Creating Alignment during Change Efforts: The Bridge Between Vision and Execution

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Abstract

Great, you are charged with implementing an exciting new initiative in your organization. Your initiative could be a process improvement effort, a software implementation, a quality initiative, or even a culture shift. The vision is clear, you have the team, you're ready to get started, and you are already anticipating the wins of a successfully implemented project. But what about those times when you start implementing and suddenly face unexpected resistance? The missing bridge between vision and execution is building ALIGNMENT so that people on your team, within your organization, and even in an external client system have buy-in and are ready to work WITH you rather than AGAINST you.

I will share three drivers of alignment that will change how you approach any type of change initiative. You will know how to tactically bridge the gap between vision and execution so that any project or change initiative you sponsor is effectively supported.

This presentation is ideal for organizational leaders sponsoring change initiatives of any type and is also applicable for project leaders frustrated with projects that fall short due to lack of buy-in from key stakeholders.

Biography

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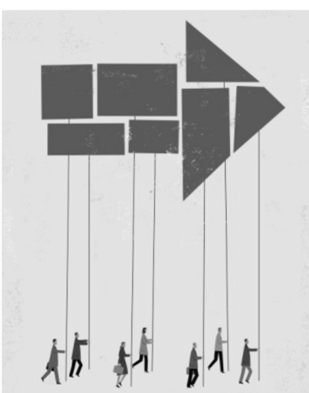
1 Introduction: The Importance of Creating Organizational Alignment for Successful Change Initiatives

Implementations of great software programs tend to be unsuccessful (or more difficult) if the people who are supposed to use the software do not know about it or actively oppose it. In 2013, I was asked to lead an organizational readiness strategy for a software implementation project that had already failed dramatically. This organization needed to re-start the project because the following factors derailed the first implementation:

- Communication about the project and expected changes did not reach most end-users;
- When the software went live, employees were surprised when they logged onto their computer and found an unexpected user interface;
- Advance training was limited in scope so the few end-users who did receive training still not have the skills to use the program for their specific work processes;
- Employees were upset that many processes and issues they considered important were not taken into account when the software was changed. In fact, the project team seemed unaware of critical processes the software needed to support and manage…and thus ultimately doomed their own project.

The project team members were all smart people with strong technical skills. They had a clear vision, or picture, of what they needed to accomplish and had detailed project plans for executing that vision. The missing link was ensuring organizational alignment so that anyone affected by a project or initiative knew what was occurring, why it was important, how they were going to be impacted, how it was going to be implemented, and how their knowledge and concerns would be taken into account. This example may seem extreme, but leaders of strategic initiatives, process improvement efforts, or any kind of technical implementation often underestimate (or ignore) the people-side of their effort and are surprised by negative emotional reactions and active resistance by the people they are trying to help.



Creating organizational alignment is more than having a communication plan and making sure everyone has the same information. **Having alignment means that individuals are rationally and emotionally committed to the change effort: they know what is going on, know what they need to do, agree that the applicable initiative or change effort is a great decision, and are willing to help make it succeed.**

In this paper, I will share how you can build organizational alignment by clearly communicating purpose and vision, creating opportunities for discussion, and providing inspiration so that everyone is committed and moving towards the same goal (Straw, et al.). I will include common mistakes that get leaders and project teams into trouble and on the path to mis-alignment. For examples of practical application, I will share how these concepts applied to the software project mentioned above.

2 Clearly Communicate Purpose and Vision

The first driver for building alignment among anyone affected by a change initiative is to concisely communicate the purpose and vision of the project, including why the project or initiative is important and what the impacts are expected to be on the people, company and customers. Your message must be structured in a way that keeps people from becoming overwhelmed by details.

People affected by any change need to clearly understand the logical rationale driving the initiative or project, the desired result, and their role throughout the process. When people do not have an accurate idea of what or why something is happening, the normal human reaction is to make up and assume information, often incorrectly. Instead of organizational alignment, the result is then confusion, rumors, fear, blame and an unsuccessful initiative.

2.1 How to Create Clarity

As you create and implement your communication plan:

- Think about what you would want to know if you were first hearing the details. Remember that you have been exposed to the idea of your initiative longer than most people and are probably taking many details for granted, such as why the project is important.
- Develop a headline for key messages about the project, perhaps even test each headline on a few people for what creates a positive reaction.
- Take time to plan out the top two or three points you want people to remember. Some things to think about include:
    a) What is the most compelling reason the initiative is being undertaken?
    b) What are the costs of not taking it?
    c) Why now?
    d) Who is involved?
    e) Who will be impacted by the change and how?
    f) How can details be grouped together in a way that's simple and logical?
    g) Where can people go for more information?
- If you have specific audience groups affected by the change in different ways (such as marketing, manufacturing, sales, etc.), create individual messages that are specific to each group. Answer the "what's in it for me" question by communicating the advantages unique to that group and/or the specific pains that will go away as a result of the change(s).
- Avoid using acronyms and other jargon. Find simple language everyone can relate to.
- After you have created a message, use the points consistently and repeatedly in different communication mediums: meetings, email, print, break room monitor displays, etc.

2.2 Common Mistakes

The following are some common communication mistakes that create lack of clarity and therefore become barriers to organizational alignment:

- Assuming the audience already knows why the project is important, so you skip the "why" and go straight to details;
- Being so excited by technical aspects of the change that you overwhelm the audience with too much information and jargon;
- Creating talking points on the spot without organizing your key messages, so talking points become unclear and inconsistent. When different audiences receive different or conflicting information, you (and the change initiative) are at high risk for losing credibility;
- Thinking you have to communicate the rationale just once and people will remember it; and
- Assuming the same rationale appeals to all the stakeholder audiences.

2.3 Application

In the failed software implementation I mentioned in the Introduction, company-wide communication happened primarily via email and did not take into account that many end-users rarely used email and instead used team meetings at the start of a shift as the main communication method. Ongoing communication occurred primarily between the project team members, with occasional progress checks given to senior leadership who sponsored the upgrade. The project leader incorrectly assumed that project members would get input from, and share information with, the functional groups they represented.

In the re-implementation effort, the first goal of the new communication plan was to clearly explain the purpose and vision of the project, and to share this in ways that was specific to different functional groups (Quality, Testing, Finance, Purchasing, and Logistics, just to name a few). In this case, communications also had to address why the project was restarted when it had failed dramatically in so many ways. The same key headlines and important messages were used multiple times and through a variety of communication mediums that included: a launch presentation scheduled at all main locations and at different times to accommodate different shifts, company newsletter, a “talking points” document for supervisors to use in shift meetings, and a continuous presentation that ran on monitors in employee break rooms.

3 Create Discussion Opportunities

The second driver for building alignment is talking <u>with</u> people. The Gallup Organization scientifically showed that employees believing their opinions count is one of twelve key factors for employee to feel engaged at work (Wagner and Harter). When you create a safe environment for multi-directional conversations that allow an exchange of perspectives, and when you take others’ ideas and concerns seriously, people feel respected and begin to have a sense of accountability and ownership for the success of the project. This means you must be open to discussing ideas and concerns not yet thought of by you or the project team.

Holding productive discussions is often the hardest part of building organizational alignment for several reasons:

- It can feel uncomfortable to be questioned about decisions that have already been made;
- It can be messy and emotional if people have a lot of fear and anxiety about the anticipated impacts of the project, or have past negative history influencing their perspectives; and
- For leaders and teams who are focused on completing their tasks, it can seem like a waste of time because scheduling more meetings and talking with people is taking them away from getting things done.

However, soliciting others’ concerns and ideas can save you and your project team significant time and expense. You might hear about concerns that if you moved forward without knowing about them, could cause serious problems later on. You might hear good ideas that you could use to improve on the original project plan. By drawing out people’s concerns early, you also have a way to address them so that it minimizes more aggressive resistance at the implementation stage.

3.1 How to Have Productive Discussions

An important aspect of productive discussion is to make it safe for people to share what they think. This means creating an environment that is relaxed and informal, monitoring your body language so it looks welcoming, and not immediately discounting others’ concerns and ideas, especially if you disagree with what they say. Other key tips for effective discussion sessions include:

- Use multiple types of engagement opportunities, designed for specific target audiences that are impacted by your project. The chart below lists various types of meetings that you can use to encourage discussion and active dialogue.

Examples of potential discussion forums:
☐ One-on-one meetings. ☐ Team meetings, with or without the supervisor (choose whichever scenario will help participants feel safe to share what they really think). ☐ Focus groups sessions, with cross-functional representation. ☐ Casual conversational opportunities, such as in a break-room. Bring doughnuts, pizza or other refreshments and be open to whatever people bring up. ☐ Formal question and answer sessions, such as where people can hear a status update and submit questions in advance or during the session. It can be positioned as an “ask the project team” event. ☐ Group conference calls / video-conference calls. ☐ Topic-specific meetings, such as with leadership to discuss sponsorship needs and hear

their concerns and expectations or meetings with stakeholders where you purposefully invite (or challenge) them to bring up concerns or potential problems that haven't yet been addressed. ☐ A moderated chat or blog site on the company intranet that invites questions, ideas and concerns.

- Develop a way to track concerns people bring up, such as an issues list. For common concerns and questions, you might create a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document and make it easily accessible.
- Say "tell me more," when someone shares a perspective or idea you disagree with or think won't work. Often, being able to share their thoughts fully helps people accept change.
- Practice active listening. Paraphrase and summarize what others say, to make sure you capture it. Empathize with people who seem to be having more fear or anxiety related to the initiative.
- Tell people where to turn if more ideas and concerns come to mind, and where they can learn about project updates.
- Thank people for sharing their perspectives. Let them know their participation in those discussions will help the project be successful. It is also a good time to remind people why the project is important.

3.2 Common Mistakes

The following thoughts and actions can get in the way of effective discussions:

- Thinking you have to have all the answers;
- Doing more talking than listening;
- Making a minimizing or dismissive comment every time someone brings up a concern, like "we've already thought of that and this is why it won't work…;"
- Focusing only on executive leadership rather than including those directly impacted; and
- Soliciting suggestions and concerns but not sharing the outcomes or resolutions for the input you collected.

Because one of the hardest parts of encouraging discussions is to actually listen rather than present and/or defend the project, the chart below may be a helpful reminder of active listening skills to use.

3.3 Active Listening Skills: Use for Creating Productive Discussions

Technique	Example	Purpose	How To
Invite More Information	*Tell me more.* *Can you give me an example…?*	▪ Convey interest ▪ Get more information ▪ To help the speaker see other points of view	▪ Don't agree or disagree. ▪ Use neutral words. ▪ Ask questions to get more specific information.
Clarifying or Paraphrasing	*What I heard you just say was…* *My interpretation of what you said is… is that correct?*	▪ Test your understanding ▪ Let the speaker(s) know you are trying to understand ▪ Clarify meaning	Restate your understanding of what the person said.

Perception Check	*What you seem to be concerned about is…* *Is that accurate?*	Test the accuracy of your perception of another's meaning	State your understanding and ask for validation.
Empathizing **(Acknowledge Other's Experience)**	*If I were in your place, I'd be concerned, as well.* *Wow, that sounds like it is really important to you/your team.*	▪ Acknowledge the other's feelings ▪ Help the speaker evaluate his/her feelings ▪ Open up communication about feelings	▪ Imagine yourself in the other person's shoes. ▪ Reflect and describe how you imagine the person is feeling.
Summarizing	*These seem to be the key ideas you've talked about…* *I want to be sure I have the main concerns you raised…*	▪ Review progress ▪ Pull together important ideas and facts ▪ Establish a basis for further discussion	List or sum up the major ideas or issues.

3.4 Application

In the re-implementation initiative, a variety of strategies were used to encourage productive discussions, particularly with the goal to hear ideas and solicit concerns. We held one-on-ones with team supervisors, scheduled interviews with functional groups, and brought coffee and doughnuts for informal chats with teams in the warehouse and production areas. Some meetings had specific questions that were asked, such as "what concerns do you have?" and "what might go wrong?" and other meetings were just opportunities to share updates and answer questions. The project leader avoided responding to concerns defensively and often used "tell me more" and "let me take that back to the team and follow up with what we find out." The project lead learned that it was okay if he did not have all the answers. He could trust the various stakeholder groups to come up with questions that needed answers, sometimes come up with answers themselves that he could use, and then work with the project team and follow up with responses as needed.

We wanted to let people know that their ideas and concerns were actively contributing to the project. An issues list was maintained in Excel, and resolutions were communicated to the person who first brought up the issue. If an issue was postponed or determined to not be in the project scope, that information and the rationale were still communicated to the originator. Ideas were seriously considered and when implemented, the originator was acknowledged and sent a personal note thanking them for submitting the suggestion. We also wrote project updates for the company newsletters which answered common concerns, shared success stories of suggestions that were submitted and used by the project team, and that consistently let people know where to find more information and who to go to with concerns and questions.

4 Inspire Others to Move with You

The first driver for alignment, clarity of purpose and vision, taps into the rational mind so people understand the logic behind the initiative you are leading. In some cases, if the vision you describe is especially enticing, you may have already started inspiring others to move with you. The second driver, productive discussions, begins to bring diverse perspectives together and lets people know you care about their ideas and concerns, but people are usually not yet aligned and working together for the success of the project. That comes with **the third driver for alignment, providing inspiration so that**

people are excited by what the initiative is doing for them, the organization, and the customers. When you inspire others, you are influencing their emotions to create optimism and positive perceptions of your change effort. You are creating an emotional state where your stakeholders care enough about the outcome of the project that they feel a sense of ownership to help make it successful. This is very different from just getting compliance, where people go along with the project because they think they have to.

Even leaders who are not typically very expressive and can inspire others. You inspire others by expressing your enthusiasm and passion for the project outcomes and by offering encouragement so people feel good about the work they are doing.

4.1 How to Provide Inspiration

To inspire others to care about the project you're leading, you do not have be theatrical or lead a cheer, but you do need to be authentic and able to express emotions through words, tone of voice and body language. Here are some tips to make inspiration work for you:

- Clarify in your own mind why you're passionate about the vision you're implementing. What excites you about it? What feelings do you have when you think about not moving forward with it?
- Find two or three things that will speak to people's emotions. This might be answering the question "what 3 things will we feel best about when we successfully achieve our vision?"
- Consider having a project slogan that can be a rallying point – simple, easy to remember, and based on a shared aspiration or hope of what the project will deliver.
- Take time to acknowledge effort and word towards the goals. Celebrate achieving milestones, beyond just the project team.
- Thank people for their contributions, whether they are concerns that would otherwise not have been addressed or ideas that improve the outcome of the project.
- Know what motivates different audiences, and have a different message for each one. How is each audience's world going to be improved after xyz is implemented?

4.2 Common Mistakes

Here are some common mistakes for inspiring others:

- Thinking that showing enthusiasm, hope and even passion for your project and its potential impacts is emotional and will cause people to disengage;
- Forgetting to thank people for their contributions;
- Being so optimistic that you minimize others' concerns; and
- Assuming that what motivates you is the same thing that motivates others.

4.3 Application

The project leader and project team members let their enthusiasm for the project show in their words, tone of voice, and expressions. Part of the messaging focused on building stakeholder confidence that this time was different and explaining how it was different. The project members didn't try to hide the failures made during the first implementation, but used them as learning experiences which made them more passionate about doing it right this time.

When hearing concerns and complaints from people, they said "thank you for letting us know" and empathized with the person's point of view instead of saying "yes, but…"

Many of the discussion forums provided information that allowed the project leader to tailor communications specifically to what each group cared most about, such as the specific pain that would be solved by the project, an improvement to how they did their work, or an improvement for the customers.

A key lesson for building inspiration is that the project leader and team members had to find ways to highlight project successes, and to make those successes into human interest stories that applied in practical ways to people's work. One way we did this was to write short articles that highlighted how end-user input and suggestions made positive contributions to the project. In this way, the project team shared credit for successes, reinforced small wins that rebuilt people's confidence in the project, kept the project in people's minds, and helped build shared accountability for project success. Employees on the floor saw and heard that they were taken seriously and that their input had a measurable, positive impact.

5 Alignment: An Outcome of a Well-Executed Communication Plan

A communication plan is the map that helps organize how information will be exchanged among all stakeholders. It identifies the communication goals and tactically how those goals will be reached. One of the outcomes of a well-implemented communication plan is organizational alignment, because the plan identifies the key messages and opportunities for discussion and other input. Communication plan elements that help build alignment include:

- Clearly articulated purpose and goals for the communication plan. Some of the goals set for the re-implementation plan were:
  - *Create positive perceptions towards (name of project or initiative).*
  - *Identify consistent key messages and diverse mediums for communicating them, targeted to unique stakeholder groups.*
  - *Proactively solicit and address stakeholder concerns.*
- Communication plan assumptions. Some of the assumptions used in the re-implementation project were:
  - *Communication will need to be targeted to different types of stakeholders as well as to different events and milestones related to the project.*
  - *Multiple channels of communication will be needed: electronic, print, in person – group, in person – one-to-one.*
  - *While some stakeholders may be interested enough to search for information about the project, most information will need to be communicated via a "push" strategy, i.e. – pro-actively communicated and put in front of people.*
- Communication mediums (e.g. – meetings, email, reporting, in person, etc.) by identified stakeholder groups, including the frequency, the type of information that will be communicated, and the schedule for that medium.
- Event-driven communication strategies, such as at already scheduled company meetings, project phases (e.g. – kick-off, milestone completion, final completion), when issues are resolved, and/or when exciting progress is made.

6 Conclusion

When you build alignment, you conserve time and energy. You "slow down to speed up," meaning you take time to explore issues and ideas early in the process that then prevent you from having to make costly fixes or start over. You encourage everyone impacted by the project to have a sense of ownership. Finally, alignment unites and excites people around a vision. Without that sense of excitement, people become bored, exhausted, and demoralized. In some cases, they refuse to accept the change(s) and create workarounds or even sabotage the project so it has no chance of working. Once people understand and make sense of something that they can commit to it. Most people have experienced being on the receiving end of a project or initiative where the prevailing thoughts were things like:

> "Why are they doing this to us again?"
> "If they'd talked to us we could have told them it wouldn't work."

“Another waste of money down the drain for the latest flavor of the month.”
“Whatever!”

By proactively having a plan to build alignment for your initiative, the prevailing thoughts are more likely to be:

“It wasn’t easy, but I know it’s going to work.”
“This is so cool!”
“They really put a lot of thought into this. I’m glad we’re doing this.”
“They took the time to figure out what we needed, rather than just what they thought we needed.”
“This new (widget) will help me do x, y, and z.”

One you have alignment, executing all the steps to your initiative is much easier and likely to lead to success.

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