

The Do's and Don'ts of Chaordic Management

How to Misuse This Diagram (Please Read Before You Try)

This diagram fails when leaders use it as an excuse to disengage, abdicate responsibility, or avoid difficult conversations. Defining outcomes without clarity, follow-through, or accountability is not empowerment—it is neglect. Allowing “emergent practice” without clear boundaries, shared values, and consequences turns adaptation into chaos. Conversely, over-specifying processes, mandating best practices, or collapsing decisions upward destroys the very intelligence this structure is designed to unleash. This model requires discipline at the top, trust in the middle, and humility everywhere. If you are unwilling to clearly define success, protect principles, listen to feedback, and intervene when outcomes are missed, do not use this diagram. It will not save you from poor leadership—it will expose it.

6 Things to Have in Place *Before* Implementation

These are prerequisites, not nice-to-haves. If these aren't in place, the model will amplify dysfunction.

1. A Single, Stable Purpose

Not a slogan. Not a paragraph.

A clear reason the organization exists that can guide decisions when no one is watching.

If your leadership team can't independently answer “*Why do we exist?*” with roughly the same words, stop here.

2. Leaders Willing to Be Accountable for Clarity

This model demands more responsibility at the top, not less.

Leaders must be willing to:

- Define outcomes precisely
- Make tradeoffs explicit
- Say "this matters more than that"
- Revisit and correct ambiguity they created

If leaders prefer flexibility over clarity, chaos will follow.

3. A Shared Definition of "Success"

Teams cannot self-organize toward a moving or vague target.

You must be able to clearly articulate:

- What "good" looks like
- How success is measured
- What failure looks like
- When work is "done"

Ambiguity here guarantees rework, resentment, or both.

4. Psychological Safety With Teeth

People must feel safe to:

- Make decisions
- Try things
- Be wrong
- Surface problems early

But safety **without accountability** is avoidance, not trust.

Both must exist together.

5. Managers Who See Their Role as Enablers

If your managers believe their job is to:

- Approve everything
- Control decisions
- Be the smartest person in the room

They will suffocate this structure.

Managers must be willing to design systems for others to succeed without them.

6. A Willingness to Learn Publicly

This structure assumes:

- You will get things wrong
- You will need feedback loops
- You will need to adjust outcomes and systems over time

If leadership needs to appear infallible, don't use this model.

7 Things to Do *When* Implementing

These are **behaviors**, not steps.

1. Start With Outcomes, Not Org Charts

Do not begin by redefining roles or reporting lines.

Begin by answering:

- What outcomes matter most right now?
- What must be true for the business to succeed?

Structure follows intent—not the other way around.

2. Make Constraints Explicit and Visible

Say out loud:

- What cannot be compromised
- What values override speed or profit
- Where teams have freedom
- Where they do not

Unspoken constraints are traps.

3. Push Decision-Making Down Intentionally

Ask:

- Who has the best information *at the moment the decision must be made?*

Then give them authority—and back them publicly.

Nothing kills this model faster than reversed decisions without explanation.

4. Build Feedback Loops Early

Do not wait for quarterly reviews.

Create mechanisms for:

- Teams to report what's working
- Teams to surface friction
- Leaders to hear uncomfortable truths

If information only flows upward when something breaks, you're already late.

5. Intervene on Outcomes, Not Methods

When results miss the mark:

- Ask what got in the way
- Adjust constraints, clarity, or support
- Resist prescribing tactics

Correcting methods instead of outcomes trains dependency.

6. Teach the Model Explicitly

Do not assume people "get it."

Explain:

- Why this structure exists
- What autonomy actually means
- Where accountability lives
- How decisions should be made

Unexplained freedom feels like abandonment.

7. Model the Behavior at the Top

Leaders must visibly:

- Accept feedback
- Admit mistakes
- Change their minds when data improves
- Respect the boundaries they set

Culture follows permission.

5 Things to Be Sure to Avoid

These are the most common failure modes.

1. Avoid Calling This "Hands-Off Leadership"

This is high-engagement leadership, just focused on the right level.

Hands-off leaders create drift, not emergence.

2. Avoid Letting Outcomes Stay Vague

If you hear phrases like:

- "You know what I mean"
- "Use your judgment" (without context)
- "We'll know it when we see it"

You are planting future conflict.

3. Avoid Re-Centralizing Decisions Under Stress

When pressure rises, leaders often revert to control.

That moment is the test.

If you collapse authority upward every time things get hard, trust will never form.

4. Avoid Treating Best Practices as Mandates

Best practices are inputs, not rules.

When you mandate them:

- You freeze learning
- You erase context
- You punish innovation

Let practices compete. Outcomes decide.

5. Avoid Using This Model to Avoid Conflict

This structure does not remove hard conversations—it requires them sooner.

If leaders use autonomy to dodge:

- Performance issues
- Misalignment
- Broken agreements

The system will rot quietly.

Final Framing for Leaders

If you want a single sentence to anchor all of this:

Chaordic leadership is the discipline of being clear where clarity is required, and courageous enough to let go everywhere else.