

Why Are We Always Firefighting?

Understanding the root causes — and the first actions that actually address them

Firefighting isn’t the problem. It’s the symptom.

If your team spends more time reacting than preventing — chasing late shipments, expediting orders, re-explaining a plan that keeps not holding — it’s tempting to conclude you need more people, a better system, or stricter discipline. That’s rarely where the answer lives.

Firefighting happens when one of five capabilities breaks down: **Visibility**, **Alignment**, **Decision quality**, **Execution**, or **Outcome/Learning**. The fire itself is just where the failure finally became visible — not where it started.

Where Firefighting Actually Starts

Visibility breaks down when decisions get made on data that no longer reflects reality — stock counts, supplier commitments, or demand signals that are technically “in the system” but already stale.

Alignment breaks down when the team is executing against three different versions of the plan — sales, operations, and procurement all confident they’re right, all working from something slightly different.

Decision quality breaks down when the right call gets made too late to matter, or the wrong call gets made confidently because nobody paused to question the data behind it.

Execution breaks down when accountability stops at your organisation’s boundary — the plan was sound, but nothing enforced it once it left your building.

Outcome/Learning breaks down when the same fire gets put out over and over, because nobody traced it back far enough to stop it recurring.

A Pattern Worth Recognising

The Reactive Expediting Loop

One of the most common patterns: a delayed decision creates urgency, urgency creates expediting, expediting creates cost and fatigue, and fatigue makes the next delayed decision more likely.

It resolves the immediate fire. It doesn’t touch the reason the fire started.

First Actions

Before adding headcount, new software, or stricter SOPs, ask:

1. When we last resolved a “fire,” did we ask what decision — made or not made — actually caused it?
2. Is the data driving today’s decisions still true, or just still present in the system?
3. Are the three functions closest to this problem (typically sales, operations, procurement) actually working from the same plan right now?
4. Where does our accountability for this decision actually end — and is that the same place the consequence lands?

If you don’t have confident answers to these four questions, that’s not a knowledge gap. It’s the diagnostic starting point.

Firefighting tells you something is wrong. It doesn’t tell you what.
The next step is identifying which capability is actually failing — not guessing, diagnosing.

[Book a Diagnostic Call →](#)

INSIGHT

Your Team Doesn't Need a Better Leader. It Needs Faster Decisions. — how the Reactive Expediting Loop above shows up as a decision-speed problem, not a leadership-quality one.

INSIGHT

From Firefighting to Coaching: Leadership Realignment in Operations — firefighting has a leadership cost too. This is how leaders rebuild the coaching capacity firefighting quietly erodes.

INSIGHT

Is Firefighting a Delivery Culture, or a Response to a Specific Problem? — the underlying constraints that turn occasional firefighting into a standing habit.