

# Is your team aligned?

**Summary:** Business leaders often express frustration at the disconnect between the ability of their teams, and the results being delivered. Having a team that is truly aligned on the top priorities will ensure that the valuable resources of the organization are being directed at the right opportunities. A motivated team working towards a common goal will be able to perform at its peak potential. In this article we will discuss the implications of a misaligned team and present an exercise by which leaders can evaluate the alignment amongst their team.



*Written by Gaurav Gupta, Oct 2009*

In our engagements with companies both large and small, we have often come across managers who are frustrated with the effectiveness of their teams. In our experience this is not due to a lack of ability or desire, but rather stems from the lack of alignment amongst the various projects in the organization.

Most people will agree that being able to generate agreement amongst a team is one of the fundamental elements of good leadership. As Fred Smith, Chairman of Federal Express has been repeatedly quoted as saying, “Alignment is the essence of management.”<sup>i</sup>

Creating consensus or agreement is distinctly different from generating alignment. Alignment reflects an active ownership on the part of the team members, not simply the absence of disagreement. Many leaders fall into the trap of assuming their team is aligned because of a lack of any active disagreement, and therefore do not direct any energy at improving the understanding of the business priorities.

At the heart of this ineffective use of resources is a misperception of the clarity around the organization’s top priorities. Simply relying on visible disagreement is not the most effective way to discern the true state of alignment amongst the different stakeholders. As one of our clients found: “I thought my team was perfectly aligned – until I asked them what our top challenge was, and got five different answers from five different members of the team.”

## What it means to be a well aligned organization

How would you like to lead an organization in which every individual knows the business’ goals, vision, and top challenges? “If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time.”<sup>ii</sup>

All activities performed by individuals in a perfectly aligned organization help move the business closer to its strategic vision. By ensuring that teams at various levels in the organization are aligned on their goals, we can move the business towards a culture of “working towards objectives”. This alignment amongst the teams will help drive actions that are necessary in the medium term to deliver the required results.

Developing a well aligned organization depends on two critical factors: First, the systems and structures must support the strategic vision; and second, the members of the organization must understand the top strategic objectives and how this translates to their personal goals.

## What this means for your organization

We have often seen significant gaps in the understanding of an organization’s top opportunities. Management teams often have different understandings of the top priorities.

As part of a supply chain transformation, a food business required a 10% improvement in productivity at their largest facility. The management team was

very well aligned with the goal, but was not making much progress in improving productivity. Upon conducting a review of the various improvement common agreement on the path forward each manager had been focused on “their ideas”, and this lead to many disjointed and unsupported projects.

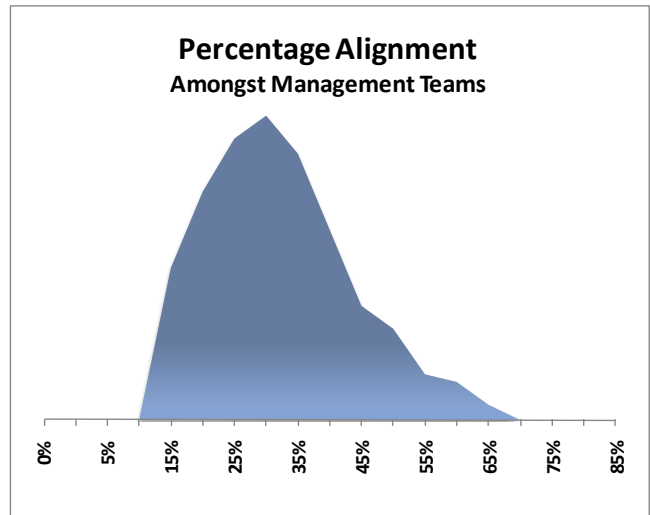
### Evaluating your alignment

The question to ask is: How do you know if your team is aligned? If your management team is forthcoming with disagreement and debate about priorities then you know you have room to improve. If your team is not forthcoming with disagreement, then how do you determine whether your team is perfectly aligned or simply avoiding confrontation?

We have facilitated alignment exercises to help leaders at various levels in their organizations evaluate the alignment of their teams. As is evident in the graph below, we have found that all managers have a significant opportunity to improve the alignment amongst their teams.

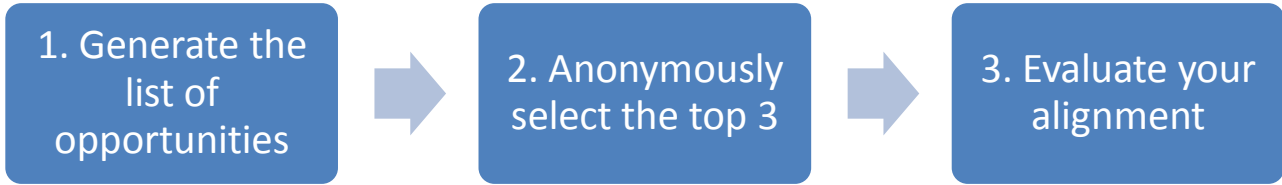
We have developed a simple tool (see below) to help you evaluate the alignment amongst your team. It helps highlight the opportunity as a first step to addressing the lack of alignment. Running this exercise with your team will help lend clarity to your overall alignment. You may find that you have room to improve, in which case you can adopt one of the many tools available to help create alignment amongst your team. Alternatively you may find that your team is well aligned, in which case you can relax

projects, the general manager discovered an inadequate resource commitment from the broader organization to any of the initiatives. Without a in the knowledge that your team is pulling together; and it may be time to put your effort into ensuring that the team is focused on the right opportunity and is executing effectively.



The benefits of a well aligned team are no surprise to anyone. A lot has been written about how to create better alignment within teams, through team building, incentives, and other management techniques. However, the first step in any effort to improve the alignment amongst a group must start with an honest evaluation of the current state, and a desire to improve. The purpose of the exercise contained in this article is to create this desire by highlighting the opportunity to improve the alignment of your team.

## Evaluating your teams alignment



### 1. Brainstorm the list of opportunities

Have each member of your team identify the top 5-10 items on their list of opportunities in the area you are evaluating (for example, the top five ideas to improve customer satisfaction).

- The items must be specific such as “reduce the amount of time customers spend in the queue,” or “reduce the lead time on a product A.” Avoid broad categories such as “improve customer service” or “reduce inventory.”
- Focus on opportunities, not potential solutions. For example, instead of “training,” list the specific problem that you are trying to solve with training.
- The team should have the authority to impact the opportunities being discussed.
- The list should consist of projects that can be delivered upon within a few months by teams

**Opportunities to Improve Customer Satisfaction**

- A.** Reduce the hold time
- B.** Call customers within 5min of order shipment
- C.** Ship all warehouse items within 1 hour of order receipt
- D.** .....
- E.** ..... **AZ**.....

of 1-5 individuals.

Have a facilitator write each of these opportunities on a flip chart with a letter assigned to it as shown in the example above. The brainstorm list should contain all the ideas that would need to be resourced by the team.

### 2. Prioritizing the list

In the next step of the exercise, each member of the team will anonymously select their top three priorities from the brainstorm list.

### 3. Evaluating the alignment

In a perfectly aligned team the members would each pick exactly the same three opportunities in exactly the same order. To determine your team’s alignment, select one member to be the baseline for comparison.

<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> <p>Leaders List</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Opportunity A</li> <li>2. Opportunity G</li> <li>3. Opportunity L</li> </ol> </div>	
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <p>Perfect Alignment</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Opportunity A</li> <li>2. Opportunity G</li> <li>3. Opportunity L</li> </ol> </div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <p>Perfect Score</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Opportunity A = 3</li> <li>2. Opportunity G = 2</li> <li>3. Opportunity L = 1</li> </ol> <p>Score = 6</p> </div>
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <p>Typical Alignment</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Opportunity J</li> <li>5. Opportunity A</li> <li>6. Opportunity T</li> </ol> </div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <p>Typical Score</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Opportunity J = 0</li> <li>5. Opportunity A = 3</li> <li>6. Opportunity T = 0</li> </ol> <p>Score = 3</p> </div>

The top opportunity in this comparison list will be worth 3 points, the second worth 2 points, and the third worth 1 point. Each of the other team members’ prioritized lists will be scored based on these three opportunities. The average of these scores divided by the perfect (6) will give you your alignment score. A score of 75% or better is excellent and any score below 60% suggests a big opportunity to improve alignment.

## About the Author

Gaurav has had experience working with clients in a variety of industries from food and beverage to healthcare to oil and energy. In addition to his work with clients, Gaurav is also a part of the North American office leadership team where he has responsibilities in business development, recruiting, and intellectual property development.

Gaurav received a bachelor's degree from Middlebury College and a master's degree from Cornell University.

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<sup>i</sup> Labovits and Rosansky, *"The power of Alignment"*, John Wiley & Sons - 1997

<sup>ii</sup> Lencioni, Patrick, *"The five dysfunctions of a team"*, John Wiley & Sons - 2002