

# Leadership Coach

Practical strategies for building strong relationships and achieving sustainable results

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**Issue No. 2009-01B**

## **Leadership Power Principles: Leverage & Alignment - Part II**

In Part I of this article, we addressed the “power principle” of leverage. In this issue, we’ll discuss the principle of alignment. Alignment, in an organizational sense, refers to the synchronization of strategies, structures, systems, policies, processes, procedures, people, and programs. That’s a mouthful, and a daunting challenge. For now, just remember that alignment is about syncing three S’s and five P’s.

At Disney World, they use the phrase, “Everything Speaks.” The meaning behind this phrase is that everything associated with the theme park, from the parking lot to the landscaping, from the restaurants to the rides, and from gift shops to the shows, sends a powerful message to customers about Disney. Disney prides itself four core quality principles – safety, courtesy, show and efficiency. Show refers to the magical experience Disney wants to impart to its guests and efficiency refers to the timeliness, continuity and consistency of that experience. Consistency is the highest order of quality because it means that everything and everyone is sending the same message and rendering the same level of performance time and time again. This is what creates the perception of excellence for Disney and other companies that follow a similar approach.

Disney is all about alignment with regard to the customer. They know that anyone can be a “one hit wonder” but that it takes real work to deliver consistent quality over time. This is why Disney has an entire team dedicated to light bulb replacement. This team maintains a map of every light bulb on the property, including the date a bulb was installed and its lifespan. When a bulb hits 80% of its expected lifespan, the team replaces it. The result is that no guest ever sees a burned out bulb. This process is not merely a great example of attention to detail. It is also a tangible expression of company that is deadly serious about its commitments to delight its customers and provide superior quality – commitments that flow directly from its mission and vision.

Once an organization determines its mission and vision, it must be very purposeful and deliberate about aligning each element of its strategy and business operations. Alignment creates a visceral sense of “flow” among members of the organization.

In other words, employees are knowledgeable, confident and comfortable about how the business works and the roles that they and their co-workers play. Alignment also has measurable financial and operational benefits. All you have to do is look for the absence of alignment, such as work place accidents, defects, waste, rework, grievances, turnover, unfavorable audit results, customer complaints, etc. I argue that these negative factors, when outside of normal parameters, provide good evidence of misalignment. Also, anyway you define it, misalignment disrupts “flow” in an organization. When attempting to solve problems such as these, organizations need to get at the root causes and then design solutions with the idea of improving the synchronization of the three S’s – strategy, structure and systems – and the five P’s – people, policies, processes, procedures and programs. Incentive systems provide a good illustration. Incentive systems that fail to strike the right balance between rewarding short-term and long-term results, or individual vs. team performance, may create misalignment among members of the work force and various departments or divisions. The design of incentive systems, even in the same organization, may differ, but they should never create inconsistencies that cause people to question the behaviors and results that are important to the organization, and why they are important. Inconsistencies create doubt, and doubt leads to mistrust.

There is probably no such thing as “optimal” alignment for any company that exists in today’s business environment. It’s best to think about alignment as an ongoing process or discipline. Just like vehicles, organizations require periodic adjustment. It’s best to not wait for the tires to wear out and the steering to go askew. Following are some very basic diagnostic questions that leaders can use to assess the degree of alignment within their organizations. These questions can be customized and augmented to fit almost any company.

1. Is the mission relevant and durable? Is it clear, compelling, and understandable, as judged by the key stakeholders (i.e., employees, customers, suppliers, share holders, etc.)? Is it imbued with noble values and principles? Can everyone in the organization answer the question: “What business is your company in and what does it stand for?”
2. Is the vision consistent with the mission? Is it forward-looking, bold, inspiring and achievable if the organization functions at its very best? Can everyone in the organization answer the question: “Where is the company going?”
3. Is the strategy sound? Can it be easily communicated and then translated into specific goals, tactical plans, projects, roles and tasks? Are the criteria for success identified? Have contingencies been considered?
4. Are authority and responsibility clearly defined within the organization? Are these two factors considered whenever an expectation is developed for action? Is there a mechanism for quickly clarifying or resolving issues related to authority and responsibility?

5. Is there a transparent process for decision-making and are decisions made on the basis of the values and principles that have been espoused by the organization? Are the appropriate people consulted and/or advised prior to key decisions being made?
6. Is there a regular review process in place for key systems such as performance evaluation, recognition, total compensation, career advancement and professional development to ensure they strengthen human capital within the organization?
7. Is there a regular review process in place for key administrative systems to ensure that they improve safety, knowledge-capture, decision-making, efficiency, and compliance without creating bureaucracy?
8. Is there a regular review process in place for key technical systems to ensure that they add value to users and stakeholders internal and external to the organization?
9. Is there a regular review process in place for policies, processes and procedures to ensure that they are relevant and efficacious?
10. Is there a regular review process in place for core programs and services to ensure they meet defined objectives and that the objectives are relevant to the goals, values and interests of the organization?
11. Have feedback mechanisms been developed, utilized and improved to provide a steady flow of accurate information about the perceptions, needs and interests of key stakeholders? Is there a check and balance process in place to ensure that unpopular or unflattering feedback is not disregarded, dismissed, discounted or devalued?

Obviously, the questions could go on and on. What I've tried to emphasize is that organizational alignment is a leadership discipline that requires ongoing attention. Leaders who master this discipline – which is likely a lifetime of work – will develop a reputation for integrity, consistency, and tenacity and will reap the rewards of synchronicity and flow.