

The Async Assumption That's Quietly Breaking Teams

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Async is having a moment, and mostly for good reason. A thread instead of a meeting. A Loom instead of a live walkthrough. A standup update you can write whenever it suits you, now generated in seconds. Everyone answers on their own time. It feels efficient, and often it is.

But it quietly rests on an assumption, and the assumption is usually wrong.

THE ASSUMPTION HIDING INSIDE ASYNC

Async assumes that everyone reads the same context, at their own pace, and comes away with the same understanding. That's the whole premise. Post it once, everyone absorbs it, everyone's aligned.

The trouble is that the entire reason miscommunication happens is that people are wired to send and receive differently. In a live conversation, the gap between what you meant and what I heard shows up fast. A puzzled look. A follow-up question. A "wait, say that again." Async strips all of those out. The gap is still there. Nothing surfaces.

"CAUGHT UP" ISN'T "ALIGNED"

Picture a long thread. Good discussion, a couple of tangents, everyone drops a thumbs-up, everyone is technically caught up. Then three people walk away with three different ideas of what was actually decided.

Nobody did anything wrong. There was just no moment where the differences could collide and get sorted. Everyone read the same words in a different chair, in a different mood, right after a different meeting, and filled in the ambiguous parts in their own way. "I read it" quietly became "I got it," and no one had a reason to check.

That's the trap. Being caught up is about information. Being aligned is about meaning. Async is great at moving information around and surprisingly bad at confirming meaning.

WHY THE GAP COMPOUNDS

Reading on your own time means reading in your own state, and state shapes interpretation more than we like to admit. The same three-sentence update lands as “we’re on track” for one person and “we’re behind and nobody’s saying it” for another.

Then the second problem stacks on top. The cost of asking goes up in async. Reopening yesterday’s thread to say “wait, what did we actually decide here” feels like admitting you weren’t paying attention. So people don’t ask. They assume, and they move. The misreads accumulate quietly, decision by decision. It’s the same tax that shows up in Asana’s 2024 State of Work Innovation report, where companies of 100 people spend around 17 hours a week just clarifying what was already communicated. Async doesn’t remove that clarifying work. It just hides it until something visible breaks, and by then the origin looks impossibly complicated. It usually traces straight back to a thread everyone thought they understood.

WHAT ACTUALLY MAKES ASYNC WORK

Async isn’t the problem. Assuming shared understanding without ever checking for it is.

A few things help. Write the decision, not just the discussion. End a thread with an explicit “here’s what we landed on and who owns what,” so there’s one version instead of five. Make it genuinely normal to ask a clarifying question with no apology attached, because a team that can’t ask is a team quietly guessing. And match the medium to the stakes. Something truly ambiguous or high-stakes deserves ten live minutes, not forty async messages that each get read a little differently.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The best async teams aren’t the ones who never meet. They’re the ones who know which conversations can’t survive being read alone. When everyone is technically caught up and nobody is actually aligned, the work doesn’t feel broken yet. It just starts drifting, and by the time you can see the drift, you’re not fixing a thread anymore. You’re untangling a month of small, reasonable misreads.

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