

Beneath the Behavior

An HR Leader's Guide to Uncovering What's Really Driving Leadership Problems

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The leadership problem you see may not be the real problem.

An executive who dominates meetings, a manager whose team keeps leaving, a senior leader no one will challenge: these are the visible parts. The cause usually sits deeper, in beliefs, communication habits, emotional intelligence, interpersonal dynamics, trust, accountability, or the culture the leader operates in.

Coaching visible behavior alone often produces a short-lived fix. Terminating without understanding what drove the behavior can repeat the problem with the next hire. I look beneath the behavior first, so you can choose the right intervention. My work draws on clinical psychology, executive coaching, leadership development, , and organizational leadership.

Missed handoffs, sharp emails, high turnover, silent meetings

Tension, avoidance, "walking on eggshells." quiet disengagement

What drives it

Beliefs, emotional patterns, communication style, trust, accountability, culture

This guide covers seven questions I hear from HR leaders and executives most often.

In this guide

1. Your highest performer may also be your highest retention risk
2. When should HR bring in an executive coach?
3. When the problem is the executive everyone is afraid to confront
4. Before you fire a senior leader, ask these five questions
5. The executive is delivering results. The team is miserable.
6. Why leadership problems rarely stay leadership problems
7. Your turnover problem may actually be a manager problem

1.

Your Highest Performer May Also Be Your Highest Retention Risk

Some leaders hit every target while leaving damage behind them: disengaged direct reports, unresolved conflict, and a steady exit of capable people. Because the numbers look good, the cost stays hidden, often for years.

Results tell you *what* a leader achieves. They say nothing about *how*. Ask both questions.

What: the outcomes

Revenue, delivery, growth, targets met, projects shipped.

How: the impact

Trust, communication, how people are treated under pressure, who stays and who leaves.

Signals worth noticing

- Strong performers on their team transfer out or resign, often citing "fit" or "growth."
- People go around the leader to reach HR or peers.
- Team members are cautious, quiet, or guarded in the leader's presence.
- The leader's success is described with a caveat: "Great results, but..."

When HR hears "but" after a leader's name, that is the start of a conversation, not the end of one.

2

When Should HR Bring in an Executive Coach?

Not every leadership problem means the person needs to be replaced. Many talented leaders are strong on strategy and weaker on the human side of leading, and that gap can be closed when the leader is willing.

Coaching may be a fit when a leader

- Is technically excellent but struggles with self-awareness about their impact.
- Communicates in ways that create confusion, defensiveness, or fear.
- Shows limited emotional intelligence under stress.
- Deflects accountability or reacts poorly to feedback.
- Has just been promoted into a role that demands different skills.
- Has high potential and the organization wants to protect its investment.

Coaching is less likely to work when

- The leader has no willingness to look at their own behavior.
- The conduct involves legal, ethical, or safety violations that require a formal process.
- Coaching is being used as a last-chance formality with the decision already made.

Coaching works best when it addresses what drives the behavior, not only the behavior itself. That is where a clinical background makes a difference.

3

What Do You Do When the Problem Is the Executive Everyone Is Afraid to Confront?

Senior leaders rarely get honest feedback. Power changes what people are willing to say. Employees fear retaliation. Peers avoid friction. HR may hesitate because the executive is well-connected, high-performing, or intimidating.

The result is a quiet agreement not to speak. Everyone knows, no one says, and the behavior continues, sometimes for years.

What avoidance costs

- The executive assumes silence means approval and never learns their impact.
- Employees conclude that speaking up is pointless, or risky.
- HR's credibility erodes when the standard appears to apply to some people and not others.
- The behavior becomes part of "how things work here."

Where to begin

- Name the pattern, not the person. Start with specific, observable behavior and its effects.
- Gather perspective safely. Structured feedback, confidential interviews, or a facilitated conversation can surface what people will not say openly.
- Acknowledge your own hesitation. Avoidance is a dynamic in the organization, and HR is inside it.
- Bring in a neutral third party. A coach or mediator can hold difficult conversations without the history or power imbalance that makes them hard internally.

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4

Before You Fire a Senior Leader, Ask These Five Questions

Removing a senior leader is sometimes the right call. It is also costly, visible, and hard to reverse. These questions help you decide with clarity rather than frustration.

Where to begin

- 1 Describe it in specific, observable terms. "Difficult" and "not a culture fit" are not diagnoses. What does the person do, and in what situations?

Is it a pattern?

- 2 Is this one incident or a consistent history across teams, roles, and time? Patterns point to something the person carries with them. Isolated events may point elsewhere.

Has clear feedback been given?

- 3 Has anyone told this leader directly, with examples, what needs to change and why it matters? Many leaders are terminated over things no one ever said to their face.

Has meaningful support for change been offered?

- 4 Not a one-time warning or a generic training. Real support: coaching, defined expectations, time, and follow-up. Did the person have a fair chance to change?

Is the issue the individual, the team, or the culture?

- 5 Would a different leader in this seat face the same problem? Consider team dynamics, unclear expectations, incentives that reward the behavior, and the culture around it.

If you answer these honestly and the picture is clear, you can act with confidence. If the answers are murky, you have learned that the next step is understanding, not termination.

5

The Executive Is Delivering Results. The Team Is Miserable. Now What?

Business performance and leadership effectiveness are related but different. A leader can hit targets through pressure, fear, or personal heroics that cannot be sustained, and the cost arrives later as burnout, attrition, and a shallow bench.

Organizations need to look at both results and leadership impact.

Retention Who is leaving this leader's team, and are they your best people?	Trust Do people believe the leader has their interests in mind?
Communication Is information clear, timely, and two-way?	Engagement Are people invested, or doing the minimum?
Psychological safety Can people raise concerns, disagree, or admit mistakes without penalty?	Team development Are people growing, or is talent stalling under this leader?

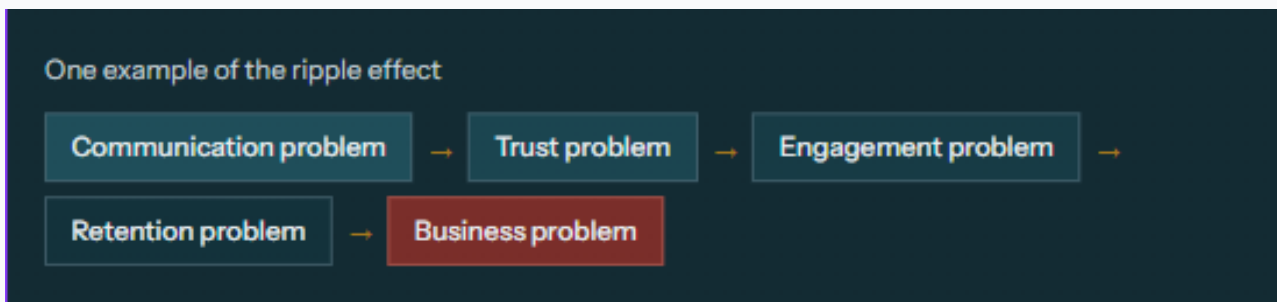
Practical next steps

- Add leadership impact to how senior leaders are evaluated, alongside results.
- Collect structured input from direct reports and peers, not only from the leader's manager.
- Have a candid conversation with the leader that connects behavior to business consequences.
- Determine whether coaching, or a team-level intervention fits.

6

Why Leadership Problems Rarely Stay Leadership Problems

A single leadership behavior seldom stays contained. It moves outward, and by the time it appears on a dashboard, it has traveled far from its source.



A leader who withholds context or reacts sharply to questions teaches people to stay quiet. Silence erodes trust. Without trust, people disengage and protect themselves. Disengaged people leave, or stay and coast. Meanwhile the organization absorbs rehiring costs, lost knowledge, slower delivery, and damaged reputation.

The business problem is real, but it is the last link in the chain. Treating it at the end, with a new incentive or a hiring push, does not touch the beginning.

Follow the problem upstream. Ask what happened before the turnover, before the disengagement, before the mistrust.

This is why I look at what drives the behavior. A leader who avoids conflict, needs control, or struggles to regulate stress will create the same ripple in any role until the pattern itself is understood.

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7

Your Turnover Problem May Actually Be a Manager Problem

Company-wide turnover numbers hide where the problem lives. Break them down. People often say they are leaving a company when they are actually leaving a manager.

Look for concentration

- Is turnover clustered under a particular leader, department, or team?
- Do people leave shortly after a certain manager takes over?
- Are transfers out of one team unusually common?

What HR can examine

Exit interviews

Look for repeated themes and names across departures, not single comments.

Employee feedback

Compare engagement and pulse results team by team.

Conflict

Track complaints, escalations, and unresolved disputes by team.

Communication

Ask whether people understand priorities and feel heard.

Psychological safety

Notice whether people speak up in meetings or wait until they are leaving.

High-performer retention

Are your strongest people leaving at a higher rate than average?

- Exit data is often more honest after someone has left, which is why a third-party conversation can surface what a standard exit form does not.

If the pattern points to one leader, the next question is why, and what would help.

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For 16 years, Dr. Michele has studied why talented people and good teams still end up stuck, misaligned, or driving each other crazy.

Before becoming an executive coach, she earned her PsyD in Clinical Psychology. She has since added a Marshall Goldsmith Certification, a CELC Executive Coach credential, and a Certified Master Trainer certification, but she still thinks like a psychologist first.

She uses the assessments, frameworks, and proven methods many coaches use, and pairs them with a clinical understanding of human behavior. That is why her clients working at Disney, Uber, Salesforce, and dozens of SMBs experience meaningful, lasting change in individuals and systems alike.

Clinical psychology

Executive coaching

Leadership development

Emotional intelligence

Organizational leadership

If you're ready for lasting change, let's talk.

If a leader on your team fits one of the patterns in this guide, a conversation with Dr. Michele can help you decide what to do next.

Book a call with Dr. Michele