

# Alignment

## The Secret behind Organizational Power and Coordination

*By Steve Zaffron and Allan Cohen*

### **Rough beginnings — a story on the way to alignment...**

In 1993, a hundred serious, grim-faced, copper mining leaders came together in an attempt to create a new future for their enterprise. The gathering included company executives, labor leaders from 11 different unions, and a group of unofficial workforce leaders who normally spent their days underground or driving trucks. On behalf of the 4,000 employees of the company, this diverse and highly-conflicted group of stakeholders was brought together to create an alternative to a predictable future of decline with a nasty and escalating union-management conflict at its center.

Against this reality and against all odds, company management had engaged a small consulting firm to work with the organization to create a new future using a process called “Alignment”. In the words of the CEO, “We need a future that each and every person in the company will be moved and inspired by and will go to work to make happen.”

Now, as this Alignment process moved achingly, slowly forward, an argument broke out: Should we describe this organization as “a family” or not? The unions said “yes” while company management said “no”. The ensuing argument over this one word went on for four hours.

Why would 100 busy, intelligent, committed people spend four hours attempting to align on whether or not to call themselves a “family”?

### **Why deal with the hard work of Alignment?**

Organizations today have a real problem. It is nearly impossible to effectively coordinate actions across an organization while both its size and complexity rapidly expand. The command and control systems that worked for a smaller, less complex organization inevitably break down as size and complexity increase. This condition is accelerated by such factors as the globalization of nearly every market and supply chain, the turmoil caused by internet-enabled business models that shift overnight, the shortening of innovation cycle times for both products and processes, and by an investment community that demands that it all go faster and faster.

What is missing for most organizations is a competency for naturally connecting, coordinating, and focusing people's actions and outputs in a coherent manner. We call this competency Alignment. In an Aligned organization, the myriad of actions taking place across different functions and at different levels are all naturally coherent. People in the organization aim their actions at the same shared concerns without the need for control imposed from above.

When you have a small group or simple organization, Alignment can emerge from day to day working together. But when your organization becomes large and complex, Alignment must be a competency that is intentionally pursued and developed.

An Aligned organization has a decisive strategic advantage: It is able to execute more efficiently, effectively, and with more velocity than competitors whose organizations are not aligned. Like a race car with its tires out of alignment, organizations that are not Aligned cannot perform at the optimum level.

## **What do we mean by an Aligned Organization?**

What we mean by "Alignment" is distinct from what is generally meant by "consensus", "agreeing", "lining up behind someone", "getting behind someone's ideas", "buying in", "getting on board" or "going along with". These are all forms of "agreement", or more rigorously said, these are all forms of being in agreement with someone or something.

When we agree with something, we are not the creator of it. We are related to it at a distance. By contrast, when we Align with something, as Alignment is meant here, we are the creators of it, we are the authors of it, and we give our word to the fulfillment of it. "I agree with X" and "I align with X" are two completely different ways of relating to X. In the first case, I know something about X and have evaluated it as true or acceptable or right. In the latter case, I give my word to X and I experience X as a self-expression.

Alignment is a unique state in which a group experiences and operates from a wholeness or oneness in approaching those matters relevant to fulfilling the group's concerns. When a state of Alignment has been created, the group members' actions are naturally and necessarily coordinated and focused towards fulfilling shared concerns. Their actions are like iron filings lining up under the influence of a magnetic field. The group itself can be as small as a single work team or as large as the entire workforce in a Fortune 500 company.

A state of Alignment is achieved when all members of the group have created a shared context for dealing with the issues at hand and where each member owns that context as their own creation. Group members are then at the source of what needs to happen— not being in an argument about what needs to happen or even passively waiting to be told what needs to happen.

When groups of people Align on something – for example, on a future for their group or a project or effort that the group has taken on – they are the co-creators or authors of it, and they share a common way in which that future occurs for them. That future is now part of their personal future.

The power of Alignment, however, is not merely in having a group move forward together; it includes moving forward together in a new relationship to the group's past. True Alignment means that previously divisive issues between individuals or between groups of individuals, often referred to as “baggage,” have been completed. That is to say, they have been dealt with in such a way that these issues no longer have power or significance for those involved. This aspect of the state of Alignment is so rare that it often goes unnoticed or is overlooked as an essential element of Alignment.

When Alignment is present in an organization, what it looks like is:

- Increased velocity of strategic execution and expansion of results
- Surprising levels of support coming from all over the enterprise
- People working with an increased sense of ownership, purpose, pride in accomplishment, and satisfaction
- Innovation flowing from a new freedom to be, think, and act
- Positive “coincidences” happening everywhere

When Alignment is present in an organization, what you will *not* see is:

- Politics and personal agendas dominating the action
- Significant friction between groups and individuals in the organization
- People going through the motions, resigned to “business as usual”
- Resistance to what needs to get done to address the organization's concerns
- Complaints and gossip masquerading as good intentions

## **Smooth Landing: A Breakthrough in Alignment**

Let's return to the room with the 100 contentious mining company leaders. They have been arguing for four hours over whether to call the company a “family” or not. Why was it worth staying with the conversation for four hours? Because, if they could not Align on the fundamental nature of their relationship with each other, there would be no possibility of creating an Aligned future.

The word “family” was the tip of an iceberg. It stood for a historical battle regarding the relationship between employees and managers: the choice of calling the company a “family” meant a future of relating to each other the way brothers and sisters do versus relating to each other in a more impersonal or contractual manner. As one of the executives said during the four-hour standoff, “We can't be a family, because I may need to fire an employee.”

When it became clear that this log jam was never going to break without an intervention, the consultant leading the process said, “Time out! We need to create a small working group to resolve this issue quickly, or we will be here all night.”

Within a few minutes, two of the executives and two of the union officials were selected by the group to meet over a 10 minute break. When the break was over, everyone was back but the four members of the working group. The room was heavy with expectation. Finally, the working group walked in, each of them beaming-- especially the two executives who looked as if years had fallen away from their faces. One of the executives addressed the crowd shouting, “WE ARE A FAMILY!” There was a long moment of surprise, then the room exploded with applause and cheers.

The consultant asked the executive, “What changed your mind?” The executive replied, “What I realized in talking with the group was that my union guys could be my brothers, and I could still fire them if that’s what the family needs. There’s no law against firing your brother. And given how important it is for us to move forward together, I gave up my position to empower us in creating a new future.”

The Alignment process accelerated successfully from there, and the following declaration was included in their Aligned future:

*“We are the people of Magma Copper Company, a family dedicated to each other’s success, promising to fulfill the future we have declared.”*

## **A Final Thought**

Is it possible that Alignment is a natural state for human groups – that we are, in fact, wired by evolution to seek Alignment? Consider that Alignment carries with it a high survival value in the evolutionary sense. Early in human history, groups that found Alignment were more likely to carry on, and groups that did not were more likely to disappear. We have the genes of the groups that carried on. Human beings are fundamentally “social” creatures whose early survival depended on banding together and coordinating action.

The task then, as now, is to allow that natural Alignment to emerge, to remove what is in the way, and to reveal what is possible. You and I are constituted by Alignment. It is the possibility we are together.