

The effectiveness of a team, organization, or any kind of working group is greatly impacted by the degree of alignment on critical factors such as goals, strategy, tactics, process, etc.

As agents of transformational change, whether as consultants or internal leaders, one of our most important jobs is to help create alignment.

Conditions That Support Alignment

1. Alignment on purpose and vision

Alignment at this deeper level creates a field of agreement and unity that can be drawn upon in helping groups align around other issues. Where there is a lack of alignment on purpose or vision, almost any issue can become a battleground.

2. Clarity on decision-making power

Clarity and agreement on who has the authority to make which decisions is *critical* to aligning groups.

3. Focus and boundaries

Leadership should provide focus for the alignment process. Exactly what are we trying to align around? What are the decisions that need to be made? What's on the table? What's off the table?

4. Trust

Different viewpoints and concerns become increasingly hard (or even impossible) to resolve when trust is low in the group. Issues around trust need to be dealt with directly and proactively, rather than allowing them to contaminate and impede the group's work.

5. Ground Rules

Clear and agreed upon ground rules for group process and behavior are fundamental for supporting alignment work. Make sure to clarify these before initiating an alignment process.

6. Attention

Leaders often fail to pay attention to subtle signs of lack of alignment. There's so much to do. It might be time-consuming and messy to acknowledge these. We may hope misalignment will just go away if we ignore it. Unfortunately, lack of alignment at the beginning of a process usually grows with time. Obstacles are encountered. There are increasing demands for effort from group members and competing priorities. Places of misalignment are like fault lines: when pressure grows, cracks and fissures start to appear – maybe even tremors and ruptures in the group.

What's required is sufficient attention to test for alignment, and a willingness to devote the time and energy to achieve maximum buy-in before launching any major endeavor.

Two Scenarios

In dealing with issues of group alignment, we are typically dealing with one of two basic scenarios:

Scenario #1: Co-creating Alignment

The group has the authority to make a decision and needs to come to agreement about something.

Scenario #2: Aligning to Given Reality

A decision has already been made. The group or individuals within the group do not have the power to change it, but need to be brought into alignment.

It is critical that leaders and consultants be completely clear on the operative scenario. The methods and process for creating alignment depends totally on whether or not the group has the power to make decisions.

Methods for Co-creating Alignment

We are now in the domain of good group facilitation. There exists a wide range of tools for promoting deep listening, authentic communication, good dialogue, win-win negotiation, group creativity, and problem-solving processes.

As facilitators of transformational change, we want to add to this traditional toolkit everything we are learning about group energy.

All of the state-shifting tools we discussed in *Coaching the Shift*¹ for individuals work equally well with groups. Be inventive in your use of emotional release, moving energy, humor, inner knowing, guided imagery, art, and ritual for helping groups quickly shift when energy gets bogged down in content.

Methods for Aligning to Given Reality

It is a very different set of challenges when faced with needing to align a group or individuals within a group to an existing decision, policy, course of action, etc.

Commitment cannot be coerced. Given this, how do we move individuals or groups where we want them to go?

1. Persuasion

We use our intelligence, our energy, our ability to connect and communicate with people, to invite/convince them to willingly go along. Techniques include:

a. Inspire

Create a positive and compelling vision of what's possible. Engage people's hearts as well as their minds. Connect to what they care about. Help them to see the potential benefits for themselves, and your shared purpose and mission.

¹ See also: *Tools for Transformational Consulting: Coaching the Shift*

b. Clarify

Lack of commitment may arise from simply not understanding what's so. It's often helpful to go back to the beginning. Provide better context: what led to things being this way, other options that were considered, explain the process, why this decision was made, what it means, what it doesn't mean, etc.

c. Deep Listening

Even if it won't necessarily change anything, giving people the opportunity to *really* be heard – and responded to – often will help people move up the commitment scale. It creates an experience of respect, human connection, helps people move their energy, and sometimes get off their positions of resistance. It's also an important opportunity for a leader to understand peoples' needs and concerns. People not only need to speak, but they need to experience being heard. This means, at the very least, reflecting back what you heard and communicating (sincerely) your understanding and appreciation for their feelings and perspectives.

d. Reframing

Reframing can be a powerful tool in giving people new ways to understand something about which they have concerns or objections. Reframing is often more possible after deep listening. You will have a better sense of people's concerns that need to be addressed, and people will usually be more willing to listen after they have been listened to.

2. Adaptation

While you as leader may not be able or willing to change the basics of the reality in question, you may still be able to respond to barriers to full alignment. There may be room to negotiate or give around implementation, timing, details, etc., that may not be critical to your primary concerns, yet still significant to those whose commitment you are trying to ensure. A leader's willingness to adapt in response to stated concerns will often help people overcome their initial resistance.

3. Direct use of power

Sometimes those with the authority and responsibility need to step and deal firmly with misalignment.

Sometimes people dig in and won't go along with the group's direction. It's usually O.K. for some group members to not be totally on board for relatively unimportant matters. But it's a huge drain on group energy to try to move forward on major work with one or more people in resistance. This usually requires firm confrontation from the team or a leader.

Sometimes it is necessary for the well-being of the group and the integrity of the process (and possibly also for the well-being of misaligned people themselves) to remove such people from the group field. This might range from inviting one or more people not to participate in a particular project, reassigning them, or in extreme cases, firing.

Many progressive organizations suffer from a lack of willingness and/or skill in dealing firmly and cleanly with chronic misalignment of certain individuals.

4. Admitting error

While this should not be on the table at the beginning of a process of aligning to given reality, occasionally leaders may learn things by going through an alignment process that require re-evaluating the wisdom of the original plan/decision/course of action. Perhaps the lack of commitment and support truly makes the original course untenable. Perhaps those who were misaligned are seeing things that were not properly taken into consideration. We may choose to re-open everything for question, rather than trying to compel agreement.

(NOTE: Sometimes we may need to admit error but may not have the power to change the given reality.)

Lack of alignment is the source of much wasted energy, poor implementation, and conflict in teams and organizations. Leaders and consultants alike must learn the arts of facilitating alignment.