Achieving Alignment
(or "Practicing the Fine Art of Organizational Chiropractic")

Larry F. Johnston, PhD

Because my son is a chiropractor, I've grown very familiar with the term "subluxation." In fact, I've experienced the nasty little devils on more than one occasion myself. I've also experienced on numerous occasions the relief and dramatic improved functioning that comes from being "adjusted."

Subluxation is a term used to indicate a skeletal misalignment that causes a variety of problems in the human body. Subluxations can impair the proper functioning of nerves and muscles, the flow of blood, the health of vital organs, and depending on severity, can range from downright painful to chronic incapacitation. Interestingly enough, these subluxations are often imperceptibly incremental – until the pain sets in. That's when we

realize that something has gone wrong.

The same thing happens to and in organizations, and the effects can be every bit as disruptive and deleterious as subluxations in the human body.

In this article we will look at four dimensions of organizational alignment: the organization-environment challenge, the vision alignment challenge, the customer/stakeholder alignment challenge, and the job fit challenge. Once we have looked at these four alignment challenges, we will look at the challenge of attunement – how to synchronize the emotional energy of stakeholders, especially staff, to "turbo-charge" organizational performance.
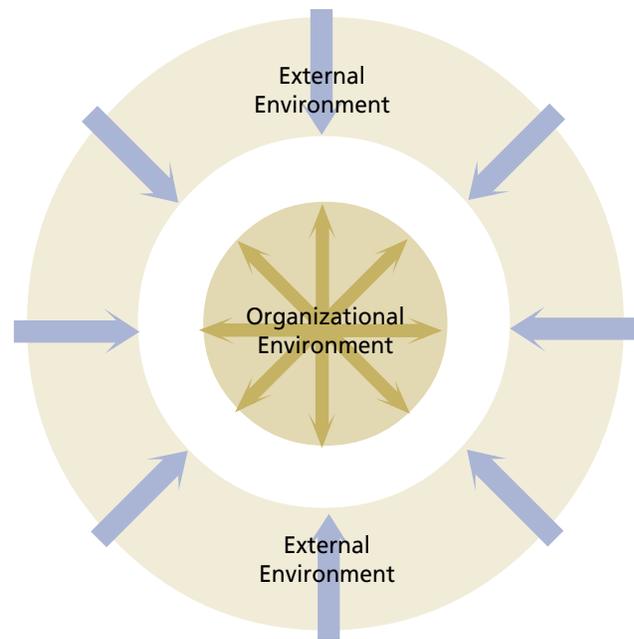
External Misalignments

One of the most dangerous misalignments faced by nonprofit organizations is the failure to be aligned with their external environment. In extreme cases, this environmental misalignment can become "non-habit forming," much like the consequences of extended stays underwater without the aid of a breathing apparatus!

## Organization-Environment Misalignment

Marketing Mix – One of the more obvious forms of misalignment is an organization's marketing mix, known traditionally as the "Four P's" of marketing: Product (what the organization offers), Price (how much it costs), Place (distribution or delivery channels), and Promotion (how the product or services is promoted). Stated very simply, in today's

highly competitive environment this type of external misalignment entails such potentially deadly dislocations as giving stakeholders

(customers, donors, etc.) what they don't want and/or failing to give them what they do want. Although often reflected in the marketing mix, additional misalignments may take the form of being out of synch with the STEEP factors

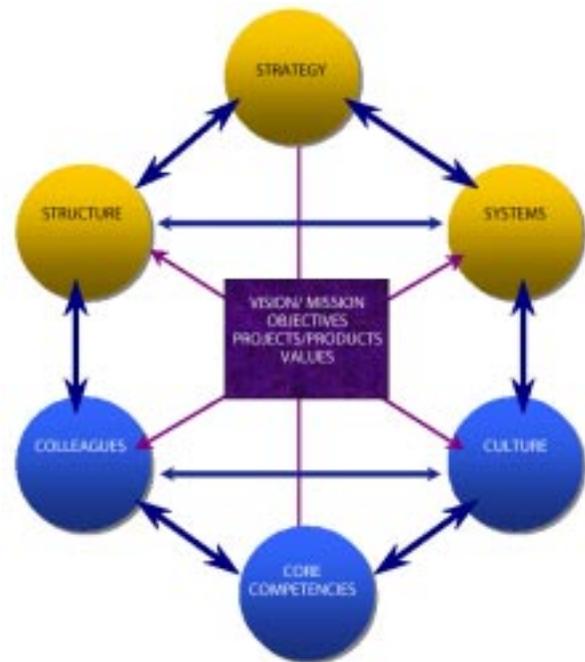## Organization-Environment Alignment
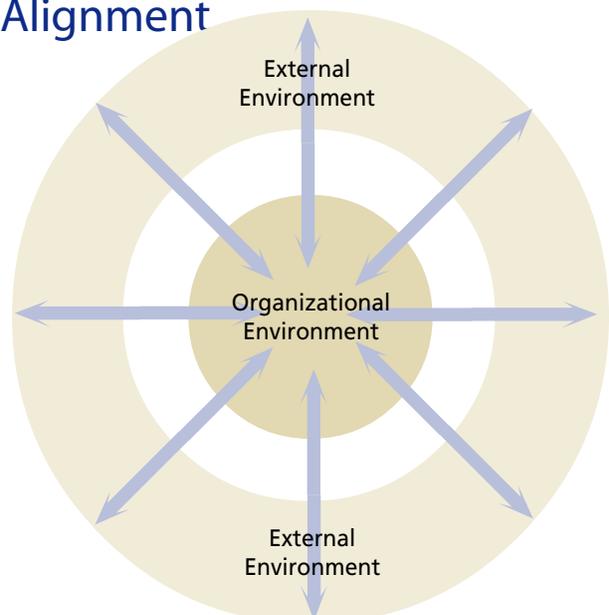
normally addressed in strategic planning: social, technological, economic, environmental, and political trends. Examples of social or demographic misalignments might include trying to reach Gen Xers with communications content geared to Baby Boomers. Technological misalignments might include relying wholly or extensively on print media when a younger generation demands more electronic communications such as e-mail and Web-based communications. Economic misalignments might include launching a capital campaign in the midst of a serious economic downturn, etc.

Needless to say, being out of synch with an organization's marketing environment can be problematic at best, terminal at worst. In fact, the corporate cemetery is littered with the headstones of countless organizations who failed to deliver the right products at the right cost, through the right distribution channels and promoted the right way.

Organization-Vision Alignment

But the organization-environment alignment dimension is merely one of several alignment challenges today's organizations must successfully meet. In addition, organizations today must successfully align at least six other key dimensions around the critical element of vision (that is, a compelling picture or mental image of where the organization is headed): *strategy, structure, systems, culture, colleagues* (e.g., board, staff, volunteers), and *competencies* (or core capabilities).

Adapted from *Leading Corporate Transformation* - Robert Miles

Complicating the task of achieving alignment around vision are several challenges we see in every organization. The first is the need to develop a compelling vision, by no means a small task. The second is how to consistently and persuasively communicate the vision to the organization's various stakeholders. The third is the lack of awareness of the criticality of organizational alignment, perhaps naively believing in the power of vision alone to transform and empower an organization. The fourth is the lack of awareness of organizational lifecycles, and the need to emphasize different elements (e.g., strategy, structure, systems) at different stages in the organization's growth. The fifth is the belief that alignment, once achieved, is a "done deal." In fact, given the "permanent whitewater" environment in which organizations operate today, the challenge of alignment is perpetual. Simply stated, it is not

so much "achieved" as it is constantly approximated and maintained to the best of the organization's abilities. Sixth – and this is a challenge for virtually every nonprofit organization – is the availability of financial resources to fund the organization's human resource needs, strategies, information systems, etc. (With the above challenges in mind, is it any wonder that there are so few truly high performance nonprofits?)

Let's assume for the sake of discussion, however, that the organization has achieved alignment with its external environment and has also achieved a fairly high degree of organizational alignment around the dimensions shown in the model above. Those alignments will ultimately mean little if the organization fails to align those same dimensions around the needs, desires, and expectations of its customers or clients (internal as well as external stakeholders such as staff, volunteers, beneficiaries of the organization's programs and services, etc.).

Adapted from *Leading Corporate Transformation* - Robert Miles

Customer (Stakeholder) Alignment

At this point, it should be emphasized that when the issue of customer or stakeholder needs, desires, and expectations are addressed, we are not talking about assumed needs, supposed needs, imagined needs, or even "observed" needs (since observation skills are frequently subjective and biased). In today's environment, there is no substitute for hard, empirical research. Furthermore, we are not merely talking here about the need to identify just any drivers of stakeholder satisfaction and loyalty. We are talking about a process like Stakeholder Value Mappingsm or Donor Value Mapping® to identify the key drivers of satisfaction and loyalty. (In one case of value mapping with a client, we determined that a single factor among 28 variables accounted for 50 percent of major donor satisfaction!)

Once these key drivers of loyalty and lifetime value are identified, the goal for forward-thinking organizations is to convert their organizations into strategic value delivery systems. In McConkey•Johnston, our consultants talk frequently about the "relentless pursuit of stakeholder delight." We do so not as an expression of any pathological need to please (we hope), but from the realization that delighted stakeholders do not defect. Merely "satisfied"

or even "very satisfied" customers or donors may defect in a heartbeat when a better offer comes along. Not so with truly delighted customers or donors.

Job Fit

Our earlier discussion entailed the mention of structure, normally thought of as the traditional organizational chart (this is the arena of "macro-organization design," to put it technically). But every bit as important, if not more important, than getting the right macro-structure is the need to get the right micro-structure or "job fit." Indeed, job design has been a major area of study for several decades now.

In his book, Good to Great, Jim Collins speaks to the need of: 1) getting the right people on the bus; 2) getting the wrong people off the bus, and; 3) then getting the right people in the right seats. What Collins is emphasizing here in a folksy and highly memorable way is the criticality of human resource alignment. Collins is on the money in emphasizing all three points. First, because an organization will never be better than the caliber of its people. Second, too many organizations, in the interest of kindness, compassion, tolerance, etc. fail to get the wrong people off the bus. The problem here is that keeping the wrong people not only depotentiates organizational performance, it will often drive the best people out of the organization, still further diminishing performance capacity.

Collins' third point gets to the issue, technically speaking, of "micro-organizational alignment." More popularly, this entails releasing the full potential of organizational employees and volunteers by enabling them to "soar with their strengths." In their wonderful book, Soar With Your Strengths, Clifton and Nelson make the point poignantly: "Don't try to teach a pig to sing – it wastes your time and annoys the pig." Or, as someone else has noted more loftily, "Don't try to put in what God left out. Try to pull out what God put in."

Bud Grant, the former steely-eyed coach of the Minnesota Vikings, expressed the same insight when he said simply, "I build the playbook around the players." While I believe the issue of job design in enlightened organizations very much entails building the playbook around the players, this is radical if not revolutionary thinking in most organizations. Instead, apparently we would rather hire people and then attempt to force-fit them into positions for which they're ill-fitted, then compound the insult and futility by spending thousand of dollars trying to train them for tasks for which they have little aptitude or

> Billions of dollars have been spent by corporations on training, and in many cases the result is highly trained incompetents!

giftedness. Robert Half, one of the world's better known human resource specialists, notes that billions of dollars have been spent by U.S. corporations on training, and in many cases the result is highly trained incompetents! What Half is saying is not that people are incompetent, but that no amount of money spent on training is going to teach pigs to sing.

But even achieving alignment on all the dimensions we have discussed will fall short if we miss the critical dimension of attunement.

Attunement

So far, we have focused on multiple perspectives of organizational alignment: the need to achieve alignment with the organization's external operating environment, the need to achieve alignment around the organization's vision, and the need to achieve alignment around customer or stakeholder needs, desires, and expectations. But if, revisiting the issue of subluxations, alignment is akin to the neuroskeletal structure of the human body, attunement is the vital "life force" without which alignment is nothing more than a car running out of fuel.

What is attunement? In his book, Primal Leadership, Daniel Goleman states that attunement is "alignment with the kind of resonance that moves people emotionally as well as intellectually." He notes that "The challenge is in how to attune people to your vision and then to your business strategy in a way that arouses passion. Emotionally intelligent leaders know that this attunement requires something more than simply making people aware of the strategy itself. It requires a direct

connection with people's emotional centers." Goleman goes on to say that "Attunement, rather than mere alignment, offers the motivating enthusiasm for an organizational vision. When this attunement takes hold, people feel the heat of a collective excitement, of many people being enthusiastic about their work. A vision that "tunes" people in" – that creates resonance – builds organizational harmony and people's capacity to act collectively." (pp. 208-209)

What can we conclude from these notions of alignment and attunement? I would express the "bottom line" as a simple* formula: A1 + A2 = HP (Alignment plus attunement equals high performance). To those leaders (whose primary concern is attunement) and managers (whose primary concern is alignment) of for profit and not-for-profit who make the formula work in the real world, I express my profound and enduring respect and admiration. May your tribe increase.

---

*"Simple" as in "not complex." Not to be confused with "easy."

(Author's Note: I wish to express my gratitude to my son, Dr. Josh Johnston, for his insightful comments regarding subluxations. He graciously hints at times that his father's real subluxations are psychic rather than skeletal.)

Recommended Reading

Leading Corporate Transformation
    – Robert H. Miles

The Power of Alignment
    – Labovitz & Rosansky

Primal Leadership
    – Daniel Goleman

Soar With Your Strengths
    – Clifton & Nelson

The Pursuit of Prime
    – Ichak Adizes

Note: Larry F. Johnston is president of McConkey/Johnston, International, a marketing, fundraising, management and organization development consulting firm serving nonprofit organizations. He holds a Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, California. Dr. Johnston is the developer of Donor Value Mapping®, a process for identifying the key drivers of donor satisfaction, loyalty, retention and lifetime value. He can be reached by e-mail at larry_johnston@mcconkey-johnston.com.