THE HUMAN MARGIN SERIES

Entering a settled team.

Everything is fine.
And has been for years.

Some teams meet a new leader with reassurance. The work is done, the reports arrive, and little is asked for. The first challenge is seeing what that calm has been protecting.

SWIPE →

WHAT THE NEW LEADER HEARS

In a settled team, the first weeks are easy. Questions get answers. Requests get a yes.

Agreement comes easily.
Delivery is another matter.

WHAT YES CAN MEAN

Sometimes commitment. Sometimes the shortest way out of the conversation. Work that challenges old habits tends to stall quietly, without anyone ever having said no.

WHAT SITS BENEATH

Look closer, and the same work is often done several different ways, each person with their own system.

The team shares a function.
It rarely shares a way of working.

SMALL SIGNS

Practices unchanged for years. Information kept close. Answers that lead to three more emails. Reports that arrive complete and say little.

A REASONABLE ADAPTATION

None of this starts with the people in the team.

Where results are rarely asked for, doing becomes the result.

THE MIRROR

Often there is no direction to follow, and the same work is done comfortably. Activity counts for more than value. The hard questions seldom come. And expectations are rarely set, so comfort sets them instead.

WHO LEAVES

Over time, a team like this also shapes who stays in it.

People with drive move on.
The ones who stay settle in.

WHAT IT COSTS

Functions like this rarely break, so the cost is easy to miss. It looks like one team's performance. In reality, everyone who depends on the team works around it, and the whole organisation pays twice: in the speed it loses, and in the opportunities it can't take.

READING BENEATH THE SURFACE

The surface is presented to the leader. The real service is experienced by everyone else.

The team tells one story.
Its customers often tell another.

WHERE ELSE TO LOOK

Internal customers and suppliers, who live with the service every day. And the numbers, where they exist. In teams like this, measures are often thin, and that is information in itself.

BELIEF BEFORE PRESSURE

The instinct is to set targets early. In a settled team, early pressure tends to produce numbers that look right, rather than numbers that are right.

First, the numbers become normal.
Then they start to count.

WHAT THE TEAM READS

Whether data arrives as a threat or as help. Whether progress is noticed, and praised generously, even while there is still a long way to go.

A WAY THAT BELONGS TO EVERYONE

Where everyone works their own way, none of those ways is usually the best one. There is often a better way than any of them.

Not the best existing practice.
A better one, built together.

WHY IT MATTERS

Everyone contributes, so everyone owns what comes out of it. The pride is shared, and so is the reason to keep it working. The leader's part is to inspire the search and advise on it, not to hand down the answer.

WHEN THE SURFACE NO LONGER NEEDS PROTECTING

At some point, the numbers stop being managed and start being used.

That is when ambition can land.
And a target means something.

AND THE HARDER PART

Not everyone comes along. Decisions about people come later, not first. But not too late: the longer they wait, the more the people who did come along pay for it.

WHAT THE TEAM FEELS

Change reaches people at different speeds. When it arrives, it is physical before it is cultural.

The same work takes less effort.
And there is room to think again.

AND WITH IT

Fewer ad hoc requests. Priorities that are ambitious but focused. A clear picture of what good looks like, so performance conversations hold no surprises.

THE TAKEAWAY

A settled team is rarely of its own making. The leader starts it. The team makes it hold.

Teams like this need to be pushed, not cornered. Staying means working differently, and each person makes that call. When it holds, others notice: peers come with questions, and some ask to join. For the organisation, the alternative is to leave it settled and keep paying for it.

IF THIS RESONATED

→ **Follow Anna Plekhanova** for more on leadership, transformation, and operating models.
→ **Save this** for the next time you inherit a team that says everything is fine.
→ **Agree, disagree, or seen this firsthand?** Leave a comment.
→ **Visit annaplekhanova.com** for more from The Human Margin, including The Quiet Ones.