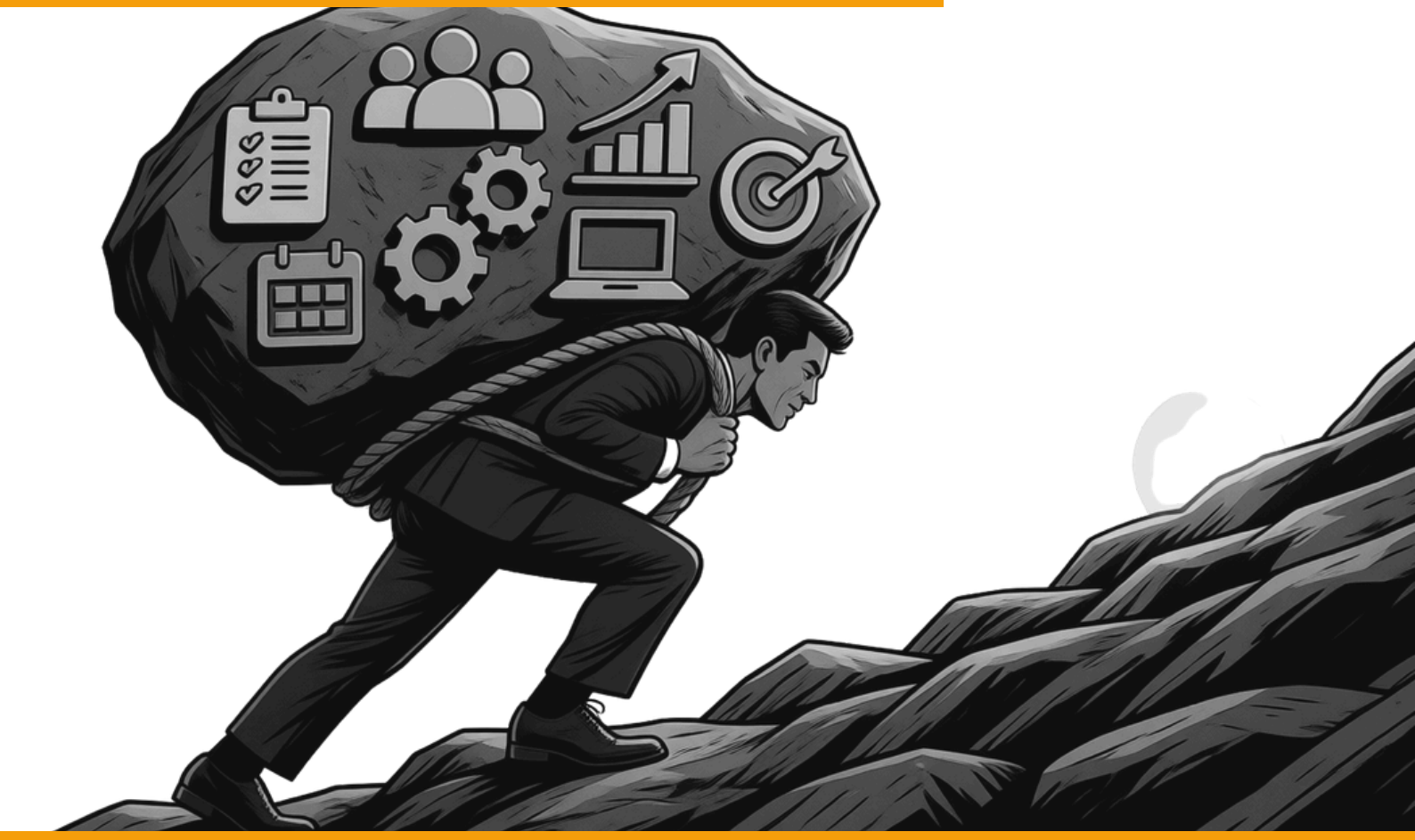


Co-Exponential®
For Enterprise Leaders

When Leaders Are Expected to Do Both

The false choices that constrain leadership teams, the trade-offs that still need decisions, and how to turn competing demands into better performance.

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Empower your people. Stay in control.

Encourage challenge. Get everyone aligned.

Deliver today. Build the capability for tomorrow.

Each expectation can be reasonable. The difficulty appears when people must act on them together.

What takes priority when they collide? Who can make the trade-off? What happens when someone makes a legitimate decision that another leader would have made differently?

“We need both” can express a worthwhile ambition. It can also conceal a decision nobody has made.

Being told to deliver both is not the same as being equipped to deliver both.

The opportunity is not to make leadership less demanding. It is to distinguish the choices that need challenging from the decisions that need making, then develop the team’s ability to act.

First, Understand What Kind of Tension You Are Facing



Research on paradoxical leadership has examined apparently competing behaviors, including maintaining decision control while allowing autonomy and enforcing requirements while permitting flexibility. These demands are not new. The practical challenge is how a particular team handles them.

Source: Zhang et al. (2015), Paradoxical Leader Behaviors in People Management, Academy of Management Journal.

Start by distinguishing three situations.

A false choice treats compatible responsibilities as mutually exclusive. "We can have psychological safety or accountability" assumes that strengthening one must weaken the other.

A genuine trade-off involves a real constraint. The same specialist cannot spend the same hour resolving a customer escalation and developing a new product. Someone must decide what happens first, what changes, or what additional support is required.

A contradictory expectation asks for one behavior while rewarding or enforcing another. "Take ownership, but seek my approval before every consequential decision" is not a clear delegation agreement.

The response should match the problem: challenge the false choice, make the trade-off, or change the contradictory expectation. A situation may require more than one.

Do not ask people to resolve through greater effort what leadership has left unresolved through unclear expectations.

Psychological Safety or High Standards? Reject the Choice.

People should not have to choose between speaking honestly and being accountable for performance.



Amy Edmondson describes psychological safety and accountability as separate dimensions. Making it possible to raise concerns, ask questions, and discuss mistakes does not require lowering expectations. Leaders need to develop both.

Source: Harvard Business School

The practical distinction is between the act of speaking up and the issue being raised.

A missed commitment still needs examination. But reporting a risk early should not receive the same response as concealing it until the deadline passes. Respond constructively to the information while addressing the decisions, behavior, and conditions behind the problem.

Alignment or disagreement is another false choice. A team can challenge a proposal and still commit to a decision.

Make the transition explicit. Agree how views will be heard, who decides, and what commitment means afterward. Also agree what justifies reopening the decision, such as new evidence, changed circumstances, or a material risk.

Alignment should mean clarity about how to move forward, not an obligation to pretend everyone preferred the same option.

In our work with a T-Mobile divisional leadership team, participants reported greater candor alongside stronger peer accountability and coaching. Commitments had owners, deadlines, and subsequent reviews. These were the participants' observations, not a claim that a single intervention caused every improvement. They illustrate the combination worth pursuing: more honest discussion and clearer responsibility for action.

Source: Co-Exponential

The revealing question: Can people challenge the plan or report a problem early while remaining responsible for what happens next?

Empowerment or Control? Clarify the Boundaries.

Imagine a leader who asks the team to take ownership, then routinely reverses decisions made within the authority supposedly delegated.

The team has received responsibility without confidence that its decisions will stand.

The answer is not necessarily less oversight. It is a clearer agreement about oversight.

For consequential work, establish who can decide, which constraints apply, whose expertise must be considered, and what circumstances require escalation. Distinguish decisions people can make independently from those that need agreement across functions.

Then examine the leader's response when the team makes a different but legitimate choice.

New evidence, changed circumstances, or an unacceptable risk may justify intervention. A different personal preference is not the same thing.

Consistent standards or local adaptation is a related false choice. Consistency need not mean identical execution everywhere.

Specify which outcomes and boundaries are non-negotiable, then identify where people can adapt their methods. A shared service standard, for example, can coexist with different local approaches to meeting it.

Local discretion should be explicit, not something people discover only after being told they have exceeded it.

The revealing question: Which decisions can people genuinely make without further permission, including decisions their leader might have made differently?

Speed or Rigor? Remove Delay, Not Judgment.

When decisions take too long, reducing consultation can look like the obvious answer.

First distinguish time spent improving a decision from time spent waiting for ownership, repeating discussions, or discovering dependencies late.



Kathleen Eisenhardt's study of eight microcomputer firms found that faster decision-makers used more information and considered more alternatives, not less. Conflict resolution and the integration of strategic decisions with practical plans also mattered. The study was context-specific, but it challenges the assumption that faster decisions necessarily require less thinking.

Source: Eisenhardt (1989), Making Fast Strategic Decisions in High-Velocity Environments, Academy of Management Journal.

Design the process around the decision.

A reversible trial within agreed limits can follow a different process from a commitment that is expensive or difficult to reverse. Bring relevant expertise into the discussion early. Name the decision owner. Establish what evidence is necessary and when the decision must be made.

Some decisions genuinely require more investigation. The aim is not to eliminate scrutiny, but to stop confusing scrutiny with avoidable delay.

Confidence or acknowledging uncertainty is another false choice.

A leader can communicate a clear direction without claiming certainty about every assumption. State what is known, what remains uncertain, and what evidence would trigger a review.

"Here is our decision, here is what it depends on, and here is when we will reassess" offers direction without pretending the future is settled.

The revealing question: Are we waiting because essential evidence is missing, or because the decision process is unclear?

Functional Results or Enterprise Success? Make the Trade-Off Visible.

“Put the business first” is easy to endorse until doing so puts a functional target at risk.

Imagine that operations must lend specialist capacity to a strategic launch. The transfer benefits the business but threatens an operations service target. The functional leader is still evaluated as though nothing has changed.

The leadership team has not resolved the trade-off. It has passed the consequences to one function.



Steven Kerr’s classic analysis of reward systems examined precisely this broader problem: organizations can reward behaviors different from those they say they want.

Source: Kerr (1975), On the Folly of Rewarding A, While Hoping for B, Academy of Management Journal

The false choice is that leaders must either defend their function or become good enterprise colleagues. A better approach is to define functional success in relation to shared outcomes.

Make the local consequences explicit. Agree which commitment takes precedence, who authorizes the resource shift, and whether targets, resources, or expectations need adjusting.

Sometimes the right enterprise decision will require a local sacrifice. Do not pretend that every function can maximize every measure simultaneously. Make the sacrifice a conscious decision rather than a hidden penalty for cooperation.

The revealing question: When doing the right thing for the business makes a functional result look worse, how will that leader be evaluated?

Stability or Change? Make the Process Dependable.

Leading change does not require making everything uncertain.

Be explicit about what is changing, what remains dependable, and what has not yet been decided. A team's structure or priorities may evolve while its commitments to clear communication, fair treatment, and transparent decision-making remain intact.

For example, during a reorganization, people may not yet know their final responsibilities. Leaders can still explain who makes interim decisions, when updates will be provided, and how unresolved questions will be handled.

The false choice is between preserving every familiar arrangement and expecting people to tolerate continuous ambiguity.

Stability should not mean that nothing changes. It should mean that people have a reliable basis for understanding and responding to change.

The revealing question: What can people rely on while the organization changes, and are leaders consistently honoring it?

Develop People or Deliver the Work? Connect Them Deliberately.

Development does not always need to happen separately from delivery.

A live strategic decision can develop judgment. A cross-functional project can become the setting in which people improve their handling of dependencies. A customer escalation can be reviewed to strengthen ownership and future decisions.

But learning must be intentional. Agree what people will practice, provide feedback, and review what changed.

Simply exposing people to more pressure is not a development method.

Some learning still requires protected time, specialist input, or separate practice. Do not describe development as a priority while making it impossible to undertake.

Develop People or Deliver the Work? (Continued)



Microsoft's 2026 Work Trend Index illustrates this tension around AI. Among 20,000 workers using AI across 10 countries, 45% said concentrating on current goals felt safer than redesigning work with AI. Only 13% said they were rewarded for reinventing work with AI even when results were not met. These are reported perceptions, but they provide a reason to examine whether incentives support the change leaders request.

Source: Microsoft

Producing more and becoming more capable are also not interchangeable.

Extra output can be valuable. It does not, by itself, demonstrate stronger judgment, adaptability, or coordination. Look for evidence that people can handle unfamiliar problems, explain trade-offs, and combine their expertise more effectively.

Review that evidence alongside delivery results. Neither should substitute for the other.

The revealing question: What are people learning to handle better through this work, and what time, feedback, and support make that learning possible?

Invest in AI or Invest in People? Design Their Contributions Together.

The choice is not simply between replacing people with AI and preserving every existing role or process.



A preregistered field experiment involving 791 professionals at Procter & Gamble found that individuals using AI matched the performance of two-person teams without AI on the product-innovation tasks studied. AI also helped participants produce proposals that combined technical and commercial considerations. The findings do not establish that human teams are generally unnecessary. They show why assumptions about how expertise is accessed and combined deserve examination.

Source: Dell'Acqua et al. (2026), The Cybernetic Teammate: A Field Experiment on Generative AI and Teamwork, Organization Science.

The leadership task is to decide how human expertise and AI should contribute to the outcome.

Which work can AI undertake? What must a person verify? Who can intervene? Who takes responsibility for a customer commitment or a consequential decision?

"Human oversight" should be an assigned responsibility, not a reassuring phrase. Specify what the reviewer must understand, what they must check, and what authority they have to act.

Also identify where people need continued practice to maintain the judgment that oversight requires.

Budgets still involve choices. Rejecting the false choice does not mean every investment can be funded. It means evaluating technology and human development as connected parts of how work will be done, rather than assuming one removes the need for the other.

The revealing question: Where should AI expand the team's capability, and where must human judgment and accountability remain explicit?

But "Both" Does Not Mean "Everything"

Not every tension disappears through better working agreements.

Current delivery and future investment compete for finite time and resources. PwC's 2026 survey of 4,454 CEOs found that respondents reported spending 47% of their time on issues with horizons under one year and 16% on matters looking more than five years ahead. Those figures do not establish an ideal allocation. They illustrate why the allocation needs deliberate attention.

Source: PwC, 29th Global CEO Survey (2026).

If a team receives a new priority without changes to capacity, scope, or timing, ask what is expected to give.

Some work may need to stop. Some commitments may need to move. Additional support may be necessary. A short period of exceptional effort may be justified, but it should not quietly become the permanent plan.

The same applies when speed and risk genuinely conflict. Some commitments cannot responsibly proceed until essential uncertainty has been reduced.

Rejecting false choices does not remove the responsibility to make difficult choices.

A useful leadership question is not only, "How can we achieve both?"

It is also, **"What must change for both to become realistic?"**

A Successful Team Can Still Need to Develop

The choice between fixing an underperforming team and leaving a successful team alone is false too.

A team can be effective today while needing different working practices for its next ambition.

Entering a new market might require wider consultation without recreating every decision at the top. Integrating an acquisition might require shared standards alongside local knowledge. Adopting AI might require more delegation to technology and clearer human responsibility.

The starting point need not be “What is wrong with this team?”

It can be, **“Which competing demands will our next ambition require us to handle better?”**

That makes development a preparation for greater performance, not an admission of failure.

Turn “Both” Into a Working Agreement

Start with one live priority where competing expectations are affecting progress.

Ask the people involved, independently, to explain the outcome, the decisions they can make, the boundaries they must respect, and what should happen when priorities conflict.

Then compare the answers.

For example, the leader may believe that a team owns a decision, while team members believe approval is still expected. A written delegation statement does not resolve that difference if everyday behavior communicates something else.

Use the discussion to establish an agreement concrete enough to test:

"For this customer proposal, the account lead can approve changes within these commercial limits. Delivery must confirm feasibility before any commitment is made. Exceptions go to this decision-maker by this deadline."

That is more actionable than "Be empowered, collaborative, and commercially responsible."



At Co-Exponential®, our **12-factor team effectiveness diagnostic** captures every team member's perspective to reveal strengths, differences in understanding, and potential barriers to performance. Confidential individual debriefs help us examine what the team may not recognize collectively and identify the working practices that could make the greatest difference to its business priorities.

Source: Co-Exponential



The next step is to apply the findings to actual business priorities. Our **90-Day Team Accelerator** connects assessment at day 0 with working agreements, coaching applied to real work, and reassessment at day 90.

Source: Co-Exponential

Assess progress through evidence from the work as well as changes in the assessment. Are decisions made within agreed boundaries allowed to stand? Are risks raised early enough to act? Are commitments clearer and more consistently delivered?

Where capacity is constrained, record what has been stopped, deferred, simplified, or resourced differently.

The goal is not agreement with the idea of "both." It is agreement about what people will actually do.

What Is Your Team Being Asked to Deliver Together?

Your team may need greater autonomy and tighter coordination. Faster execution and stronger judgment. More immediate output and greater readiness for what comes next.

The goal is not to eliminate every tension or ask capable people to work harder around unresolved contradictions.

It is to challenge false choices, make genuine trade-offs explicit, and build the working practices that help people deliver.

Keep the ambition demanding. Make the expectations clear enough to act on.

Bring one priority where your team is being asked to deliver two apparently competing outcomes to a conversation with Co-Exponential.

We will explore where those competing demands are affecting decisions, accountability, or execution, and whether the underlying issue is a false choice, a genuine trade-off, or a contradictory expectation.

Together, we can consider what needs to change and whether our 12-factor diagnostic or targeted team development would help your team make measurable progress.

You do not need to arrive with the answer. Start with the result you need your team to make possible.

Book a conversation with Co-Exponential