

rB Aligned Accountability | Rod Brace

<http://rodbrace.com/article/align>

Alignments are common place in our life. We are aligned with a particular cause, sports team or church. That alignment is typically based on a set of shared circumstances or beliefs. We enjoy strong alignments that give us identity and enjoyable relationships. Alignment can be a powerful intensifier of effort toward purpose. Yet, alignment is often disregarded in the planning routine of many organizations. It is often seen as merely a chance by-product of being in the "right place at the right time. " Alignment should be a strategic tool for organizational effectiveness. When properly arranged, alignment is the bridge between strategy and accountability -- leading eventually to the accomplishment of organizational goals. It all starts with the creation of a clear strategy to which we align.

Strategy is misunderstood, misapplied and mismanaged in far too many organizations. Whether a manufacturer, service provider or religious/civic organization, strategy must support the organizational mission, or basis for existence. It is the "how" of our daily efforts. Strategy, when carefully articulated, gives direction to our team so they can support the broader goals in their area of the organization. Strategy should define our movement through the "market" on which we depend for our success. Based on the needs and desires of those we seek to serve, strategic planning takes into account our strengths, uniqueness and capacity for execution and converts it into a set of defining boundaries. These boundaries allow us to run new ideas, new market dynamics through a screen of sorts that instructs us on whether the contemplated effort is in keeping with our strategy. Strategy in it's most powerful form strives to make the competition inconsequential. It is within this strategic "apart-ness" that we create an identifiable map to success.

It is common for organizations to operate outside of their strategic focus and venture off their strategic map. In doing so, they create waste. Misguided efforts not only waste time and money but they can at times be destructive to our strategic focus. These organizations get "lost" among the distracting ideas and possibilities eventually missing their desired destination. It is the obligation of the organizational leaders to ensure resolute adherence to the strategy -- this map. This "policing" of organizational intent creates alignment to the strategy. It is a skill that many leaders find difficult and often avoid. Avoidance cripples the effectiveness of the leader and the organization.

A leader's ability to align the organization's activities with the strategy is largely dependent upon their willingness to encourage their team to create their own path toward the agreed upon goals while at the same time checking their progress and ensuring their efforts fit within the strategy. Human nature makes this "loose/tight" leadership style difficult. Leaders often rise to their position based on their ability to execute -- to do tasks. Their comfort zone is "hands on" execution. When moved into a leadership role, they will often migrate back to this comfort zone and either be overly prescriptive in how their team should reach the strategic goals or worse yet, they will continue doing the task themselves. Either role interferes with their leadership responsibility of holding others accountable to the strategic goals. Accountability requires that a leader hold team members in alignment while not

"micro-managing" their efforts. Leaders remove a team member's accountability when they make decisions and complete tasks for them. The distinction is subtle.

Alignment is created in this subtle balance when strategy is defined and then clearly communicated to each team member as to their role and the expectations the leader will have of them in that role. Goals are sufficiently defined along with companion metrics such that team members can easily articulate where they are going and recognize when they have arrived. Alignment exists as organizational goals are converted into sub-goals by each team member in a way that defines not only the key accomplishments they intend to create but also defines the major milestones and time-line they will use to check their progress. These milestones and time-lines provide the leader with a construct in which alignment can be periodically checked.

Most well meaning people desire to contribute to the success of the organization and understand the concept of accountability and alignment. However, since true alignment and accountability are uncommon in most organizations, they will initially find it uncomfortable. This inexperience with the process eventually subsides as the team member becomes more comfortable with their strategic role. Through effective communication of the strategy, professional conversations about expectations and routine status checks, leaders will create a level of comfort among team members moving them to accept their new level of accountability. For those individuals who do not accept alignment and accountability, the process of leadership scrutiny will generally remove them from the organization.

Alignment with strategy through accountability is the primary responsibility of senior leaders throughout the organization. It requires high levels of self-management and discipline on the part of the leader to properly execute this role. Holding oneself accountable to the mission of the organization is the energy behind the effort. A leader who struggles with self-discipline will not be an effective leader. Yet, when achieved, alignment of the team with a common goal can be a very gratifying accomplishment for leadership. In the internal alignment of our beliefs with the mission of the organization we find purpose and productivity. Alignment breeds accountability and accountability breeds success.