



CoachStation

Leadership. People. Business Development.

LEADERSHIP BRIEFING 03

Teams and the Cohesion Advantage

Why understanding, not skill, determines how well your team performs over time.

For leaders, HR professionals, and business owners who work with, manage, or develop teams.

Steve Riddle | CoachStation | 2026

INSIDE THIS BRIEFING

What you will learn

- Why calling a group of people a team does not make them one, and why that distinction matters more than most leaders realise.
- The cohesion advantage: what research and real-world evidence tells us about why familiarity and consistency outperform raw talent over time.
- The four building blocks of genuine team cohesion, and where most teams fall short.
- Why understanding, not agreement, is the foundation that everything else sits on.
- How values, strengths, and emotional intelligence translate from individual insight into team performance.
- A practical framework for building cohesion deliberately, whether your team sits together or works remotely.
- Reflection prompts to use before, during, and after team development work.

SECTION ONE

What we get wrong about teams

A group is not a team

Most people use the word team loosely. It is understandable. Language shortcuts help us communicate quickly. But when the word team is applied to any group of people who happen to share a reporting line or a work area, something important is lost.

A team is not a collection of individuals who report to the same manager. That is a peer group. It may be a functional group, a business unit, or a department. But calling it a team does not make it one.

A genuine team operates at a qualitatively different level. There is shared accountability, not just individual accountability. There is mutual understanding, not just task coordination. There is a degree of mutual trust and confidence that allows honest dialogue, productive disagreement, and genuine collaboration. Most importantly, there is an investment in understanding each other that goes beyond what is required to complete the work.

I raise this in almost every workshop I facilitate, and the response is almost always the same: a moment of quiet recognition. People know, instinctively, when they are part of something real versus something nominal. The problem is that very few organisations actually build for it.

Why this matters in practice

When a group functions as peers rather than a team, several things happen consistently:

- Communication becomes transactional. People share what they need to share to get the task done, no more.
- Negative judgement fills the gap where understanding is absent. When we do not understand someone's reasoning, values, communication style, background, beliefs, experiences, or any of the other aspects that make us genuinely different from each other, we tend to assume.
- Agreement is pursued too quickly. People try to resolve tension by reaching a position, rather than by understanding each other well enough to work through it meaningfully.
- Capability is underutilised. People do not draw on each other's strengths because they do not know each other well enough to recognise them.

None of this is a character failure. It is a structural one. Most organisations invest heavily in individual capability and almost nothing in collective cohesion. Then they are surprised when groups of talented individuals produce mediocre collective results.

SECTION TWO

The Cohesion Advantage

Skill gets you to the table. Cohesion keeps you competitive.

In June 2026, researcher and former professional rugby player Ben Darwin, co-founder of sports analytics company Gain Line Analytics, was profiled in the Australian Financial Review Weekend Edition (27–28 June 2026, page 3) in the context of the FIFA World Cup. The central claim of his work is striking in its simplicity: teams with high cohesion, formed through consistency and familiarity built over weeks, months, and years, have a measurably better chance of competing against teams with objectively higher individual skill levels.

This is not a feel-good theory about teamwork. It is a data-informed observation about how performance actually compounds over time.

The implication for workplace teams is direct. Organisations that invest in cohesion, the shared understanding, consistent habits, and relational depth that accumulate through genuine time and effort together, are building a competitive advantage that is very difficult to replicate quickly. It is not the sort of thing a team-building day creates. It is the sort of thing a sustained, intentional culture creates.

What cohesion actually is

Cohesion is not harmony. It is not absence of conflict. It is not even particularly about liking each other, though that can emerge over time. Cohesion is the degree to which members of a group understand each other well enough to work effectively together under pressure. It is built through four things:

Consistency

Regular, predictable contact and collaboration over time. Not occasional events, but the rhythm of working together.

Shared Experience

Having navigated real challenges together, including difficulty and disagreement, not just successes.

Familiarity

Knowing how someone thinks, what they value, where they are confident, and where they are not. This comes from genuine exposure, not surface-level interaction.

Confidence to Contribute

The assurance that honest input will be heard and respected, even when it challenges the prevailing view.

Cohesion compounds. The longer a team invests in it, the stronger the foundation becomes. This is why disruption, such as restructures, frequent turnover, or constantly shifting team compositions, is so costly. It does not just remove individuals. It destroys the accumulated relational infrastructure that took months or years to build.

The remote team question

One of the most common objections I hear when raising cohesion in a workshop is the remote or distributed team challenge. “Our people are spread across three states. We barely see each other. How do we build cohesion?”

The honest answer is: it is harder, but it is not impossible. What changes is the intentionality required. Cohesion does not happen by accident in co-located teams. It certainly does not happen by accident in remote ones. But the building blocks, consistency, familiarity, shared experience, and the confidence to contribute, can be cultivated across distance if leaders are deliberate about creating the conditions for them.

What does not work is assuming that digital communication tools are a substitute. A Slack channel is not cohesion. A weekly video call is not cohesion. They can be components of a cohesion-building practice, but only if what happens in those interactions goes beyond task coordination.

SECTION THREE

The foundation is understanding, not agreement

The most common mistake teams make

Since founding CoachStation in 2010, one pattern appears more consistently than almost any other: teams that try to reach agreement before they have established understanding.

It looks like efficiency. Move quickly to a decision. Resolve the tension. Get back to work. But what it actually produces is superficial alignment that does not hold under pressure. People comply rather than commit. Disagreement goes underground. The same conversations happen again and again because the underlying differences in perspective were never genuinely heard.

We do not always need agreement. But we always need understanding, and we can always improve it. You will never get to genuine agreement in the absence of understanding.

This has become a consistent theme in my work with leaders and teams, because it is so frequently the root cause of the friction I see. People try to resolve tension by reaching a position before anyone in the room truly understands the positions already held. The result is not resolution. It is compliance at best, and resentment at worst.

Understanding means knowing why someone holds a view, not just what the view is. It means grasping the values, experiences, or priorities that sit behind a position. It means asking questions with genuine curiosity, not to find the flaw in the argument, but to understand the person making it.

Questions as the primary skill

The single most underinvested skill in most teams is the quality of questions people ask each other. Most people in a conversation are waiting to respond. They hear a position and immediately begin formulating a reply. This is natural and human. But it means they are engaging with the surface of what someone has said, not the substance beneath it.

The question is the skill. But the purpose of the question is not to win an argument or expose a weakness. The purpose is to understand more. And when we understand more, agreement becomes both more achievable and less essential.

Questioning and listening are inseparable. The quality of a question only matters if it is followed by genuine listening. Not listening to prepare a response, but listening to understand. Most people significantly overestimate how well they listen. They hear the words. They miss the meaning. Effective listening means holding back the urge to fill the space, tolerating the discomfort of not yet knowing where a conversation is going, and staying genuinely curious about what the other person is actually trying to say, not what you expect them to say. When questioning and listening operate together at a high level, the quality of every conversation in a team improves.

The practical gap

Here is where most organisations fall short. They invest in individual communication training. Presentation skills courses, assertiveness programmes, negotiation workshops. All of these have value.

But almost none of them invest in teaching people how to ask better questions in service of understanding. This is arguably the highest-leverage interpersonal skill available to a team, and it is almost universally underdeveloped.

SECTION FOUR

The building blocks of team cohesion

Understanding yourself before understanding others

Genuine team cohesion begins with self-awareness. This is not a soft proposition. It is a practical one. If I do not understand how I tend to operate under pressure, what I value most deeply, or how my communication style lands on others, I am not able to adjust. I am not able to meet someone where they are. I can only operate from a fixed position and wonder why others do not respond the way I expect.

This is why the work of values clarification, behavioural profiling, and strengths identification is not a nice-to-have in team development. It is foundational. And it is most valuable not as individual insight, but as shared insight. What changes things is not that I know my DiSC profile. It is that my team knows it too, and I know theirs.

When I led a national, remote team at GE Money, the investment we made in understanding each other at that level was the single most significant contributor to what we built together. The quality of the conversations changed. Negative judgement decreased because we had replaced assumption with understanding. We knew why someone communicated the way they did. We knew what they needed in order to contribute well. We knew where their strengths were strongest and where to give them support. That team was genuinely a team, not because of a shared title or a reporting structure, but because of the understanding we had built through consistent, deliberate effort over time.

The four elements that build cohesion

Since 2010, working with teams across a wide range of industries and organisational sizes, four interconnected elements consistently emerge as the foundation of genuine cohesion.

Self-awareness

Each person's understanding of their own values, behavioural tendencies, emotional triggers, and communication preferences. Without this, the team is working with incomplete information about its most important inputs: its people.

Emotional Intelligence

Two elements about you: self-awareness and self-management. Two about you in relation to others: social awareness and relationship management. The second two determine how you actually show up in a team, and require a relational context to develop.

Other-awareness

Genuine awareness of how team members think, what they value, and what they need to perform well. Built through structured sharing, not assumed through proximity. People who have sat next to each other for three years are often surprised by what they do not know.

Shared Language

Teams that perform well over time develop a shared vocabulary around decisions, disagreement, feedback, and accountability. Not bureaucratic process, but informal norms that make collaboration feel reliable and consistent.

SECTION FIVE

Values, strengths, and why shared insight changes everything

Values work in a team context

Values clarification is often treated as a personal development activity. Individuals reflect on what matters most to them, produce a list, and move on. There is some value in this. But it misses the most powerful application of values work, which is what happens when a team does it together.

When team members share their values, including what a given value actually means to them in practice, something shifts. A word like integrity, for example, means different things to different people. For one person it means transparency at all times. For another it means protecting confidentiality. Both are genuine expressions of integrity. But if those two people are in conflict and neither understands that the other is operating from the same value through a different lens, they will talk past each other indefinitely.

Shared values work creates the conditions for this kind of revelation. And when it happens, the reduction in negative judgement is immediate and significant.

Strengths as a team map

Strengths-based assessments such as CliftonStrengths provide a language for talking about how people are naturally wired to contribute. When a team collectively maps its strengths, two things become visible that are otherwise hidden.

First, the areas of genuine collective strength: where multiple team members have complementary capabilities that, when deployed together, produce something stronger than any individual could produce alone. Second, the gaps: what is genuinely absent from this team's natural repertoire, and what needs to be compensated for deliberately. Most teams have a vague sense of this. A strengths map makes it explicit, workable, and actionable.

Productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness

These three words are often used interchangeably. They are not the same thing. Productivity is about output volume. Efficiency is about output relative to input. Effectiveness is about whether the output is the right output.

All three are improved by cohesion. A team that understands each other wastes less time on misunderstanding, rework, and interpersonal friction. A team where people feel genuinely confident to contribute surfaces problems earlier, when they are still addressable. A team with shared norms and clear expectations makes better decisions faster, because the relational infrastructure required to have a genuine conversation is already in place.

The organisations that achieve all three, at scale and over time, are almost always the ones that have taken cohesion seriously. Not as a cultural initiative, but as a performance strategy.

SECTION SIX

Building cohesion deliberately

What does not work

Before addressing what does work, it is worth naming what does not, because a significant amount of time, money, and goodwill is spent on activities that produce short-term warmth and long-term very little.

Team-building events, in the traditional sense, do not build cohesion. They build moments of shared experience, which can be pleasant and even meaningful. But cohesion is built through consistency over time, not through a single day of shared activity. The Friday afternoon drinks, the escape room, the team retreat to a nice venue: all of these can play a role in a broader cohesion-building strategy. None of them are a strategy on their own. What they tend to produce is a short-lived improvement in mood followed by a return to existing patterns.

What does work

Cohesion is built through the accumulation of small, consistent, deliberate practices over time. There is no single intervention that creates it. There are a set of habits that, sustained over months and years, produce it.

1. **Create the conditions for genuine knowing.** Go beyond task-focused interaction. Build structured opportunities for team members to share how they work, what they value, and what they need. This does not require a dedicated off-site. It can happen in regular team meetings if the space is created intentionally.
2. **Invest in shared language.** Run values clarification as a team activity, not just an individual one. Map strengths collectively. Develop a shared understanding of the behavioural profiles in the room. Give people the language to talk about how they are wired and how they want to be met.
3. **Build and protect consistent rhythms.** Cohesion requires contact. Effective 1:1s, well-facilitated team meetings, and regular opportunities for genuine dialogue are not luxuries. They are the infrastructure through which cohesion accumulates. When they are cancelled, skipped, or allowed to become purely transactional, the investment erodes.
4. **Prioritise understanding over agreement.** Make this a cultural norm, not just a philosophy. Slow down in moments of tension to ask more questions before seeking resolution. Model curiosity at the leadership level. Create enough genuine trust that people feel they can raise a disagreement without it damaging their standing.
5. **Name the difference between a group and a team.** This is a provocation worth raising directly with any group that calls itself a team. Not to diminish what they have, but to make visible what is possible. A group that understands it is functioning as a peer group, and that this is both normal and improvable, is in a far better position to build toward something more.

REFLECT AND ACT

Reflect and Act

These prompts are designed to be used in three ways: as preparation before a team workshop, as a discussion tool during one, and as a continuing practice after.

FOR INDIVIDUALS

- How well do I genuinely know the people I work with, beyond their job responsibilities?
- When I encounter behaviour or a decision I do not understand, do I ask a question or do I form a judgement?
- What are the two or three things about how I work that, if my team understood them better, would improve how we collaborate?

FOR TEAM LEADERS

- Is this group a team, or a peer group that calls itself a team? What is the honest answer?
- What is the most significant gap in our collective understanding of each other?
- What consistent practices do we have that build familiarity over time, not just during dedicated workshops?

FOR TEAMS

- Where do we tend to reach for agreement before we have established understanding?
- What assumptions do we carry about each other that have never been tested or named?
- If we had significantly higher cohesion than we do today, what would be different about how we work together?

PRACTICAL NEXT STEPS

A practical starting point

If the ideas in this briefing resonate, here is a simple, three-phase starting point that does not require a major programme or significant budget.

1. **Name the Reality (Weeks 1 to 2).** Facilitate an honest conversation with your team about the difference between a group and a team. Do not frame it as a critique. Frame it as a possibility. Ask each person to privately reflect on one thing they wish their colleagues understood better about how they work. Share those reflections in a structured session. This single activity consistently produces more genuine connection than a full day of team-building activities.
2. **Build the Shared Map (Weeks 3 to 6).** Run a values clarification exercise as a team. If you have access to a strengths tool or behavioural profile, map those collectively. Create a visible, shared picture of how the team is wired. Include both strengths and development areas. The goal is a map, not a performance appraisal.
3. **Build the Habits (Ongoing).** Identify two or three consistent practices that will build familiarity over time. Effective 1:1s between leaders and their people. A regular team conversation that goes beyond task updates. A quarterly half-day that is explicitly about the team, not just the work. None of these need to be complex. They need to be consistent.

Cohesion is not a destination. It is an accumulation. The organisations and teams that treat it as an ongoing practice, rather than a periodic event, are the ones that build something genuinely durable.

BOOK A CONVERSATION

You recognise the pattern. Let's build something real.

If the ideas in this briefing are relevant to your team or organisation, book a discovery conversation. No pitch. No pressure. A direct conversation about where you are and what is worth doing next.

[Book a Discussion](#)

ALSO FROM COACHSTATION

More from the Leadership Briefings series

Each briefing in this series tackles a specific leadership challenge with the same direct, experience-backed approach.

LEADERSHIP BRIEFING 01

Leadership Development: Intent vs Action

Why people remain the number one business challenge, and what you can actually do about it. Six reinforcing dynamics, three patterns, and four practical moves.

[Leadership Development: Intent Vs Action](#)

LEADERSHIP BRIEFING 02

The Hidden Cost of Fast Growth

What happens to leadership and culture when headcount climbs. Four failure patterns, a four-pillar model, and a 90-day playbook.

[The Hidden Cost of Fast Growth](#)

Steve Riddle · Primary Author, CoachStation

Steve Riddle is the founder of [CoachStation](#). Since 2010 he has worked with leaders and teams across Australia, accumulating more than 16 years of coaching experience and 30-plus years of leadership experience across more than 600 leaders and 90-plus organisations. His focus is practical, embedded development: the kind that shows up in conversations, decisions, and results. He is the primary author of [Falling Into Leadership](#) and the creator of the [Effective LEADER framework](#).

The cohesion research referenced in this briefing draws on the work of Ben Darwin, co-founder of Gain Line Analytics, as reported by Jonathan Shapiro. Australian Financial Review, Weekend Edition, page 3, 27–28 June 2026.