

Real Alignment

Move from concept to action.



by Howard M. Guttman

IT'S A COMMON TRAP: The top team meets, makes a decision, and later wonders what, if anything, happened. The decision to align the organization—to ensure that it is a unified force to achieve results—is too important to risk apathy. Alignment is the axial principle of high performance.

Here are six actions to take:

1. Take stock. Alignment is often triggered by a leader who senses a disconnect between the “should be” and the “what is.” First ask: What would this organization look like if we could take it to the next level of performance? And then: What could the senior-management team accomplish? What goals could we reach? What barriers could we eliminate? What problems could we solve?

2. Engage the team. The message that “We need to up the performance bar” is disquieting. It puts the status quo on trial. So, the leader communicates with team members, allays their fears, secures buy-in, and generates excitement for high performance.

The leader presents the case for a performance-improvement initiative: “We are here, and we need to be there.” The leader shares his or her perspective. Effective leaders come with solutions, not just problem statements. When a team is committed to a common direction, when it focuses on deliverables that evolve from that direction, when it is clear about its roles and responsibilities, when decision-making protocols are in place, and when relationships are open, then it acquires new performance muscle and the will to win.

While the leader presents the “why” of alignment, a trusted consultant briefs the team on the “how”—the steps going forward in the alignment process.

3. Get the facts. Team members need to be informed that the consultant will be speaking with each of them to get their perspective. The alignment revolu-

tion is a team effort. Do team members share the leader’s view? Do they share the same sense of urgency and assessment of the barriers to high performance? The consultant draws out and analyzes the viewpoints and “stories.”

Confidentiality allows team members to answer candidly tough questions: How would you rate the clarity of team goals? How clear are you about your role/accountability? Others’ roles/accountabilities? How would you rate the working within the team?

Along with these quantitative questions, ask some open-ended questions designed to obtain qualitative data:

What one suggestion would you give your team leader to increase his or her effectiveness? What isn’t working in the way the team functions? What is working?

At the end of these interviews, the consultant has an accurate picture of the alignment journey, and that information is shared first with the team leader, then with the rest of the team.

4. Give the leader a heads-up. Some leaders perceive the feedback from their team as a personal challenge or, worse, an attack. The consultant helps the leader to depersonalize the critique and view it as the fact pattern in the case.

The consultant must give the leader a chance to absorb the team’s feedback and plan the next step. Together, they discuss which key areas will require the most work, where there appear to be breakdowns between players, where turf battles between functions are paralyzing the team, where decision making is stalled, and which team members are perceived as either aggressive or nonassertive. Think of the heads-up session with the leader as the “choreographing” of the alignment workout.

5. Hold the alignment workout. First, have the team take a long look in the mirror by sharing the data from the

interviews with the group. The effect of such self-revelation is powerful, as Gerard Kells, VP of HR for Johnson & Johnson’s Medical Devices and Diagnostics Division, can attest: “When the team sees the data, they realize that it’s theirs: It’s sobering—and a little frightening.”

Next, confront the alignment issue head on. High-performance teams are aligned, and this alignment enables them to work through conflict and attain expected results.

The consultant asks team members to look objectively at the data and address four questions: 1) What adjectives would you use to describe this team? 2) What is the main message or “story” that comes through about this team? 3) What are the obvious issues that this team needs to resolve? and 4) What will happen to this team if, six months from now, it hasn’t changed?

As responses are shared, team members begin thinking about the team as a cohesive social unit. They begin to see the implications of their behavior on the group. They realize how much is at stake and buy-in to the need to change.

They know what key issues need to be resolved. Each member has a clear picture of what he or she

needs to do differently. They assume responsibility for their transformation.

6. Assess on an ongoing basis. After their initial alignment, team members will have to work hard to maintain the momentum. Promises that were made must be kept: to let go of destructive stories, to be candid and encourage candor in others, to refuse to play the triangulation game, and to put allegiance to the team above functional self-interest.

Self-assessment sessions must be held regularly, and team members must take corrective action as soon as they realize that a contract has been broken.

All teams must turn in a stellar performance, which makes “multi-tier alignments” an imperative. EE

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ACTION: Align teams to boost performance.

