

North Star Insights

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Guiding Organizations to Success

The theory of Appreciative Inquiry, which I learned of a little over a decade ago, seeks to foster change from a positive core. The theory is that change is more likely when we use success to build upon success, rather than focusing on fixing problems. The feature article this issue describes a practical application of this theory, employed to kick-start a strategic initiative. We've included a link to a case study on this work should you wish more details.

-Tracy

A Perspective on Leadership and Alignment

What is a leader's role in the alignment process?

By seeking alignment, is a leader acting inappropriately – not fulfilling their role – by choosing to follow the group rather than to lead?

The leader is expected to have a vision, to set a direction and to inspire others to follow. His or her goals may be in tension with the rest of the group. Not all changes desired by a leader, however, are truly visionary. Wisdom dictates caution when so naming an initiative.

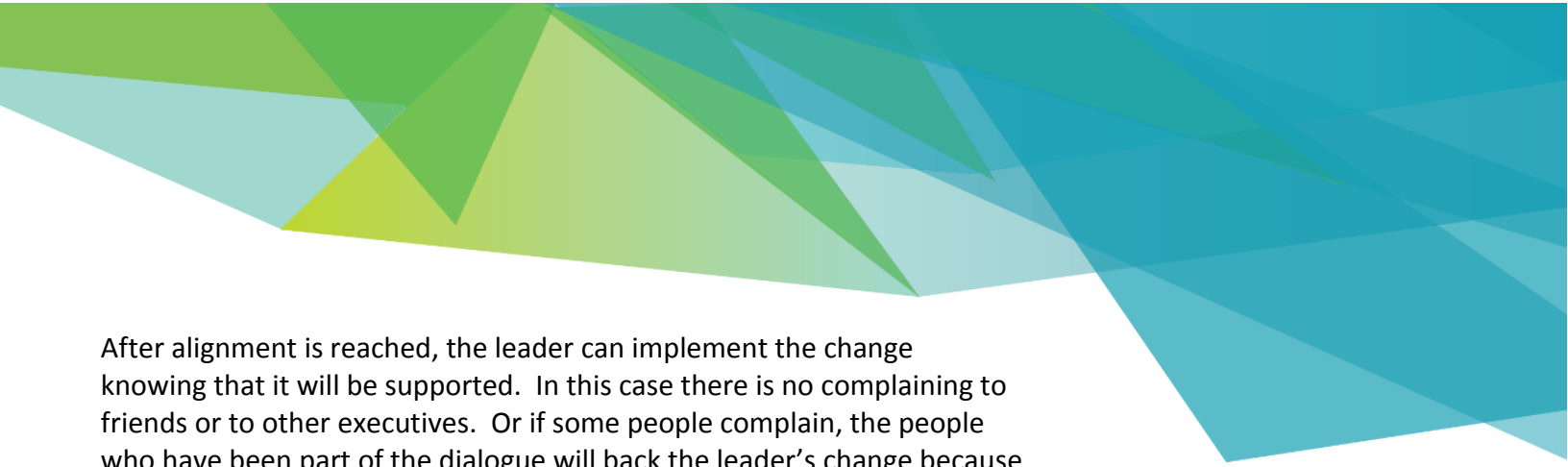
The value in understanding alignment is in the leader seeking to know where a change in direction will be fully supported and where a change will face resistance. Where there is not full alignment, fostering dialogue to move towards greater alignment minimizes resistance to change. When a leader wants to move in a direction not fully supported, the dialogue includes the leader providing more reasoning behind the desired change. This dialogue prior to implementing the change leads to a smoother execution.

For example, the leader may want to form a partnership with another organization because he or she believes it will deliver more value to customers with fewer internal resources.

There are multiple options to implement this change. Here are two contrasting approaches that highlight the value of alignment.

In the first approach, the leader may announce a collaboration on a small scale with the partner as a test project. Piloting the change allows time to hear feedback and proceed incrementally with time to adjust. This is a good traditional approach to change. Some of the feedback may get through to the leader, such as it is wrong because it is not a good project. But some are uncomfortable talking to the leader. They simply complain to their friends, or other executives.

In the second approach, the leader begins with conversations with many key people about considering this change. He or she will hear whether there is support for the partnership (alignment) or resistance to this partnership (non-alignment). If the resistance is because people feel that it is not a good initial project, the leader can explain the basis for this choice. The dialogue would continue prior to the change until there is alignment based on shared understanding for the leader's original vision or a modified change, such as a different test project or a different partner.



After alignment is reached, the leader can implement the change knowing that it will be supported. In this case there is no complaining to friends or to other executives. Or if some people complain, the people who have been part of the dialogue will back the leader's change because they have come to support it.

The second approach may seem to take more energy than the first approach. But consider the amount of time and energy that it takes to overcome complaining and how long it takes until all the complainers accept the change. Sometimes years later, the leader will continue to hear, "Remember when he formed that partnership!? That's why Customer ABC started purchasing from Company XYZ." Or the change is made for several months, and then the leader gives up on collaboration altogether, frustrated with the lack of support from the group.

Intentionally seeking understanding of the degree of alignment for a change and fostering dialogue to increase the alignment need not change the leader's original vision, but it is more likely to lead to positive and permanent steps towards realizing that vision.

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