

Time to Check Your Alignment?

Lois J. Zachary and Lory A. Fischler

John brought his car into the garage for its quarterly checkup the other day. John is diligent about oil changes and always attends to regular preventive maintenance, so he was surprised when the mechanic told him his tires were out of alignment. There was no telltale shimmy; the car was not pulling to the right or left. Instead the damage had been done quietly, eroding the tread on his tires and shortening their life span without his awareness.

Organizations, like cars, can be out of alignment and damaged without anyone noticing until something actually breaks down. If one part of an organization is out of alignment, the whole system may be knocked out of whack. Misalignment creates compartmentalization, mistrust, and ineffectiveness. The typical symptoms are missed financial goals, high employee turnover, low quality, and poor productivity. Quietly, sometimes almost imperceptibly, staff members become less engaged and pull away from and even avoid one another. Communication becomes one-way; people lose commitment; they are present but unenthusiastically so. Over time, performance is compromised. Ultimately, the organization's bottom line is affected.

Alignment is a shared understanding of an organization's goals and a commitment to achievement of those goals through coordinated, seamless,

and holistic action. Proper alignment is manifested in how the work actually gets done and the clear-cut way in which individuals align their values, actions, and interactions with the values, vision, and strategic direction of the organization. Optimally, alignment transcends time and place and permeates the very fiber of the organization. This synergy creates peak-performance moments for an organization. Alignment is organic and is in a state of perpetual motion—that is, organizations are never totally aligned but are always working toward becoming aligned. There is always a dynamic tension at play between the current and the desired states.

Rather than wait for signs of misalignment to appear, effective leaders engage in high-leverage practices to keep their organizations in balance. In our organization's work with leaders, we have found that consistently leveraging four specific practices promotes organizational alignment.

We have developed a tool that integrates these four high-leverage practices we see as necessary to successful organizational alignment. The practices are *feedback*, *accountability*, *communication*, and *trust*, and they form what we call the FACT model. Much like each of a car's tires, each of these four must be in sync with the others. They work in tandem to produce organizational alignment.

Effective leaders have mastered the art and practice of feedback, accountability, communication, and trust in their organizations. They stay alert to the early signs of misalignment, modeling the way for others

and demanding no less from their people.

Feedback is a process of sharing observations, concerns, and suggestions among individuals and units of an organization with the intent of improving both personal and organizational performance. To foster alignment, feedback must be embedded in the organization's DNA. When feedback is given and received in the right way, it fosters alignment among people, the work they do, and how they accomplish it. When it is given or received in the wrong way, it can result in distrust, impeded communication, and compromised accountability.

A climate that encourages feedback fosters continuous improvement. Leaders must intentionally develop an infrastructure to support a feedback-friendly culture. In some organizations, feedback is associated solely with critique of performance. Feedback that is solely negative can foster accountability in the short term but often adversely affects long-term performance. Feedback misses the promise of its potential if it is not ongoing and constructive. Taking the right approach to gathering feedback helps people hold each other accountable long before it's too late to resolve a situation or problem.

As a leader, are you giving and asking for feedback regularly and encouraging your team to do the same? Are you consciously modeling the behaviors you want to create? Are you creating a climate in which feedback is welcomed, honest, and valued?

Accountability is the obligation to successfully deliver on performance

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expectations and results and to bear the consequences for failing to do so. Feedback encourages accountability in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Accountability fosters ownership, nurtures commitment, and creates ongoing value for the organization. Without shared accountability it is next to impossible for an organization to achieve its vision and create the positive energy needed to get desired results. Feedback promotes accountability by aligning expectations, increasing understanding of goals, and providing input to ensure quality and timely results.

It is an attention to and a focus on goals that helps people be accountable in the first place. Goals frame, define, and focus the work to be done; eliminate ambiguity; minimize personal agendas; construct a framework for gauging progress and measuring success; and set a context for the work to be done. They also increase motivation because they harness and focus energy and action.

Leaders need to walk the talk on quality measurements and goal achievement. What do you do to hold people accountable? Do you provide feedback in a timely way to let people know where they are in the process? Do you talk about high performance expectations? Are there consequences for low standards or failing to meet expected results? Are high performers acknowledged and rewarded? Do you distinguish between excellence and the status quo?

Communication is the process by which information is conveyed among people. When communication promotes shared understanding, it contributes to alignment. Leaders cannot build trust without it.

When lines of communication are closed, people become hungrier than ever for information. The resulting need-to-know climate often leaves people feeling disaffected, suspicious, and disempowered, and it contributes

to a lack of productivity. Without good communication, effective feedback becomes impossible and accountability an illusion.

Communication energizes only when it is clear, definitive, and timely. Leaders communicate to reinforce their vision, their goals, and their results. Are you holding open forums? Are you looking for ways to create value and visibility? Are you encouraging and supporting your next level of leadership to do the same? Are you establishing effective and accessible information-sharing processes in your organization? Do you have an ongoing, inclusive, and comprehensive communication strategy plan?

Trust is the most precious organizational currency for building relationships in the workplace. When there is trust, communication is likely to be open and frequent. People are open to confronting issues, quickly resolving conflicts, and deepening relationships.

Trust is vital to an organization's health. Without trust, alignment is impossible to achieve, communication becomes disingenuous, people avoid giving honest feedback, and accountability becomes suspect. A lack of trust stops performance dead in its tracks. New efforts, directions, and initiatives are viewed with rampant skepticism.

Leaders must invest in, engage in, and actively build and maintain trust throughout their organizations. Check the trust gauge in your organization. Are people speaking up, even if what they say isn't necessarily welcomed? Is risk taking encouraged and rewarded? Are people willing to admit their deficiencies? Do they ask for help? What are you doing to promote alignment through trust? Are you sharing your own vulnerabilities or past mistakes? Do you assign blame, or work on fixing problems?

The dynamic interaction of feedback, accountability, communication,


and trust helps an organization live out its core values, maintain its integrity, promote ongoing effectiveness, and create the momentum needed to realize its vision and attain its strategic goals.

Alignment is, by nature, a continuous process. It must receive constant attention and can't be taken for granted. It can't be assumed that one-time efforts have staying power.

There are parallels between the four tires you drive on and the organization you lead. You can get your tires aligned at the garage, yet over time the alignment may slip. Sometimes there are signals. If you know what to look for and are paying attention, you might be aware of those signals. If not, you must depend on someone or something to remind you that alignment is necessary.

Effective performance relies on alignment efforts that are pervasive, seamless, and continuous. The bottom line is that leaders must be more intentional about alignment. The four alignment practices are not factory parts that can be made to specification; they need to fit together according to the organization's pattern, standard, and design.

Leaders who demonstrate consistent attentiveness to these four practices differentiate themselves and their organizations. They make a conscious effort to ensure that the practices are alive and well so that their organizations stay in alignment and on course.

Have you had your tires checked lately? 

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