Project Leadership & the Four Types of Alignment

Tom Robertson, Ph.D. specializes in organization development and has worked on major projects throughout the world. The former Director of Engineering and Chief Scientist at Lockheed Martin, Tom now works with companies through his consulting firm Thinking Teams.

Recently, I interviewed Tom on the topic of project leadership and alignment.

JATHAN JANOVE: What do you mean by “alignment?”

TOM ROBERTSON: Alignment is a form of harmony in which all relevant parts, aspects and people come together to produce a successful result.

JJ: What are the principal types of alignment?

TR: There are four:

(1) Individual alignment--how effectively each employee contributes their particular skills, talents, passions and energies to the project. Are they primarily focused on project fulfillment or are they primarily focused on their separate, individual interests?

(2) Interpersonal alignment--how effectively project members interact. Do they communicate with each other cooperatively and respectfully? Do they resolve disagreements constructively? Have proper communication protocols been set and, if so, are they being followed? Too often, organization projects or initiatives get bogged down by needless conflict. When I lead projects, I place particular emphasis on interaction dynamics, and coach people to anticipate, discuss and defuse potentially problematic encounters.

(3) Project alignment--how teams function as a unit. Big projects have many details. Even the smallest detail can have a major impact on outcome. Project alignment calls for continual assessment of whether the right resources, tools and measurements are being used. Are we applying efficient, value-added measures, or are they unnecessarily time-consuming? As the project moves from one stage to another, are we maintaining alignment among the various stakeholders, such as project leaders, sponsors, users and workers? Are we making timely, appropriate adjustments?
Enterprise alignment—how connected the project is with the organization’s mission, vision, and core values. Is the project properly aligned with them? It’s like the saying, “You’re climbing the tree, but are you in the right forest?”

JJ: What do you recommend to ensure such alignment?

TR: Project leaders should do the following:

1. Be more of a coach and less of a boss—help people do their jobs and feel a sense of personal accomplishment and growth.

2. Model the behaviors you wish to see in others, including candor, transparency and collaboration over competition.

3. Ensure that appropriate resources and tools are made available and customized or adapted to meet the needs of the project and the people working on it. Invest resources to ensure that effective information systems are being used.

4. If you’re at the highest organization level of leadership, provide a framework where shared vision and passion radiate across the organization, empowering and engaging employees while maintaining a balance between structure and flexibility.

Alignment requires sustained attention and effort. However, when achieved, the organization moves into “flow” state, and the results can be extraordinary.