

Using Data to Achieve Real Alignment for Change

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November 2021

This month's conversation was about creating real alignment and achieve better results in our change initiatives. [Lindsay Uittenbogaard](#) who ran our session started the conversation referencing symptoms of fractured and misaligned organisations. These symptoms included speech bubbles with comments like "things are taking longer and costing more than expected" or "people don't seem to be on the same page". As we delved deeper into the reasons for misalignment we added:

- Working in silos
- Company culture
- People and their ego's
- Time constraints
- and the more recent remote working

As we pondered on the challenges, we realised that things are not getting easier, in most organisations are becoming diversified, with change and transformation happening more frequently. Traditional communication methods don't create alignment they just tell people the message and leave individuals to interpret what they hear or read. Finally with more remote and virtual working people are relying on tools like enterprise social networks, that may connect people but don't provide clarity or alignment.

Having understood the symptoms of misalignment we were all keen to have Lindsay give us some hints and tips for creating alignment.

We looked at some of the more recent research behind alignment and there were a few interesting common themes coming out from the research. The importance of language to create understanding and help us to share a more consistent picture of the future. Until we have this shared reality the conversations feel difficult and there are lots of points where people feel confused. As people get full explanations of what the future may look like and can share the same vision, they can converse about a subject in a way that will reduce conflict as the stories are consistent and are not made up from having limited information. For example, imagine coming into the office one morning and the window is open. Quickly realising its not, a burglar we want to understand what happened. We remember that John opened the window yesterday so we assume that John left it open. Without the full explanation of what happened a story that John left the window open yesterday, has been created. It may not be true but without some research and knowledge about what happened the story sticks and becomes fact.

Recent research suggests that virtual teams are more likely to distrust the communications and that this could take 5 or 10 times longer than before to correct this. Yet we know from research that people deliver better together with shared vision and understanding. The group asked if we perform better in a crisis because there is often a clear vision that everyone understands all too well. Think about the recent pandemic when it was clear remote working had to happen where possible to preserve life. The message was clear and people made it happen. The group went further suggesting sport was a good example of teams working together to share a common goal although some disagreement and examples where sports teams are misaligned. Although the group generally thought that the pitch example was a good one where people were together, had muscle memory of what to do and often did perform well as a team.

The group then thought about examples of misalignment and there were many good examples but usually the theme was about multiple stakeholders who come together to deliver a project with multiple reasons for the project happening in the first place and didn't understand the diverse perspectives.

During the discussion one group suggested that empathy maybe an important skill when seeking to align teams. Having empathy gives you the ability to see the problem through the eyes of others. Another group took this a stage further and suggested using Edward de Bono's six hats whereby people try on the different hats and see how they fit, in other words they look at the same problem through different lenses.

Then came an "ah ha" moment when we realised that by asking the same, identical question to a group of people may show whether they are aligned or misaligned. Only then as the lead on a project would you understand the challenge that you have. Maybe that question is relatively simple like "What is the goal of this project"?

The challenge of this simple question is that so many change initiatives begin with "presentation" rather than "discussion". The sponsor tells people what the end goal is, and because they have described something that makes sense to them, they automatically assume that everyone has "got it" so there is no need to facilitate a discussion on it. Maybe the first argument we need to win is the need to align, and so we use the simple question to show the diverse understanding of what the sponsor is saying.

The group then wanted to think about when you ask these questions. Initially the suggestion from the group was they would like to use the technique at the start of the project, when alignment is needed and a time that the organisation needs to share a common language. Maybe by creating a team charter.

Following the discussion, we discussed different types of misalignment and what gaps would be created. These were termed the information gaps the perception gaps, structural gaps and the anti team gaps. In other words, are we structured correctly to align, do we all have the same perspectives or strategic frame and the more we hear the views of others the more likely a shared direction is created? The anti team gaps are those that are created when we do not have the team at the heart of everything, we do but we are seeking to stand out from the crowd can be different. Resulting in the lack of information sharing and potentially the hiding of information.

We also talked about the importance of help and support from someone who can facilitate the discussion. A leader can in from help frame an issue and provide the briefing behind that strategy, but they are often too close to the problem to be objective. The leader will not be best placed to

align the team and with the help of a facilitator, who can ask the questions and challenge assumptions, get to the heart of the problems, and ensure the team becomes aligned.

The question that was then asked is when the best time is to check people are aligned and avoid the challenges of misalignment. Initially the view was needed to get alignment at the start of the project. However, that may not be enough so one individual suggested that we need pre-alignment to ensure there is the discussion on the end goal. The next suggestion was that we need alignment during the “discovery” phase of our change, when everyone is weighing in with their version of the scope. It was suggested we would have to carry this out multiple times because as we know, some people jump into the change initiative very quickly but others lag behind, and we have to keep repeating these conversations so everyone has a chance to get involved. Finally, one team suggested the need to get alignment at every milestone. For example, ask two questions:

1. What have we achieved, where have we got to? This helps us to build alignment on the new baseline
2. What do we think we need to achieve next? We are aligning on the way forward, and it gives us a chance to revisit our understanding of the end goal.

Whilst there were many nods on the call the challenge came about that this may not be appropriate as you may have far too many milestones and it may end up being impractical. There also maybe other times when seeking to test alignment may feel more appropriate than at a milestone. In conclusion the project will need to seek out times when they need to test for misalignment. Particularly when there is a specific event that happens during a project.

- Throw in the odd question
- What is frustrating you about this project
- What is concerning you about this project

When we ask question to understand alignment it is essential that we include people so that a richer picture of what is happening is essential and by including everyone and are we being respectful.

The conclusion was that if we do not use these alignment techniques we will continue to work on change initiatives where it appears everyone is signed up to the same end goal, but underneath, everyone has their own interpretation and their own priorities.