

Teams That Thrive

*Creating a Curious Culture and
Nutritious Environment for Marketing Teams*



I would like to share my huge gratitude with the leaders who took the time to participate in the research that led to this report.

Each of the participants generously gave their time to be interviewed and complete surveys.

Some requested anonymity for themselves and their brands, but the insight they provided was no less valid.

Without each participant speaking so candidly about their approach to leading teams, the report would not have been possible.

About the author

Chris Healey is a published author, researcher and creative who designs and delivers high-impact development programmes.



Driven by a deep understanding of how people learn, lead and create change, and supported by an MBA-level education in marketing, Chris founded a training company that delivers high-impact programmes for teams. Each programme combines strategic insight with hands-on experience.

Before moving into marketing, Chris spent two decades in education, specialising in organisational development, leadership training and cultural transformation. Appointed by the Department for Education as a Specialist Leader in Education, he led improvement projects across schools and trusts nationwide, helping leaders raise standards, navigate complexity and build empowered, high-performing teams.

Known for his practical, people-first philosophy, Chris applies that same approach within marketing, supporting leaders to strengthen team capability, enhance collaboration and improve strategic confidence. He focusses on helping organisations design the conditions where teams can learn, align and deliver sustainable performance.

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xecutive Summary (TL/DR)

Over three months in 2025, I interviewed 15 marketing leaders of brands from several industries. The aim was to discover the ways exceptional leaders successfully establish and build their marketing teams, in the current climate of unprecedented flux.

Marketing teams are facing unprecedented disruption.

Hybrid and remote working have weakened the informal peer learning and creative exchange that once powered the discipline. At the same time, rapid advances in artificial intelligence, the surge of data and shifting customer expectations are transforming the skills required of marketers.

Across all interviews, one clear conclusion emerged: collective development is the foundation of team performance.

High-performing teams are not built on process alone. Their leaders **balance structure with culture, clarity with trust, and planning with reflection.**

For these teams, learning is a shared practice rather than an individual activity, and training is a vital part of delivery rather than an optional extra.

Headline Findings

- **Team training is the engine of development.**

Teams that protect structured learning time build capability faster and with greater confidence. The most effective leaders ensure that training is collective, contextual and continuous.

- **Strategic alignment depends on commercial understanding.**

Leaders who build cross-functional integration and teach their teams the business context create stronger connections between marketing activity and company goals.

- **Shared language drives collaboration.**

When teams use consistent terminology and frameworks, they reduce friction and work faster. Clarity of meaning is a performance tool, not a linguistic nicety.

- **The biggest barriers are time and mindset, not money.**

Time, priority and mindset are the real constraints. Teams that protect space for learning and reflection outperform those that see it as optional.

- **System and culture must work together.**

Structure provides rhythm and clarity; culture provides trust and motivation. The strongest leaders integrate the two, making reflection, experimentation and shared development a normal part of team life.

“Formal collective learning happens two to three times a year, but it’s where shared understanding really solidifies.”

- P11 (CMO)

“It’s when you remove people from the day-to-day that their minds open up again.”

- P10 (CMO)

Across the study, leaders drew a clear distinction between **operational rhythm** and **developmental rhythm**.

Operational rhythm keeps work moving; developmental rhythm ensures teams learn, reflect and grow together.

The difference defines whether a team becomes reactive or resilient.

The strongest marketing teams now build performance on rhythm, structured learning and commercial understanding: treating development as integral to delivery.

M

ethodology

I conducted fifteen in-depth interviews with senior marketing leaders across industries including finance, travel, automotive, entertainment and healthcare.

Throughout this report the participants are referenced as P1-P15. For example, to the right of this paragraph you will see a quotation labelled “P3 (Marketing Director)”. This indicates that the quote is from my interview with participant 3.

My approach was mainly qualitative, designed to capture the real texture of people’s experience. The questions were consistent across all interviewees.

The participants led teams that ranged from small co-located groups to large complex, global hybrids.

I transcribed and coded every conversation, then reviewed the transcripts repeated to find shared patterns, practices and outliers. Certain themes such as rhythm, leadership, learning and collaboration quickly emerged.

Each insight in this report is built directly from what participants told me, their words, not my assumptions. The quotes included throughout illustrate those lived realities in context.

My analysis focussed on six recurring themes:

1. Team structure and operating rhythm.
2. Language and communication practices.
3. Strategic alignment and commercial understanding.
4. Barriers and enablers to learning.
5. Leadership philosophies and development cultures.
6. Practical strategies and models for collective growth.

Each insight is grounded in evidence and shared to reflect what leaders themselves are learning as they adapt to change.

“The world is changing so quickly that the old model of annual training plans just doesn’t work anymore.” - P3 (Marketing Director)

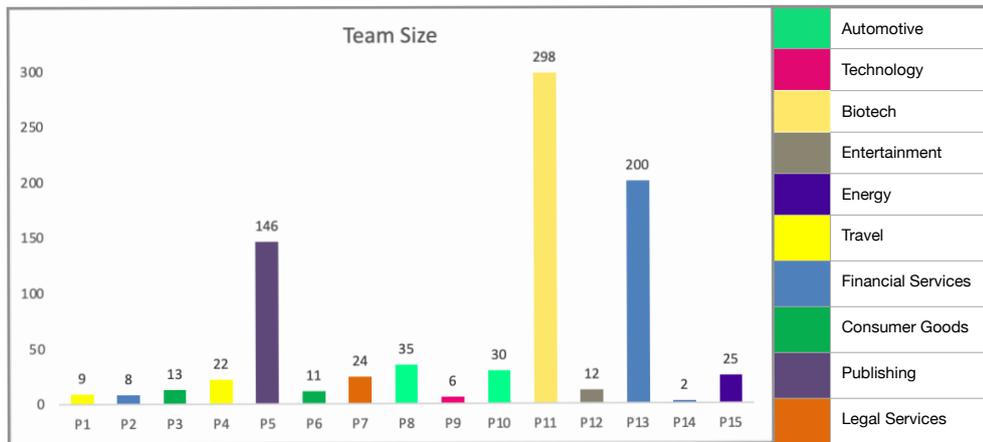
“If people do not understand why they are learning something, it does not stick.” - P7 (Head of Marketing)

“It’s not about one big course; it’s about constant small moments that remind people they’re growing.” - P4 (Marketing Director)

1 Team Structures and Context

Marketing teams now operate within increasingly complex structures. Hybrid working, dispersed locations and growing specialisms have reshaped how people connect, collaborate and learn.

Across the study, every leader agreed that structure alone does not create performance. What matters is the rhythm and environment that hold that structure together.



Participant Brands - Size of Marketing Teams and Industry Sector

Physical rhythm and presence

Leaders described how deliberate patterns of meeting in person built energy, trust and shared understanding in their teams. The pattern of when and how teams met strongly influenced cohesion, confidence and creative exchange.

I was struck by how often senior-level marketers talked about “rhythm” as something tangible.

I began to understand “rhythm” to refer to the establishment of frequent and regular team development opportunities inside the team calendar - so that development becomes part of “what the team does”. It was not just about meetings; it was about momentum. It provided a regular cadence to activities which were nutritious to team development.

Jae Hopkins, who leads a mid-sized travel marketing team, described the impact of consistent physical presence. Her team works together weekly in person without fail and recently won a national Travel Marketing Team of the Year award. She attributes their success partly

“Being together every week means we really know how each other works, and we can solve problems faster.” - P4 (Marketing Director)

“Typically, Fitch has been working hybrid - more often than remote - so you see them working about three days weekly and we’ve maintained that rhythm.” - P13 (Director of Marketing Optimisation)

“Working from home suits senior managers, not the people starting out.” - P10 (CMO)

“It’s the clarity of rhythm that keeps people connected. Everyone knows what happens and when.” - P2 (Head of Digital Marketing)

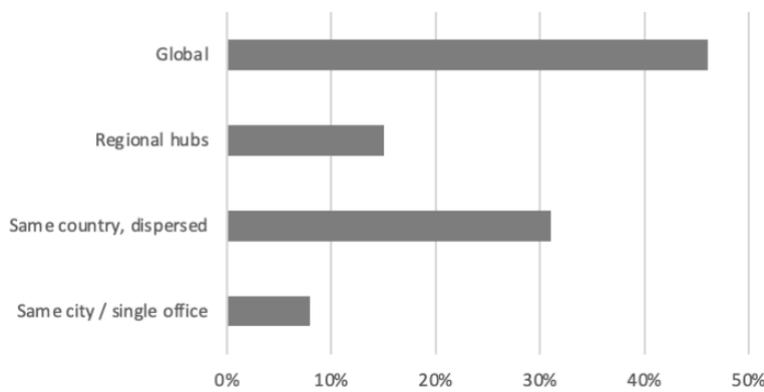
to this regular co-presence. It sustains momentum, builds shared purpose and deepens trust.

Dominic Chambers, CMO at *Ineos Automotive*, offered a complementary view. His team works in the office four days a week, using that time to strengthen collaboration and inclusion.

He highlighted how hybrid patterns can unintentionally favour senior staff with better home setups. While senior marketers may have the space and privacy to work effectively at home, younger or newer team members often lack those conditions.

Perhaps more importantly, the shared workspace gives them both practical support and access to informal learning, mentors and cultural cues that would otherwise be missing if they worked from home.

Geographical location of teams



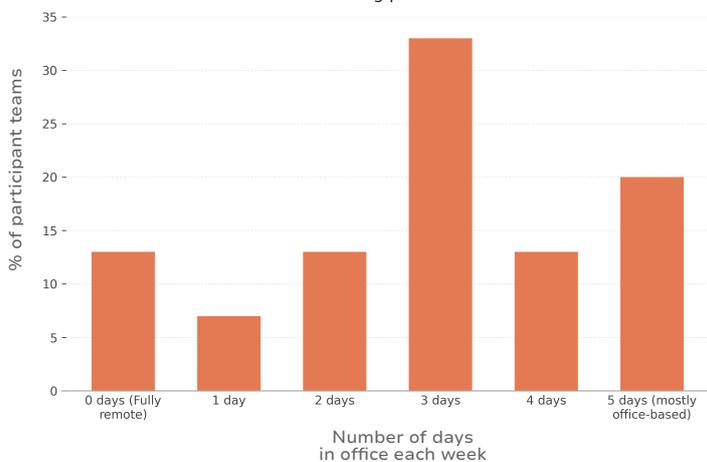
“We have a relatively tight-knit marketing leadership group that keeps rhythm constant across regions.”

- P11 (CMO)

“It’s in the room that you learn how others think. You don’t get that through a screen.” - P11 (CMO)

Dominic also spoke about the cultural value of shared time together. Simple interactions, from lunch breaks to post-work gatherings, help build trust and cohesion. That social glue supports honest communication and mutual care within projects.

Working patterns



Hybrid equity and learning

A consistent theme was equity in hybrid work: how to ensure shared learning and inclusion regardless of role or location.

Leaders recognised that while flexible work supports autonomy, it can reduce the informal, side-by-side learning that shapes early-career development.

Teams working together physically, in the same environment, reduced this risk. Bringing teams together often and regularly, provided them with the time and space to collaborate, learn from each other and share their creativity.

Key insight

Across the cohort, the most confident leaders link frequent and regular in-person collaboration with team confidence and creativity. Whether through fixed in-office days, regular hybrid patterns or structured offsites, deliberate proximity acts as the glue that turns teams from working groups into learning communities.

Structural Practice	Purpose	Observed Benefit
Regular in-person collaboration	Builds shared energy and trust	Faster collaboration and problem-solving
Hybrid equity focus	Supports early-career learning	Greater inclusion and confidence
Social connection outside work	Strengthens relationships	Higher trust and psychological safety
Structured offsites	Enables deeper reflection and creativity	Renewed focus and shared understanding

2 Shared Language and Collaboration

Every leader I spoke with highlighted the importance of shared language as a foundation for effective collaboration.

In high-performing teams, clarity of meaning accelerates decisions, reduces duplication and builds confidence.

Where language is inconsistent or siloed, teams lose time translating rather than creating.

“Sometimes we use the same words but mean completely different things.” - P7 (Head of Marketing)

Why shared language matters

Marketing teams operate across multiple channels, functions and disciplines. Without a common vocabulary, even simple terms such as “campaign”, “lead” or “conversion” can mean very different things between teams.

Leaders told me that agreeing on shared definitions brings speed, accountability and a stronger sense of collective ownership. The process of defining terms also builds understanding of commercial priorities.

Several leaders described how clarity of language connects creative thinking with strategic intent. When people share the same definitions, it becomes easier to link marketing activity to business goals.

“If people do not understand why they are learning something, it does not stick.” - P7 (Head of Marketing)

“If you don’t share the same language, even simple things get lost. For us, it’s not just words: it’s how we stay connected across global markets.” - P13 (Director of Marketing Optimisation)

Building shared language

Creating a shared language takes deliberate effort. Leaders described a range of practices that make it real in daily work:

- Developing simple glossaries or visual frameworks for key concepts.
- Reviewing terminology during quarterly planning or retrospectives.
- Using training sessions to connect creative, digital and commercial terms.

These small actions turn language from a potential barrier into a performance asset.

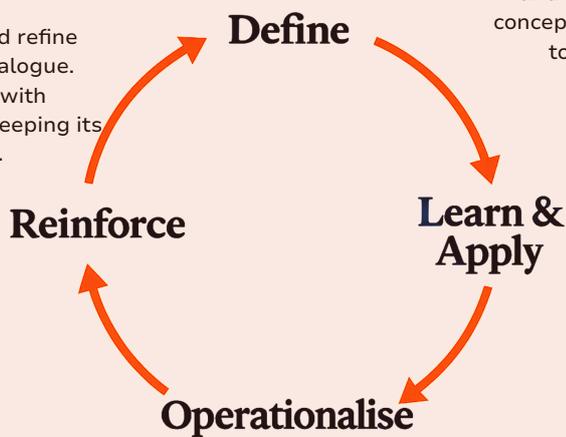
Key insight

Teams that invest in shared language collaborate faster and with greater confidence. Clarity of meaning does not restrict creativity; it enables it. When language connects creative ideas to commercial intent, collaboration becomes both more inclusive and more effective.

The Shared Language Cycle

How teams define, learn and embed a common vocabulary that connects learning with performance.

Review, reflect, and refine through regular dialogue. Language evolves with experience while keeping its shared foundation.



Agree on shared terms and frameworks for core concepts. Clarify meanings to ensure consistency across teams and channels.

Integrate shared language into systems and routines . KPIs ,briefs, dashboards, and reports. Consistency in metrics drives alignment

Embed the language through training, retrospectives, and shared projects. Practice turns terminology into lived understanding.

3

Strategic Alignment of Teams

Why alignment matters

Alignment came through as one of the most consistent themes in my conversations. Leaders described it as the point where strategy, culture and communication meet.

When teams understand the commercial intent behind their work, decisions come faster, collaboration improves and creativity gains direction. Alignment was strongest where marketing teams worked closely with other parts of the business.

“It’s primarily the clarity around what we’re doing, why we’re doing it.” - P2 (Head of Digital Marketing)

Commercial understanding

Many participants linked alignment directly to commercial literacy. They spoke about the importance of marketers understanding business drivers, profit and loss, margins, and strategic pressures so they can prioritise effectively.

I noticed that when leaders made commercial context visible, it changed how their teams behaved. It created a sense of ownership and helped people see how their work contributed to wider organisational goals.

One leader put it simply: “When people understand the numbers, they care about the outcomes.”

“We’ve been trying to build that thinking into the team, helping them see the commercial side as part of our marketing rhythm.” - P13 (Director of Marketing Optimisation)

Cross-functional connection

Several leaders described intentional collaboration across departments to maintain alignment as teams and channels grow. Regular joint planning sessions, shared KPIs and common reporting tools were practical ways to prevent siloed decision-making.

This cross-functional connection also strengthened empathy and understanding. When teams could see how their work linked with others, conversations became more transparent and decisions more balanced.

Leaders explained that this kind of connection is not automatic; it has to be designed and protected. It is what turns alignment from a process into a shared habit.

Avoiding silos

Hybrid working and specialisation have made alignment harder to sustain. Without a shared commercial language, teams can easily drift into isolated groups focussed on their own metrics.

Most of the leaders I spoke with had introduced deliberate rhythms, such as weekly commercial check-ins or cross-team retrospectives, to keep alignment active and visible. These short, structured routines stop assumptions from building up and keep priorities fresh in people’s minds.

“The more we drum in the strategy, the more it sticks.”

- P10 (CMO)

Key insight

Strategic alignment depends on both system and culture. Systems provide the structure through planning cycles, shared metrics and transparent reporting. Culture provides the trust and curiosity to ask why decisions are made and how they link to strategy.

When both are in place, marketing teams shift from reacting to briefs to contributing strategically across the organisation.

“If you don’t know the numbers, you can’t know the why.” - P11 (CMO)

Summary: Building and Sustaining Alignment

Focus Area	Practice Described by Leaders	Observed Effect
Shared commercial literacy	Open discussion of business metrics and goals	Stronger ownership and clearer priorities
Cross-functional planning	Joint meetings and shared KPIs	Faster decisions and better integration
Regular deliberate alignment opportunities	Weekly or monthly commercial check-ins	Prevents drift and reinforces focus
Transparent reporting systems	Common dashboards and performance reviews	Improved accountability and collaboration

4 Barriers and Enablers

When I asked leaders about how their teams learn together, though budget was often cited as a barrier, it was rarely the main one. Most leaders pointed instead to time, delivery pressure and mindset. These were the factors that most often got in the way of building capable and confident teams.

Even in well-resourced organisations, learning is still treated as secondary to delivery. Budget constraints and unclear ownership of development were mentioned too, but the real challenge lies in how people prioritise their time.

Several participants admitted that when no one owns learning explicitly, it tends to slip. Shared responsibility often means little real accountability.

Larger or more dispersed teams also face the practical challenge of keeping learning consistent across locations. Some leaders described how a clear rhythm of communication and reflection can help close that gap, but it requires deliberate effort and leadership attention.

Cultural barriers

Many participants described cultures where delivery comes first and development is left for quieter periods that rarely arrive. Deadlines, campaigns and urgent tasks absorb the time that could otherwise be used to learn.

Even when leaders value growth, it does not happen by accident. It must be built deliberately into the rhythm of the team.

Development needs protection, not permission.

One leader said the main barrier was “Time... We work at quite a pace, so it’s hard to carve out proper space for learning.” - P4 (Marketing Director).

That reflection captured what many others described in different ways: the will to learn is there, but the space to do it rarely survives the pressure of delivering tasks in the day-to-day.

“Time and delivery pressures limit opportunities for development and reflection.”
- P10 (CMO)

“Training budgets are often limited, with priorities elsewhere.” - P5 (Digital Marketing Leader)

“Empowering and developmental. Always starts with learning and curiosity.”
- P6 (Performance Marketing Lead)

“Limited formal development; unclear ownership of responsibility for training.” - P6 (Performance Marketing Lead)

“To be very honest, I think that’s probably one of the biggest challenges we face - while there’s alignment at a high level, it’s hard to cascade that consistency across each label.” - P12

“Geographic spread and language differences make alignment more difficult.” - P1 (Marketing Director)

“There’s never enough time to stop and think, and when things get busy, that’s the first thing to go.” - P10 (CMO)

“Budgets are the first to be frozen when pressure hits, so training becomes a nice-to-have.” - P5 (Digital Marketing Leader)

Enablers of learning and alignment

Where learning thrives, it does so because leaders make it visible, structured and shared. They build it into the rhythm of the team, not around the edges of it.

Leaders who focus on empowerment, curiosity and support strengthen confidence and capability.

These practices show that leadership behaviour is the single biggest enabler of sustainable learning.

When learning is visible, it becomes normal. When it is shared, it becomes culture.

Teams flourish when curiosity is modelled and when reflection is treated as part of everyday work, not a luxury reserved for quieter periods.

Strong leaders make that possible. They create the rhythm that keeps learning alive.

“When leaders protect the time and actually show up, people take learning seriously.” - P7 (Head of Marketing),

Key insights

The barriers to learning are mainly cultural. Time, mindset and leadership attention matter more than resource.

Teams excel when learning is treated as part of delivery itself, within a planned, protected rhythm that sustains performance.

Barrier	Impact	Enabler	Impact
Limited time and workload	Learning deprioritised	Protected learning rhythm	Sustainable capability growth
Budget and ownership gaps	Inconsistent or informal training	Leadership commitment and	Shared accountability
Geographic and organisational distance	Reduced alignment	Regular connection rituals	Reinforced shared understanding
Delivery-first mindset	Reflection postponed	Development embedded in daily	Stronger adaptability and

Ultimately, no team can stay sharp if learning remains an afterthought. The most forward-thinking leaders are building it into the rhythm of their work, not squeezing it around the edges of delivery.

Once a regular rhythm of team development opportunities is established, time and pressure cease to be a barrier.

5 Learning and Development Practices

When I asked leaders about how their teams learn together, most said the pattern is inconsistent. Collective learning happens, but it often depends on individual enthusiasm rather than structured design.

Some teams rely on informal sharing or creative reviews. Others schedule training in short bursts when time or budget allow. Few treat team learning as a sustained rhythm.

Deliberate structures build confidence

The most confident leaders had created deliberate learning structures. They used team sessions to build shared direction, not just new skills. In these settings, learning felt practical, social and forward-looking.

Several participants spoke about the difference between training and development. Training solves a task. Development builds a mindset. The most effective teams combine both.

One leader described how her team sets aside a half-day each month for “collective sense-making”, a simple space to talk about what they are learning, what they are seeing in the market and how it shapes their next move. That rhythm built confidence and cohesion over time.

*“That’s something that we’ve done, and we’ve built it into delivery so that learning is not a separate activity. It happens while we work.”-P13
(Director of Marketing Optimisation)*

Shared learning strengthens trust

Leaders also said that shared learning accelerates trust. When people learn together, they talk differently. They ask questions more openly and recognise the pressure others face. Learning becomes a tool for empathy as much as for performance.

The traits of effective learning

I found that the most impactful practices share three traits: they are collective, consistent, and connected to real work. Learning is not added on, it is built in.

The strongest practices had three things in common. They were simple, repeatable and connected to real work.

- **Regular team retrospectives** gave people time to reflect after key projects and strengthened accountability.
- **Shared learning sessions** created space for collective problem-solving and built team confidence.
- **Cross-functional learning** brought marketing together with other departments and deepened commercial understanding.
- **Shared leadership** encouraged team members to take turns leading discussions or training. It showed that learning is everyone's responsibility, not just the leader's.

These routines linked directly to higher engagement, stronger alignment and better decision-making.

The message was clear. Learning is most effective when it is visible, shared and expected. It becomes part of how teams stay alert to change and connected to one another.

When learning is fundamental to how a team works, they come together.

They show initiative.

They innovate.

They become a unit striving to continually improve.

“We learn best when training relates to what we are actually working on.” - P6 (Performance Marketing Lead)

6 Integrating Systems and Culture

High-performing teams succeed because structure and culture reinforce each other.

***Systems provide rhythm and clarity.
Culture empowers, and establishes curiosity and energy.***

The best leaders design both deliberately so that process supports people and culture sustains performance.

A system-led approach can deliver rapid coordination and consistency. Yet when alignment depends only on process, it becomes brittle.

Several leaders warned that systems alone cannot create belonging. Systems alone rarely empower individuals or teams. System-based alignment can easily drift into enforcement, and when it does, employees inevitably disengage and innovation stalls.

People may comply, but they will begin to stop contributing.

Your innovators will leave.

Alignment is only sustainable if the correct culture is created. A culture built on trust, curiosity and shared purpose.

System-led alignment: Clarity sustained by culture

Conor McKechnie, CMO at *Cytiva (Life Sciences)*, explained how their shared systems connect global teams and enable consistent delivery. Clear processes for goal-setting, reporting and creative approval mean everyone knows what success looks like. This approach delivers pace and coherence across complex structures and shows how well-designed systems can create visibility and shared rhythm.

Conor emphasised that systems alone do not create cohesion. Regular group learning sessions and cross-site knowledge exchanges maintain a sense of shared purpose and connection among colleagues who rarely meet in person.

While the *Fitch Group (Financial Services)* is focussed on establishing systematic reporting commonality across its global centres, P13 was driven by the desire to establish a shared culture through the design of those systems. With a global marketing team operating across

“We build systems to support people, not to control them.” - P2 (Head of Digital Marketing)

“We’re constantly balancing structure and freedom. The best teams learn how to flex between the two.” - P7 (Head of Marketing)

“We need everyone to talk about marketing in the same way and use the same measures. Otherwise we can’t compare or collaborate effectively.” - P11 (CMO)

*“Marketing at *Cytiva* is tightly linked to measurable commercial goals. If you don’t know the numbers, you can’t know the why.” - P11 (CMO)*

“It’s not just about dashboards, it’s about having the same reference points wherever you are.” - P11 (CMO)

multiple centres, *Fitch* has worked to ensure that culture is not left to chance but built into the system itself. Innovation sits at the heart of that culture. It is now a core pillar of every employee's appraisal objectives, and each person is expected to design and complete at least one innovation within their role every year.

Cytiva's system-led model shows how structure can protect culture at scale, keeping reflection and learning visible within complex organisations.

"Our accountability systems are there to keep us aligned, not restricted. They mean everyone knows how success is defined." - P11 (CMO)

Inside *Cytiva's* Alignment System

Focus: Structure that supports connection

- **Shared frameworks:** Consistent processes for planning, reporting and approvals connect teams across continents.
- **Common metrics:** Standard definitions of success make performance visible and comparable.
- **Cross-team reviews:** Regular sessions share learning between business lines and sites.
- **Knowledge exchanges:** Group learning events and cross-site discussions sustain a sense of shared purpose.

Strength: Predictability, consistency and speed across scale.

Risk if isolated: Over-reliance on compliance can limit innovation and belonging.

What works: Structure that protects culture by making learning and reflection visible.

"You cannot rely on dashboards alone, it is the rhythm of talking, reviewing and adjusting that makes the system work." - P4 (Marketing Director)

"When people understand each other's pressures, they collaborate, not compete." - P4 (Marketing Director)

Culture-led alignment: Rhythm that renews

At *Explore Worldwide (Travel)*, alignment lives in rhythm and trust.

Jae Hopkins' team balance structured reporting with deliberate time for conversation, shared learning and creative challenge.

As well as meeting weekly, they also invest heavily in learning as a collective discipline.

Each quarter, an external expert trains the team on one of their own specialisms, so everyone understands the language and pressures of colleagues' roles. Regular "teach-the-team" sessions add a different kind of learning, as people share a personal passion, from art to knitting to music.

When new initiatives are proposed, she asks the group to explore the counter-argument: why might this not work?

By creating a safe environment to test ideas from all sides, the team gains confidence in the decisions they take.

This rhythm builds trust, curiosity and shared accountability. Systems provide the scaffolding, but culture turns it into a living, adaptive rhythm of learning.

In recognition of this approach, Jae Hopkins' team at *Explore Worldwide* won In-house Team of the Year at the Travel Marketing Awards 2024. The award highlighted a culture built on rhythm, reflection and trust. It demonstrates how deliberate integration of structure and connection drives both performance and recognition.

Inside *Explore Worldwide's* Learning Rhythm

Focus: Culture that sustains alignment

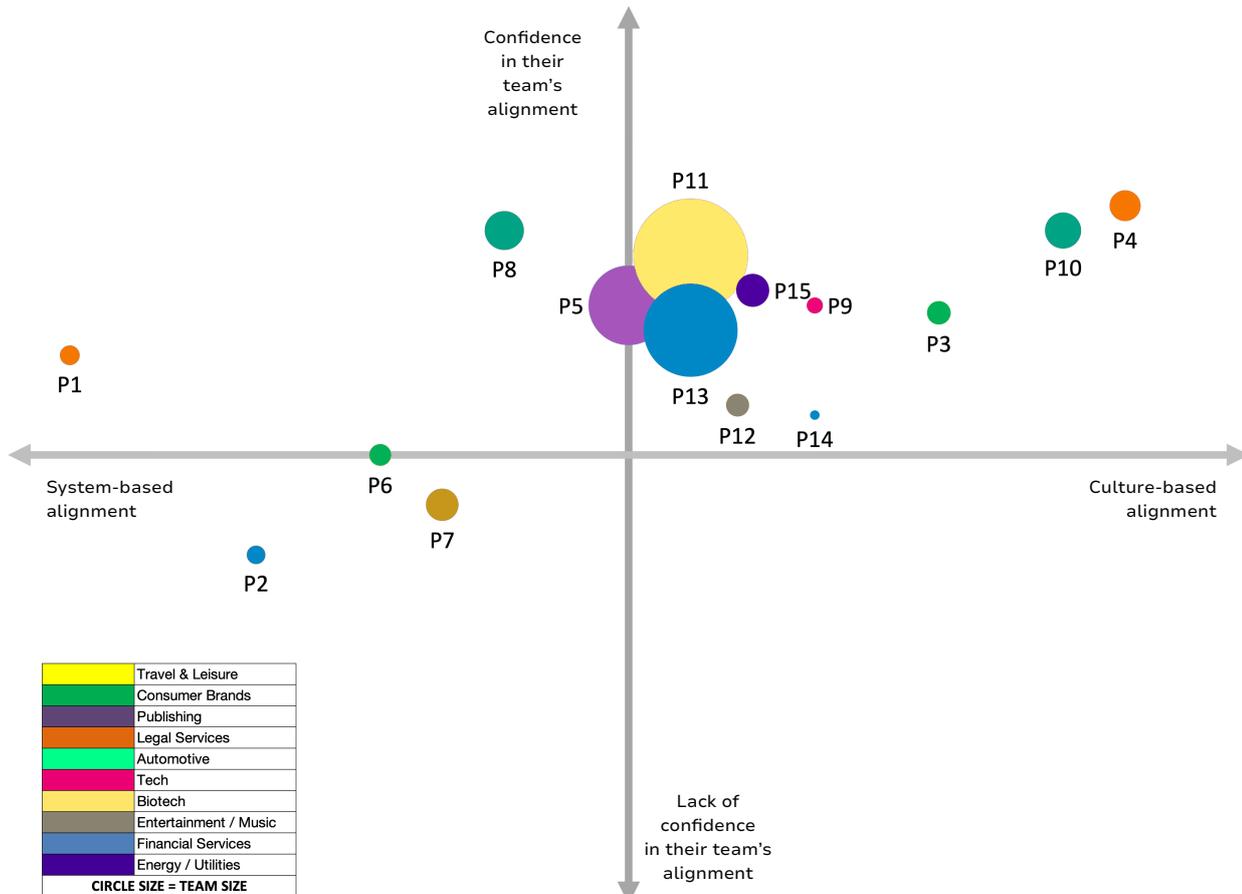
- **Quarterly external training:** Experts teach the team about each other's specialisms, deepening respect and shared understanding.
- **Teach-the-team sessions:** Each person shares a personal passion, such as art, knitting or music, helping colleagues see each other's creativity and depth.
- **Counter-argument reviews:** Every new idea is tested by asking, "Why might this not work?", creating confidence through openness.
- **Weekly rhythm:** Regular meetings balance performance review with learning, conversation and reflection.

Strength: Psychological safety, curiosity and adaptability.

Risk if isolated: Without system structure, rhythm can drift or lose coherence.

What works: Culture that anchors rhythm and learning, keeping innovation alive.

Focus on alignment: System vs Culture



Key insight

Sustainable alignment depends on the interaction of system and culture.

Systems provide clarity and pace, but without establishing a culture of learning and collaboration, they risk stagnation.

For teams to grow, evolve and succeed, it is vital to create a culture of trust, curiosity and innovation which is supported by clearly designed systems.

When both evolve together, development becomes integral to the team's key objectives

7

Practical Strategies and Emerging Models

The most effective teams treat learning not as an add-on, but as a rhythm built into the year.

Regularly, time is protected to allow them to step away from daily work, reflect together and explore new approaches in shared learning environments.

These experiences extend beyond routine meetings; they are about downing tools and entering a different space where the team can think, learn and reconnect.

1. Leadership rhythm

Effective leaders protect both operational focus and time for team development by building them into an established rhythm.

They create predictable cycles for reflection and planning, ensuring the team does not lose sight of its learning needs.

This rhythm provides stability so that learning activities can be scheduled, funded and prioritised rather than postponed.

“It’s not just about skills. It’s about helping people understand each other’s roles and talents.” - P5 (Digital Marketing Leader)

2. Group learning experiences

All participants described how valuable it is to take the team out of its everyday environment.

Working together on shared challenges, with facilitation and space to think differently, builds confidence and connection.

Leaders noted that group training delivers more than skills; it strengthens relationships, exposes hidden talent and builds empathy across roles.

Many teams said these sessions are when real learning sticks, the moment they start to see how lessons apply to their own systems and roles.

Those benefits in turn open and strengthen communication between team members when they return to their day-to-day work, a crucial gain for geographically separated teams.

Shared learning builds cross-functional commercial understanding and draws team members willingly into greater alignment, strengthening both collaboration and trust.

*“If development is part of the rhythm, it becomes normal, not a special event.”
- P9 (Marketing Director)*

*“When people understand each other’s pressures, they collaborate, not compete.”
- P4 (Marketing Director)*

*“Confidence, storytelling and collaboration – that’s what we’re building next.”
- P9 (Marketing Director)*

3. Training with specialists and across functions

Several leaders use external experts or cross-team exchanges to stretch their teams' thinking.

Exposure to new methods or external case studies challenges assumptions and sparks ideas that would not surface in isolation.

Reviewing what other brands are doing well was also described as vital.

Benchmarking against strong creative, strategic or operational examples helps teams see both opportunity and gap.

These sessions often reveal differences in shared language or approach that can then be addressed back in the workplace.

“When you take people away from the everyday, that’s when you get the best ideas.”
- P4 (Marketing Director)

4. The value of changing environment

Stepping away from the normal workspace plays a powerful role in team development.

Many interviewees described how time away from desks or regular surroundings creates mental space for creativity and reflection.

Offsites, external workshops and informal sessions encourage openness and strengthen relationships.

This act of downing tools helps teams see their work and each other differently, building empathy, energy and new connections.

“Learning that helps us improve how we hit our targets is what sticks.”
- P11 (CMO)

5. Shared learning and reflection

When teams approach reflection collectively, not as individuals, learning is embedded more deeply.

They set aside time to revisit insights from external training and test how they translate into daily practice.

Short team sessions to discuss what has been tried since the last training help embed new habits.

This practice turns developmental events into ongoing improvement.

6. Sharing language and intent

Clear, shared language remains essential to collaboration.

Teams that define their terms, frameworks and measures together work faster and with fewer misunderstandings.

This shared vocabulary gives people confidence to ask questions and challenge constructively, reinforcing openness and shared accountability.

7. Establishing the culture

Culture does not form by chance; it is designed through consistent actions and signals.

Leaders described how deliberately modelling openness, curiosity and accountability creates a climate where learning feels safe and expected.

They use shared rituals, such as reflection sessions or peer teaching, to reinforce these values until they become part of everyday behaviour.

A culture built this way makes development self-sustaining.

It normalises reflection, values challenge and turns learning into a shared identity rather than a scheduled activity.

These strategies show that real development happens when teams step away from their desks to learn together.

Downing tools, entering a new environment and tackling shared challenges turn training into transformation.

The learning gained does not sit outside work; it re-enters through stronger relationships, new ideas and renewed confidence in collective capability.

Key Insight

Development becomes most powerful when teams learn together, step away from routine, and connect learning directly to live goals.

Regular specialist input and cross-departmental exchange strengthen understanding and commercial awareness.

Leaders who protect reflection time and change the learning environment foster capability, creativity and cohesion.

Model	Core Approach	Application	Observed Outcome
Learning in Flow	Training embedded in live work	Campaign retrospectives and shared reviews	Real-time skill growth and faster improvement
Specialist and Cross-Functional Learning	Collective external and inter-departmental sessions	Whole-team training and finance-marketing exchanges	Greater capability, shared understanding and commercial literacy
Changing Environment	Stepping away from routine settings	Offsites and away-days	Stronger creativity, trust and team energy
Shared Language Framework	Common terminology and success metrics	Cross-team workshops and onboarding	Improved alignment and reduced friction

C onclusions and Recommendations

Leaders described how their teams are learning to balance system clarity with cultural connection.

Processes and frameworks bring order and pace, but culture gives meaning and resilience.

When systems dominate, alignment can become mechanical.

When a collaborative culture is left to chance, teams lose coherence.

The most effective organisations build deliberate bridges between the two, using rhythm, language and shared learning to sustain performance over time.

A culture that renews alignment

Alignment achieved through compliance is fragile.

People may deliver but they stop contributing.

True alignment is social, not structural.

It grows from shared intent and trust in how decisions are made.

Culture renews alignment by creating the safety and curiosity that keep systems relevant.

Learning practices such as peer teaching, external training and continual collective reflection are key ingredients to establishing thriving successful teams.

These practices ensure feedback continues to flow and systems do not become rigid.

They turn operational rhythm into **developmental** rhythm, linking the pace of delivery with time for reflection, challenge and shared understanding.

The role of leadership

Leaders shape the learning climate more than any policy or programme.

They set expectations for openness and create the boundaries in which experimentation can occur safely.

By modelling reflection, they make it visible and legitimate.

By asking questions rather than providing answers, they encourage curiosity and shared responsibility for growth.

Several participants said their role has shifted from directing activity to designing the conditions for learning.

This shift requires confidence, humility and the ability to hold space for productive disagreement.

System clarity that enables learning

Systems remain essential.

They create shared language, comparability and speed of coordination across dispersed teams.

When systems are designed to capture learning, not just results, they support rather than suppress innovation.

The most effective systems in this study also reinforced cultural intent: shared dashboards were paired with regular learning conversations, and consistent metrics were used to prompt reflection, not compliance.

Towards a learning culture

Teams that thrive in complex environments approach learning as part of their collective identity.

They make time to question assumptions, share insight and connect experiences across roles and geographies.

They treat reflection as operational work, not as a pause from it.

When leaders support this, development becomes continuous and self-sustaining.

Culture becomes the rhythm that keeps alignment alive.

Recommendations

For team leaders

1. ***Build a rhythm of reflection***
Protect regular time for shared learning.
Make it visible, structured and connected to real work.
2. ***Encourage curiosity and constructive challenge***
Create conditions where questioning is welcome and learning is mutual.
3. ***Turn training into dialogue***
Treat every development activity as a chance for the team to talk about how they work together, not just what they do.
4. ***Model openness***
Show vulnerability, share your own learning, and invite feedback to keep culture honest and active.
5. ***Make culture practical***
Translate values into visible routines that the team can sustain when pressure rises.

For organisations

1. ***Protect collective development time***
Treat group learning as operational, not optional.
Fund and schedule it as part of delivery.
2. ***Align systems with cultural intent***
Ensure that performance measures and reporting reinforce learning, not compliance.
3. ***Equip leaders as learning designers***
Provide frameworks, facilitation skills and peer networks to help leaders create developmental rhythm in their teams.
4. ***Recognise and share examples of balance***
Highlight teams that combine structure with experimentation to model what sustainable alignment looks like.
5. ***Keep learning visible at scale***
Celebrate progress stories, share learning openly and use internal platforms to connect reflection across teams.

Collaborative pilots for the *Little Grey Cells Club*

The next phase of this work will explore opportunities for collaboration within the community of the Little Grey Cells Club.

Members of the Little Grey Cells community who would like to explore any aspect of this report's findings, or discuss how the community might support their implementation, are warmly invited to contact Tim Healey at tim@shoot4themoon.co.uk.

At the time of writing, the team is also developing a series of focussed workshops on team optimisation, designed to connect senior marketers who are already applying expert-led solutions.

Bespoke team training sessions can also be arranged for organisations seeking tailored development and alignment support.

Final reflection

Sustainable alignment depends on the relationship between system and culture.

Systems deliver clarity and pace, but culture provides the rhythm that keeps them alive.

When teams trust each other enough to question, reflect and renew, they perform with both confidence and agility.

The strongest organisations protect this rhythm deliberately, turning everyday work into a continuous act of learning.

About Mx

Mx is a specialist training designer and provider for marketing teams.

We create bespoke development programmes shaped around each client's goals, culture and challenges.

We don't teach. But everyone learns.

Our workshops are built around carefully designed tasks that blend best practice with real marketing challenges, helping teams find their own solutions, turn theory into action and learning into results.

Every programme is co-designed to fit the way each team works. Through guided experimentation and reflection, participants discover new insights, strengthen collaboration and build confidence in how they deliver.

We deliver practical outcomes for teams:

- sharper capability
- closer alignment
- focussed strategy

Curiosity becomes normal, learning becomes collective, and a strong commitment to continual development takes root.

About Little Grey Cells Club

Empowering Senior Marketers Through Peer-to-Peer Learning

The Little Grey Cells Club stands as a trusted, sales-free network dedicated to curating peer-to-peer learning for senior marketing teams navigating an ever-changing environment. As part of our ongoing commitment to our community, we provide a platform where senior marketing directors share practical insights, address shared challenges, and collectively advance their leadership.

Founded and led by Tim Healey, the Club is a space for authentic marketing intelligence rooted in real experience and open dialogue. Our vibrant community of senior UK marketers is united by a passion for learning from one another and raising standards across the industry.

As your professional resource, we support top-tier marketers in five key ways:

- **Profile Interviews in The Drum** – Every Tuesday, founder Tim Healey publishes in-depth conversations with industry leaders, revealing the ideas shaping marketing today.
- **Community Gatherings** – Dinners, breakfasts, and our annual one-day Summit foster honest discussion and the sharing of best practice.
- **Reports with Practical Value** – Commissioned on topics chosen by our members, these publications offer actionable routes to progress and measurable success.
- **Peer Connections** – We introduce members to trusted peers who bring perspective, advice, and hard-won experience.
- **Access to Innovators** – Our network features marketing partners and service providers who help members overcome barriers and accelerate growth.

Tim Healey welcomes contact from community members for virtual chats or face-to-face meetings. Reach him directly at tim@shoot4themoon.co.uk.

To discover more or suggest new initiatives, visit www.littlegreycells.club.

