

## **IDENTIFYING ORGANIZATIONAL (MIS-)ALIGNMENT IN TRANSFORMATIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Identifying misalignment beforehand is a key challenge for organizational transformation projects. A lack of organizational alignment could easily slow down an organizational transformation or even bring it to a grinding halt. However, how to successfully reconfigure this issue remains unclear in the literature. This case study explores misalignment within an organizational transformation. Towards this aim, a comprehensive dataset of 449 organizational transformations covering more than 3,000 teams and nearly 130,000 employees have been collected, processed, and analyzed. We focused on two aspects leading to four quadrants. Firstly, to what extent were teams themselves aligned about the organizations near future (high versus low). Secondly, to what extent were teams aligned with the management target (high versus low). It is found in this study that in half of the teams, there was low alignment within the team itself, whereas low alignment with the management target in another (partly overlapping) half. Identifying where misalignment is prevalent within an organizational transformation will contribute to a smarter target setting and, therefore, an increased chance of a successful transformation.

**Keywords:** Employee Polling, Alignment In Organizational Transformation, Guttman-poll, Alignment.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

At any given point in an organizational transformation, there is a moment where an improvement target has to be set. However, setting a goal is the easy part of the job. Although more than 65% of organizations have a strategic initiative, only 14% of employees actually understand their organization's initiative and less than 10% of all organizations successfully execute the initiative (Paradigm Learning, 2017). The true challenge comes with getting employees to understand how their daily decisions and actions directly affect the organization's success. Ramesh and Delen (2019) surveyed 190 experts on their experiences with transformation and synthesized factors that could be used to improve multiple organizations' success in the transformation process, including leadership involvement and transparency. Transformations are not guaranteed success, but consistent communication is one of the main factors that can help. Clear communication is key to making sure each person knows their part and how to address this misalignment and therefore contribute to a greater chance of a successful transformation. According to Burnes and Jackson (2011), value system alignment between the change initiative and an organization's members is important, as a lack of alignment contributes to change failure. Kotter (1995) points out that transformations often take significantly more time than desirable. Coupled with a lack of vision and the inability to communicate that vision effectively, these are significant factors that lead to

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transformations failing. In a study of Lean transformations, DeLuzio (2020) found that leaders are key players in the transformation process. Still, they are often “leading” from the sidelines, which can be detrimental to the whole process. Mahmood et al.’s (2019) literature review of digital transformations pinpointed that an effective strategy is the most frequently-mentioned challenge during the transformation process. Implementation of a successful change program relies on managers' capabilities to adopt and adapt the program to their organization (Mosadeghrad & Ansarian, 2014). Suppose employees are only told that a workplace change will occur and do not understand why it is happening in the first place. This can lead to resistance—keeping employees involved in the why and the how are key factors in transformations (Galbraith, 2018). Employee engagement is a fundamental element of a successful transformation. This can be achieved by ensuring employees have a role and a defined purpose and are supported throughout the change process (Halm, 2011). Lamm and Gordon (2010) noted a positive relationship between empowerment in the workplace and behavioral support for organizational change. The failure of organizational change is often caused mainly by employees’ resistance to change. To reduce resistance, Buick et al. (2018) suggest that managers need to be actively engaged and support the change and the employees. Gonzalez-Mulé et al. (2016) demonstrated that highly autonomous teams, who also received a high level of performance feedback, showed an increased level of goal clarity and, as a result, had a higher performance level compared to autonomous teams who received a low level of feedback. In a study of government employees, Stayzk (2016) found that a strong reinvention focus led to greater goal clarity, notably higher job satisfaction. It is not only essential to have goal clarity, but it is equally pertinent for employees to view their goals as necessary, as this leads to lower turnover intention (Chan, 2014). Boswell (2007) showed how employees’ understanding of organizational objectives varies among hierarchy levels and length of tenure of employees. At the same time, awareness and comprehension of the impact of the objective workplace attitude and turnover rates. In a study of public sector teams, van der Hoek et al. (2018) noted a positive relationship between goal clarity and the performance of work teams. Lacking role clarity makes teams less efficient and leads to high turnover rates. Barke and Prechelt (2019) demonstrate how when each team member has both local and team-wide role clarity, and those issues can be avoided.

### **1.1. Research objectives**

Organizations are dynamic systems, and, like all other systems, they function best when their elements are formed to work together smoothly and efficiently. Although the literature includes many studies that deal with how to improve organizational transformation, there is no definite conclusion about how to determine alignment. Consequently, there is a research gap for a comprehensive literature review on the general applications of visualizing alignment in organizational transformations and how to use it. In this study, building on earlier research works, we have attempted to respond to three important research questions:

- 1) How could an organization measure organizational alignment?
- 2) Is it possible to describe how alignment is distributed across an organization?
- 3) How can management intervene to use alignment data to their advantage?

## **2.METHOD**

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## 2.1 Procedure and participants

To measure alignment in an organizational transformation, management would like to objectively measure how far the organization is in its transformation and understand whether managers' and employees' viewpoints about the immediate road ahead match the management's strategy and planning. This is about objectively tallying rather than gauging employees' feelings and opinions about the strategy. Hence, we did not use surveys based on Likert scales. Instead, we created a different survey scale based on the Guttman survey scale (Stauffer et al., 1950; Diamond et al., 1986) designed to objectively survey employees (Van de Poll 2018, 2021, and Van de Poll et al., 2022). Next, we analyzed 449 different employee polls concerning various organizational transformations. These employee polls showed a response from 129,086 respondents in 3,121 teams. These polls resulted in three data points per respondent for each question in the employee poll: their actual view, their ambition for the next six months, and the management target for that question. We used PRAIORITIZE, an automated consultancy platform ([www.praioritize.com](http://www.praioritize.com)) to perform the calculations about the organizational alignment. This resulted in 19,949,844 data points.

## 2.2 Measures

We designed an alternative survey format based on the Guttman scale to capture the three data points per respondent per question. This is an ordinal and multiple-choice scale: every following answer is better than the answer before; so-called 'breaking points' Uhlner (2002). We added a time dimension to ask for two answers to the same question (actual view versus in 6 months). For example (from a team effectiveness poll):

- |   |   |      |    |                          | Now             | In 6 months |
|---|---|------|----|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Q. How have you defined your team objectives? |   |      |    |                          |                 |             |
| 1.  | We  | have | no | <input type="checkbox"/> | team objectives | (yet)       |
| 2.  | We  | have | a  | <input type="checkbox"/> | qualitative     | description |
| 3.  | We have formal, SMART key performance indicators. |      |    |                          |                 |             |

We abstained from adjectives or adverbs that couldn't be verified (e.g., "good"). Hence, we consider this question format sufficiently verifiable (Ahrens & Chapman, 2006; Plewis & Mason, 2007). Additionally, we reduced the respondents' self-reporting bias (Donaldson and Grans-Vallone, 2002) by adding "proof-words" like, e.g., 'periodically,' 'measurable,' 'described,' 'formally,' and 'documented.' Such "proof-words" reduce the emotional or cognitive meaning given by employees to the answers (Frese & Zapf, 1988). Next, we created for every team a dendrogram, a valuable way of segmenting observations, which shows the hierarchical relationship between objects. In Fig. 1, we compared the difference in alignment between team members.

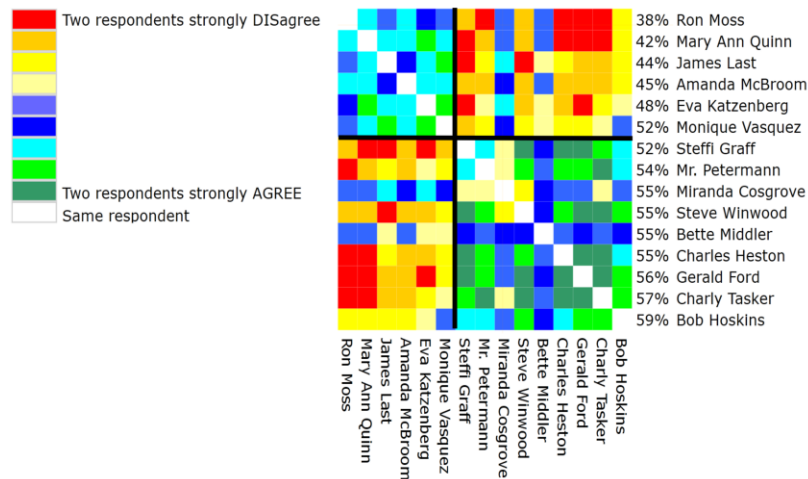


Fig. 1: An example of a dendrogram to visualize (mis-)alignment

### 3. DATA ANALYSIS

#### 3.1. Measurement

The first research question requires a method to measure organizational alignment. In the dendrogram (Figure 2), we assigned a 0% alignment to the couple of respondents who most *disagreed* with their outlook for the next six months. In a hypothetical 10-question survey, Respondent 1 only wants to improve on questions one to five, and Respondent 2 wants to improve on questions 6 to 10. We assigned a 100% alignment to the couple of respondents who most *agreed* with their outlook for the next six months—all other respondents were distributed between these two ends. In Figure 1, the 0%-alignment couples are represented in red, and the 100%-alignment couples in dark green. Then, each respondent was compared to all other respondents, had a color-coding (with underlying agreement percentages) assigned, and the total alignment per respondent was calculated. The latter is represented in Figure 1 by the percentages before the (hypothetical) respondent names. Finally, the respondents were sorted from most disagreeing (top row/left-most column) to most agreeing (bottom row/right-most column). The white diagonal indicates that respondents (by definition) agree with themselves.

#### 3.2. Comparison

To address the second research question (distribution of alignment across the organization), there is an example hidden in Figure 1. Note that in Figure 1, there are two different ‘camps.’ The group on the upper left (from ‘Monique Vasquez’ to ‘Ron Moss’) shows that this group of respondents agree with each other. In contrast, the upper-right group (from the column ‘Bob Hoskins’ up to the column ‘Steffi Graff’) shows that they disagree with the first group of respondents. Averaging the agreement percentages results in an overall team alignment percentage. In larger organization, the dendrogram could be bigger and additional coding (in the rows, right of the respondent name) could indicate the respondent’s team, role, department, etc. Similarly, management can compare dendrograms of different teams or divisions to gauge their alignment homogeneity. Management could use teams with high alignment for testing initial target setting. Figure 1 only represents the total alignment score for a respondent. There are underlying alignment score per question.

Management can analyze for which questions, or groups of questions, there is the most misalignment. All this supports their decision-making.

### 3.3. Management intervention

The third research questions refers to possible interventions by management. Reverting to our hypothetical 10-question survey, the management target could be treated as just another respondent, albeit not a team member but a representation of management. In Figure 1, this would be an extra row/column called 'Target.' Consequently, there is also an average percentage of the alignment of respondents with the management target. Finally, the team's alignment and that team's alignment with the management target was visualized in a scatter plot. Working with Low- (below average) and High (above average) indicators, four quadrants emerge, which are labelled with A-D. Each quadrant merits its own management intervention. Management should be most worried about the 50% (33% + 17%) of teams that had low alignment with their target (Groups C and D). Of that group, the 17% 'high team, low target'-alignment teams (Group D) should be the group to be most worried about. Here the team is aligned in that they do not like the management target. It's possible to define specific measures for each of the quadrants. For example, in 'high team, low target'-alignment teams (Group D), there is a choice between confrontation ("It's a management decision, so you have to obey.") and compromise ("Where can we find a middle-ground?"). Similarly, in 'low team, low target'-alignment teams (Group C), the implementation could be centered around a cautious step-by-step approach. Using dedicated



**Fig. 2:** Alignment plot (every dot is a team)

algorithms, it is possible to design a target that maximizes the alignment and thus makes the most of the transformative energy in the teams. Most promising are the 'high team, high target'-alignment teams (Group A): management could use these to kick off their transformation. And Group B is not aligned as a team but does feel the target is the way to go: one could think of a

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“Follow the leader”-approach where management asks for trust that they know what they’re doing. Figure 2 shows how the team compares the two alignment axes in more detail. Alignment within the team is on the X-axis, and alignment with the management target is on the Y-axis. Both axes run from 0% to 100%. Every dot is a team. The red cross points to the average for the database and divides the scatter plot into four quadrants (A-D).

## **5. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

There are a few cautionary remarks to be made about our research. We have tried to vary the topics of the organizational transformations in our database. We reckon there were teams of 4 respondents and ‘teams’ of over 900 respondents. These were more likely divisions than actual teams. Yet, we worked with the base data of close to 130,000 respondents. That would make our conclusion about the alignment scores very indicative. We were also unable to do a second round of questions with the teams. We haven’t measured to what extent teams and employees went on their way to actually implement their ambition or whether their ambition was more an indication than a concrete priority list. There was no way to confront teams with their results and then ask them anew to answer the questionnaire to make a more deliberate choice. We divided our database into four quadrants to make the measurements easier for the transformations’ management to digest the results. Then, the best (upper right) and worst quadrant (lower right) border each other in our quadrants. A slight change in our database would flip teams close to that border from being in the worst quadrant to being in the best quadrant. More refined clustering could result in more precise handling of the misalignment in teams

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

The concept of fit or alignment in transformation is a central theme in strategic management. The field of organizational transformation is rife with stories about failure. Visualizing organizational alignment within organizations is less common in the literature. This study aims to unearth one possible reason why management fails to execute its strategic vision. An extensive series of employee polls were conducted, resulting in a response from 129,086 respondents in 3,121 teams. The study’s findings proved that half of the teams are misaligned with their management target is a genuinely worrisome figure. This implies that even when management has chosen a strategy, it’s apparently to be seen whether teams can implement their part or go down in quarrel trying to do so. Of that group, the 17% ‘high team, low target’-alignment teams should be worry management, which indicates that the team is aligned in that they do not like the management target. It is also found that the most promising teams are the ‘high team, high target’-alignment teams: management could use these to kick off their transformation. More precise calculations will indicate how misalignment is divided over an organization into future studies. In addition, further research will indicate what other criteria our quadrants might differentiate to find levers to improve alignment.

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