

Alignment Tool

Note: while often used in workshops, it is also useful when facilitating meetings face-to-face or online.

Introduction to the Alignment Process

The Challenge

Increasingly, managers realize that many of their tasks have to be handled by teams and that the pressure is on them to do quality work quickly. However, many are frustrated at the large amount of time they now spend in team meetings and the slow progress they make at most of these meetings. The challenge is to develop and utilize some tools, which help teams to make quick, quality team decision making.

The ability to utilize new tools for teams to make quick, quality decisions depends upon acceptance of a few key assumptions about the realities of today's world. If we agree on the following, then our focus should be on making the best decisions we can in the shortest period of time with the best information we can quickly gather together.

Assumptions

Here are some of the assumptions that led to the development of the alignment tool.

- We are living through a period of fundamental change
- New realities are provoking an organizational, if not, societal, revolution
- The standard of performance in organizations has moved from "certainty" to flexibility
- The rules of the "game" will continue to change
- In this new "game," new cross functional teams are regularly being formed to undertake specific tasks for a short period of time
- The pressure is to improve our ability to create new teams, then:
 - Get them on the playing field working well together in a short time
 - Have them ready to quickly respond to the ongoing changes in the "game"

If these assumptions are accepted, then it should be safe to assume that **few decisions will be absolute and certain**. Certainty and rigidity will no longer be the standard of excellence in performance. **Quickness and flexibility will be increasingly important**. Making decisions on approximate knowledge will not only be acceptable, it is often critical. Finally, the ability to sensitively monitor the results of one's decisions and make quick adjustment is also critical.

What is Alignment for Decision Making?

Alignment is a term that is useful to describe a state of group agreement in a specific context. Alignment does not mean complete agreement. It just means if a suggestion remains one of the team's priorities, each participant will support the team as it works on this priority. In other words, members agree that the suggestion has some importance and they can live with it even though individually it may not be one individual's priority.

This means breaking through the traditional process of team decision making in which individuals win respect by thoroughly analyzing, dissecting, and criticizing the suggestions of others and in which there is an assumption that continuing this high-level analysis and criticism will eventually lead the

team to the correct decision. The premium now is on helping team to make quick, quality team decisions.

Using the language of alignment, meeting facilitators or leaders are able to continually check for acceptance of ideas and suggestions and move the discussion forward to achieve the objectives of the meeting.

This process does not encourage casual acceptance of an idea.

When participants commit themselves to alignment around any priority, their teammates can expect 100% support from them on this issue. They need to be reminded that it is not acceptable for them later to opt out by saying they thought the suggestion was not an important priority, but they let it stand because they just did not want to be difficult.

Why use the Alignment Process?

This process is a powerful tool in any situation where you have brought a team together to deal with a particular task or project and there is a need to use the time efficiently to get some action started. Once the process becomes familiar to a group, it can be used effectively by them in a wide variety of situations in which decisions have to be made quickly. This would include regular department meetings. It can be particularly useful in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of teleconference sessions.

Alignment Tool for Quick, Quality Team Decision Making

Purpose:

- To help people make quick, quality team decisions

What is it?

- Describes a state of group commitment in a specific context
- Not necessarily complete agreement
- If proposed action remains a priority, then all team members will support the action. The action is seen as a high priority worth supporting though it may not have been their individual top priority.

How do you use it?

- An individual suggests an action
- Example: "I suggest that a focus on building the foundation elements be one of the top priorities for this initiative."
- They then ask the question: Is there anyone not in alignment? NOTE - the reference is to disagreement. If everyone agrees, then no one speaks, and a decision has been made, and the group moves on
- People say, I am not in alignment, when they don't understand the suggestion OR if they are absolutely in disagreement and could not live with this action
- Then there can be a short 2-person discussion - without quick agreement the proposal is removed
- 2-person discussion only - 3rd person in gets thrown out to avoid "verbal brawl"
- This process does not encourage casual acceptance of an idea
- Alignment means team can expect your 100 percent support

Note: The Alignment Tool is an important tool in CDS' Suggested Rules of the Road for Nurturing Collaboration