

The Meeting After the Meeting

Why your team's most important conversations may be happening without you in the room

A NOTE FROM JENNY

October gave me a wonderful opportunity to spend four days in New York City visiting my son, who relocated there just two months ago. It had been 15 years since my last visit, and I had forgotten how much energy the city has. We explored Fifth Avenue, Central Park, Times Square, Brooklyn, SoHo, Chinatown, Chelsea, Little Italy and finished with a terrific evening at a comedy club. With one day working remotely and three days exploring, it was a refreshing change of pace and a real pleasure to spend time together.

Back at work, I have been spending considerable time with leadership teams preparing for 2027, including executive and senior leadership retreats. One pattern continues to stand out: the difference between what people say in the meeting and what they discuss after everyone has left. That gap can quietly undermine even a well-developed strategy, and it is the focus of this month's newsletter.



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WHY YOUR TEAM'S MOST IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS MAY BE HAPPENING WITHOUT YOU IN THE ROOM

The decision looked settled. The leader laid out the direction, the team asked a few good questions, heads nodded, and the meeting wrapped up ten minutes early.

Then the real meeting started.

Two people compared notes on the way to the parkade. One doubted the timeline. Another wasn't convinced the budget was there. A third saw an operational risk nobody had mentioned. By Monday, each of them was quietly planning around the decision rather than executing it.

If you lead people, at any level, you have almost certainly been part of this pattern, on one side of it or the other. It is one of the most common dynamics I see in teams, from the boardroom to the front line, and one of the most costly. It rarely shows up as conflict. Instead, it appears as slow execution, missed handoffs, duplicated effort and resources committed to priorities people do not fully support. Those costs eventually affect margins, customers and the organization's ability to deliver.

Managing Up Is Not Politics. It Is Preparation.

When I facilitate executive retreats, I pay as much attention to the conversations at the coffee break and over dinner as I do to anything said in the session. That is usually where the real agenda surfaces: a concern about a colleague's performance, frustration with competing priorities, uncertainty about who actually owns a decision, or quiet doubts about the direction of the business.

The people raising these issues in the hallway are rarely timid. Most are experienced, capable people. Over years of working together, they have learned which conversations are worth having in the room and which ones cost more than they return. Add the expectation that a team should present a united front, and silence starts to look like professionalism.
It isn't.

A team that protects harmony at the expense of honest debate makes weaker decisions, and it usually finds out later than it should.

The weight of the first opinion

Whoever holds the most authority in the room tends to underestimate how much their opinion shapes the discussion. That is true whether you run the company or a team of six. When the leader signals a preference early, many people hear a decision. Some stop offering alternatives. Others adjust their recommendations to fit what they think the leader wants. The conversation carries on, but the range of thinking narrows.

This happens in well-run organizations with strong relationships and well-intentioned leaders, which is exactly what makes it hard to see. It also runs in both directions. Most leaders sit in two meetings: the one they lead, and the one their own leader runs. In the first, you may be the voice that narrows the conversation. In the second, you may be the one holding back. So here is a useful test: when your team agrees with you, how confident are you that you are hearing their independent judgment?

One of the simplest changes I recommend is also one of the hardest for decisive leaders to practise. Hold your view until everyone else has given theirs.

When loyalty becomes a liability

Loyalty can hold teams together through difficult years. But it can also keep problems off the table. People hesitate to question a respected colleague or a decision made by someone they trust. The intention may be good; the cost of leaving the issue unresolved rarely is.

Supporting a colleague sometimes requires a difficult conversation. Challenging your own leader can be equally necessary. Executives must welcome well-reasoned challenges, and senior team members have a responsibility to raise material concerns rather than save them for the hallway.

Silence is not alignment

Silence can mean agreement. It can also mean someone believes the decision was made before they walked in, or doubts that speaking up will make any difference. These situations look identical in the room but play out differently afterward.

When concerns stay unspoken, different teams interpret priorities in different ways. What looked like alignment at the table becomes inconsistent execution across the business.

High-performing teams do not need unanimous agreement. They need honest debate before a decision and a shared commitment to execution afterward. Leaders must create the conditions for constructive challenge, and team members must take responsibility for raising concerns before decisions are finalized. Once a direction is agreed upon, everyone needs to understand the rationale, what is expected and what they have committed to delivering.

Three practices to try before 2027

Most organizations are now planning for the year ahead, and so are the teams within them. It is also a good moment to look at how your team makes decisions. These are three practices I use with leadership teams. They work just as well in a weekly team meeting as at an executive retreat:

1. **Collect independent views before the discussion starts.** For any significant decision, ask each person to write down their position and their biggest concern before the conversation opens, and hear from them before the most senior person in the room speaks. A short pre-mortem works well here: assume it is twelve months from now and the decision has failed. What went wrong?

2. **Ask the question that brings the hallway conversation into the room.** Instead of asking “Does everyone agree?”, try “If we were discussing this privately, what concern would you raise?” Go around the table so everyone answers. It turns candour into an expectation rather than a risk.

3. **Define commitment before you leave.** Who owns the decision? What actions are required, and from whom? How will progress be measured? What should someone do if new information changes the picture? Commitment doesn't mean setting concerns aside. It means backing the agreed direction and raising risks openly, in the room rather than in the parkade.

One question for your next team meeting

“What is one conversation we need to have as a team that we have been avoiding?”

Give people time to think before anyone answers. When something surfaces, resist the urge to explain, defend or fix it on the spot. Listen first. How the team responds in that moment tells everyone whether it is safe to raise the next difficult issue.
Then follow through. A question like this builds trust only when what surfaces leads to action.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Whether you lead an executive team or a frontline crew, the decisions your team makes reach employees, customers and the health of the business. Experience and strong relationships matter, but on their own they are not enough. The teams I see perform best are willing to disagree openly, decide clearly and move forward together.

As you plan for 2027, ask yourself whether your team is having its most important conversations in the room, or in the parkade afterward.

PLANNING A 2027 STRATEGY SESSION OR EXECUTIVE RETREAT? IF YOU WOULD LIKE YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM TO LEAVE WITH DECISIONS EVERYONE IS GENUINELY COMMITTED TO, OR WANT TO BUILD THESE HABITS IN THE LEADERS ACROSS YOUR ORGANIZATION, I WOULD WELCOME A CONVERSATION. SIMPLY REPLY TO THIS EMAIL.

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