

Cross-Functional or Dysfunctional?



4-minute read

Big organizations still breed cross-functional initiatives like overripe bananas breed fruit flies—and nowadays, they’re multiplying faster than ever. Hybrid and remote work, generative AI projects, rapid digital transformations, and economic volatility have made them essential for staying competitive. When these internal-focused initiatives work, they elevate the organization by pulling expertise and perspectives from across the organization to solve critical problems. When they don’t, they drain morale, talent, and budgets in an era where no company can afford waste.

Recent data underscores the stakes: Studies show 70-95% of digital transformations and strategic initiatives fail to meet goals (McKinsey, BCG, Bain), while Gartner reports 84% of leaders experience high “collaboration drag” from cross-functional work—too many meetings, unclear decisions, and misaligned priorities. Cross-functional teams remain prone to dysfunction.

Here are four common types of dysfunctional initiatives, plus their antidotes.

Zombies

By definition, “initiatives” have a beginning and an end. But some become undead: lifeless, aimless, and endless, sucking resources but delivering nothing.

Antidote #1: Clearly define your home run up front. Failure to declare your success-defining goal at the start will turn any initiative into a zombie. If no one clearly answers, “What’s the point?” then the work becomes pointless—and perpetual. *Unclear goals remain the top contributor to failure.*

So, before planning or staffing, ask: “How, exactly, will things be different if we hit payday?” Don’t cheat with circular answers (e.g., the point of a GenAI



rollout isn't "to deploy GenAI"). Define verifiable business outcomes—like faster customer response times or reduced operational costs.

Antidote #2: Clear goals enable clear roles. Only after you have clear goals can you have clear roles, which is the other cure for zombie-ism. People need to know what's expected of them: What are *their* deliverables? With whom will they work, and on what? When do they need to kick into gear, and when should they wait on someone else?

Misguided Missiles

Unlike zombies, these hit a target—just the wrong one. In this scenario, the executive sponsor and the team lead chat broadly about the initiative and its intent. But then communication fades to infrequent touchpoints – or maybe just the lead's occasional declarations that "everything's green."

Meanwhile, for the exec, strategic priorities can shift (new market pressures, AI advancements, whatever). Anyway, the executive's thinking about "success" naturally shifts and refines over time. Why wouldn't it?

Meanwhile the cross-functional team grinds on in isolation—especially in hybrid work arrangements where casual alignment is harder.

The result: executive sponsor's shock when outcomes miss the mark. The sponsor could have adjusted fire (in military argot); likewise, the team lead could have better managed expectations. But neither did either. So.

Antidote #3: Hold brief, frequent check-ins. Executive sponsors and leads must first agree on specifics upfront (the verifiable "win" we described earlier), *then* they must communicate early and often. It doesn't require endless meetings—just recurring, focused check-ins to recalibrate. As a smart admiral, John Morgan, once told us: "Make sure you're not building the perfect ladder against the wrong wall."

Cesspools

Weighty initiatives often get lightweight talent—people who "won't be missed" back at their desks. What should be a talent pool becomes a cesspool of benchwarmers.

Antidote #4: Assign top people. When the "return" is undefined, investing scarce talent (especially AI-savvy or digitally fluent experts) feels risky. Define the win first; then it's easier to justify pulling stars. In today's talent-



scarce environment, this is non-negotiable. And, of course, keep working on ways to increase the top talent bench.

Boneless Chickens

One of cartoonist Gary Larson's most popular works was a picture of a boneless chicken ranch, with chickens draped like wet rags all over the scene. Now, reimagine those chickens as members of cross-functional initiatives – good-looking chickens, all, but flopping around without a leg of authority to stand on.

See, a cross-functional initiative is an actual organization. Just like a department or a division. The fact that it is only temporary does not lessen the participants' need for ordinary authorities. In fact, it heightens the need. Lack of authority will leave them all flopping around but getting nowhere.

Antidote #5: Grant commensurate authority. Since the lead is accountable for the initiative's success, then give them managerial authorities, such as resource decisions and escalation paths, just like in a real department. Then, *it's the exec's job* to tell the team members who's the team lead and what they're authorized to do or decide. Do not ask the lead to self-anoint. It doesn't work.

At that point the team lead can begin spelling out what will be needed of each team member. That conversation may need to include that team members must represent their functions decisively, not just take notes.

The Über Antidote is Project Management

Ultimately, this isn't "initiative management"—it's *project* management, a discipline that comes with abundant resources: PMI certifications, hybrid Agile/waterfall methods, AI-enhanced tools for planning/risk/forecasting, and a focus on true value delivery, not just time and budget constraints.

Yet organizations heavy on project management in tech or construction often forget to apply the same magic to cross-functional initiatives. Result: same fizzle rates as everyone else.

Advice: Reuse proven disciplines. If your org already excels at project management, extend it to these big bets. Doing so might be one of your most strategic moves this year. And if you don't already have project management expertise in your organization, now might be a good time to introduce it.

