



Why don't people just do what you tell them?

Why Alignment is key to strategy execution – and why our current approaches don't work

Wouldn't it be great if people just did what you tell them?

That people would focus their efforts on the priorities and that they would do it 'how we do things around here'. Doing the right things, the right way.

The challenge is that if you have ever worked in an organization, you'll know that that is often not what is happening.

If we want people to be aligned and work on the right things, we have to find a way to do that most effectively. That's what this paper is about – where Alignment starts and how to make it work.

Why it matters

Ask any CEO and they would like things to go faster, to sell more; to reduce costs more, to be able to change direction faster. Any activity that is not focused on delivering the priorities and where value is created is something CEOs would like to avoid or reduce.

If speed and cost competitiveness is what you are after, there is a likelihood that what you do to align your organization does little to help you with this. There is in fact a higher likelihood that you're making things worse if you are doing what other teams are doing.

Imagine the impact on speed when people aren't aligned and do their own thing.

Imagine the cost of the inefficiencies, the double work, the gaps that come from it.

Imagine the impact on people's engagement and desire to perform their best when they have to operate in unclarity.

The alignment challenge

Here is a reason why people don't just do what you tell them:

People filter everything

Ever tried the old 'telephone game' exercise? The one where you pass on a message to people in a circle and the message ends up being very different from what it was originally. Expectations passed down the line rarely land the way they were intended.

People crave autonomy

Human beings desire a degree of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). We want to know what is expected of us but also to be able to influence 'the what and how'. Overly rigid and imposed objectives lead to disengagement or misalignment on one hand, but too much autonomy leads to variation in execution on the other. That can be a challenge if we don't find the right balance: enough to engage people but not too much, so it leads to misalignment and everyone doing their own thing.

Leaders assume too much

Articulating your expectations so others can understand your intention is hard. It is difficult to articulate exactly what we want others to do – especially when it comes to *how* we'd like them to do things.

Most leaders have a way, they would ideally like people to do things – which is usually the way, the leader would do it him/herself.

The challenge is that this often doesn't translate to what works equally well for others.

Top-down doesn't work

The efforts by some headquarters to define and cascade objectives fail to recognize that people in the headquarters do not – in fact cannot – know what goes on on the ground. The desire for rigor and control clashes with the lived reality of people outside of the headquarters. What we are lacking is often a more effective approach to delegation and empowerment within clear boundaries that satisfies both parties' needs.

How companies have tried to address the Alignment challenge

As you can imagine, companies have tried to address this for a long time.

Management by Objectives (MBO)

Introduced by Peter Drucker in his book *The Practice of Management* in 1954, 'Managing by Objectives' (MBO) and later Doran's 'SMART' approach to goals from 1981 continue to be applied in many companies. Both can be helpful to cascade objectives collaboratively and to link individual objectives to higher-order objectives.

The challenge is how many companies continue to run MBO: many impose and fix objectives once in the beginning of the year to then not change them before the next year, not even when circumstances change which, surprise, often happens. If you ask leaders why they don't adapt objectives, you'll typically hear that it's because it takes too much time, or that it is a way for people to avoid accountability for not meeting their objectives.

Logical arguments that address efficiency but ignore what this does to people being held to account for delivering things that are irrelevant.

Another challenge is that most miss out on Drucker's 'collaborative' component and don't collaborate with people to define their objectives. They are merely imposed and cascaded in an attempt to get people objectives fast. I talked with a CHRO for a very large industrial company, who was excited that they could get all their employees to have objectives in only six weeks. The only challenge was that objectives were calculated and imposed from the headquarters. No dialogue or collaboration. Everyone had objectives but no one understood them or felt accountable for them.

The results of all of this are twofold:

- 1) that people often don't fully understand what is expected of them and
- 2) that the objectives are irrelevant a few weeks after they have been defined.

The challenges multiply at the end of the year when people are assessed and rewarded based on these mostly irrelevant objectives.

Objectives and Key Results (OKR)

The emergence of Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) - as popularized by Intel, Google and John Doerr in his best-selling 'Measure what Matters' book (1918) - does something about that in that it includes an approach to help people define and make sense of their objectives in a team context, and adapting objectives and results as circumstances change.

One obvious benefit of that is that objectives remain relevant and meaningful at all times.

The missing piece

But here's the thing - while all of these techniques are helpful, something is still missing.

Let me give you an example. One of the exercises we've often run when we work with companies to improve their PM is to start by interviewing the CEO and leadership team (LT). Often, they have just spent months defining their strategy, have agreed on how to activate it and have their individual objectives defined relative to that.

They have almost all applied MBO or OKRs to help them with this.

We ask them a few simple questions:

- *How clear is the strategy to you?*
Often, this question scores very high.
- *How clear is the strategy to your peers?*
Again, very high scores.

Where it gets interesting is around the next questions:

- *Describe the strategy and how your unit contributes to it in your own words.*
- *Articulate the choices and trade-offs that have shaped the strategy and why these were made, and lastly,*
- *What will you need from your peers to succeed with your own objectives and vice versa, what you peers will need from you?*

The result? They are almost always all over the place.

What people are clear on is only what they themselves have to do.

The intent behind the objectives, the trade-offs, where they need to collaborate with their peers to achieve the objectives, etc. is mostly totally unclear. It either hasn't been talked about or not talked about to a point where it is sufficiently clear and the LT fully aligned.

But it gets worse: curious about the results when we interview the people that report to the LT?

You guessed it – they often navigate in total darkness, without any or only a vague sense of a strategic intent or boundaries.

The thing is that when we ask the LT about how clear they believe things are for their teams, they all express that it should be totally clear. That's, however, just not the case.

Clearly, there is something missing here.



Why the German army got it right and many companies get it wrong

What's interesting is that the lack of alignment occurs even when the LTs have applied MBO or OKRs and spent a lot of time detailing things also for their direct reports and even when objectives are dictated and rigor and control applied. There is something about how we go about this process that doesn't work even with MBOs and OKRs.

The missing piece is, I believe, in our conversations and sensemaking about objectives.

In his seminal book 'The Art of Action' from 2010, historian Stephen Bungay examined why the German armed forces in the beginning of WW II was able to so decisively outperform other armies.

One of Bungay's many interesting findings was that they were able to win, not because of a few superhero generals, but because they had built an operating model – a culture – that balanced alignment with agility across their organization.

What the German armed forces sought to address were a few gaps, notably the one that Bungay calls 'the Alignment Gap' – the gap *between what we want people to do and what they actually do.*

What they institutionalized at scale was:

Clarity of intent

There's a saying in the military – 'any plan only lasts until the first encounter with the enemy'. Mike Tyson talked about 'everyone's got a plan until they punched in the face'...Either way, the point here is that things change and that we can't plan for everything. Plans are stagnant but the real world isn't.

The Germans realized that people in the headquarters wouldn't know enough about what happened on the ground to be of much use when things evolved: merely dictating objectives from the top wouldn't help.

Instead, they operated with *clarity of intent*.

Clarity of intent starts with articulating 'Why are we trying to accomplish this?'

Why is it important?' before they discussed *what* they were trying to accomplish. Implementing this approach meant that the entire organization was able to adapt but still be aligned to a higher-level intent even as circumstances would change.

People in the front line could be empowered to make decisions that worked in their context and at the same time be aligned to the higher-level intent. Not an either-or but satisfying both the needs of both the headquarters and the frontline.

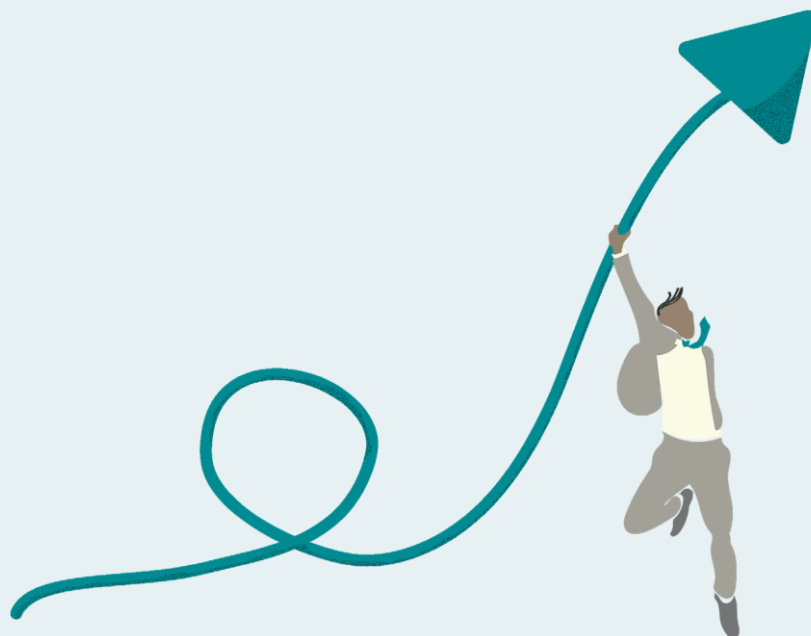
Guardrails (freedom to act)

Beyond setting clear objectives, the Germans focused on clarifying boundaries – or guardrails if you want. This enabled them to provide frontline people with the *Freedom to Act*. As long as you were operating within the guardrails, you were free to do what you needed to do to adapt to the situation on the ground.

Backbriefing

Backbriefing was the last component. Instead of merely telling people what to do, people were asked to feed back how they had understood the objectives in their own words.

Backbriefing provided leaders with the opportunity to test whether people had made sense of and internalized their objectives. If not, there would be an opportunity to address that *before* people started to work on them.



Tell me what you want, what you really, really want

'Do better next year'. That is how a leader defined an objective for an employee when I was inhouse. Imagine being the employee who has to act on that.

If you want performance from your people it has to start with leaders becoming much, much clearer on what they are looking for - what their expectations are - and in a way that makes it possible for their people to act on it.

Bungay refers to the 1990's Spice Girls' famous song 'Tell me what you want, what you really, really want' when talking about this.

It's simple really: if you want people do to what you want them to do, you have to start with telling them what you really, really want. You can't delegate this. You can't assume people will know. There is no other way to do it than to become much clearer on what you really, really want.

Bringing Alignment to your organization

I know you are probably eager to remind me that the Germans lost WW II and that the corporate world is not the same as that of an army.

What Bungay will tell you is that the German operational methods were highly effective – how their decentralized command structure allowed for rapid decision-making and adaptability on the ground – but also that their strategic leadership failed, notably when Hitler and other leaders from the headquarters started to interfere and refused to delegate strategic authority.

Either way, I believe there is a lot we can take away from this: Alignment is quite simple really if we get these five things right:

- Be clear: tell your people **what you want, what you really, really want**.
- Clarify **your intent**. Explain what you are trying to accomplish with the objective and why it matters.
- Define **guardrails** within which your people are free to adapt to the situation.
- Institute **backbrief sessions**: have your teams articulate in their own words to ensure they understand them and the logic behind them
- Review and **adjust objectives continuously** - as Doerr recommends with OKRs - to ensure relevance and engagement.

Final thoughts and where to start

Alignment isn't a one-and-done activity. It needs to be an ongoing dialogue that links intent, priorities and practical decision-making across every level of your organization.

To get it to work, many a leadership team will need to revisit how they align around defining and delivering their objectives and get a regular cadence in place where they review and – if needed – adapt their objectives.

Where to start? Ask your LT and LT-1 the five questions and find out whether you have an Alignment issue on your hands.

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