ENSURE ALIGNMENT

SUCCESSFUL LEADERS RISE ABOVE THE NOISE TO BE HEARD
ORGANIZATIONAL CLARITY THROUGH ALIGNMENT

In today's world of always-on media, we have gone from relief at the democratization of information to feeling overwhelmed at the continual deluge of slogans, thoughts and experts sharing the next big breakthrough. It is not possible to keep up with it all, and so many of us have adopted an expert and become followers of their doctrine. The leadership world seems to have split into distinct camps, with those who follow different schools of thought left feeling as if they have very little to say to or learn from one another.

Having said this, you may be thinking that the last thing the world needs right now is *another* model of effective leadership. But this model is different; it is a simple, clear and comprehensive framework for leadership success. It speaks to both the "what" and the "how" of leadership. It does not focus on any one big thing because successful leadership is always more than one big thing. Instead, we have taken our research, our experience advising and coaching leaders across diverse organizations and our own personal experiences with leadership to distill the four deliverables and five behaviors that successful leaders have in common.

I said our model is simple - 4 deliverables and 5 core behaviors – but simple does not mean easy. Each deliverable results from a series of actions that must be taken, and each behavior listed is meant not as a one size fits all prescription but rather a reference to be personalized according to your own capabilities and strengths.

Declare, build, confront …each is a clear action verb chosen deliberately to emphasize that leadership is about action and the leader must be an action figure. **Ensure**, while still requiring action, connotes that it must be accomplished with and through others in the organizational system. What follows is an introduction to one of the individual pieces of this framework.

Ensure Alignment
Setting a direction, nurturing commitment and investing in organizational capability are a good start but the core purpose and values take on real meaning only when the words are brought to life through actions. Employees draw their meaning from the things that touch them every day, the decision-making protocols, the structure and resource allocations, the policies and approval procedures, and the human resources systems that deliver the individual messages and rewards. This is where a leader's authenticity is put to the test and real meaning is solidified to employees.

Creating and maintaining alignment requires broad-based participation, time, determination and patience. The first step is to address obvious inconsistencies, those things that do the most harm by sending messages in conflict with the intended direction. Since the impact of process is relative, it is important to enlist others at all levels of the organization to help identify and then discuss seeming inconsistencies. For example, teamwork has become a common organizational structure for accomplishing cross- functional initiatives. Supervisors often think of special team assignments as perqs,

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spoils to be handed out as a recognition award. Employees often have a very different take on the selection. The degree of organizational process support to the team structure determines which it becomes, but all too often it is misalignment that prevails. If the contributions to the team are outside of the normal reporting relationship and not captured by the performance management system, then employees in this predicament feel they are being asked to devote time and effort that goes unappreciated. Worse yet, this extra work could place them at risk of falling behind in their assigned area for which they are appraised. Faced with this choice, most employees shortchange the team initiative and resent being loaded up. Meanwhile, the supervisor is delighted with the "extra" they were able to offer this talented and deserving employee. We face a similar threat of misaligned messages with the more recent drive toward greater external collaboration and partnerships. These new strategic imperatives will garner employee commitment only when we align the supporting work and reward processes to support them.

It is also important to move with deliberate speed but not compulsive speed, as there is only so much change that an organization can absorb at once. It is important to develop a plan for strengthening alignment and it is also important to let the organization know of your plan. They must believe there is openness to identification of inconsistencies, and that you will remain committed to exploring each over time. Misalignments that cannot be immediately modified should be openly addressed to model honest communication and also avoid the assumption of politics or favoritism.

Identifying and correcting misalignments is one action, strengthening the message by creating new alignments is a second powerful leadership action that solidifies meaning in an organization. We work with a company that has innovation as a core value, and yet was known for its slow, steady rate of change and growth. In order to elevate the meaning and impact of innovation, the CEO created a new alignment. By instituting a specific and measurable goal that 5% of all annual revenues must come as a result of new products, services or processes, he elevated the focus and changed the behavior surrounding innovation to a new and more meaningful level.

The senior leaders working among themselves cannot eliminate misalignment and create new alignments throughout the organization. This work must be accomplished cooperatively through a network of distributed leadership. It is essential that the leaders and managers in this network are themselves aligned well enough to share the goals and model the values and behaviors of the organization. What is most difficult here is the realization that not every one will share the goals and values no matter how compelling you think the case may be. Those who do not share the values today usually will not in the future. After a reasonable period of explanation and opportunity, those who choose not to align either self-select out or need to be helped out of the system. As difficult as this may be, the elimination of mixed messages and blockers is critical to ensuring alignment. This is a key test of a leader's authenticity in the eyes of the organization, and one that employees typically wait to evaluate before deciding to offer their full commitment. When a leader passes this test, trust is enabled, the final answer to "what's in it for me" is delivered and capabilities truly become boundaryless.

One of the most difficult aspects of this work is that you are never finished. The organization will continue to grow and adjust to its changing environment, and these changes must be analyzed for alignment challenges and opportunities. However, the decisions made here directly influence the environment and, over time, the culture. In our technologically connected and

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ever-flattening world, culture is at the core of the only remaining sustainable competitive advantage, and so there is probably no better use of the leaders time than in framing and nurturing the desired culture. If you have to choose, spend less time on picking the perfect word and more time on proving what you mean by taking actions that ensure alignment and drive common meaning through your organization.

We at TMT Associates have worked closely with executives and leadership teams to identify opportunities for strategic alignment of culture, values, strategies, plans and work processes. We have helped teams successfully lead change initiatives ranging from an individual project idea to shifts in whole business system cultures. We welcome the opportunity to discuss our services with you and your team. Contact us by e-mail at mail@tmtassociates.com or phone 804-379-1861.

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