

North Star Insights

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Guiding Organizations to Success

To support you—our friends, colleagues and clients—this is part of our series of articles designed to help you improve your execution on strategic topics. As strategy consultant we are continuously developing plans with clients and are passionate about using the best tools and research to implement these plans.

The articles are based on recent research—both original research conducted by North Star Strategies and SchellingPoint and supported by the work of acknowledged experts in this field. Each article will include simple ideas that you can put immediately into action.

We hope you enjoy the articles and find them useful.

-Tracy

Alignment: The Key to Harmony in the Workplace

How to collaborate effectively

All work can be divided into two categories: we either perform tasks or collaborate. Tasks are those activities that are done by one person. *Everything* else is collaboration. Collaborative activities are most productive when the people conducting them are highly aligned. One factor in finding alignment is certainly healthy relationships and professional friendships.

We find, however, that all teams and organizations can reduce working in discord and at cross-purposes by simply focusing on the common ground of the project at hand.

Collaborative Work Relationships Within an Organization

Let's first look at alignment within an organization. One would think that in the same organization things like common vision and mission statement, understanding of goals, tasks and action items should keep everyone on the same page and moving in the same direction, but that may not always be the case.

Two typical areas where we find misalignments are goals and roles:

Goals

Within a team it's essential that there is common understanding of the organization's goals. Many stated goals are vague, such as "We want to grow our business." *Misalignments occur when there is a lack of clarity or definition in the description.*

Concreteness is critical to team member alignment. In the case of a vague goal, the group should ask clarification questions such as, "How much by when?", "Is the growth in revenue or profits? Employees or people served?" or "Do we want to grow across the board or in a specific product or service area?"

Roles

Misalignment leads to confusion, duplicative work and missed deadlines when there is a lack of role clarification. *In many situations, the goal is clear, but who does what is still not clearly defined.*

Roles in collaborations can be complex because often one person is consulted to provide input, another to create the work product, and a third to be accountable for the work product. A common understanding of which team members fit into which of these groups can dramatically increase role alignment.

Collaborative Work Relationships Between Organizations

Next, let's explore typical misalignments between organizations. In collaborative activities people frequently don't say what they mean, and they may make erroneous assumptions about what others are thinking or doing.

Language

An organization often uses short hand and references that become part of its unique culture and norms. The language frequently develops from pivotal events in the organization's history, industry jargon or the jargon from a specific professional field. *When one organization collaborates with another some words may be unfamiliar or used differently.* To minimize misalignments, people should check meanings with each other. For example, "When you said 'we will let folks know', I infer that someone from your organization will email the notes from this meeting to the full project team in both of our organizations, is that accurate?"

Knowledge

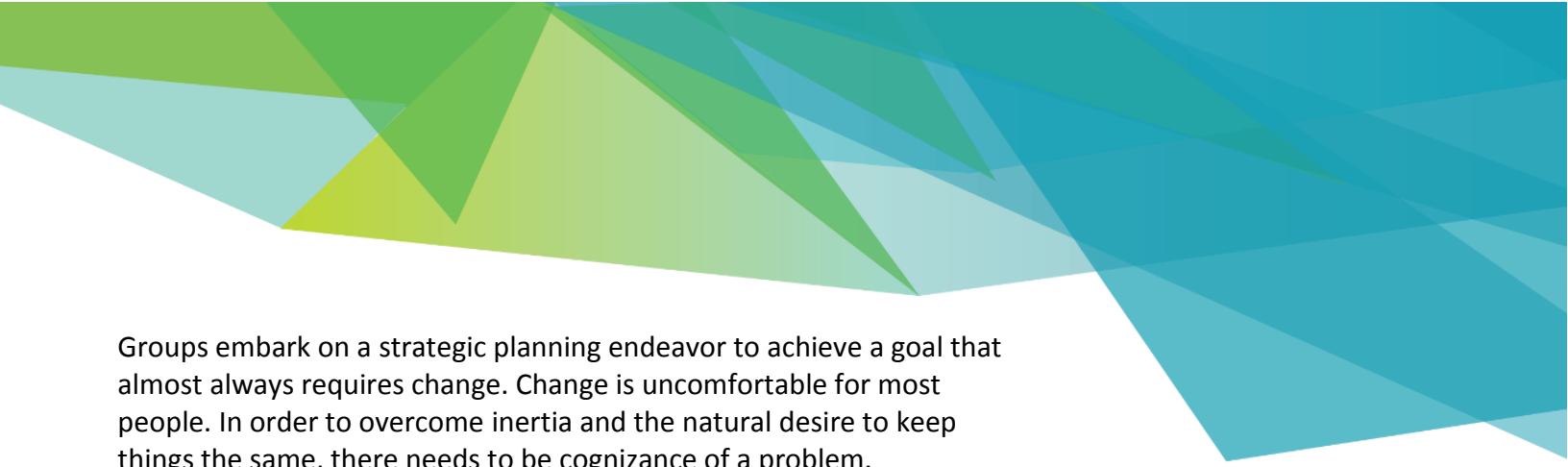
Differences in information and backgrounds frequently cause unintentional misalignments between organizations. A common situation occurs when groups draft an agreement that includes a work activity in which one of the organizations has a high degree of experience and the other does not. A gap in understanding of the time, effort or expertise required for that activity may lead to different values placed on that activity or different staffing to create the shared work product. *Alignment can be increased in these situations by the proactive clarification of expected resources—time, money, and skills—to complete the activity.*

Action Items

There are a few specific actions that can significantly increase the alignment and, therefore, increase productivity and satisfaction.

1. *Set a distinct time and place to have an intentional and open dialogue to check alignment.*
2. *Use an internal or external facilitator for this dialogue who is not a member of the collaborating group.*
3. *Get as specific as possible on goals, assumptions, roles, tasks, and communication processes, then check to ensure everyone has the same understanding of the words being used.*
4. *Plan time to revisit alignment periodically as long as the collaboration is ongoing.*

(P.S. This process also works in personal and family relationships!)



Groups embark on a strategic planning endeavor to achieve a goal that almost always requires change. Change is uncomfortable for most people. In order to overcome inertia and the natural desire to keep things the same, there needs to be cognizance of a problem.

- *What is the problem caused by the current situation that is significant enough to warrant the difficulties associated with changing?*
- *What is driving the need change? Is it internal or external to the organization?*
- *What are the underlying beliefs and assumptions held by people in the organization related to this situation?*

A shared understanding of the answers to these questions is foundational to the development of a strategic plan.

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