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# Why Navigating Change Requires a Compass

■ *“Alignment” is more than a buzzword: for organizations that are really serious about peak performance, it’s a strategic imperative.* ■

**by Rodger Dean Duncan, Ph.D.**  
**The Duncan Company**

As the old adage says, "If you don't know where you're going, any path will get you there."

Amazingly, many organizations — even in this age of sophisticated technology and management tools — still try to navigate the waves of change without a guidance system. The results are nearly always disappointing at best, disastrous at worst.

## Strategic Alignment: A Simple Approach to Tough Questions

Smart business people are learning that rapid change can swallow them up. So they're looking for simple answers to the tough questions: What's *really* happening in our business? How can we stay competitive with our current product or service? What adjustments do we need to make? What new opportunities should we pursue? How can we best position ourselves to make good things happen?

One way to get reliable answers to such questions is a process called *Strategic Alignment*.

Strategic Alignment is relatively simple, and it has the advantage of forcing you to take a wide-angle, holistic look at every important part of your business.

The result is a kind of decision making compass that helps you stay

on course as you navigate toward the "true north" you've chosen for your business.

## Fighting Fragmentation

In a nutshell, Strategic Alignment is a critical ingredient of all good strategic planning. It is not an event. It is a process. It is not some warm and fuzzy add-on. It is a business-like approach to the real issues of running a business. A critical challenge facing many organizations is fragmentation: people, systems, structure, strategies, style, skills and other performance ingredients that (despite sincere effort) somehow lack harmony and cohesion. (Sound familiar?)

Fragmentation is an illusive enemy. Unfortunately, there's a temptation to apply a Band-Aid rather than identify and address root causes. This kind of "tampering" often produces a cure that can be worse than the original ailment.

Example: if you walked into an overheated control room of a nuclear power plant and began adjusting dozens of instruments randomly, the results could be catastrophic. So it is with organizations.

It's been said that *every organization is perfectly aligned to get the results it is getting*. A sobering thought.

If your organization is perfectly aligned to get the results it is getting, and if you are not satisfied with those results, then Strategic Alignment is not a luxury. It is an imperative.

## Begin With a Paradigm Shift

*Strategic Alignment* is a process that begins with a paradigm shift. The organization is not a machine to be "fixed," it is a living organism with many interrelated elements. The successful leader, then, is less of a mechanic and more of a gardener.

The leader/gardener does not rely on chance, but deliberately and strategically creates an environment in which his business will prosper.

The leader/gardener tends to every one of the interrelated elements.

The leader/gardener cultivates carefully. Because of this "big picture" mentality, he has more control over results than the mechanic ever dreamed about.

Yes, we have a mixed metaphor here — navigating waves of change, mechanic vs. gardener. But you get the idea. To make your business perform best, you need to deal with all the interrelated parts in an integrated way.



The illustration here shows the various components of a typical organization. At the center are the shared principles, often articulated as **Mission, Vision** and **Values**.

These are at the very core of the model, just as you would find an effective, self-directing person with core beliefs and goals at the center of his life.

The model on this page shows the components that enable an organization to conduct its business - including the so-called "hard elements" of **Strategy, Structure** and **Systems**, along with the so-called "soft elements" of **Style, Skills, People** and **Self**. Competitive forces and social elements are illustrated by **Environment**. The basic idea is to keep all the elements aligned so the organization can be consistently navigated toward its "True North," thereby meeting **Stakeholder Needs**.

## Avoid the Detours

Like all good models, this one is uncomplicated and it focuses attention and energy on the things that really make a difference.

Though the idea is simple, using Strategic Alignment can be fraught with costly detours. To get on the right path and stay there, try the following steps:

### 1. Clarify Your Destination

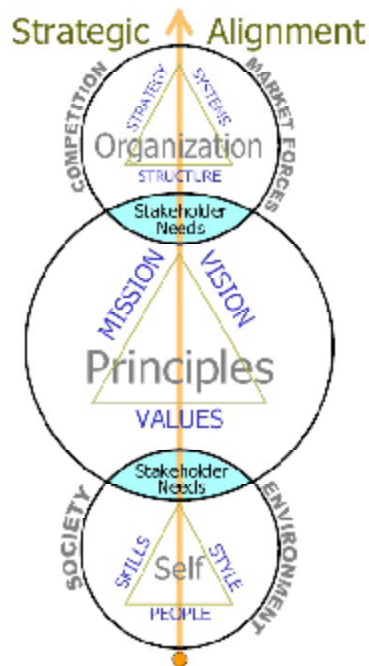
This step is every bit as critical as clarifying the core principles or "doctrines" that guide an individual in his personal life. Tempting though it may be, this is *not* the place to take short cuts. It is in this step that you do a lot of honest soul-searching to clarify your organization's Mission, Vision and Values.

Look at annual reports or company brochures nowadays, and you know that Mission, Vision and Values statements are definitely in vogue. Trouble is, many companies seem to regard them as

public relations platitudes rather than as the strategic and operational guidance tools they can and should be. Lack of clarity — and commitment — around core principles is one of the most common root causes of poor performance.

### A good Mission Statement does three things:

1. *Defines* by providing an enduring statement of purpose, 2. *Sets boundaries* by identifying the



scope of operations in terms of product(s) and market(s), and 3. *Clarifies* the core priorities.

An effective mission statement is often no longer than a dozen words, it's clear and concise, it's specific, and it contributes to the "psychological ownership" and pride of the organization's people.

### A good Vision Statement, by definition, looks to the future:

1. It provides a *concise word picture* of what the organization hopes to "look like" at some future time,

2. It articulates what the organization aspires to *be*, and  
3. It describes an *ideal to be pursued*.

Good vision statements tend to be *evocative* rather than precise. In their simplicity and evocativeness, they can have a more profound influence on real behavior than binders full of strategic plans and detailed documentation.

They can be likened to an *organizational dream*. They stretch the imagination and motivate people to rethink what is possible.

### A good Values Statement provides a guidepost that:

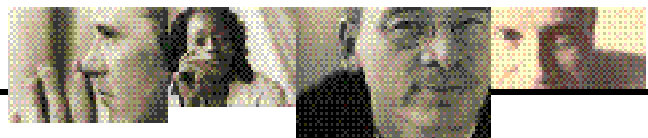
1. *Directs* the thoughts and actions of people,  
2. *Defines* the organization's character,  
3. *Describes* what the organization stands for (and will *not* stand for), and  
4. *Highlights* behaviors critical for success.

Remember — Mission, Vision and Values are serious business. It's a dangerous mistake to short-change the importance of drafting these carefully and *involving* people throughout the organization (even if it's only a focus group or two).

And be prepared to "walk the talk." Nothing erodes morale faster than seeing behaviors that are tolerated (or even rewarded) when they violate professed values.

### 2. Get Your Bearings

Take a detailed look at each "ingredient" in the Strategic Alignment model. This is much, much more than a cursory analysis. Do it right or don't do it at all.



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## Use a Holistic Approach

Avoid the trap of conducting a traditional "employee attitude survey." Remember that "attitudes," as well as behaviors, are driven by underlying *assumptions*. A culture assessment survey can be a very effective tool for getting your bearings, and it needs to be specially tailored to your organization's unique mix of issues. And it should give you a reliable measure of the cultural *assumptions* at play in your work place.

Two critical things to remember about surveys:

1. Ask the *right* questions.
2. Avoid asking the *wrong* questions.

If you ask the wrong questions you'll still get plenty of data. But the fancy charts, graphs and tables will lead you to chase the wrong issues. To be effective in your strategic alignment work, you must deal with root causes, not just superfi-

cial symptoms. That's where expertise in culture assessment is so critical. Poor surveying is not just ineffective. It can actually do serious harm.

A common side effect of a culture assessment survey is *denial* — as in "Sure, that kind of stuff goes on around here. But it doesn't apply to me and *my* group!"

To avoid the detour of denial, don't stop with assessing the culture as a whole. Also take a close look at the performance of key individuals by using a 360-degree or multi-rater instrument (again, tailored to your organization's unique mix of issues) . . . and profile the effectiveness of key groups like service departments and project teams. With all the bases covered, you get richer data and you enable people to focus on necessary change rather than on denial. The idea is to address and solve problems, not assign blame.

## 3. Course Correct

Bear in mind that the whole idea behind Strategic Alignment is that it channels your energy to focus on *all* the critical components of your business and to consider their interrelated effects on each other.

**Strategic alignment is about leadership because it's a valuable tool for empowering people to make vision happen. And it's about management because it focuses laser beam energy on planning, organizing, controlling and problem solving.**

This distinction between leadership and management is neither arbitrary nor semantic. Both are necessary to the vitality of your organization. And Strategic Alignment provides a useful compass as you navigate the seas of a competitive business world.



Dr. Rodger Dean Duncan is a specialist in the strategic management of change and is well known for his user-friendly diagnostic tools for dealing with organizational culture and performance issues. He founded The Duncan Company in 1972 and counts some of the world's best companies among his clients.

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**Scan for Speed Bumps** – assess the climate, identify points of resistance, profile the key players.

**Chart the Course** – identify the change approach, navigate the "neutral zone" between the old and the new.

**Build a Coalition** – create powerful network of cascading sponsorship.

**Ford the Streams** – align with (and, where necessary, change) the culture.

**Stay on Message** – make sure that symbols, metaphors and all reinforcement are consistent with the change you want.

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