The emergence of organizational alignment

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BACKGROUND

Since around the 1950s, increasing levels of complexity in the workplace have led to more disconnects between people at work. Not only has the world become more dynamic, but there is more information, cultural diversity, there are more tools and ways of working – such as virtual teaming – to navigate in the workplace.

People are different and so are their views on the world. Naturally, they form unique interpretations of reality. Achieving alignment between people is therefore a challenge itself, and it doesn't happen spontaneously.

When people are not aligned – misalignment – it looks like this: decisions and actions conflict, interactions are more confused, it takes more time and money to get results, and when those results are not what was expected, the whole process is frustrating for all.

The need for people to align, or 'point in the same direction' as it was commonly phrased, became recognised as something that required proactive management attention.

GOALS, TARGETS AND REPORTING LINES

Typically, the term 'alignment' was first used in an organizational setting to describe the task of matching individual roles and goals to the objectives of the team and the organization. The thinking being that once the logic was created, set down to paper and communicated, alignment would be complete.

While this work, if done successfully, does help to align people with the strategy, it only goes so far. Goals and roles are conceptual. What do the words used to describe these concepts really mean in practice? Do they help people come to a common understanding about what's happening and what exactly the challenges are? And critically – do they align people around how they will collaborate and deliver together?

The fact is that people at all levels of seniority interact and communicate based on their unique vantage points and views. They attempt to align with people in different ways, using different terms and reference points, at different times, and in different places. The challenge shifted to sharing meaning about those roles and goals.

STRATEGY COMMUNICATIONS

The task of aligning people to the company strategy became commonplace as a kind of 'internal PR' in the 1960's. Messages were crafted and distributed to employees 'top-down'. By the 1990's internal communication had become more sophisticated, morphing into the 'employee engagement' discipline that is still developing today. Work in this area seeks to be as effective and as efficient as possible, taking advantage of media technologies such as the intranet, webcasts, and video to transmit information, news and stories. Such mass media communications, aimed at wide groups of employees, or all employees, inevitably include one-way generic content. Again, while useful, it lacks relevance to how context sits at the team and individual level.

MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

Ever since senior leaders had problems connecting with the reality on the ground in person, they relied on Line Management to bridge the gap.

Success here is still notoriously difficult to achieve. Being 'in the middle' means trying to facilitate a shared reality among others

while wrestling with your own interpretation of the context, amidst pressure to deliver results.

PROCESSES, POLICIES AND TOOLS

At the same time, the design of processes, policies and procedures came into focus. Reporting structures, onboarding processes, feedback mechanisms, compensation policies - indeed anything that influences the way people behave can be aligned to match an organization's brand and vision, bringing congruence and improved results.

In parallel with the 1980's craze for Total Quality Management, followed Six Sigma and Lean, which brought huge leaps in efficiency. However, the larger and more bureaucratic the organization, the more difficult it became to accommodate change, rendering the more static processes and systems less relevant and less useful to the point of hinderance.

PERSONALITY AND BEHAVIOURS

The 1990's saw a huge wave of personality analysis tools with a focus on using behaviour to improve performance. Myers Briggs, Belbin, Hogan for example, provided a means for people to understand more about themselves and others to improve sense-making and collaboration. They came at the perfect time – just when people were trying to navigate the challenges of diversity, some of these tools blossomed in popularity and helped with the integration of diverse workforces.

But we're still missing something to complete the alignment picture.

THE RELEVANCE GAP

By 2005, despite the attention, organizational alignment seemed only to be getting worse, as researchers Box and Platts brought to light.

Problems caused by misalignment include confusion; waste of time, money and opportunity; diminished productivity; demotivation of individuals and teams; internal conflicts, power struggles; and ultimately project failure as well as resulting in time and energy spent: doubting, conspiring, guessing or gossiping when that same energy could be deployed in moving an organisation forward.

(Box, S., & Platts, K. 2005 - Business process management: establishing and maintaining project alignment", Business Process Management Journal, Vol.11 Issue: 4).

Either the known alignment approaches in systems management and communications so far weren't being put into practice, or they weren't working as well as were needed. The challenge was still to create alignment in a way that is relevant for all.

Fig. 1 – the relevance gap



TEAM ALIGNMENT

A more recent part of the puzzle activates insights from neuroscience. These recognise that fundamentally people interpret things differently. They need to relate what they learn in the scope of their own context if it is to be meaningful. They need to make sense of things in their own ways to fully understand and take ownership. They need to feel safe and included to participate. They need to be understood and valued to contribute effectively.

None of this sounds new but it is only now being put into practice.

Team alignment work brings a better shared understanding between team members about their context and challenges (cognitive alignment); and how they will collaborate to deliver together effectively (behaviours). It allows people to connect better with the wider brand, strategy and systems because if there is shared clarity within the shared context, then they can relate better to the wider context together. In other words, it bridges the relevance gap.

ALIGNMENT AND AGILITY

The VUCA world that we live in adds a big dimension to alignment. Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous: these

conditions colour everyone's reality. For decades now, leaders have been struggling with how to succeed in such dynamic environments.

Typically, efforts to correct shortfalls and improve performance have followed logic A, B, C. Take step 1, 2, 3. Today this is too mechanical, too, well, 2D.

Agile principles and ways of working began in the IT function to accommodate dynamic requirements some time back. Those principles have since taken the form of agile design for the whole organization.

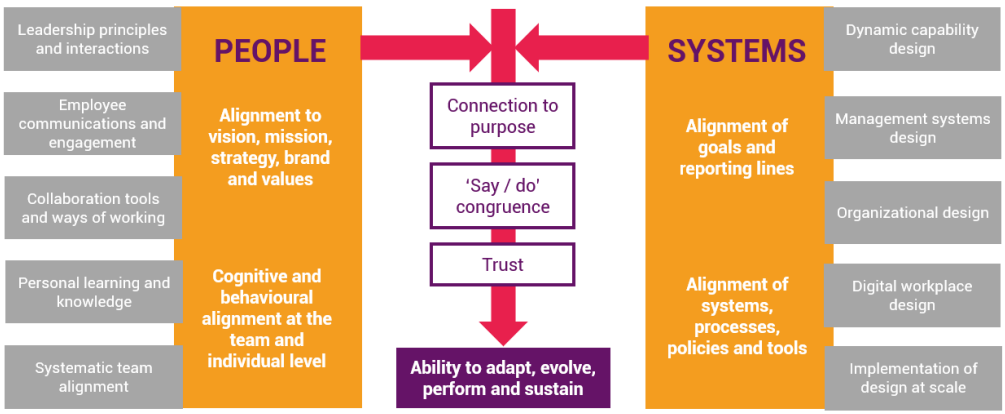
Agile *design* however, is the creation and implementation of policies, processes, and tools that govern how leaders build capability among people across their organizations to deal with change.

Unlike the original agile movement, agile design starts at the top. It prioritises self-responsibility, self-organisation, stakeholder inclusion, and delegated accountability – all with the client as a central focus. This is a paradigm-shift from traditional leadership, allowing organizations to adapt to change as a whole system.

Agile design relies on good alignment between people as a foundation for alignment across the parts in the ecosystem because without that, just like with other change efforts, implementation fails.

When people are aligned with each other AND with the agile ecosystem, the organization can adapt, evolve, perform and sustain.

Fig. 2 – alignment and agile design activities, focus areas and outcomes



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