

A PRACTICAL CROSS-SECTION OF DOZENS OF CONVERSATIONS WITH LEADERSHIP TEAMS

30 Problems CEOs Deal With Behind Closed Doors

What keeps repeating in small and mid-sized companies, and what to check before the same problem starts slowing yours down too.

6 areas

30 situations

12 check questions

What these conversations taught me

Looking back across conversations with CEOs and managing directors, a pattern became clear. Companies differ in industry, size, and history, but leadership keeps running into very similar things: unclear ownership, overloaded key people, work that depends on one person, or changes that quietly fall apart in the daily grind.

Why I'm sharing it

I figured this could turn into something useful for anyone else running a company and facing similar situations. Not so you'd recognize yourself in all thirty points. It's enough if two or three help you notice something in your business that's needlessly eating time, money, or people's energy, and decide whether it's time to deal with it.

I've generalized and combined every topic across multiple conversations. You won't find names, company names, exact figures, or details that would let anyone be identified. This document isn't market research or a description of one specific company. It's my read on what leadership at small and mid-sized companies actually deals with.

How to use it

- 1 On your first read, mark the five points that reminded you of your own company.
- 2 Hand the same document to one other person on your leadership team. Let them pick their own points.
- 3 Compare results. The most interesting problems are usually the ones only one side sees.
- 4 Pick one problem. Not the biggest one, the one where you can verify a real change within a month.

One important note

Recognizing yourself in a point doesn't mean your company is badly run. Most of these problems show up exactly when a company is growing, changing, or outgrowing a way of working that used to serve it well.

Six places where a company can start to snag

Each chapter groups five concrete situations. You don't have to read them in order. Start wherever the pressure feels strongest today.

01	 Leadership and ownership	Problems 1-5
02	 Processes and daily work	Problems 6-10
03	 People and change	Problems 11-15
04	 Sales, marketing, and the customer	Problems 16-20
05	 Data, systems, and AI	Problems 21-25
06	 Growth, finance, and resilience	Problems 26-30

Where the problems tend to hide

From the outside they can look like a delayed order, thinner margins, or someone leaving. The real cause often sits in a completely different part of the business.



01

Leadership and ownership

Five situations where a company looks well managed, but most important things still rest on one person.



02

Processes and daily work

Places where people work hard, but part of that energy disappears into waiting, tracking things down, and fixing work.



03

People and change

Problems that look like one person's fault, but often come from the environment they walked into.



04

Sales, marketing, and the customer

A company can have a good product and good marketing, and still lose opportunities between first interest and an actual conversation.



05

Data, systems, and AI

Technology speeds up work that's already well set up. It can just as quickly multiply chaos that used to simply be less visible.



06

Growth, finance, and resilience

Growth usually doesn't just surface new opportunities. It also exposes the places that were only ever held together by a few people's personal effort.

Look for the connections as you read

A slow reply to a lead isn't necessarily a sales problem. It might start with unclear ownership. Resistance to a new system isn't necessarily people being difficult. Maybe no one showed them how their work will actually change. One visible symptom often links several areas at once.



Leadership and ownership

Five situations where a company looks well managed, but most important things still rest on one person.

PROBLEMS 1-5



What gets overlooked in this area

The fix for these problems is rarely just delegating more. People need to know the limits of their own decisions, have the information they need, and know when something genuinely belongs with leadership.

1 The CEO became the final check on absolutely everything

The company has managers and experienced people, but an important quote, exception, purchase, or customer reply still ends up with the CEO. Not always because they want it that way. Often no one is quite sure what they're actually allowed to decide on their own.

SIGNALS

- a calendar full of small approvals
- work waits during any absence
- the same questions keep coming back every week

ASK YOURSELF Which decisions keep coming back to me, even though someone else should be handling them by now?

2 Responsibility was handed over, authority wasn't

People are accountable for the result, but any meaningful deviation still needs sign-off. Managers end up waiting, the owner feels like nothing moves without them, and both sides get frustrated.

SIGNALS

- the phrase "better safe, I asked first" comes up constantly
- managers with no room to decide
- ownership only gets assigned after something goes wrong

ASK YOURSELF What are we holding someone accountable for without ever giving them the right to decide it?

3 Roles are only clear inside each department

Sales knows what sales should do. Production knows its own job. The problem shows up between them. Once an order crosses more than one team, it's unclear who's watching the whole thing, who has the latest version of the brief, and what happens next.

SIGNALS

- handoffs happen over email and phone calls
- different versions of the same information
- a task with no owner stuck between two teams

ASK YOURSELF Who owns the overall result when several departments are involved in it?



CONTINUED

AREA 1 OF 6



Leadership and ownership

Five situations where a company looks well managed, but most important things still rest on one person.

PROBLEMS 1-5

Two more situations that are easy to miss

4 The founder can't let go of quality

The founder carries a feel for the customer, the product, and the brand in their head. The team can't see all the criteria behind that judgment. So the checking stays with the founder, and growth just adds more work to the one person who was supposed to get more time back.

SIGNALS

- finished work gets sent back
- last-minute fixes
- quality depends on the owner personally being there

ASK YOURSELF *Could anyone on the team describe what actually makes work genuinely good, the way I judge it?*

5 Day-to-day operations crowded out thinking about the future

Leadership spends most of the week on deadlines, people, and customer exceptions. Strategy gets discussed in the evening, on weekends, or only once a problem starts to really hurt.

SIGNALS

- meetings full of firefighting
- priorities keep getting pushed back
- important changes with no owner and no deadline

ASK YOURSELF *How much time did I actually spend on the company's future last month?*



A short conversation, no slides needed

Ask the people around the table: "Which of these five problems costs us the most time right now?" Have everyone answer on their own first. Only then compare answers. The gap between them is usually more useful than quick agreement.



Processes and daily work

Places where people work hard, but part of that energy disappears into waiting, tracking things down, and fixing work.

PROBLEMS 6-10

What gets overlooked in this area

A process isn't a tidy diagram from a meeting. It's how the work actually happens, exceptions, phone calls, and informal agreements included. That's usually where the real reason for the delay shows up.

6 An important process lives mostly in people's heads

The company runs fine as long as specific employees are around. No need to look anything up, just call a colleague. That's fast right up until someone gets sick, leaves, or simply gets overloaded.

SIGNALS

- one irreplaceable person
- inconsistent methods between people
- training happens by word of mouth
- uncertainty whenever someone covers for them

ASK YOURSELF *Where would work actually stop if a key person were unavailable for two weeks?*

7 A handoff is never missing the same piece of information twice

Everyone does their part of the work, but the next person doesn't have the price, the deadline, the last approval, or what was actually agreed with the customer. Instead of continuing, they start tracking things down.

SIGNALS

- repeated questions
- forwarding old emails
- waiting on missing documents
- changes discovered too late

ASK YOURSELF *What has to be finished and visible at every handoff so the next person can continue without a phone call?*

8 Everything is urgent

Requests sit untouched for a long time and then need to be done immediately. The team keeps jumping between tasks, interrupting work already in progress, and real priorities shift based on whoever shouts the loudest.

SIGNALS

- frequent emergencies
- work happening in the evenings
- unfinished tasks piling up with no end
- conflicts over capacity

ASK YOURSELF *Who gets to change the priority of work that's already underway, and on what basis?*



CONTINUED

AREA 2 OF 6

Processes and daily work

Places where people work hard, but part of that energy disappears into waiting, tracking things down, and fixing work.

PROBLEMS 6-10



Two more situations that are easy to miss

9 Exceptions get solved from scratch, every single time

The company handles the normal case just fine. The moment a deadline, quantity, contract term, or material availability changes, the solution gets worked out all over again, even though the same types of exceptions keep repeating.

SIGNALS

- the same crisis meetings
- decisions with no record
- exceptions that automatically end up with leadership

ASK YOURSELF Which three exceptions did we solve repeatedly over the last quarter?

10 Context gets lost once a customer is handed over

Sales or the project team closes the deal, but service continues. The person on the other end can't see the original agreement, the changes that were made, or what the customer has already dealt with.

SIGNALS

- the customer has to repeat their story
- service keeps asking sales for answers
- decisions get chased down with leadership

ASK YOURSELF Does whoever is handling the customer today have the full context they need in one place?



A short conversation, no slides needed

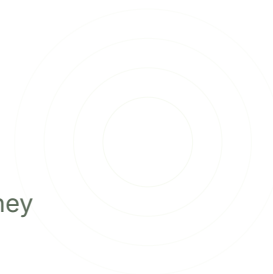
Ask the people around the table: "Which of these five problems costs us the most time right now?" Have everyone answer on their own first. Only then compare answers. The gap between them is usually more useful than quick agreement.



People and change

Problems that look like one person's fault, but often come from the environment they walked into.

PROBLEMS 11-15



What gets overlooked in this area

A change doesn't stick just because it makes sense. People need to know what's actually changing in their daily work, what stays the same, and where to get help when the new way runs into reality.

11 Leadership accepts the new hire, the team doesn't

The owner sets up good conditions, but one toxic colleague, a few small slights, or distrust of someone from a different background can derail the whole onboarding. The new hire often stays quiet about it, and the problem looks like their own inability to fit in.

SIGNALS

- quick departures
- the new hire gets isolated
- vague complaints about them "not fitting in"

ASK YOURSELF *How do we find out what a new hire is actually experiencing before they hand in their notice?*

12 Succession gets treated as just handing over a title

The new CEO takes over the title, but along with it comes the relationships, the unwritten rules, and the expectations of the family or the previous owner. The hard part isn't deciding what to change. The hard part is recognizing what's already working well, and why.

SIGNALS

- two competing authorities
- people go around the new leadership
- changes get read as criticism of the past

ASK YOURSELF *In which areas is the new CEO genuinely the final word, and where are they not yet?*

13 Expertise dilutes as the company grows

The company hires more people or expands its network. Information gets trained, but everyone explains it slightly differently. Customers end up with an inconsistent experience across teams and locations.

SIGNALS

- customers get different answers
- training with no check that it's actually applied
- quality depends on which location you're dealing with

ASK YOURSELF *How do we know an important piece of information wasn't just passed along, but is actually being used?*



CONTINUED

AREA 3 OF 6

People and change

Problems that look like one person's fault, but often come from the environment they walked into.

PROBLEMS 11-15



Two more situations that are easy to miss

14 People are wary of remote work and digitalization

The company could hand off or remote-enable part of its admin work, but leadership feels they need to see the work happening. Watching for presence replaces checking the result, and a simple change starts to feel like a loss of control.

SIGNALS

- paper as the only proof work happened
- approvals that require being there in person
- resistance to outside help with no real justification

ASK YOURSELF Which result do we actually need to see, and why do we currently need to see the person too?

15 So many changes that people stopped believing in the next one

A new system, a new structure, new leadership, and new goals all land in quick succession. Each change might make sense on its own, but together they create fatigue. People start waiting to see if this initiative, too, will just fade out on its own.

SIGNALS

- passive agreement
- a quiet return to the old way of doing things
- low attendance at training
- cynical comments

ASK YOURSELF Which two changes genuinely need to take root right now, and what can we consciously postpone?



A short conversation, no slides needed

Ask the people around the table: "Which of these five problems costs us the most time right now?" Have everyone answer on their own first. Only then compare answers. The gap between them is usually more useful than quick agreement.



Sales, marketing, and the customer

A company can have a good product and good marketing, and still lose opportunities between first interest and an actual conversation.

PROBLEMS 16-20

What gets overlooked in this area

More contacts won't fix the point where your current contacts are getting lost. You first need to see the whole path from the first signal to the offer, and know who owns every step along the way.

16 Marketing brings in contacts, sales responds too late

A campaign can work well and bring in genuinely relevant prospects. If nobody follows up in time, if context is missing, or it isn't clear whose contact it is, the money gets wasted right after the marketing succeeded.

SIGNALS

- a lead with no owner
- a delay of several days
- marketing and sales are tracking different numbers

ASK YOURSELF *How long after someone shows interest does a person who actually understands their situation reach out?*

17 Volume of outreach outran trust

Automation lets you send hundreds of messages, but the same line lands on people in completely different situations. The numbers look active, while the brand starts to sound like everyone else.

SIGNALS

- low reply rates
- replies with no genuine interest behind them
- meetings with people outside the target group

ASK YOURSELF *Do we have a real reason behind every single outreach, why we're writing to this specific person right now?*

18 Visibility has no clear next step

The owner or the company publishes interesting content and picks up followers. After reading it, though, people can't find a related resource, a question to ask, or a specific service that naturally follows from the topic.

SIGNALS

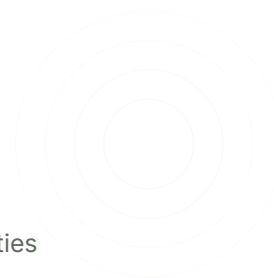
- reach with no inquiries behind it
- visitors land on a generic homepage
- no record of where a contact actually came from

ASK YOURSELF *Where should someone who got interested in today's post actually go next?*



CONTINUED

AREA 4 OF 6



Sales, marketing, and the customer

A company can have a good product and good marketing, and still lose opportunities between first interest and an actual conversation.

PROBLEMS 16-20

Two more situations that are easy to miss

19 The ideal customer is basically everyone

The company describes its target group by industry and size. What's missing is the specific situation that would make a customer need to act right now. Outreach ends up resting on a generic problem that everyone recognizes but almost no one wants to solve immediately.

SIGNALS

- broad contact lists
- generic messaging
- long explanations of the service's value

ASK YOURSELF *What specific change inside a company raises the odds that they need our help right now?*

20 The solution gets sold before the problem is clear

A customer asks for a website, an app, a campaign, or automation. The provider starts preparing a proposal even though it isn't clear what's supposed to change in the business or how success will be measured.

SIGNALS

- the scope keeps shifting
- disputes over what's included
- a finished solution that never gets used
- price compared only by the hour

ASK YOURSELF *What result is supposed to be different after this project, and what's stopping that from happening today?*



A short conversation, no slides needed

Ask the people around the table: "Which of these five problems costs us the most time right now?" Have everyone answer on their own first. Only then compare answers. The gap between them is usually more useful than quick agreement.



Data, systems, and AI

Technology speeds up work that's already well set up. It can just as quickly multiply chaos that used to simply be less visible.

PROBLEMS 21-25



What gets overlooked in this area

You first need clarity on decisions, ownership, and how work genuinely happens. Only then does it make sense to pick a tool, connect data, or build automation.

21 Systems don't talk to each other, so people retype data

The CRM holds sales, accounting holds invoices, the warehouse system holds stock levels. Between them, though, run spreadsheets, emails, and manual re-entry. The company pays for several systems and also for the work that holds them together.

SIGNALS

- the same figure lives in multiple places
- values don't match
- manual exports
- errors that only surface with the customer

ASK YOURSELF *What piece of data does someone retype from one system into another today, and what happens if they get it wrong?*

22 A new tool is supposed to fix an unclear process

The company buys a system because the current way of working isn't cutting it. During rollout it becomes clear the teams don't share a method or a clearly split ownership. The software just moves the same dispute into a new environment.

SIGNALS

- a long setup phase
- a growing pile of exceptions
- only part of the team actually uses the system
- a quiet return to spreadsheets

ASK YOURSELF *Can we explain the process without naming the tool that currently supports it?*

23 The company has data, just not a basis for deciding

The reports hold dozens of metrics. In the meeting, leadership still asks what's actually happening, why it's happening, and who takes the next step. The numbers describe the past but don't lead to action.

SIGNALS

- multiple versions of the same report
- manual comments bolted onto numbers
- charts with no owner for the anomaly
- decisions made by gut feel

ASK YOURSELF *Which five figures genuinely change our decisions, and what happens next when they move?*



CONTINUED

AREA 5 OF 6

Data, systems, and AI

Technology speeds up work that's already well set up. It can just as quickly multiply chaos that used to simply be less visible.

PROBLEMS 21-25



Two more situations that are easy to miss

24 AI gets deployed with no clear place in the work

The team tries new tools and builds small automations. What's missing is an owner, rules for working with the data, and a clear answer to what's actually supposed to get faster or better. After the initial excitement, there's just one more thing that needs managing.

SIGNALS

- more pilots than tools actually in use
- unclear oversight of the output
- sensitive data scattered across different tools

ASK YOURSELF Which specific step of the work is AI supposed to shorten, and who stays accountable for the result?

25 A major IT overhaul runs in every direction at once

The company is changing its infrastructure, collaboration tools, security, documents, and core business system all at once. Each piece has its own vendor and timeline, but the employee just experiences one single, continuous change.

SIGNALS

- overlapping projects
- decisions made with no connection to each other
- people unsure which method is current
- fatigue from constant migrations

ASK YOURSELF Which changes actually depend on each other, and in what order can people genuinely absorb them?



A short conversation, no slides needed

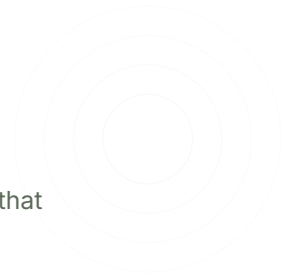
Ask the people around the table: "Which of these five problems costs us the most time right now?" Have everyone answer on their own first. Only then compare answers. The gap between them is usually more useful than quick agreement.



Growth, finance, and resilience

Growth usually doesn't just surface new opportunities. It also exposes the places that were only ever held together by a few people's personal effort.

PROBLEMS 26-30



What gets overlooked in this area

A company doesn't necessarily need heavier governance just because it's growing. It does need earlier visibility into capacity, cash, exceptions, and obligations that can no longer be safely tracked in someone's head.

26 The company is growing faster than the way it's run

New locations, markets, sales channels, or services keep appearing. The original agreements and spreadsheets still technically work, but every additional step adds more dependencies and more decisions.

SIGNALS

- more coordination meetings
- inconsistent methods between locations
- the owner pulled into every detail

ASK YOURSELF Which part of how we run things still fits the smaller company we were two years ago?

27 One missing item stops an entire order

Production can have the people and most of the material ready. A single component, a piece of packaging, an approval, or a document still blocks the whole order from finishing. The value of unfinished work keeps climbing, and the customer just sees a delay.

SIGNALS

- rush purchases
- the schedule keeps slipping
- stock that never gets used
- risk information arrives too late

ASK YOURSELF Which handful of items or approvals could stop the largest part of production today?

28 Order growth is masking a capacity and margin problem

Sales keeps bringing in new customers, but each one needs a different quantity, packaging, deadline, or paperwork. Production can handle the volume, but the complexity is growing faster than revenue.

SIGNALS

- many small exceptions
- frequent schedule changes
- it's hard to calculate what an order actually earns

ASK YOURSELF Do we know which types of orders are still profitable once changes, waiting, and leadership interventions are counted in?



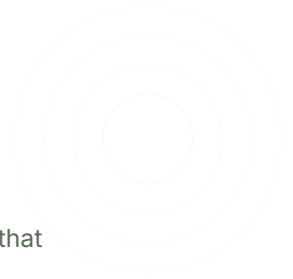
CONTINUED

AREA 6 OF 6

Growth, finance, and resilience

Growth usually doesn't just surface new opportunities. It also exposes the places that were only ever held together by a few people's personal effort.

PROBLEMS 26-30



Two more situations that are easy to miss

29 The budget belongs to finance, not to everyday decisions

Finance prepares a plan, but the people in operations, sales, and purchasing can't see the impact of their own decisions. The budget gets checked after the fact instead of helping choose the next step.

SIGNALS

- surprises at month end
- the same variances every time
- managers don't know the numbers they could actually influence

ASK YOURSELF Which financial figure should every manager know as part of their everyday decisions?

30 A crisis starts before it's officially admitted

Leadership often senses something is breaking before all the evidence is on the table. At the same time, they need to protect payroll, core operations, customer communication, and relationships with lenders. The order of the steps decides what actually gets saved.

SIGNALS

- delayed payments
- uncertainty among employees
- a rising number of emergencies
- decisions made with no shared plan

ASK YOURSELF Have we already decided what we protect first if income drops sharply for a few weeks?



A short conversation, no slides needed

Ask the people around the table: "Which of these five problems costs us the most time right now?" Have everyone answer on their own first. Only then compare answers. The gap between them is usually more useful than quick agreement.

Five patterns behind thirty different problems

Lined up next to each other, most of these situations trace back to a handful of the same root causes.

01 Decisions have no clear home

People don't know what they can close out themselves, what needs to be handed up, and who decides when there's an exception.

02 Information doesn't travel with the work

The task gets handed off, but the reason behind it, the last change, or the expected result stays with the previous person.

03 The company measures activity instead of results

You can see the number of meetings, tasks, and reports. It's harder to tell what actually got finished and what actually changed.

04 The tool arrives before people agree on anything

Software gets chosen before the company has agreed on the process, the ownership, and the rules for exceptions.

05 Growth enlarges a hidden dependency

What the owner or an experienced colleague used to handle personally starts holding back the whole company once volume grows.

Twelve questions I'd ask myself first

Answer yes, no, or not sure. It's often the "not sure" answer that reveals where leadership is missing a shared view.

	YES	NO	NOT SURE
Do we know which decisions needlessly keep coming back to the CEO?	☐	☐	☐
Does every important process have one person accountable for the whole result?	☐	☐	☐
Can the work keep going for two weeks without a key person?	☐	☐	☐
Does the necessary context always travel along with a handed-off task?	☐	☐	☐
Do we have a clear rule for who can change the priority of work already underway?	☐	☐	☐
Do we know why new hires leave within their first few months?	☐	☐	☐
Do we respond to a new sales contact while they're still interested?	☐	☐	☐
Can we explain why we're reaching out to this specific company right now?	☐	☐	☐
Can we describe a process before we pick software for it?	☐	☐	☐
Does every report have an owner and a next step for any deviation?	☐	☐	☐
Do we know which orders are actually profitable once exceptions and leadership interventions are counted in?	☐	☐	☐
Have we agreed on what we protect first if revenue suddenly drops?	☐	☐	☐

Don't pick all thirty problems. Pick one.

The best starting point isn't a big transformation. It's one process or one decision where you can verify, within a few weeks, that the work genuinely got simpler.

The first step

Pick a problem that leadership and the people doing the work actually agree on. Describe how it really happens, not the ideal version. Measure the waiting, the tracking down, the number of handoffs or leadership interventions. Then change only what has a direct effect on that result.

If you want to know where to start

I have a short test on my website that helps you name, in a few minutes, where your company is losing the most time and people's energy. You can take it yourself or send it to another member of leadership and compare answers.

Free test

www.karelpetros.com

If your result points to something worth discussing, I'd be glad to look at your specific situation with you.



Karel Petroš

www.karelpetros.com

I help companies straighten out their processes, ownership, and decision-making. Only then do I look at what to change, simplify, or support with a better workflow or custom-built app.