

Gates & Guardrails



At the heart of effective leadership teams is knowing which decisions you own, when you're expected to involve others, and what's out of bounds entirely. **Gates and Guardrails** are tools to help teams work with greater clarity, reduce surprises, and build trust.

They help us answer questions like:

- When do I act on my own?
- When do I check in with someone else?
- Where are the red lines that I don't cross?

When these are missing or just implicit, teams get bogged down. Spend a little time making explicit gates and guardrails with your team and you'll reduce drama, speed up decisions, and stay focused on what matters most.

Gates: Decisions That Require a Check-In

A **gate** is a moment where a leader *agrees to check in with someone else before acting*. Gates can exist between you and a manager, a peer, or someone you manage - or an entire team. There are **three types**:

Type	What it means	Example
Inform	You'll notify someone of your action, but you don't need a reply or approval.	"I'll be meeting with a key client and will send a recap afterward."
Advice	You'll seek someone's input before deciding, but you retain decision rights.	"Before shifting the project timeline, I'll check in with the design lead."
Consent	You will not move forward without someone's explicit approval.	"I will get leadership sign-off before submitting this funding proposal."

Tip: Start with "inform" gates and build up as needed. Most teams assume they need more "consent" gates than are practical, and risk stifling ownership along the way.

Guardrails: Boundaries That Are Never Crossed

A **guardrail** on the highway keeps you from going far off the road and into severe danger. Guardrails on teams serve the same function. Too often, these boundaries are unstated or vague. Making them explicit helps everyone stay on the desired path and trust others to manage risk appropriately.

Examples:

- We do not share confidential employee or customer information outside approved systems.
- We do not use company resources for personal gain.
- We do not falsify reports, data, or outcomes.

Try This

As a team or with a direct report, discuss:

- Where do you have **vague or unstated** gates and guardrails?
- What gates or guardrails are in place today that **aren't working** or create confusion?
- What **new gates or guardrails** would you recommend or propose?
- Where do you think a gate or guardrail **should** exist—but you're not sure what to propose?

Agree on a few to try for the next couple of months. Schedule time to come back to them, reflect on what you learned, and make any adjustments for the future.