

Alignment: Five Things You Need to Get Right Before You Start (Anything)

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After years of researching happiness and fulfillment, psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt at the University of Virginia wrote that “getting the relationships right between yourself and others, between yourself and your work, and between yourself and something larger than yourself is key to developing a sense of purpose and meaning.”

We call this “alignment.” We have divided alignment into five key elements with which we can more easily work: goals, purpose, capacity, governance, and optimistic confidence. Deliberately addressing these key elements prior to starting any endeavor will help maximize successful outcomes, whether as an individual, as part of a team, or part of a larger project. Ignoring alignment increases risk and requires extra work. Just as it takes extra work to keep your car on the road when your wheels are out of alignment, it takes extra work to keep yourself, your team, or your project on track when they are not aligned.

GOALS

1 While it may sound trite, one of the most important things to get right before starting anything is to understand your goals for the project or initiative. Goals help align the relationships between yourself and the rest of the people you’ll be working with, as well as between yourself and the work. Goals focus attention and increase effort and persistence. They increase security by providing clarity, and when achieved, they generate a sense of accomplishment. Actions without explicit goals can lead to results, but with greater risk and without any sense of achievement. It’s like saying, “I meant to do that,” when something happens the way it should

have, without a detailed plan. Luck is often important to a successful outcome, but it’s not the best way to tackle an initiative, and it certainly isn’t as fulfilling.

PURPOSE

2 Once goals have been determined, it’s important to understand how those goals align with the broader purpose of the organization and the individuals responsible for implementation. Businesses spend the lion’s share of time managing their extrinsic goals and motivations (e.g., as MBOs and performance targets) and almost no time talking about what is intrinsically motivating to individuals. Enlightened companies, teams, and individuals generally have a clear purpose — something that explains why they do what they do and its impact on making a difference in the world. At Disney, the purpose is “to use our imagination to bring happiness to millions,” and at Johnson & Johnson, their purpose is “to alleviate pain and suffering.” If you’re a leader at Disney or Johnson & Johnson and want to get the most out of the people on your project team, you would find ways to communicate and demonstrate how the purpose of your project aligns with the purpose of the overall organization. With alignment to purpose, you see the value of your contribution to your own growth and, more importantly, to others.

At the individual level, it is worth taking the time to work with each project team member to help them understand how their own purpose and goals align to the goals of the project. Without that alignment, you'll miss out on an opportunity to increase engagement and motivation, and the work could turn out to be drudgery.

If you don't know the purpose of your organization, or your people haven't spent the time to understand how they are intrinsically motivated towards making an impact on something larger than themselves, exploring purpose is a great place to start.

CAPACITY

3 The discipline to stop and understand whether the capacity and resources to perform the work is available is another key factor in aligning the relationship between you and your work. Most of the time, an analysis of capacity focuses on availability of funding and headcount, and occasionally tools and other technology resources. Leaders should also take the time to analyze and understand the emotional and physical energy required to deliver.

If you don't have the capacity, it will be difficult to own the work and be held accountable. It's important to be open and honest about your priorities and capacity to get the job done to the best of your abilities. Even if everything else is in place (goals, purpose, governance, and optimistic confidence), if you don't have the capacity, your ability to get the work done won't be sustainable. The same goes for a single project within the larger organization — many times organizations don't have the capacity to roll out another

initiative due to competing priorities. Just how many initiatives have you started and completed on time? It becomes more and more difficult when more players are involved. It is important to understand your personal capacity, the team's capacity, and the organization's capacity for the initiative before you agree to commit resources.

GOVERNANCE

4 Governance provides the control to keep things on track and ensure that key decision-makers are actively engaged in the pursuit of the endeavor. At the individual level, governance is about self-regulation and mindfulness. Being able to "step outside" of yourself and examine your progress towards goals, your emotional state, and your own thoughts is a key skill that can be cultivated to help you stay on track in pursuit of your goals. At the team and organization level it's about managing towards milestones, overcoming obstacles, mitigating risk, involving key stakeholders, and coordinating decision-making.

It is important to keep an open dialog about governance and decision-making. Before you start anything, make sure there are clear reporting relationships and decision-makers. Do you fully understand your role, what you are being held accountable for personally, and to what others are being held accountable? Are you satisfied with the level of control that you exhibit? Do you trust those who are holding you accountable? If there is any lack of clarity with these questions, it could diminish the overall success of the project.

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we are able to maximize the intrinsic motivations of individuals.

OPTIMISTIC CONFIDENCE

5 The last component of alignment is to make sure that the entire organization believes that success is possible. Psychologists call this self-efficacy. High self-efficacy has been shown to improve performance. Think of this optimistic confidence as the opposite of cynicism and doubt. Individuals, teams and organizations that generate a sense of optimism and focus on positive outcomes increase their likelihood of success. On the contrary, cynical talk and other indicators of doubt throughout the organization (e.g., Dilbert cartoon postings) are a red flag that should not be ignored. A sense of optimistic confidence and belief in the likelihood of success is motivating and reassuring during the more challenging moments of any endeavor.

We have listed optimistic confidence as the last factor for successful alignment, but that's not to say that it's the least important. Instead, it might be the most critical factor for getting something done and getting it done well with organizational and personal satisfaction. Every other factor of alignment mentioned — goals, purpose, capacity, and governance — can determine an individual's personal optimistic confidence. In addition, optimistic confidence is the factor that is not as commonly openly discussed with others in the organization, especially those who have a greater level of accountability. It is much more common to have a discussion about the project's goals, purpose (mission, vision, strategy), capacity (especially resource capacity), and governance. How often has someone come up and asked you just how likely you thought the project was to succeed? It's a more sensitive and subjective question.

When people are battling the gut feeling that the work they're doing is inconsistent with who they are, not moving them towards a meaningful goal to generate a sense of accomplishment, not contributing in a positive way to who they believe they are and why they're here, or sense that attempting this goal is futile, the amount of work to achieve success will likely exceed the energy that the individual or team is able to generate. Conversely, when projects are in alignment, we are able to maximize the intrinsic motivations of individuals. That coherence helps people get into a state of flow where tremendous amounts of work can get done in short periods of time. Finding ways to align purpose, goals, capacity, governance, and optimistic confidence maximizes intrinsic motivation, creates coherence, and drives outstanding outcomes.

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