

What is happening to your team's work

A guide for team leaders whose capable teams are
losing ground

Why capable teams lose ground

Your team is capable. The people doing the work are experienced, committed, and not new to delivering under pressure. That is not the problem.

Some teams lose ground from the start. A project gets underway without a shared and concrete understanding of what it is supposed to produce. Decisions made in one meeting come back in the next because no one recorded the reasoning behind them. Progress is hard to point to because no one established what progress was supposed to look like. The team works hard and stays busy, but the work does not accumulate. Each cycle starts close to where the last one did.

Other teams start well and stall in motion. Initiation is clean enough. The outcome is named, and the first decisions are remembered. But somewhere between the kickoff and the close, the work loses its shape. Scope grows without anyone explicitly deciding to absorb the additional load. The timeline stays fixed while the commitment expands beyond the team's ability to complete it in a predictable way.

Other teams have solid fundamentals and still watch work lose coherence when conditions change. Someone leaves or joins, and the incoming contributor reconstructs from scratch what the team already established. A priority shift restarts work that was nearly complete. A hard cycle ends, and the learning from it does not survive into the next. Each cycle closes without passing much forward.

These are three distinct failure modes, and none of them requires a struggling team to manifest. They appear precisely because capable people keep compensating for them. A leader re-clarifies direction. A contributor re-sends old context. A team recovers ground it has already covered. The work moves, but not as far nor as fast as the effort deserves.

The condition underneath all three is the same. The work depends on the people carrying it rather than on a system holding it. Decisions and outcomes live in people's heads. Scope and commitment live in informal agreements. Context and learning live with the individuals who accumulated them. When those people move, shift attention, or leave, the work loses what they were carrying. Capable teams keep compensating because the work itself was never designed to hold its own ground.

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Why the standard responses do not resolve it

The standard responses to these conditions address the wrong layer. More status meetings produce more activity reporting without changing whether decisions hold or progress accumulates. Better project tools create more places to record information without changing whether it gets recorded properly. Tighter timelines add pressure without adding the structure that would make the timeline manageable. More documentation produces artifacts no one consults because they were never designed to be retrieved. More oversight requires more of the leader without changing what the work does on its own.

These responses address the visible symptoms of lateness, drift, unclear status, and effort that exceeds the commitment without addressing what produces those symptoms. The work still depends on the people carrying it. Until the system holds what the work produces, the symptoms will return.

What the work requires

For teams losing ground from the beginning, the work needs a memory. Decisions recorded with their reasoning and the conditions under which they should be revisited stay settled. Updates that report what changed relative to the expected outcome tell a leader where the work actually stands. Work that starts with a named outcome and advances through recorded decisions reaches a deliberate close: outcomes preserved, active pull on the team ended, residual responsibility formally released. These changes are observable. A team that has installed this discipline can point to specific instances where the work behaved differently.

For teams that start well and stall in motion, the work needs a motor. Work needs to start cleanly with a named outcome, explicit ownership, and clear scope authority across every initiative. Scope needs to be adjusted through explicit trade-offs so that discovered effort produces a decision rather than silent absorption. Work needs to close deliberately, releasing the team from residual responsibility rather than letting finished work follow people into their next assignments.

For teams with solid fundamentals whose work loses coherence when conditions change, the work needs to be built for disruption. Context needs to survive personnel transitions deliberately, so incoming contributors extend the work rather than reconstruct it. Scope needs a mechanism for adjusting explicitly when reality changes, so the team records what shifted rather than absorbing it silently or restarting. Learning needs to be captured at the end of each cycle so the next one starts from a higher floor.

Where to start

For teams whose work is losing ground from the start, **Give Your Work a Memory** is a guided engagement that installs the three disciplines above on one active initiative currently underway. It runs across four sessions over four to six weeks. Between sessions, the team applies one habit to one piece of real work. What surfaces in practice becomes the material for the next conversation. By the end, the team has practiced these habits on work that matters, and there is a record of what that practice revealed, including decisions that held, updates that required no follow-up, and at least one piece of work that reached a deliberate close. The pilot is available now to a small number of founding teams, who receive direct access and a reduced rate in exchange for candid feedback on what the program produces. [Apply here.](#)

For teams whose breakdown is happening in motion, the memory disciplines are the correct starting point. A team that has not anchored early decisions or named outcomes clearly will hit the same wall at every subsequent stage. The guided program that addresses initiation, scope management, and deliberate closure as repeatable disciplines is in development. Teams that complete the memory stage will be positioned to move directly into it when it is available.

For teams with solid fundamentals, the memory disciplines close the gaps that remain at the foundation before the adaptive layer is added. A team that handles context transfer and learning capture well but still has decisions that occasionally get rehashed, or updates that require follow-up, will find those gaps compound as the work gets more complex. The guided program that addresses context transfer, scope adjustment, and learning capture as repeatable disciplines is in development. Teams that complete the earlier stages will be positioned to move directly into it when it is available.

To find out where your team should start, [email me here.](#)

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