A Kinesthetic Introduction to Organizational Architecture and Alignment

Abstract

The performance of organizations, like all complex systems, depends on their underlying architectures and alignment. This session introduces a method that brings this reality quite literally to life in the classroom using an organization-as-athlete metaphor. Specifically, it walks attendees through four alignment principles central to athletic and organizational performance and do scalable exercises that allow participants of all levels of fitness to experience each one at work in their own bodies. Attendees should wear comfortable clothing suitable for engaging in *light* exercise.

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

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Introduction

The success or failure of organizations largely depends on how managers respond to problems. Despite the potentiality for extreme, including life-and-death stakes in such situations, managers often only have their intuition and experience on which to rely when choosing solutions. Extant evidence suggests that both resources can fall short when it comes to identifying optimal solutions (Baldwin, Pierce, Joines, & Farouk, 2011) and, thus, lead to tragic outcomes. I suggest an alternative, more systematic approach based on those used in more "technical" disciplines.

Whether dealing with airplanes, automobiles, buildings, computer software, or even the human body, any reputable diagnostician, engineer, or technician knows that effective performance management and troubleshooting starts with a proper understanding of the underlying architecture and how its components work, that is, align, with one another. An increasing number of scholars and experts argue the same holds true for organizations (Labovitz & Rosansky, 1997; Quiros, 2009; Semler, 1997). Though this affirmation may sound reasonable or even obvious to many management scholars, it provides little insight into how organizational architecture and alignment actually look and feel. An integration of the multiple perspectives on the topic suggest that they manifest very much like they do in the human body. In this session, participants will learn to explain how this is so by way of kinesthetic exercises developed with the assistance of kinesiologists and athletic trainers.

Participants in this session will find the exercises useful, as I have, for application as modules in general management courses or in entire courses on organizational

alignment. I have used them with and received highly positive responses from both undergraduate and graduate students. Though unattempted thus far, feedback suggests that the overall session has relevance for instructors whose course content covers organizational architecture/structure, design, change, or development. This implies courses on general management, organizational behavior, leadership, strategy, strategic HRM, and organizational theory.

Theoretical Foundation & Teaching Implications

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. I 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 and physical trainers, I have come up with four simple and *scalable* exercises that allow students to see these four principles come alive in their own bodies. I emphasize "scalable" because students will be able to vary the difficulty of these exercises to match 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

The proposed 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 management themes: (1) organizational development and change (ODC) and (2) systems versus siloed views of organizations.

Regarding the former, the present 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 "siloed" 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 optimal performance.

Finally, our session should also be of interest to participants wishing to learn more about improving physical (i.e., athletic) performance. Though not central to management learning per se, the physical fitness of managers and employees does have important organizational and personal consequences. I am further excited about these implications because learning the basic principles of alignment has been helping me resolve a number

of issues with muscles and joints that had plagued me for more than ten years. Given that many of us suffer from aches and pains, particularly as we get older, I anticipate this session will be helpful to participants of all ages and ability.

Exercise Overview

We will walk through an amended introduction to organizational alignment class that I have previously delivered to both undergraduate and MBA students as well as management educators at OBTC 2017. Feedback from those presentations informs me that I need to resequence the exercise to start with the familiar—our bodies—demonstrate how the principles of alignment apply to those bodies—and then tease out the organizational metaphor. Last year, I had used something of the reverse order, which seemed to create more confusion than clarity among the OBTC participants.

To be more specific, we will warm up with a brief discussion about participants experience with musculoskeletal alignment and alignment problems (i.e., athletic performance and injuries) and the ways we manage them. Younger participants tend to relate more with the performance side and learning about how to achieve seemingly impossible feats (e.g., one legged, pistol squats, one-armed handstands, “double unders”—a method of jumping rope whereby the rope passes under the feet twice for every jump). Older groups, as expected, identify more with the injury side and welcome suggestions for alleviation.

Following the opening discussion, I will ask attendees where they would start if they wanted to increase performance of or decrease pain in their own bodies. In response, they will likely respond something along the lines of conditioning (strengthening and

stretching) which opens up the notion of force versus resistance and why it is better to work smarter rather (i.e., reduce resistance) than harder (i.e., increase force). I will then ask them how they would work smarter with their bodies. Groups often include at least one or two participants who mention something along the lines of alignment—if so or if not, I will explain alignment as we understand it with our cars' wheel (i.e., as working with or against each other).

The next question will concern how they would know if their bodies were properly aligned. Responses to that question will serve as a transition to introduction of four principles of alignment demonstrated by way of simple and scalable (i.e., can be as easy or as challenging as the participants want them to be) poses and exercises (see Session Description III through VI).

After performing the exercises, we will transition into a more conceptual discussion of how the principles underlying those exercises apply to organizational performance and management. Specifically, we will identify and define two types of alignment—vertical and horizontal—that apply to both human bodies and organizations. We will then discuss how we can turn this understanding into a more systematic approach for improving organizational performance and remediating faults and failures.

Based on previous experience, 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.

Session Description

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

I. Personal introductions — 7 (5) minutes

Names, teaching areas/experience, & expectations

II. Experiences with athletic performance and problems — 7 (5) minutes

Big challenges and goals versus injuries and pain

III. Alignment Principle I: Awareness — 10 (5) 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. Principles of Organizational Alignment 20 (10) minutes

Presenter-led conceptual discussion in which we will map the principles of alignment onto our understanding of organizational architecture.

VIII. Wrap-up 10 (5) minutes

a. Participant reflections

b. Discussion of common alignment problems

c. Q & A

References

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