

# Humanizing Organizational Performance

## *Abstract*

The performance of organizations, like all complex systems, depends on their underlying architectures and alignment. In this session, we introduce a simple lesson that brings this reality quite literally to life in the classroom using an organization-as-athlete metaphor. Specifically, we will walk through four alignment principles central to athletic and organizational performance and do scalable exercises that allow participants of all fitness levels to experience each one at work in their own bodies.

*Keywords:* Performance Management, Organizational Architecture, Organizational Alignment, Health & Fitness

## 1) Teaching Implications:

### **Audience**

Our session has relevance for instructors whose course content covers organizational architecture/structure, design, change, or development. In our experience, this implies courses on general management, organizational behavior, leadership, strategy, strategic HRM, and organizational theory.

Our session should also be of interest to participants wishing to learn more about improving physical (i.e., athletic) performance. Indeed, learning the basic principles we will discuss have helped us alleviate some longstanding issues with our muscles and joints. Given that many of us suffer from aches and pains, particularly as we get older, we anticipate this session will be helpful to participants of all ages and ability.

### **Background & Concept**

Organizational architecture and design can greatly impact performance. Despite their importance, management educators often have limited tools at our disposal to teach and discuss them. The simple diagrams and organizational charts that our textbooks offer typically do little to stimulate engagement among students, especially when they have limited work experience. We propose integrating the concept of organizational alignment as a way to enrich students learning with more dynamic concepts and experience.

Conceptually speaking, alignment refers to the degree to which all parts and processes of a system are working harmoniously towards a common goal (Labovitz & Rosansky, 1997). Though scholars have consistently considered organizational architecture and design for as long as they have studied organizations (Nadler, Gerstein, & Shaw, 1992), they have paid far less attention to the topic of

organizational alignment (Powell, 1992; Semler, 1997). Moreover, the field of management has yet to develop a consensus as to what organizational alignment is, how it relates to architecture and design, or how it impacts performance. Despite this disparate treatment, the concept of alignment is inextricably linked to organizational architecture and design. Whereas architecture concerns how systems *should* function along vertical and horizontal dimensions, alignment concerns how they actually do function contingent along those same dimensions. Unlike organizational architecture, however, teaching alignment creates the possibility to use kinesthetic experience.

Corporal and organizational alignment both depend on the comprehension and practice of four principles: awareness, flexibility, balance, and synchrony. With the help of kinesiologists (our physical trainers), we have come up with four simple and scalable exercises that allow students to see these four principles come alive in their own bodies. We emphasize “scalable” because students will be able to adapt these exercises according to their own ability. Based on growing evidence in the psychological literature, we expect our kinesthetic exercises to create deeper and more meaningful learning experiences (Kontra, Goldin-Meadow, & Beilock, 2012).

### **Learning Objectives**

Our session has specific learning objectives as well as general learning implications. The following outline summarizes the former.

- What it means to be aligned?
  - Aligned with what?
  - Aligned how?
- Four universal principles of alignment
  - Awareness
  - Flexibility
  - Balance
  - Synchrony
- How to achieve and maintain alignment

In terms of general learning implications, our session will likely lead to discussion of two broad and related themes: (1) organizational development and change (ODC) and (2) systems versus silos views of organizations.

Regarding the former, our lesson implies that understanding and evaluating alignment constitutes a critical first step prior to pursuing development and change initiatives for two reasons. First, like their physical counterparts, many organizational maladies can be alleviated with simple realignments. ODC initiatives, like unnecessary surgeries to the human body, can be both costly and catastrophic to organizations. Second, even if the situation requires radical change,

implementing such initiatives, like a new fitness routine, will most certainly go better when based on a proper understanding of alignment.

Regarding the latter, management education and practice continues to operate according to the “siloes” view of organizations. Business students take separate courses on marketing, finance, accounting, operations, and management when in reality all these functions are completely interdependent. Thinking in terms of alignment encourages a systems view whereby we can envision how the best managers find the proper balance between all business functions so that they work harmoniously together (i.e., stay properly aligned) and achieve optimum performance.

## 2) Session Description and Plan:

We will walk through our introduction to organizational alignment class exactly as it has been delivered to both undergraduate and MBA students at a large state university.

Based on those experiences, a 90-minute session is optimal to provide participants the opportunities to experiment with the basic exercises, explore additional ones, and have time to reflect upon and discuss how the principles we will introduce correspond to their own course topics. Nevertheless, we find it possible to deliver a shortened, 60-minute, version of the session as program space permits with the understanding that attendance would be limited to no more than 10 participants.

The following timeline reflects the 90-minute plan (60-minute alternatives listed parenthetically). All discussions and exercises are interactive.

- |      |   |                 |
|------|---|-----------------|
| I.   | Personal introductions  | 10 (5) minutes  |
|      | Names, teaching areas/experience, & expectations  |                 |
| II.  | Principles of Organizational Alignment  | 10 (10) minutes |
|      | Presenter-led conceptual discussion in which we will introduce and map the principles of alignment onto our understanding of organizational architecture. |                 |
| III. | Alignment Principle I: Awareness  | 12 (10) minutes |
|      | a. Intro: What is it? How would you assess it?  |                 |
|      | b. Partner exercise: Assessing our alignment through a simple pose  |                 |
|      | c. Debrief: How aligned were you?   |                 |
| IV.  | Alignment Principle II: Flexibility   | 12 (10) minutes |
|      | a. Intro: What is it? How would you assess it?  |                 |

- b. Partner exercise: Finding the sticking points
  - c. Debrief: Too tight? Too loose? Just right?
  
- V. Alignment Principle III: Balance 12 (10) minutes
  - a. Intro: What is it? How would you assess it?
  - b. Partner exercise: Same on both sides?
  - c. Debrief: Preferences & Practices
  
- VI. Alignment Principle IV: Synchrony 12 (10) minutes
  - a. Intro: What is it? How would you assess it?
  - b. Partner exercise: All together now ...
  - c. Debrief: Troubleshooting coordination
  
- VII. Wrap-up 22 (5) minutes
  - a. Participant reflections
  - b. Discussion of common alignment problems
  - c. Q & A

### 3) Application to Conference theme:

In recent times, organizational development and change have been hot topic among management scholars and practitioners. The topic of organizational alignment compliments these themes in two specific ways. First, it involves a framework for understanding if and when changes are needed and how they should or should not impact organizations. Second, the universal principles of alignment bring with them simple, minimally invasive practices (i.e., techniques) for improving performance. This latter point has important implications for managerial practice by suggesting that simple changes to behavior may yield big gains and eliminate the need for costly and risky systemic changes. As stated previously, we have seen these principles and practices improve our own professional and physical results and hope they impact participants and their students in similar ways.

### 4) Unique Contribution to OBTC:

This is a brand new proposal inspired by a brand new course that introduces a tool to illustrate and teach the principles an emergent topic in business education with high relevance for management practice (i.e. organizational alignment).

We taught organizational alignment for the first time in the fall of 2015 and one time since. We have also used this exercise in an undergraduate principles of management course. Given the overwhelmingly positive response we have received from students, we hope to share what we have learned with the OBTC community.

## References

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