



FOCUS...THE KEY TO MUNICIPAL ALIGNMENT

By Fred Pidsadny

Most municipalities in today's environment need to get to where they are going faster and more efficiently to win or even to survive. How can that happen when there is misalignment in the organization? Misalignment! You know what happens when a car is misaligned: chassis shakes; tires wear out; gas mileage goes down; and, costs go up.

Good CAOs know what a municipality feels like when it's misaligned. They are perpetually wrestling with their organizations to reach their objectives. Eventually the CAO wears out.

The question of alignment is increasingly relevant today when the paramount issue facing business is how to get there faster and more efficiently. CAO's are faced with a multi-barrel problem – getting there faster, better and with fewer resources. Organizational alignment can increase your capability WITHOUT adding resources.

In my view, a business is aligned when everyone in the organization is focused on where the municipality is going, why it's going there – and knows their individual roles in achieving those objectives.

It's simple enough to define. Indeed, simplicity, clarity and focus are essential. Achieving alignment requires commitment and dedication, however.

How do you become aligned? There are some important steps to follow:

1. ARTICULATING A VISION

Is there a clear view of where you're going? Call it what you like – strategy, direction, mandate or vision. It states where you want to go in a way that can be easily articulated to the rest of the organization. IT is up-to-date and sets specific goals.

It is NOT a 75-page manifesto gathering dust on the shelf.

2. IMPLEMENTATION – START WITH YOUR SENIOR TEAM

The process begins with your senior people holding focused and honest discussions on where the organization is going, what needs to be achieved to accomplish that goal, and how success will be measured, in terms both of the team and the individual.

If the strategy is to grow the organization, what does that mean to the GM of Finance, the GM of Operations, or the GM of Planning? Does everyone truly understand the impact of the strategy and what they are accountable for in terms of outputs and results? The key is reaching consensus around the table.

3. STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT MEETINGS

When the senior team has become aligned, the discussion process should cascade down through the organization, starting at the top and going to the lowest level.

The nature of the meetings may change slightly at the lower levels where greater focus is placed on operational short-term issues. However, the essential element remains the same: establishing teams who understand the direction and who is accountable for what.

The task can be daunting, especially for an organization with hundreds, if not thousands, of employees. Yet municipalities who have been through the process say there is no other way. You have to give people good quality time to sit together and have focused conversations over where they're going.

4. CHECKPOINT MEETINGS

Checkpoints along the way are essential to ensure the organization remains focused. Check-up meetings throughout the organization should take place at least quarterly, and more often if it is in trouble.

Yes, it may take up time. But not as much time as you'd burn from being misaligned. So spend the time now rather than later when there is a crisis.

5. MATCH COMPENSATION WITH RESULTS

People should be truly rewarded for achieving their objectives. The performance appraisal/compensation system should be aligned with the key results of the organization.

A performance management process begins with role clarity, established at the beginning of the year, so that individuals know what is expected of them – and how their compensation will be determined.

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HI-PO DEVELOPMENT

"A few leading municipalities in Canada have established a leadership course for individuals deemed to have the potential to rise to the top ranks.

The courses have a wide range of names: The City Manager's Roundtable, the XYZ Municipal Leadership Lab, etc.

The programs vary over many dimensions: content, duration, location, means of selecting attendees and involvement of the C.A.O. At the extremes, they range from a day-long program to a twelve-month course heavy with homework and class projects. My experience suggests that one to four weeks in a comfortable conference setting with a first-rate faculty consisting mostly of "hired gurus" is the most typical.

The classes generally range in size from about ten to twenty participants. The selection process varies over organizations but is usually based on some combination of reward for meritorious service and an acknowledgement of future potential.

I think the curriculum of a high-potential program should cover five general topics: (1) fly the flag, (2) teach the municipality, (3) train the individual, (4) build networks, and (5) invoke the arts and sciences.

FLY THE FLAG

Attendance at these programs is virtually always seen as a stimulating, motivating, rewarding, career-enhancing episode – that is, as a feather in one's cap – and the course should be conducted in a manner to cultivate that perception.

One excellent way to accomplish this is for either the C.A.O. and/or the Mayor to formally open, or perhaps close each program. An even better way is for the C.A.O. to show up during the course for a lengthier interactive session, say, dinner and a Q & A session afterwards.

Consider inviting a marquee name, perhaps a leading outside expert in the municipality's technology or a visible community figure to speculate about something relevant to the community and its future. The presence of such horsepower emphasizes that the organization takes this educational experience very seriously.

TEACH THE MUNICIPALITY

Some of the instruction should focus on the municipality. The range of possible subjects is wide, including such mundane topics as accounting or computer systems; or more interesting ones such as municipal history, the latest technology; or perhaps really spicy subjects such as pay, promotion or performance measurement policies. The specific content should be drawn from whatever list of hot topics the current top leadership thinks is important, and at least a few of the presentations should be conducted by the municipality's Department Heads.

This again emphasizes the importance of the course and also, not an incidental benefit, requires these managers to get their act together so as not to look stupid or ill prepared in front of this high – potential audience. I have seen executives with six-figure salaries sweating bullets backstage, apprehensive about going on before "this den of young attack tigers."

More in the next issue.

On behalf of all of us at Westcott, Thomas, we would like to take this opportunity to wish all our readers a very successful and prosperous New Year!

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And don't forget. True alignment consists of more than words. People focus on what you DO as a leader, NOT what you say.

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Focus Management facilities organizations undergoing alignment.

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We look forward to working with you.

Sincerely, Michael Thomas