

You Can't Get There Alone: Ensuring Alignment Across Your Management Team and Beyond

FEATURED EXPERT

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Whether you run a start-up of 50 people or a division of 1,000 in a mature company, achieving your vision for success depends largely on the people you lead being aligned with that vision. Founders, division heads, and others at the top — I'll call them Chiefs — and the organizations they lead frequently struggle because nobody really understands the Chief's plan or their own role in executing it. This misalignment can create friction, frustration, and failure.

During 20-plus years working in and leading public-sector organizations, stints in a consulting firm and a software startup — and now as a leadership instructor and consultant — I've seen a lot more alignment failures than successes. I've learned a lot about the causes and costs of misalignment through these experiences, as well as some simple ideas to help create alignment.

SO WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL ALIGNMENT?

Alignment is a simple concept that's hard to achieve: It occurs when every manager understands and pursues their Chief's definition of the why, how, and what of their jobs (to borrow from Simon Sinek's language for how great leaders inspire action). Alignment requires a Chief to clearly articulate their expectations for each manager's approach to leading people, running programs, working with partners, and developing themselves. Ideally, the Chief is also explicit about what these managers can expect from him or her.

Alignment minimizes uncertainty about everything from priorities and metrics to acceptable behavior and roles and responsibilities. It reduces the friction of daily operations and helps define organizational culture. It also improves the flow of information up the chain, helping Chiefs understand what's really going on below them.

Organizations often pursue alignment by publishing detailed strategic plans with mission, vision, and value statements. However, very few go the extra step of clarifying how the Chief expects each manager to implement their part of the plan. Truly exceptional organizations extend this conversation to the entire workforce, helping everyone feel more vested in the Chief's vision.

THE ROOTS AND COSTS OF MISALIGNMENT

Organizations become misaligned when communication and transparency between the Chief, subordinate managers, and the rest of the workforce breaks down. Some Chiefs purposefully run their organizations unilaterally, dictating actions without context, discussion, or concern for alignment. Others simply don't recognize the need to promote alignment, which then atrophies due to benign neglect.

Chiefs are often blind to the drag misalignment is creating in their organization because they exist in **The Bubble**, a barrier against the upward flow of accurate and timely information. The Bubble arises and persists because most Chiefs are under intense pressure, are physically and psychologically distanced from the workforce, and have subordinates afraid of telling them when something isn't quite right.

Increasing organizational complexity can accelerate misalignment. I've seen startups stumble as they grow past a point where the Chief and key managers regularly meet face to face. To make matters worse, many startups understandably cling to a mentality that favors agility over process, thereby sidestepping some of the ways they could maintain alignment as they mature.

A hallmark of misalignment is uncertainty across the workforce over the Chief's priorities, values, and expectations of others, which is almost always due to a lack of communication and transparency. Similarly, the Chief is never sure exactly what's happening outside of The Bubble. This dual uncertainty creates several problems for misaligned organization.

It undermines trust. Insufficient transparency can degrade trust in management, producing cynicism and disengagement across a workforce lacking the context behind management's actions and inactions. Without this context, people tend to create their own narrative about what's going on and why it's happening. I've found most workers don't assume noble intent when judging management's actions, so this narrative is rarely flattering.

To make matters worse, the workforce, including managers just one rung below the Chief, tend to have little understanding of or empathy for The Bubble's blinding effects on the Chief. As a result, people assume the Chief is aware of and endorses everything happening in the organization. For example, when particularly bad junior managers are not held accountable, everyone assesses the Chief must know but doesn't care.

It creates discord. Misalignment can create localized priorities and expectations as managers fill a perceived vacuum of guidance from above with their own rules, miss opportunities to collaborate, work at cross purposes, or even engage in open conflict. For example, if a firm's heads of product management, engineering, and operations are not aligned with each other or the CEO, it becomes much harder for each unit to serve the firm's strategic goals. Such dysfunction leads to confusion and friction that saps efficiency.

It degrades agility. Misalignment undercuts a Chief's ability to quickly reorient the organization to adopt new priorities or practices. Each layer and division of management might put its own spin on the push for change or slow-roll it. This kicks off a twisted game of telephone that distorts the Chief's intent by the time it reaches the workforce expected to operationalize it. The result is a series of misfires and missed opportunities until the Chief can get everyone working together. Anyone who has experienced a problematic reorganization attempt knows exactly what I'm talking about here.

HOW TO CREATE ALIGNMENT

The most important step in improving organizational alignment is a decision by the Chief to consciously create a more coherent leadership team. Movement here is sometimes hard because of the benign neglect brought on by The Bubble; everything might seem fine from the Chief's perspective. The Chief must also have the humility to accept that their brilliance might not be enough to allow them to run things by fiat — unfortunately a deal breaker for many Chiefs I've encountered. For those willing to take the initial leap, there are four primary steps in creating alignment: factfinding, formulat-

ing, communicating, and curating.

Factfinding. The launch of an alignment effort is an ideal time to look outside The Bubble and pinpoint the sources and symptoms of misalignment. Use a neutral party to hold focus groups across the workforce to gauge their perception of the Chief's priorities and expectations. Ask them about the flow of communication up and down and whether there is a gap between what they hear from senior leaders and what they experience locally. If focus groups are impractical, a quick survey can still help.

It can be tempting to skip this step when you “know” what’s wrong, but that would ignore the fact that the Chief’s view of reality is almost always skewed.

Formulating. After diagnosing the sources of misalignment, the next step is formulating a strategy for addressing them. One way to do this is for the Chief to craft expectations that clarify how managers should lead their people, run their programs, partner with each other, and develop themselves. These expectations should drive behaviors that create alignment and reinforce the Chief’s vision for why, how, and what.

Previewing these expectations with senior managers before rolling them out more broadly will provide transparency, help get the managers’ buy-in, make them feel more vested in the alignment effort, and reinforce a leadership team approach to problem solving.

Communicating. Since alignment is all about communication and transparency, it’s obviously important to convey expectations in a way that promotes both. An ideal way to do this is for the Chief to discuss their expectations with each layer of management. This allows the Chief to provide the necessary context and intent behind their expectations and lets others ask clarifying questions and perhaps pierce The Bubble by explaining why some expectations might be unrealistic.

I’ve seen this communication phase work particularly well when Chiefs invest in facilitated management offsites devoted to expectations conversations. Such offsites should be followed by communication to the rest of the workforce stating the Chief’s commitment to hold everyone — themselves included — to these expectations. Employees are likely to see such communication as a covenant their Chief is making with them, so do not take this step lightly.

Curating. Alignment can’t be a one-and-done exercise where the Chief communicates expectations and leaves it at that. The Chief must curate alignment by reinforcing expectations through regular open discussion between and across management levels and by holding accountable those who don’t meet these standards. The adoption of a leadership team approach, where the Chief meets regularly with all levels of management to discuss problems and plans, is an ideal way to maintain alignment and promotes support, not suspicion, among managers in different units. This sounds blindingly obvious, yet I have worked in several organizations where the Chief almost never met with other levels of management, thereby ensuring misalignment.

Leadership and management training that incorporates the main themes of the Chief’s expectations will further cultivate alignment. Such training establishes a common language for leading and managing in the organization.

The final element of curation is an aggressive effort by the Chief to counter The Bubble by encouraging and facilitating communication. Whether it’s formal or informal meetings with the workforce, periodic 360-degree feedback or workplace surveys, or a management advisory group, regularly taking the organization’s pulse will help the Chief know when it’s time to recalibrate to maintain alignment.

MIND THE GAP!

A final word of warning to anyone who takes on the challenge of strengthening alignment: You are setting yourself up for trouble if you fail to live up to your end of the expectations you communicate to your workforce. Any perceived gap between what you say you stand for and your actions will undercut other's perception of your trustworthiness. Avoiding this pitfall requires a high degree of self-awareness and trusting relationships with subordinates who feel safe penetrating The Bubble with the occasional reality check about how you're coming across to others.

ABOUT THE EXPERT

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Dr. Chris Savos creates and delivers unique leadership, management, and professional skills training and consulting experiences to a range of public- and private-sector clients. A former CIA senior executive known for outstanding communication, critical thinking, and leadership skills, he successfully drove complex regional and functional analytic programs covering a range of US national security challenges before moving to the private sector.

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