

THE POWER OF ALIGNMENT: USING VISION AND VALUES TO CREATE HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS

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Executive Summary

The present is a time of upheaval and change in organizations. Companies are challenging the ways that they do business. They cannot remain still; they need to innovate, adapt, shift and transform themselves. Reengineering, rightsizing, redesign and layoffs create new challenges for project managers whose task is to capture and maintain the mindshare and productivity of cross-functional teams. With all this change, what are the keys that help to keep project leaders and teams on track?

In our consulting experience, we have found that the visioning process includes the process of clarifying values, focusing mission and stretching to a preferred vision. These key elements form the essence around which individuals, teams and organizations are learning to plot their course.

The purpose of this paper is to give you an understanding of the overall process of visioning and an understanding about the importance of uncovering and aligning individual, group and organizational values, mission and vision. We will show you how all these elements fit together to create a coherent, aligned and productive team.

Visionary Leadership

During periods of change, project managers become central to the visioning process. The manager often leads the process where teams clarify their values and create exciting visions.

For the manager the process of leading visioning is far different from the more traditional planning, controlling and scheduling. The competencies involved in visioning are more involved with taking the basic focus of the team and pulling it forward into the future in a way that is compelling to others.

If the organization already has a vision, mission or set of values, that does not mean that you and your team have nothing to do. The task of your project team is to determine how your vision complements the vision of the

organization. This is the same process for an individual. As each person clarifies their own values, mission and vision, the challenge becomes how to find the alignment between the individual, team, and the organization.

Alignment between the group values, mission and vision and those of the individual creates the power of a group committed to a common vision. If they are not aligned, sooner or later the people experience tension and frustration. Alignment means that the people on the project team create their own vision that fits within the mission and vision of their organization, that defines clearly their own part in creating excellence. This process involves getting the individual vision in the same direction as the team and organizational visions. It begins with uncovering, clarifying, and creating alignment around shared team values.

Team Values Exploration

A person's values answer the question - "what's important to me?" Our values comprise the things that are most important to us. They are the deep-seated pervasive standards that influence almost every aspect of our lives. Our moral judgments, our responses to others, our commitments to personal and organizational goals. We all have belief systems we live by. Our beliefs and value systems are deeply connected. We are motivated and make decisions based on these belief systems and values.

If we all had the same values with the same priorities, it would be easy to work in groups together. In most teams, there is a diversity of values and beliefs. In order to help us work better as a team and make decisions that lead to commitment and action, it is necessary to see the range of values that are influencing the decision making process.

The first step in creating an atmosphere of common commitment is to invite the hearts and minds of employees to join the purpose of the company. The process of learning starts with an understanding about the meaning for the learning. Julian Jaynes, the Princeton psychologist, describes human consciousness as a "metaphor-making machine." One of the vital things

people look for in their work is the meaning of what they are doing.

People need to feel that what they do goes beyond the immediate activities to affect others in a positive and profound way. You need to see the connection between your actions and a greater purpose. For example, many people have stuffed envelopes to further an initiative they believe in. The process of stuffing the envelopes may have been rather boring but the reason sustained them.

In high performance teams, people assume they are powerful. They believe they have the power to contribute directly. Shared mission, values and vision bring people together. They unite and provide the link between diverse people and activities. People who share values or vision are more likely to take responsibility; they are more likely to challenge the bounds of convention.

Clarifying Values

Central to a team getting the job done today is its clarity about its values. In addition to its mission and vision, a group must also determine how they will work together, how they will treat each other, and what bonds them together. People work for different reasons, and want different things from each other and the organization. It is possible that a group agrees on a vision and mission, but lapses into conflict because different people have different values about working together. Some members might want to work on their own, some want lots of interaction, while others see the workplace as an arena for personal competition and “winning” through good results. Team and individual values exploration will make these difference explicit and lead to the building of a team values statement.

Linking Personal & Team Values

One of the most important keys to greater effectiveness is a close link between personal and organizational values. Survey data by the American Management Association from 1,460 managers and chief executives suggest that an undemanding of this relationship will provide new leverage for corporate vitality. This relationship, when mismanaged, can provide the breeding ground for conflict and cynicism. The survey provided solid evidence that shared values between the individual and the company are a major source of both personal and organizational effectiveness.

The same report by the American Management Association showed that when managers' values were

congruent with the values of their companies, their personal lives were in better shape, their approach to their job more optimistic and their stress lower. A person's sense of what is important strongly influences their commitment and motivation.

Aligned values

When you work in an environment where your work activities are aligned with what you consider important, the energy, motivation, desire, and will to achieve even the most difficult tasks seems to emerge. Therefore, clarifying personal and work values can be a great resource for a project team. First we clarify our values for ourselves, and then with our team and organization. Sometimes, our most important or most neglected values remain somewhat hidden from us. Unclear or unknown values can produce conflicts and contradictions that can make people feel confused blocked and frustrated.

Undiscussed Values

Values provide the foundation for the strategy, the mission and the structure. Values are a set of understandings in an organization about how to work together, and how to treat other people, and what is most important. In most organizations they are understood, but they are seldom discussed. Most organizational and team values are *unconscious in* that they lie below the surface and are not openly explored or discussed. Bringing them into the light of day enhances agreement and connection.

People assume certain basic values, rarely questioning them. People act out of their values and different people value different things. In fact, values are motivators, since when we feel that something is right and important we will spend a great deal of effort to achieve it. To be effective, a company needs some agreement about what its values. It has to turn these values, in turn, into policies, practices and standards for behavior. A company's or group's values thus focus the behavior of people in all of their activities.

Value Conflicts

Sometimes values are espoused, or acted upon, which either contradict, or are in conflict with other values. These are values conflicts. What if a company values honesty, but also values a high sales volume? How or when does the value of honesty supersede the value of making a sale? Many companies have been deeply wounded by such value conflicts, most often because employees did not feel they had a forum to explore or

discuss these conflicts. A values exchange and discussion is critical to clarifying the limits of behavior and personal responsibility.

For example, one company with a strong values orientation reported that they were given a huge order from a tobacco company, with the condition that they eliminate their corporate no smoking policy. The company debated the order within every work group, balancing the need for the order with the challenge to its values. Finally, the different work groups achieved consensus that their value on health promotion was more important than the order, and they turned it down rather than change their policy.

Focusing Missions

Individuals have reasons for living their lives. A personal mission statement articulates an individual's unique direction. A personal mission reticulates what you do, the purpose for which you exist. It answers the existential question, "What is it I'm here to do?"

Defining your personal mission acts as an emotional touchstone that unleashes powerful feelings. A mission is not a narrow goal, but an overall guiding direction. Sometimes people do not want to clarify their mission for fear they will be held to it. A personal mission is not a restraint but fuel, propelling you toward your vision.

A mission answers the reason you are alive, your core existential reason for being on the planet. A mission is often not the first answer to the question-why? When a group of nuclear technicians were asked what they did, they said, "We build bombs." To have stayed with that answer would have produced a less than inspiring mission. By asking why?, again and again, the group got to the reason they did their work-to learn to use science and technology to serve the needs of the nation. That mission was one that could keep them going.

Project Team Mission Statements

Project Team missions are collections of personal missions. The process of matching individual and team missions often makes the difference between a high performing team and one that is just getting by. When people find a team which is a vehicle for their personal mission, their energy and excitement is multiplied.

The answer to questions about the mission comes out of analysis that a group goes through to find out who they are. The mission emerges from a process of asking for feedback from customers and employees, and then

comparing it to internal views of what the team thinks it is doing. In many cases the team thinks it is clear about the mission until they really analyze the work that they do. Sometimes what a team does, does not fit the mission for which it was intended. Revisiting the mission can strengthen the resolve of the people on the team.

Creating Visions

Visions are powerful mental images of what we want to create in the future. They reflect what we care about most, represent an expression of what it looks like to achieve our mission, and are harmonious with our values and sense of purpose. Visions are the result of head and heart working together. They are rooted in reality, but focus on becoming the future. They enable us to explore possibilities, desired realities. Because of this, they become an overarching framework for what we want to create which guides us in making choices and commitments for action.

Even though vision directs us toward the future, it is important to understand that it is experienced in the present. The tension that comes from comparing the image of a desired future with today's reality is what fuels a vision to action. Powerful visions are never an escape from reality. It is important that an awareness of today's reality be present in a vision or else it becomes disconnected and powerless.

Visions are a compass for your project team. They can guide you when all other indicators of direction seem to be gone. Visions are strongest when they focus on an image that has enduring capability. Visions help individuals and teams make sense of what is going on by stressing the core competencies on which constant improvement can be built.

Stretching to a Preferred Vision

As your team works together to create a vision, it is not a plan, it's a stretch. It is important to extend your vision just a little farther than you think you can go. Little visions are not worth committing significant time and energy to create.

A vision is created from the fundamental values of the individuals in the organization, the fundamental purpose, and awareness of the current reality, coming together to produce a shared future. Visions capture people's minds, hearts and spirits, giving people a higher purpose for their actions. A vision paints a picture of how the organization will be in the future. A vision tends to

evolve, but needs to be big enough so it does not change substantially every few years.

Hand-off to Planning

The planning process starts with where you are and asks for specific steps to implement incremental steps. Creating an image of excellence starts with a bigger, more inspirational view and then employs planning to work backward, identifying the steps that would need to be taken to create such a future. Planning has often failed to catalyze results because it tends to not often create the excitement and energy that an image of excellence does.

One of the key qualities of high performance organizations and teams is that they have a clear picture of what they are trying to create together. A vision statement captures in words and/or pictures the desired future of your organization. Creating the passion and commitment of aligned actions is at the core of managing in a fast changing environment. The key to this aligned action is a shared vision. It acts like a magnet that pulls all the people together toward the same direction. It is not a one time process that they engage in and then forget. It is a skill that is learned and used repeatedly. The process that evokes more creative solutions to business challenges.

A vision statement captures in words, images and/or pictures the desired future of your organization. It should include your basic strategy on how you want to achieve your mission. It should include your spoken and unspoken hopes and dreams. Your vision should inspire and touch you. If it does not inspire you, it will probably not inspire others. A vision comes from within and from without. Developing it is sometimes a messy process and living it becomes a daily challenge.

Visioning Releases Spirit

When groups vision they release the spirit of the organization. Spirit is derived from the Latin *spiare*- "to breathe." When a person or a group has a vision they seem to have more energy. Vision breathes life into the group, and provides the basis for inspiration. Visions are the product of the head and heart working together.

With the emphasis on visioning in business in the past decade, many people have had the experience of creating vision statements without learning to experience vision. Some managers think that a vision is just a dream, a flight from reality, wishful thinking, naive idealism, or

merely ideal fantasy; in other words, not central to the business of business.

What teams are often missing is the emotional power, the energy that is catalyzed when a team has a shared vision. For a team to become vision driven requires a clear understanding about the values on which the individuals and teams base their actions.

Leading With Vision

If you are the leader of a new team, begin to formulate your vision quickly. As time goes by, you lose your opportunity to make change. In many instances, people say that the first 100 days is the most important time to involve people, refocus and make changes.

Planning at the end of a visioning process sets the stage for the process of determining what an organization or group intends to be in the future and how it will get there. The visioning process has allowed you to find the best future and now it's the time to create the best path to reach that destination.

Implementation Questions

How do we get to the desired state?
How will we know when we get there?
What is going to help/hinder us?
What strategies and programs are needed?
How will we know how it is going?
What should we keep doing/stop doing?
What have we learned from our experience?

The Project Leader's Role

Visions are lived in the details, the everyday choices. Many leaders err in thinking that as long as they have the big picture, the details don't matter. It is the details of the execution of the vision that everyone sees. Trust is built from repeatable behavior that people observe over and over again. If people are to trust in the vision, they need to see it in forming choices, policies and actions in the organization.

Part of living the vision is making people aware of its application to action. The leaders of the vision need to be ready to declare, over and over again its importance and application. This short vision speech helps people focus their attention and gives them an energy boost. The role of the leader is to remind them of their dedication and commitment to achieving the vision. It's also helpful if in this speech the leader can use specific

examples of how people are living the vision. The purpose here is to create a new set of stories about the organization's or team's capacity to manifest the vision.

A vision is a visceral experience. It should evoke goose bumps in you and give you a feeling of being compelled to do something. A leader without emotion will have a hard time leading the team in the vision. The reason a vision needs to be experienced emotionally is that is the way people change their behavior. People don't change from rational reasons, but from emotional experiences. The leader's ability to evoke an emotional connection to the vision will enhance its ability to take hold.

Outcomes of Visioning

The following outcomes have been reported by individuals, groups and organizations that have completed a visioning process.

1. Alignment

People and groups that go through the visioning process have an increased sense of purpose and an overall congruence with the organization's goals. There is an increased sense of energy and excitement. Work in groups that have visioned has a deeper meaning.

2. Empowerment

Visioning increases the sense of personal mastery, group empowerment and organizational vigor. The experience of taking direct responsibility for outcomes they have crafted increases the ability to act.

3. Respect

Personal visioning provides a framework for appreciating strengths and putting action in perspective. Visioning provides a ground for shared participation; contributions are all treated equally in a team process. For a team or organization, a shared vision is an image, like a recipe, around which everyone can contribute their own ingredients.

4. Interdependence

Group visioning is a format for groups to experience how they are connected at a higher level with other groups in the organization. It gives a bigger picture in which to place individual efforts. Visioning

highlights the paradox between being connected to a larger effort and making individual choices.

5. Innovation

Groups and individuals that have worked through a visioning process have increased their ability to generate divergent ideas of the future. They have stretched their ability to think beyond short term goals and imagine alternative futures. This ability to generate visions and move toward them is a primary determinant of success.

6. Commitment

Groups or individuals who have experienced guiding themselves through visioning notice that their vision often replaces rules as a standard of guidance. The vision is used to make decisions and focus attention. The role of supervision comes from within. People work not from compliance, but from commitment.

Conclusion

Undertaking a visioning process as an individual, group or organization requires a number of separate inquiries. The process of aligning personal, team and organizational values and vision is an ambitious undertaking. In our experience of working with people, teams and organizations through this process, we have found many innovations and adaptations of the basic process. We know that you will also learn a lot from the process.

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