

Organizational Alignment

by Jon Craighead

One of the greatest definitions of nonaligned organizations is found in Labovitz & Rosansky's The Power of Alignment: "Misaligned companies are like cars out of alignment; they develop serious problems quickly, they are hard to steer and don't respond well to changes in direction." Alignment is a state of agreement or cooperation for a common cause. Too often executives approach alignment as a concept which looks good in a brochure. The fact of the matter is that alignment isn't a concept; it is a hub of ideas and commitments formulated for specific and distinctive outcomes. Alignment is more missing than present in many organizations.

There are many examples of organizations, in every industry, that either failed or were reorganized because of their missing alignment. In the 1990's there were three major box store retailers: Kmart, Walmart and Target. Kmart was king. Five years later Walmart far out-performed its two competitors by creatively inventing a company-wide buying and distribution system that provided them with a competitive advantage, resulting in an international leadership position. Kmart fell to third place mainly because of a failed diversification strategy. Target had a major credit card breach that caused their customers' mistrust and resulted in the dismantling of their senior management team. At both Kmart and Target there was a costly absence of organizational alignment resulting in a competitive meltdown.

Effective measurement for alignment progress is the monitoring of preset timelines based on initial project design. The indicators that alignment is on point is the meeting of these timelines. This aspect of the process requires a highly proficient level of communication between team members at every level. This dimension of project management is facilitated by a linking system of speaking and listening connections throughout the project. Another significantly important component is the availability of nonverbal communication such as internet and mobile systems for providing even more instantaneous interaction.

The ultimate purpose of communication, irrespective of methodology, is bringing people and their work products together and in-sync. In business, communication is the essential connector for both management and personnel. Organizations cannot operate without effective dialog. When there is a lack of progress the first indicators are usually inadequate communication.

Skillful preparation is another essential component for alignment outcomes. Being unprepared is unquestionably a hazardous circumstance. Successful teams and organizations routinely prepare and drill for expected and unexpected contingencies. The primary purpose of practice is to perform flawlessly as a unit of one and to assist and support each team member. Being an aligned team is the most critical element for providing systematic and successful project completion.

Alignment is not group-think designed to inhibit independent thinking. To the contrary, one of the primary roles of leadership is to develop their personnel in thinking both independently and critically. Independent thinking promotes the ability to think for oneself, while critical thinking is the process of comprehending and disseminating pertinent information into action. When this combination of thought is present along with a focus on the mission's commitment, the outcome is accuracy and accomplishment. Conversely, dependent thinkers accept whatever they are taught and rarely examine or question its accuracy, resulting in an unreliable team member who not only offers little but becomes an inhibitor and a distraction.

The principle purpose of alignment is to facilitate a team's successfully completing a set of objectives despite any challenging circumstances which occur. Regarding previously mentioned preparation, imagine a surgeon not knowing where to begin in the operating room, or the fireman who is unfamiliar with the roadways of the city being served. When we are skillfully functioning in both the independent and critical thinking domains and thoroughly prepared, it is the difference of life or death in the operating room or the saving of lives in a fire. Accomplishment requires that we develop our ability to master independent and critical thinking in an effectual manner. Once the objectives are accomplished there are very few more satisfying or exhilarating experiences.

Alignment is a platform for committed people to achieve something larger than themselves. Naturally there are times in our lives when each of us chooses to be our freewheeling selves; however, it has been consistently proven we accomplish more together than when we operate alone.