

Align Your Team



Learn to think and act like a team.

STRUCTURE IS IMPORTANT because it sends the people in it powerful messages. However, a constant quest for the perfect structure can draw attention away from an even more fundamental question: Is the organization properly aligned? Regardless of its structure, the organization must be properly aligned.

Alignment begins at the top. Creating and maintaining alignment across the senior management team is a key leadership task. Alignment refers to a shared understanding of the results the organization must achieve, and of the actions needed to achieve those results. If a company is out of alignment—if people lack a shared understanding of the targets and the means of achieving them—structure becomes a side issue. No structure can, in and of itself, create alignment. The management team must create it, starting with themselves.

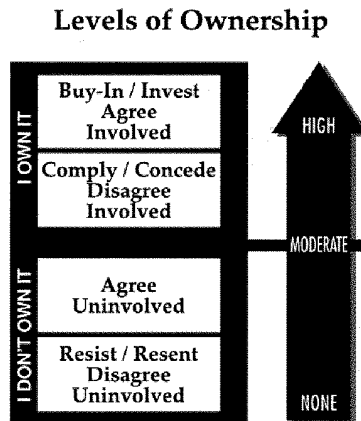
Get Aligned Around Results

We advocate alignment to achieve desired results. Management teams often lack clarity regarding the results the organization is supposed to achieve. For example, we worked with a fast-food chain whose parent company had told them they would be sold unless they achieved a certain financial target. We assumed that every senior manager in the division would know the target and think constantly about how to achieve it. We were wrong. When we asked managers what the target number was, we received answers ranging from a 3.5 to a 7.0 increase in operating income. They were completely unclear about the targeted results.

Without clarity, there can be no alignment. The targeted result must be

clear to everyone on the team. Then the results must be shared. Each team member must share accountability for achieving the result.

Creating alignment means moving from one manager feeling accountable for quality, customer service, or financial performance toward everyone feeling accountable for them. A company gets out of alignment when managers work on isolated results. Having a common focus and sharing accountability for key results keeps them united. The quality control manager is as committed to achieving the bottom line as the financial manager, and the financial manager is committed to quality. They share a sense of ownership for key results.



Levels of Ownership

People “own it” when they feel personally invested in achieving the result. When managers share ownership of results, they work together to achieve them.

There are, however, various levels of ownership. A manager may feel “I own it” or “I don’t own it” and that the feeling will affect his or her actions. At the “I own it” levels, managers who agree with a goal or decision and acknowledge their involvement will buy in and invest themselves in it. The “buy-in/invest” level is the highest level of ownership.

Managers who disagree can still be involved. They can comply and concede. Alignment does not necessarily equal agreement. You don’t have to agree with a decision to be aligned with it. But you must be aligned to move forward. You can disagree with a decision, yet still promote

it for the good of the organization or from a sense of professionalism or teamwork.

Those at “I don’t own it” levels refuse to move forward or promote a decision. They may agree with the decision but refuse to become involved—holding themselves exempt. Or they may make excuses for their lack of involvement. At the lowest level of ownership, they may actively resist or resent the decision.

To achieve alignment, managers must move to the high levels of ownership.

Once senior managers create alignment through open discussion about results and the actions needed to achieve them, they must continually check for alignment around specific checkpoints such as the timetable for achieving the result, the personal commitment to achieve the result, or how to hold each other accountable for progress. They need to ask certain questions frequently to ensure alignment.

The checkpoints must be specific to the company’s key results and unique to each team. They must then be used to trigger the right actions to ensure the team is moving forward together.

Promote Accountability

While managers need not agree with every decision, each of them must actively promote every senior management decision. This means owning the decision as if it were yours. This is essential to maintaining alignment. Leaders can promote a particular decision in four ways: *Supporting a decision* means actively promoting it with your people—agreeing with the logic of the decision, removing obstacles, and assisting others in implementation; *Advocating a decision* translates to more vigorous and proactive support; *Sponsoring a decision* involves taking vocal ownership of the decision and linking your success to its success; *Championing a decision* means actively leading people in efforts to make it a success and keeping it on the daily agenda. Alignment does not require every senior manager to champion every decision. But when each champions or sponsors three or four key initiatives, the company makes great progress.

The goal in alignment is to think and act like a team. Alignment is not an event—it’s a process. There are always forces working to throw the team out of alignment. Few of these forces can be addressed effectively by changing structure. And whatever the structure, people will reliably produce results if they have an aligned team at the top. EE

Roger Connors and Tom Smith are the authors of *Journey to the Emerald City* (1999) and the founders and principals of *Partners in Leadership*; 909-694-5596.