



Aligning the Senior Management Team for High Performance in Turbulent Times

by Lynnea Brinkerhoff

Senior managers generally gain experience and are compensated for their success in providing organization growth and enhancing the bottom line for investors. In turbulent times such as these, it is important that organizations move through predictable cycles. To navigate these cycles, there are some tried-and-true tools that organizations can employ to ensure their future. One choice is the Alignment Process. This process, when used to create high-performing teams from the top down, is an organization's best bet for surviving an economic downturn.

The Cycle: Necessary Transitions

Well-respected organizational consultant, William Bridges, has identified three key phases that must be followed to ensure a successful transition process.

Ending – Before an organization can start anything new, there must be an adequate and “humane” ending to what has been, helping people to manage their sense of loss of “the way things have been.” By making this process openly, it humanizes what could otherwise be experienced as an abrupt and cold transaction. People have a need to honor what has been successful and enduring.

Neutral Zone – The organization is no longer what it was, nor is it what it will become. Senior managers need to gain clarity about their future strategy and priorities and offer extensive communication and guidance that the organization is heading in the right direction. Short-range goals are key and simple messages and rewards will lessen the possible insecurity or concern that employees have for their workplace.

Beginning – There must be a definitive beginning. Like the inauguration of a new president, people need a reason to think freshly about a situation. Hosting a large-scale event or creating a positive video message from the chief executive officer are great ideas. Include people and their ideas and make sure that there are some “quick wins” so that employees know that they are being heard and that they can become actively engaged in the organization's future.

Since most properties did not prepare for the economic downturn or end normal operations in anticipation of it, it is normal if you find your organization thrust into the midst of the “neutral zone.” Thus, the need for clarifying short- and long-term goals and key accountabilities (the “charts”) while tending to the quality of business relationships and managing mutual expectations among all levels of employees (the “hearts”).

What Is Alignment?

Howard M. Guttman of NJ-based Guttman Development Strategies, Inc (GDS) is a noted leadership consultant and author of “Alignment for Top Performance: What It Is and How to Achieve It.” For four consecutive years, GDS has been selected by *Leadership Excellence* magazine as one of the top consulting firms in leadership development.

Guttman observes that, “If the senior team is unclear about the company's strategic thrust, that lack of clarity will cascade down through the organization.” He reminds us that, “Ultimately, alignment is about gaining agreement in five key areas.” A key result of aligning the senior team is a positive psychological climate throughout the organization. Remember, senior managers cannot provide for others what they have not created for themselves: sufficient agreement and in-sync performance among their closest colleagues in critical business arenas. When in doubt, employees look upward for direction, so there is no room for disagreement at the top.

We must define the key elements of managing during difficult economic times by using the strategy of aligning senior managers (with the possibility of cascading this throughout the property) in order to lead and properly take advantage of opportunities as the economy turns around.

Alignment Factors

Team members, no matter what their level, must be in sync with each other in the following five key areas:

Business Strategy: The organization's competitive advantage; the products and markets served and what lies outside the boundaries; the capabilities needed; long-term growth and financial targets

Goals or Business Deliverables Coming from the Strategy: The top priorities of the team, goals and values, and how the efforts of the employees align themselves in their daily work to reflect these.

Roles and Responsibilities at Individual and Department Levels: Understanding and being transparent about your role and responsibilities and those of other team members as well; the overlaps, interdependencies, and gaps.

Decision-Making Ground Rules and Other Relevant Protocols: Who makes which decisions and how they are made (unilaterally, collaboratively, by consensus); who is consulted for information or opinions and who executes; how conflicts are resolved or dealt with (“no triangulation or enlisting third parties,” “resolve it or let it go” and “don't accuse in absentia”).

Business Relationships: Individual approaches to behavior and communication (non-assertive, assertive, or aggressive), assessing one another's approach, requests to modify behavior for more positive impact and create a mutual "contract" with fellow team members.

What Does a High-Performance Team Look Like?

A high-performance team must have the following eight attributes:

1. The mission, goals, and business priorities of the team are clear to all team members.
2. The team is comprised of the "right" players. This implies that they are technically/functionally competent, with the ability and willingness to influence across functional lines.
3. The roles/points of intersection/turf are clear to all team members regarding every player on the team.
4. Team members are committed to the team "winning" (achieving the business goal) over their own parochial/functional self-interest.
5. The decision-making/leadership mechanism that the team employs is understood and accepted by all team members.
6. Every team member feels a sense of ownership/ accountability for the business results that the team creates. As a result, every team member feels that they have a license to speak on any matter concerning how the group functions. The team operates as a managing board of directors.
7. All team members are comfortable dealing with conflict in the team. Consequently, they are willing to be candid, able to depersonalize, and attempt to reach resolution on outstanding team issues.
8. The team has a willingness to periodically self-assess its progress as a group, focusing on how the team functions as a total group. This includes assessing the business deliverables, individual commitments, and relevant protocols.

Self-Check/Assessment: Is Your Organization Aligned?

Is your senior management team currently aligned? Answer the following questions by using the following rating scale:

Goals: Are the organization's and department's goals established and visible to all?

Roles: Are they clearly defined so that actions taken will align with business strategy and players can make requests of each other easily if gaps are discovered?

Communication: Is there ample opportunity for both formal and informal communication between team members?

Decision-making/Implementation: Are there generally understood decision-making processes and are the implementation programs planned carefully and allow for change based on new opportunities?

Conflict Management: Is there enough candor within the organization that multiple points of view can be expressed without becoming personal vendettas or leaving residue?

Final Question Area: Tension: Is there ample tension in the organization that necessitates to making a decision based on logical understanding of the challenges?

Extensive research shows that, even if a decision appears to be logical and feasible, if there is not ample tension in the system (clear need to change or agreement that doing otherwise brings inevitable failure), no action to turn the situation around will occur. (www.masterstream.com)

The central goal of an alignment process is to create ease of decision-making and implementation of agreed-upon priorities. Moreover, each team member realizes what he or she needs to do in order to enhance the overall function of the team. Thus begins the journey into high performance. Not surprisingly, periodic self-assessment and regular reminders remain vital ingredients.

Dale Hipsh, COO of the Pearl River Resort in Choctaw, MS was recently asked to comment on what strategic need he saw when he took over the operation departments and what the results have been of aligning the senior management team to this need. "After arriving at Pearl River Resort and taking time to assess the capabilities of our senior leaders and managers, the senior management team clearly established aligned plans for improvements in customer service, streamlined operations and clear fiscal goals. We then created feedback loops that allowed for the communication of successes and failures within the management team and back to the functional teams. Using these initiatives as the foundation in these complex and dynamic economic times has proven invaluable and shown strong results to date."

Whether your property has gained enough clarity to create productive "endings" to outmoded ways of doing business, or it has been forced into the "neutral zone" by changing conditions and is now in search of a new "beginning," without proper alignment among the senior team, the neutral zone can literally become endless. This can put the organization at risk. The alignment process is a straightforward and cost-efficient process. ♣

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