

TODAY, TOMORROW **ONE ACTION PLAN**



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HARD-WORKING EXECUTIVE TEAMS THAT ARE NOT COMPLETELY ALIGNED RUN THE RISK OF PASSING LIKE SHIPS IN THE NIGHT.

The problem

Organisations are usually a loose collection of individuals with differing goals, experiences and values. That's before we even get to their disparate thoughts and agendas inside the workplaces.

Executives are intelligent, motivated and skilled people. That is how they demonstrated such performance to allow them to rise to the positions that they hold. Superior skills, motivation, and a history of strong performance usually also come with a healthy dose of two other qualities:

1. A streak of independence in their decision making processes.
2. The confidence to choose a path independent of directions from above.

Executives do share the qualities of highly tuned and trained athletes. Executives have a strong mindset for success, the commitment to master their craft and an internal drive to take them forward.

I remember the first executive team I was part of many, many years ago. We all built cars for a living and that should have been our goal. Building cars to the best possible quality we could, as fast as we could, for the lowest possible cost. This sounds simple and obvious, doesn't it?

Broadly, that was what we did do. Sadly, we did a lot more than that. The strong personalities all agreed on the overall goal but disagreed

considerably on the best way to achieve that goal. Being independent and capable people, they pursued their own methods to bring about the overall goal. This frequently resulted in conflicting messages and all the drama that goes with that. Misalignment even without political overtones dramatically curtails performance and the rate of improvement.

“If you could get all the people in an organisation rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time.”
Patrick Lencioni.

The leader of the team implemented a series of changes in the management processes that aligned all of the team and rewarded cooperation to achieve the overall goal. This was not an instant fix, but what was very quickly realised was that the pursuit of individual agendas (no matter how well intentioned) was not going to be

possible. Differing viewpoints were encouraged, but were deliberated upon before a final agreed outcome was pursued.

The results were rapid and there was sustained improvements in performance over that year. We had never delivered such improvements in safety, quality and productivity. Absenteeism dropped and our new projects proceeded faster and with more cohesion.

Every successful team has only ONE game plan, one goal on which they are focused, and all the actions of every person, the players on the field, the support staff, the coach and the supporters, are aligned to that goal.

The plan must cover the activities of all the executives you wish to align. Executives whose activities are not totally included in the plan will continue on their own path.

Today

The start point in the process of executive alignment is to have a system and process that accurately identifies the situation as it is today. In an environment where performance is not usually measured explicitly, it can take some time to establish and agree upon suitable key performance indicators (KPI) to aid in this assessment.

The KPI should drive behaviours that contribute to the overall goal. That does sound obvious,

“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.” Henry Ford.

however, the danger is that we can want to over-analyse the situation and have many, many KPI to the point of data overload. In this situation the system is difficult to understand, time consuming to administer and does not contribute to alignment. The purpose of the system is to simply and quickly allow the team to align and act.

Focus here is on progress, not perfection.

Do not take months to build the KPI system, a day is all it should take - then get on with the next step. You can adjust and improve it as you go. This can be a challenging activity as past difficulties will surface (and need to), as well as genuine differences in viewpoints about what the important measure of the business should be.

Tomorrow

What does success look like? The next step is to define the future beginning with the vision, mission and values of your team. This document needs to be simple, understandable by a 12-year-old and be remembered under pressure. Long, complex vision statements do not achieve the goal we are after of aligning people; usually they cause the opposite effect.

With the vision, mission and values defined, we need to translate that outcome into the KPI.

Projecting the vision into the KPI defines the targets for which we need to aim, in explicit and easy-to-understand terms. If your vision provokes a strong and complex discussion, I suggest your vision statement is too complex. Keep it simple!

An executive team I led had a very simple vision. ‘8 in 08’ was the vision. The objective was to improve the business performance to achieve an 8% return on sales by 2008. The vision was simple, understandable by a 12-year-old (at least linguistically), and it was remembered by everyone at all times. The performance relative to this measure was shared every single month. This aligned everyone in the business, not just the executive team, to that one objective. The result was that we had action plans at all levels of the organisation that supported this vision and aligned the actions of most of the 600-strong workforce. But that is the next step.

Action plan

By now we have defined exactly where we are in measurable terms, and we have defined exactly where we want to be in measurable terms. Therefore we know the gap. Now the focus is on the action plans that will close the gap. This is

an activity that should not be conducted behind closed doors, but rather with the involvement of the people who will be affected and will be implementing the actions. The act of having defined the current state and the future state using KPI helps make it easier to focus the group on having one action plan, not many.

The action plan must be simple, easily understood by everyone, and crystal clear as to what action must happen, by when and by whom. Regular and focused reviews must occur to assess progress towards the goal and develop alternative action plans if they need to be formed. Clearing roadblocks towards the implementation of the action plans is a key role of the peak leader.

Consistency in follow-up and persistence in demonstrating that this is the new system is essential to achieving the outcome. Some KPI will demonstrate improvement very quickly. Others, especially long-term lag indicators, will often not demonstrate an improvement for some time.

The process works, it is used globally by many different industries, cultures, and languages. Share it with your executive team, implement it, and stick to it.

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