



ALIGNMENT

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Since the beginning of last year I have been supporting the management team of a global player in the IT industry through a process aimed at giving this organisation in Portugal a new vision. Everyone quickly agreed on the importance and significance of a new vision, but for a long time it was impossible for them to agree on how the organisation should develop this vision. Some thought that the vision should be developed by the management team and then simply communicated to the rest of the organisation, while others insisted that the whole company should be involved in the vision-creation process right from the start.

A one-day workshop, at which the management team was supposed to draw up a plan and define the next steps, ended with a sobering realisation:

“We are still not aligned.”

The management team, whose members had only been in their positions for a year, realised that there were fundamental differences of opinion within the team concerning how the company should be run. This not only meant that there was no agreement on how the vision could be developed, but also led to a general decision-making bottleneck, which had a large number of negative consequences both externally and internally. When the company took part in the Best Place to Work competition, the management team received catastrophic assessments from nearly the entire workforce, who clearly identified the lack of leadership within the company.

Only a carefully defined **alignment initiative** lasting several months (see below: one of the pillars of a programme to improve alignment within companies) was able to make sure that the members of the management team were all pulling together.

This example, chosen from a large number of similar ones, raises the question of what makes alignment such an important concept for the success of

people, teams and organisations. What needs to be aligned in order for effective decisions to be taken quickly and implemented by everyone in the intended manner? And what exactly does alignment mean?

The various meanings of alignment

1. arrangement in a straight line
2. the line or lines formed in this manner
3. alliance or union with a party, cause, etc.
4. proper or desirable coordination or relation of components
5. (engineering) a ground plan of a railway, motor road, etc.
6. (social science / archaeology) an arrangement of one or more ancient rows of standing stones, of uncertain significance
7. (psychology) integration or harmonization of aims, practices, etc. within a group
8. (psychology) identification with or matching of the behaviour, thoughts, etc. of another person

Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged © HarperCollins Publishers 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2003

These questions are analysed and answered in the following.

Alignment: A fundamental concept of human action

The easiest way to grasp the meaning of alignment is to consider its opposite: misalignment. Everyone is familiar with examples of misalignment.

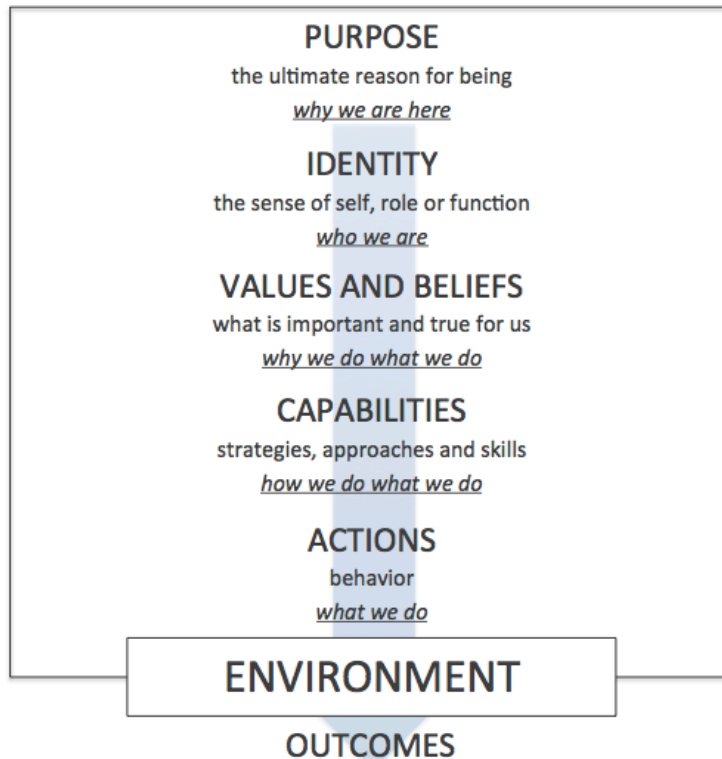
Here are a few I have come across through my work:

- the brilliant scientist who is appointed head of the research department of a pharmaceutical company and fails miserably;
- the HR manager of a big toy manufacturing company who visibly loses strength and energy during the firm's comprehensive restructuring process (away from its traditional core business);

- the regional manager of a European health service provider who dramatically fails to meet all his targets following a merger with an American company;
- the new general manager who tries to introduce the company's new

leadership principles by means of regulations and with the help of secret agreements with individual departments (one of the principles was "openness and transparency")

What links all these cases of dramatic failure is **a lack of alignment at the fundamental levels of human action.**



A person who is aligned knows her purpose in life, has found an identity or role to move towards her purpose, has values and beliefs that supports her in the identity chosen; her beliefs enable her to take full advantage of the capabilities she has. This person will do what needs to be done and will adapt the environment to support success, in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

based on Molden & Symes

Figure 1: The Basic Alignment Model based on Molden & Symes¹

Let us take a closer look at these examples:

If the values a person preaches do not match their actions (general manager), or the specialist cannot and does not want to lead (scientist), this is a case of **personal misalignment** – at identity level in the case of the scientist. The scientist who continues to see himself as a specialist failed at the role of manager, whose outlook, focus, and basis for action differ wildly from those of the specialist.

The sudden **lack of accord** between the regional manager's own **values** and those of the company following the merger

deprived him of the **foundations** on which to take the right decisions. He was no longer able to make use of the intuitive leadership strength provided by central values.

And the company's **purpose** became meaningless for the HR manager when the target group was **lost** as a result of the business abandoning its original core business. Ultimately, it took away his sources of energy.

These examples allow us to differentiate between the following types of alignment:²

Personal alignment: alignment between the values and beliefs of individuals and their actions and behaviours.

¹ David Molden and Jon Symes: *Realigning for Change*. Financial Times Publishing 1999

² See also Richard Barret: *Building a Values Driven Organization*. New York 2006

Structural alignment: alignment between the values and beliefs of a group (team, department) and the rules, regulations, processes and structures defined by the organisation to guide the behaviour of individuals.

Values alignment: alignment between the values and beliefs of individuals and those of the team, department or organisation as a whole.

Mission alignment: alignment between an individual's purpose and the purpose of the team, department or organisation.

We will come across this differentiation again when we look at initiatives and programmes for improving alignment in companies (see below).

However, the importance of alignment can be seen in more than just the problems caused by misalignment. We recognise the paramount importance of the concept primarily through its positive results, i.e. in the things that become possible when alignment is achieved.

Trust: a result of alignment

Nothing destroys trust faster and more thoroughly than if there is a noticeable discrepancy between what someone says and what he does. "Walk your talk!" is rightly one of the fundamental requirements of managers. By contrast, if we see that the words and deeds of people or groups are in harmony (aligned), we perceive their behaviour as authentic and regard them as people of integrity.

Remember the example of the management team in the IT industry whose leadership qualities were judged so harshly by the workforce. The employees' statements were not aimed at individual managers. Instead, the employees felt as if they were without a leader because there was no sign of a clear management line shared by all managers. Ultimately, however, the individual managers lost their credibility as well, and trust in the entire company was forfeited. Employee productivity plummeted and the company found itself in serious difficulties. As a result, the first, most vital task in the emergency response was to re-establish

trust in the management. In an alignment workshop (see below) the management team agreed on simple, convincing leadership principles and made a conscious effort to set an example by putting them into practice throughout the company.

Motivation, energy and passion: the second result of alignment

"Motivation" is a term we come across everywhere in today's world. A Google search for "motivation" gets 218 million hits, the literature on motivation appears endless and, for managers and leaders, motivating staff every day is a challenge. Yet the "motivation myth"³ is easy to explain. No one has motivation problems when he can do what he wants. And what he wants to do depends on his motives.

A person's motives are part of his values system, which in turn is an integral part of his identity. Values are linked to doctrines and beliefs, which prevent or enable us to use our abilities fully. If identity, values and beliefs are aligned with goals, then people are naturally motivated to achieve the goals and to carry out the relevant actions. The problem of motivation does not arise.

The same applies to the relationship between leader and follower. If the values, beliefs and goals of a leader or manager are aligned with those of the employees, it will not take much additional effort to motivate staff to achieve the goals set. People who are in harmony with themselves, leaders and followers who strive for the same goals, have energy and motivation that is capable of overcoming obstacles, coping with set-backs and even growing to match the size of the task.⁴

Group cohesion: the third result of alignment

When the values and purpose within a group, team, department or company are

³ See Reinhard K. Sprenger: *Mythos Motivation*. Frankfurt am Main 1991

⁴ To mention just two examples of people who have fully embodied this principle: Soichiro Honda, who would not let anything or anyone prevent him realising his dream; and Nelson Mandela, who also has the ability to get people with opposing backgrounds and interests to pledge themselves to a common vision.

aligned, the mutual trust and shared goals result in group cohesion. It is clear therefore, that indoor or outdoor team-building activities that focus solely on achieving tasks cannot strengthen cohesion within the team in any lasting way.

For this, there needs to be open, trusting discussion at individual and group level about the things that are most important to us: the things we believe in, who we are and what we strive for. Only by discussing these things does the group have the opportunity to develop values and goals for the team, department or company, and to develop a clear vision of its future and purpose.

The difference between alignment and agreement

For managers and leaders in particular, it is vitally important to obtain a clear understanding of the difference between alignment and agreement.

Not all the decisions that we, as leaders or managers, have to take in an environment dominated by rapidly changing conditions and complex situations, can be based on the full agreement of everyone involved. For one thing, it is not possible to achieve agreement from everyone for some decisions in large groups; and for another, most processes for obtaining agreement from everyone involved would be much too complex and slow.

This is where the group that is aligned has a clear advantage. Even if I, as a member of a management team, do not agree with all strategic decisions, I will still go along with the company, with the leader, with the team, because I know I am aligned with the overarching values and goals that ultimately determine the management team's actions and my own.

Resilience: the fourth result of alignment

It is clear that alignment has a considerable influence on what we – together with others – can achieve in life.

In companies, alignment, in all the varieties described, creates the necessary

conditions that enable people and groups to remain capable of open communication and cooperation, of increasing mutual trust and maintaining fast decision-making and vital company processes in the face of disruptions, turbulence and shocks.

Programmes to increase alignment in companies are therefore always initiatives that help strengthen the organisation's resilience.

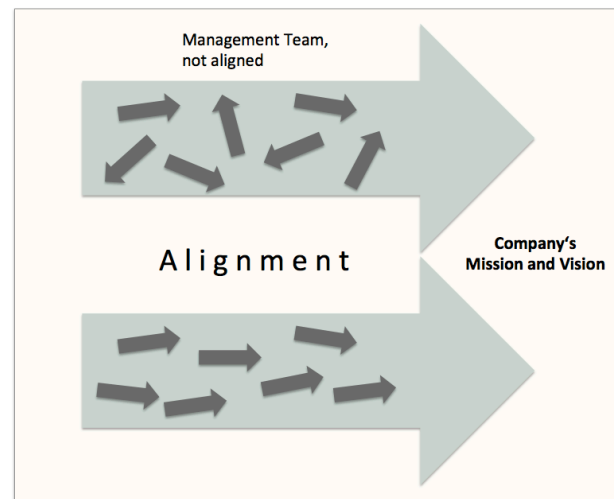


Figure 2: Alignment - All efforts concentrated on the essential goals

The pillars of a programme to improve the alignment of individuals and groups within companies

For many companies, an alignment initiative is an investment in securing the company's future. For some, it is a long overdue measure, i.e. when

- unclear visions of the future,
- a lack of focus in day-to-day actions based on overarching goals,
- turf wars between departments (the infamous silos), and
- daily violation of the company's and individuals' core values

have led to friction and quality losses that mean serious disadvantages for the organisation on the global market.

What are the main points to bear in mind when designing and carrying out an alignment programme? What are the most important components?

1. Create personal alignment

The starting point for any alignment initiative in a company is to create personal alignment among the individual managers. This is usually achieved during a two- to three-day workshop. On the first day, the managers reflect on and clarify key questions relating to their personal and professional lives:

Who am I? What things are important to me? What do I believe? What do I want to make of my life? What is my calling? What do I want to achieve? What do I want to work towards?

The managers share the results of their individual reflections in a relaxed and stimulating atmosphere, laying the foundations for the following step.

2. Values and mission alignment

By sharing their personal values and beliefs, the group, e.g. management team, gains a clear idea of the basis on which individual managers act, their motives and overarching objectives. In doing so, they discover the distinctive features of their group and start to develop a shared team identity. They experience the other managers as individuals with whom it is worth sharing important things.

The group discovers a meaningful purpose for itself, a reason for its existence, by aligning the members' own meaningful goals with the purpose of the company.

The combination of values alignment and mission alignment produces the strong group cohesion necessary for taking the alignment achieved within the management team into the company.

3. Structural alignment

This is where the real challenge begins for the management team:

discovering and cementing the shared values and purpose throughout the

organisation. This involves a fundamental change within the organisation.

And it is obvious that it cannot be achieved in two workshops. Instead, it is a change process that will require several months. The aim of the process is to reshape the collective rules, procedures, processes and structures so as to align them with the purpose, central values and principles and the goals derived from them.

It has proved extremely helpful to set up a large number of bottom-up initiatives, that not only ensure the involvement of the employees, and therefore their commitment, but also significantly improve the quality of the change process.

It is important that during this phase of the alignment initiative, the key actions no longer take place in workshops, but in the workplace.

In the case of the management team in the IT industry cited at the beginning, these bottom-up initiatives were accompanied by coaching for second- and third-level managers. The coaching sessions, which were run on an individual and group basis, were designed to help the managers make the most of every opportunity to delegate responsibility to the employees and to introduce and coordinate suitable measures. This ultimately resulted in a delegation system aligned with the company's objectives, values and vision – an impressive example of structural alignment.

The programme outlined here played a key role in achieving a rapid turnaround for the IT company, which is now one of the most profitable in the industry.

Today, when asked where the organisation's strength lies and what makes it so successful, the managers answer:

"We are all aligned!"

About the author:



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