# Vertical Leadership Teams

Publicly funded organisations are often large and complex, with leadership teams stretched across operational and corporate functions. Processes to delegate work and escalate issues help leaders to focus on just the things that need their attention. Workers learn on the job to solve or escalate thorny issues through a combination of trial, error, and luck. But learning from mistakes is risky for organisations, and can be career-ending for individuals.

Leadership teams are often understood as the top two horizontal layers: the most senior leader and their direct reports. Aside from the most serious crises, middle managers tend to protect busy senior leaders by only escalating a problem after multiple layers of managers have tried, and failed, to resolve it.
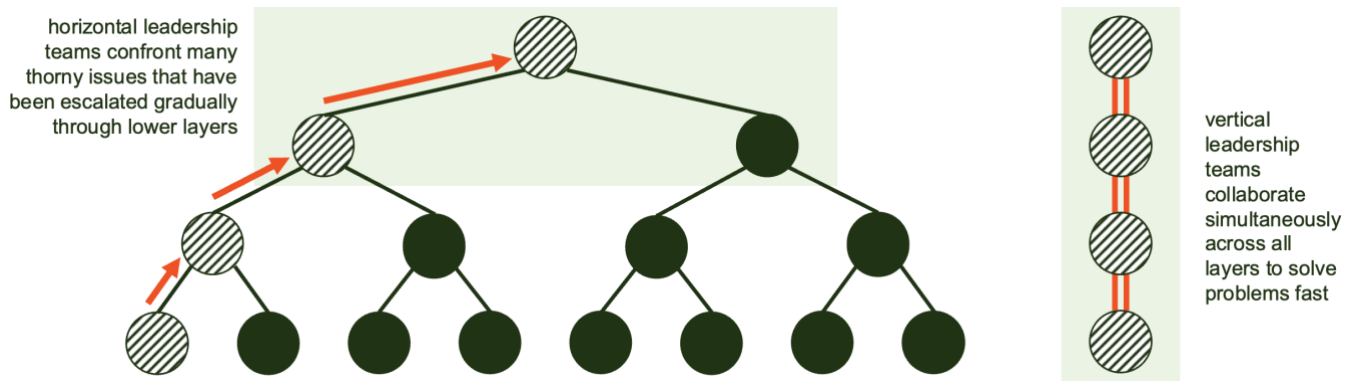
These ways of working are traditional strengths of publicly funded organisations, with most issues eventually escalating to a solution. Established management technologies reinforce this model, like formal delegations and compartmentalised work, which are essential for coordinating large enterprises.

Recognition and rewards also reinforce this approach. People who solve problems tend to earn promotion and become responsible for more and bigger issues.

Escalating to the top only after successive failed attempts to solve a problem is slow and costly. By the time it gets to the top of the organisational tree, most issues are more serious and urgent than they started, leaving fewer options and less time for leaders to act.

When someone with the authority to solve a problem becomes aware of it, they are often far removed from the detail. The time they need to investigate the issue before they can act leads to even more delays.

Workers and managers figuring out how to manage issues without structured guidance tend to make a lot of mistakes, which later need to be identified and addressed by more experienced leaders. This can be difficult, demoralising, and dangerous for workers who might make an unlucky, but honest, mistake.



horizontal leadership teams confront many thorny issues that have been escalated gradually through lower layers

vertical leadership teams collaborate simultaneously across all layers to solve problems fast

Rather than horizontal leadership teams through which issues rise gradually if not resolved by lower layers, we can manage key issues in vertical teams. Bringing everyone in the escalation pathway for an issue together simultaneously means they can assign action at the right level to solve the problem the first time.

Instead of horizontal layers with progressively broader coverage of the organisation, vertical leadership teams give depth to decision-making and capability building. Executives benefit immediately from access to workers with deep content knowledge, and gradually reduce demand on their time as more issues get solved quickly, before they get worse. Less senior workers build capability as essential participants in successful problem-solving teams, working alongside leaders with the experience and authority to act.

Vertical leadership teams take the traditional model of gradually escalating issues through horizontal layers and turn it on its side. When people with the right knowledge, experience, and authority work together, they can solve problems fast, the first time.

Executives might get involved in some issues that otherwise would have been solved by others, but they gain immediate access to details that can solve small problems quickly, before they turn into big problems. Workers learn and build leadership capacity faster by contributing to strategies with a high success rate, rather than through trial and a lot of error. They also feel better and get better results for the organisation.

Vertical leadership unites leaders, managers, and workers to solve problems collaboratively, closing out more thorny issues, and fewer budding careers.

**H4 CONSULTING**