.

In an era of disruption and division, leaders need the capability to work across divides and engage the causal forces that generate breakthrough- not just individual heroics.

We develop leaders and organizations in the capability to recognize and engage the hidden dynamics that determine collective outcomes. Through research-backed assessments, learning solutions, and organizational interventions, we help teams, organizations, and movements develop breakthrough capability.

Collectives working with BIQ science unlock the power to achieve results others thought impossible.

Learn more at collectivebreakthroughs.com