

ALIGNMENT IN THE WORKPLACE: ARE YOU ALIGNED?

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the concept of alignment by employees in organizational roles. Alignment is the orientation that results from an employee's ability to coordinate their values, interests, and skills with what they perceive are those required by their job. Following a discussion of alignment, including its implications for employees and their organizations, an activity is included in which participants, and students, may assess their alignment in their organization. Person's scores may then be used to steer a discussion about people's experiences in their jobs: which factors lead to positive alignment; which ones contribute to a lack of alignment.

Keywords: alignment, engagement.

INTRODUCTION

An individual's alignment within their organization is, in essence, the orientation that results from that person's success in aligning their values, work interests, and skills with the demands of their job, as they perceive these demands (Culbert and McDonough, '03). Another way to look at it, according to these same authors: alignment is a way of explaining how people attend to their own self-interests while pursuing the task requirements of their jobs. This view, however, begs the question: Is alignment by its employees necessarily beneficial to the organization for which they work? The answer is a qualified yes. People well aligned are also ones who experience success in what they do. That said, it can't always be assumed, that just because someone performing in a manner that brings them personal success, that same person is also meeting organizational goals.

Other researchers have described a similar concept in different terms. Posner ('07) examined personal and organizational value congruency – a component of overall alignment – and found a positive connection between employee – organizational values congruence and employee commitment, satisfaction, and motivation. Weiser (2000) sees alignment more as a collective process: one of aligning the goals of the employee with those of the organization, or in his words, "heading in the same direction." In this view, an employee becomes aligned to the extent that they are able to align themselves to the goals and purposes of the organization. Similarly, Porter ('81) described alignment as "fit" between employee and organizational goals and values. Parkes and Langford ('15) view alignment as a values connection as in "work-life alignment" and "work-life balance." Does an employee's goals and values outside of work align with their role in their organization? Alagaraja and Shuck ('15) developed a model that described alignment-engagement linkages which investigated the relationship between these two concepts with employee performance.

ALIGNMENT

For the purpose of the activity described in this paper, the concept of alignment is based primarily on the description given to it by Culbert and McDonough ('03). Alignment, in their view, is a state of mind, or "orientation," from the perspective of the employee vis a vis their role in their organization. That is, alignment is a subjective assessment by an employee of the extent to which that person feels they have

attained a positive orientation in their current position. Positive orientation develops, or emerges, when a person's skills, interests, values, and goals are congruent with the requirements of their job role.

In this regard, alignment is viewed as a self-interest construct from the point of view of the employee. It reflects a person's success in matching self-interest to what they perceive to be the demands of the job. In the words of Culbert and McDonough, "How individuals do a job...is influenced by what they find personally interesting, by the concepts they can master and the skills they can perform with excellence, by the self-ideals and values they seek to attain, by their unique ideas of what constitutes career advancement, by what they believe will score on the checklist that others will use in evaluating their performance, and by what they genuinely believe the organization needs from someone in their role" (page. 197). When from an employee's point of view these factors are enabling them to feel success in how they perform their job – things seem to be working out for them – they are said to experience alignment in their role. In contrast, when there are discrepancies between a person's work interests and skills on the one hand and what is required by the job to succeed on the other, effective alignment is missing.

So is alignment also a construct of relevance to the owners or managers of an organization? Meaning, do employees with good alignment in their roles perform better than those without good alignment? Does having well aligned employees benefit the organizations? The answer is a qualified "yes." When a person feels aligned with their perception of their role in an organization, the outcome is generally a positive one for both parties (Culbert & McDonough, '03). But not always. There are cases in which an employee finds personal alignment by subordinating the needs or goals of the organization to their own interests and values – "cynics" according to Culbert and McDonough ('03). Imagine a salesman who takes advantage of his/her expense allowances by lavishly entertaining major clients, while neglecting small, less important ones. Or an employee who takes advantage of skill-building workshops so that they can leverage their acquired skills by moving to a better-paying position at another organization.

In other cases there are the certain employees – "careerists" – whose alignments are achieved by aligning – in effect, subordinating – their goals to what they believe will serve them well on the organizational checklist (Culbert & McDonough,'03). These types typically do what they see as necessary to stay with their organization but without necessarily advancing the needs or goals of the organization. They achieve alignment by maintaining a preferred position or role in the organization with little motivation or desire to change that role. In cases where such people are simply waiting out their time until retirement, the term "dead wood" is sometimes applied.

Various factors are described as contributing to alignment. Among them, for example, congruency between the skills required by a job and an employee's skills. And the duties required by a particular job and an employee's preference for performing those types of duties. Also, "job autonomy," provided a desire for autonomy matches the degree of autonomy provided by a particular role. Other factors, such as "job engagement" and "job satisfaction," are also associated with alignment, in the sense that someone with weak alignment is not likely to experience a high level of engagement or satisfaction in their job. Conversely, a person feeling or reporting high job engagement and satisfaction is almost certain to be well aligned in their role in their organization.

Aligned employees are more likely to stay with their current organization. According to Ismail ('23), "The benefits to achieving alignment and engagement are enormous. For both the business and the

employee. On one hand, employees are more likely to stay within the organization when they are aligned, leading to lower recruitment costs, improved productivity and a tighter culture of collaboration.”

So what is the “job” or role of the organization, if any, in promoting alignment among its employees? That role begins at the hiring process. Although not an easy task for an employer, by taking the time to carefully interview a prospective employee, ensuring that the interview is a genuinely two-way process, the organization is well-positioned to start someone off in a role for which they are both well qualified and personally well-suited. Beyond that, more frequent discussions, between manager and employee, about not just their performance but also the employee’s feelings of engagement and personal growth will help in assessing that person’s emerging alignment (or lack thereof). Another step in promoting alignment, is offering employees internal opportunities to either change positions within the organization or re-define their current role, both in an effort to provide necessary flexibility for a person to achieve better alignment. As alignment is basically a self-interest construct from the point of view of the employee, ultimately from an organizational perspective, it boils down to opportunity and consultation. Provide employees with opportunities for them to achieve alignment, monitor their progress through periodic progress reviews, and intervene when it is apparent that an employee is failing to achieve effective alignment, even if that means parting-ways.

NOTE ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Components of most of management courses aim at building management skills of one kind or another. Accordingly, most management textbooks and supplements cover a multitude of concepts, practices, and techniques used by managers and professionals in the field all of which makes for a lot for students to absorb in a single semester. The expectation is that students will not only become familiar with these concepts but also retain many well after the course is over. But this is a grand hope. The sheer number, along with the pace of most courses, makes retention a challenge even for the most diligent students.

Experiential learning is an instructional approach that allows students to explore various practices and skills associated with some specific component of management, in an interactive manner. Students perform certain tasks or activities under the guidelines of a defined exercise, and in so doing gain hands on experience related to a certain concept or practice, and often receive input from other students about their interpretations. Having actively gained experience in some concept or skill, a student is more likely to retain aspects of the skill and be able to apply such in their subsequent, or ongoing, job.

According to Bowen, Lewicki, Hall, and Hall (1996) often (business) graduates are well versed in theory and terminology and certain technical skills, but weak in the interactive, problem-solving skills and practices that are more likely to enable them to succeed in a work environment. Experiential activity provides a proven method for increasing both knowledge and applied skill in a certain concept. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984). Marcic (2000) states that..."the unique feature of experiential learning is that it requires the student to become involved effectively and behaviorally with the material" (page 3). Hence, it can be argued that the use of well-crafted experiential learning activities, or activity-based educational techniques, is essential for the retention of management knowledge and skills.

APPENDIX

The purpose of this activity is to provide participants, and students, an opportunity to subjectively assess their overall alignment with a current job they hold (or one in the recent past). The alignment factors are considered to be ones that may or may not contribute to a person’s subjective assessment of their alignment in either a current or recent job.

ALIGNMENT: ARE YOU ALIGNED?

From: *The Invisible war, pursuing self-interest at work* comes the term “alignment”: the process of aligning personal values, interests, skills, and goals with one’s perception of the job requirements, activities, and environment of a particular job.

Outcomes of alignment: Motivation, Morale & Well-being, Social satisfaction (co-workers), Feelings of Success.

Drawbacks of poor alignment: Low motivation, frustration, boredom, feelings of failure. And counter-intuitively, a reluctance or hesitation to give up a current job role.

Take the job that you have now, or one that you have had in the not-too-distant past. Rate your perception of congruence or alignment on factors 1-7 below. “5” indicates high alignment on that factor.

Example: #2 (below), skill building opportunity. If the job offers or requires you to acquire new skills, but you’d rather stick with ones you know, you would rate this factor a 1 or 2. Similarly, if you hope to build skills, but the job doesn’t offer such, then again you would rate the factor a 1-2.

Example: #4 autonomy. If the job involves autonomy and you prefer autonomy then you’d rate it a 4 or 5. If the job involves autonomy but you prefer direction, structure, and feedback, you would rate this factor a 1 or 2.

ALIGNMENT FACTORS

<u>The Job and the Organization</u>	1	2	3	4	5	<u>You</u>
	1. Skills					
Skills required by the job						Your skills
	1	2	3	4	5	
	2. Skill building opportunity					
Skill building opportunities						Your preferences for new skills
	1	2	3	4	5	
	3. Job duties					
Job duties required						Your interests & qualifications.
	1	2	3	4	5	
	4. Job autonomy					
Degree of job autonomy						Your preference for autonomy

1 2 3 4 5

5. Opportunity for advancement

Advancement opportunities

Your desire or preference for advancement

1 2 3 4 5

6. Job: ethical implications

Ethical expectations

Expectations: fit with
your ethical values

1 2 3 4 5

The Job and the Organization

You

7. Work environment

The office/work environment

Your preference for a work
environment

1 2 3 4 5

8. Your manager or supervisor's style

Manager's leadership style

Your preference for that person's style

1 2 3 4 5

9. Co-workers, team-mates, office personnel

Them, their personalities, behaviors

Your preference for co-workers

1 2 3 4 5

For the following items, simply rate the factor as you experience it.

10. Job engagement or interest

1 2 3 4 5

11. Job satisfaction

1 2 3 4 5

12. Subordinates (if relevant): their motivation, skills & maturity

1 2 3 4 5

Once completed, add the factor scores for an overall total score. Divide that eleven or twelve (depending) for an overall average alignment score.

What does this alignment score tell you if anything? Could it affect your future career plans, and if so, how?

In preparing for an interview for a new job, are there things you could:

- (1) Look for, in researching the company, that might help you in evaluating your prospects for alignment in that organization?
- (2) Ask about during an interview?

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