

# TRIPLE CROWN LEADERSHIP

## **COLLABORATIVE ALIGNMENT: A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP PROCESS**

BOB AND GREGG VANOUREK

*"Creating alignment may be  
your most important work."*  
Jim Collins and Jerry Porras

Alignment is a transformational leadership process for achieving peak performance.

Many organizations today are dysfunctional, not because their people are incompetent, uncaring, or lazy, but because they are not aligned. They are, unwittingly, working at cross-purposes, unclear about what they should do, and unsure how they relate to colleagues. As a result, they work hard for a while, then become discouraged, sometimes even cynical, and withdraw, going through the motions, putting in their time, but working far below their full potential, leaving the lion's share of the work to be done by a few, overloaded people.

Other organizations are not dysfunctional but operate at sub-optimal performance levels. They never come close to achieving "flow," that state of being-in-the-zone performance where extraordinary results are achieved by people working together, reinforcing one another, innovating, executing, and feeling great satisfaction.

Through alignment, organizations can achieve breakthrough results and much greater personal satisfaction. Unfortunately, in our experience, most leaders do not know how to create an aligned organization. Alignment is a leadership process that can be learned.

Alignment is a collaborative leadership process that is not rocket science, but it does take discipline, commitment, and follow-up from committed champions. It is easy to understand, takes commitment to implement, and well worth the effort. It is not a one-time fix to be learned in a workshop with great results then magically appearing.

Alignment is an innovative way to lead an organization, creating focus on the right priorities, enlisting the involvement of many people, who were previously bystanders, and unleashing their creativity.

Alignment begins with a well-qualified leader, or facilitator, who gauges whether the top leaders of an organization are receptive to alignment. If not, save your efforts. Alignment needs support from the top of the hierarchy

Key stakeholders then meet together to hear the facilitator, or leader, describe the alignment process in detail, learning what is involved, the steps to be undertaken, and the commitment required. The group then goes into breakout sessions where they privately

discuss whether they really wish to undertake this alignment journey, committing to the process and the steps involved.

If the group does not wish to voluntarily align, then the process should not begin. The meeting can continue down a mutually desired path, e.g., strategic planning, for that session.

If the group does wish to commit to alignment for higher performance, the process begins, starting at the appropriate step for that organization. If a crisis is underway, short-term action plans may be required. It is best to begin with identification of the key issues the organization faces through a facilitated, collaborative process. Then the group can decide where to start in the process: short-term action plans, or long-term visions. Over time, all 10 steps of alignment must be covered, but the organization should start alignment from “where it is,” where the most urgent issues dictate.

Understanding of the whole alignment process and the collective commitment to it is essential for success. The leader or facilitator carefully guides the process, using velvet leadership, patiently letting the group fill-in the content, while firmly using steel leadership, keeping the group on track with the process, probing, challenging, and asking the hard questions that often get avoided. The leader often enlists a “guiding coalition” of volunteers to help in the alignment enrollment process.

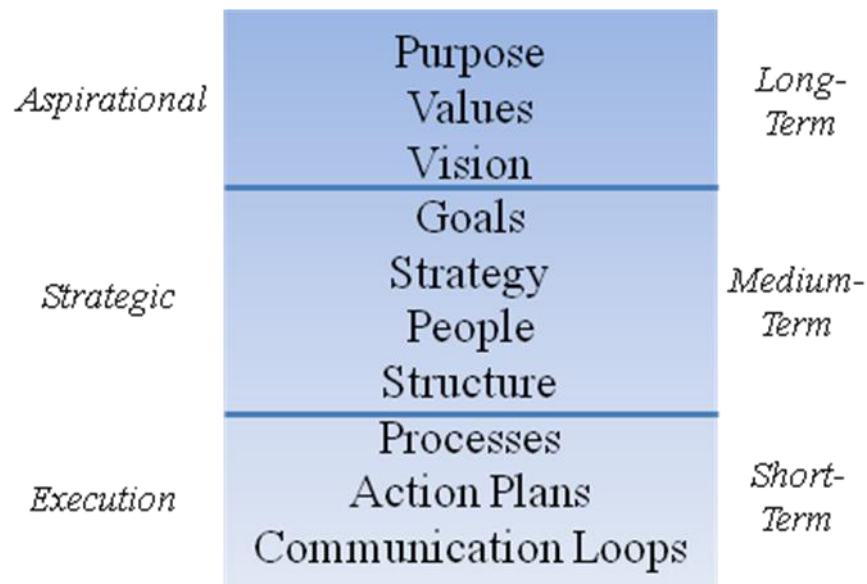
Over the course of several weeks, up to many months, depending on the size and complexity of the organization, the alignment model steps are all addressed in collaborative fashion, using small group meetings throughout the organization to uncover creative ideas and gather feedback. The small group input is blended into a master draft by the facilitator or leader for each step. The drafts are discussed with all the organization's constituents between meetings, listening carefully to gain their input and, ultimately, their commitment because they have been heard.

Patience is required with respectful listening and skillful synthesis of the many ideas that will emerge into inspiring, clear, and actionable steps.

The alternative to collaborative alignment is a benevolent strong-leader approach where most people abdicate responsibility and where few personal commitments are made to help. The results are fine for a while but soon run off-track. Many organizations operate in this sub-optimal way.

The alignment steps move from the broad to the specific, the long-term to the short-term, and the strategic to the tactical in a fashion customized to each organization depending on their issues.

Alignment can be viewed in three different clusters of steps: aspirational, strategic, and execution:



The steps covered in the process are:

### 1. Purpose (Mission)

- a) Why we are here?
- b) What is our inspirational reason for being?
- c) A compelling phrase or very short sentence, "sticky" – fits on a tee shirt
- d) At the deepest level
- e) May never change

### 2. Values

- a) How we'll behave with everyone
- b) What guides our actions
- c) Our core beliefs
- d) How we will treat each other
- e) Usually several stand-alone words
- f) Memorable (an acronym if possible)
- g) Sometimes supplemented by explanatory principles

### 3. Vision

- a) Where we want to be in the medium-term future
- b) A believable, inspiring, and vivid word picture
- c) Several sentences, a paragraph
- d) What we'll look, sound, and feel like when we are achieving our dreams

### 4. Goals

- a) What, most of all, should be achieved
- b) The few key objectives by stakeholder group for the whole organization
- c) End results, not how-to get there
- d) Measurable
- e) Prioritized
- f) Medium-term timeframe

## **5. Strategy**

- a) The several prioritized major initiatives of "how" to achieve the Goals
- b) Different from competitive initiatives, or executed better
- c) Generated by a Strategic Planning Process (e.g., Blue Ocean, Critical Success Factors, Gap Analysis, Benchmarking, etc.)
- d) Quantified in summary financial projections
- e) Summarized smartly (to not reveal competitive information) for widespread distribution among stakeholders

## **6. People**

- a) Who should be involved?
- b) The kinds of people the enterprise needs.
- c) Specify the types of people sought for key positions:
  - 1. Skills: experience, education, background, intelligence, diversity, etc.
  - 2. Personal character and characteristics
  - 3. Emotional intelligence
  - 4. Cultural fit given their leadership approach

## **7. Structure**

- a) The structural, organization forms to be used: centralized, decentralized, business units, functional, geographical, vertical, horizontal, committees required, etc.
- b) Specifies what is done internally versus contracted externally
- c) Specifies levels of management between first-line worker and the CEO and spans of control of leaders
- d) Specifies authority and responsibility levels, e.g., between a board and management
- e) Emphasis on flexible, temporary, rapid-action teams for problem solving

## **8. Processes**

- a) The necessary defined procedures to guide the work
- b) Standards, policies, and rules to follow (e.g., board governance guidelines, written committee charters, customer interaction guidelines, etc.)
- c) Control systems to keep actions within critical boundaries

## **9. Action Plans**

- a) The several major prioritized actions each person will undertake to accomplish key (non-routine) tasks
- b) Measurable with milestones of "who will do what by when"
- c) Traceable to a schedule (frequently with a budget estimate)
- d) Unique for each person

## **10. Communication Loops**

- a) The system for communicating status (e.g., daily, monthly meetings; the regular reports; etc.)
- b) Highlighting exceptions and problems
- c) The formal connection of these measurements to the performance appraisal, merit increase, incentive pay, recognition, discipline, and promotion systems.

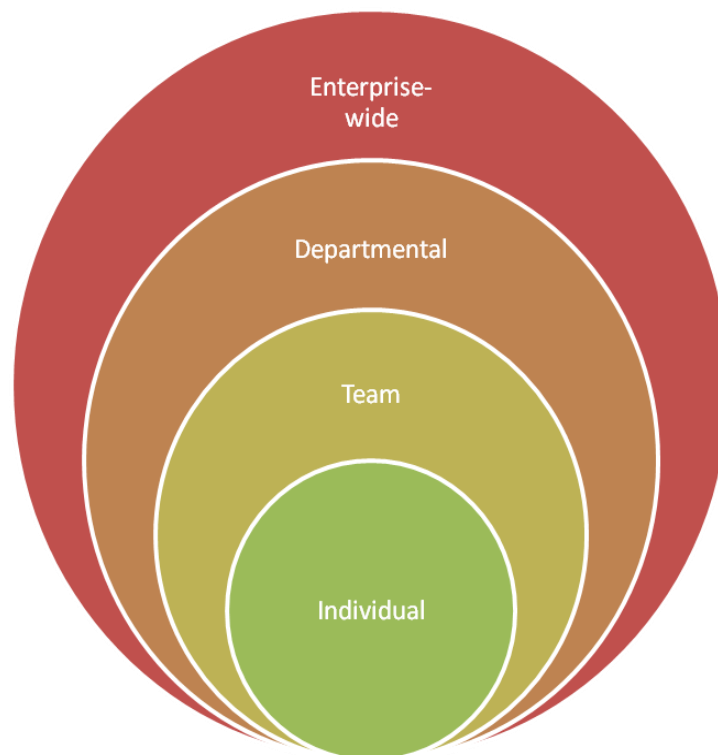
All steps in alignment are consistent with one another, linked together, and nested to cascade downwards (corporate goals precede departmental goals, etc.), while stimulating new ways to solve problems, which can flow upwards. A vice president shouldn't be asked to draft a goal for next year without knowing what's on the CEO's goal list.

Cascading requires courage because a boss must show a subordinate the boss's goals for next year, risking criticism if the boss falls short. However, the trust engendered by this transparent step is impactful.

Cascading occurs via retreats, meetings, and discussions, both in-person and "virtual." Leaders, or the guiding coalition, should use social media and other related technologies to facilitate and scale the conversation, especially in large enterprises.

Alignment also occurs at multiple levels: enterprise-wide, departmental, team, and individual. Each group can benefit from undertaking its own alignment process, even with its own purpose, values, and vision, as long as they cohere with the enterprise-wide statements. Each individual's goals, strategies, and action plans should map to those of the relevant team, and from the team to its department, all the way up to the enterprise.

### Alignment Cascades



Ideally, the facilitator, or leader, trains the organization's key leaders in the alignment process so that they are qualified and confident to carry-on and improve the approach in subsequent years.

This Alignment Model has been developed over many years based on challenging, real-world feedback from numerous for-profit and non-profit organizations of all sizes. It has

been tested against an extensive review of the literature on alternative approaches such as Balanced Scorecard and proven superior.

In summary, alignment is a collaborative leadership process with many organizational benefits. Alignment:

- Clarifies the elements for success,
- Focuses people, eliminating unessential priorities,
- Connects people collaboratively,
- Links departments of the organization,
- Provides continual feedback for mid-course corrections,
- Builds buy-in and commitment,
- Fosters teamwork,
- Creates a culture of discipline,
- Clarifies critical action steps,
- Unleashes talent in multiple leaders,
- Creates transformational leaps through high-performance teams.

The initial requirements for the organization to align are:

- Understanding of the steps,
- Commitment from the leaders,
- Champions to follow-up on the process,
- Steel and velvet leadership, staying with the process, while eliciting input from people,
- Downward cascades of key steps,
- Willingness to listen to the upward flow of ideas, and
- Patience.

An aligned organization becomes transformed into a powerful, high-performing group where it is a joy to participate.

Why would any organization not align?

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This article is not published. A complete chapter on alignment is included in *Triple Crown Leadership: Building Excellent, Ethical, and Enduring Organizations* (McGraw-Hill, 2012). Web: [triplecrownleadership.com/](http://triplecrownleadership.com/)

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