

ALIGNING SAFETY

By Robert Pater

It is essential for leaders to periodically realign their mindset with their desired outcomes. Mindset naturally spurs our choices, decisions and actions.

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How leaders think of something directs their perceptions of where they look and what they see, and aims their decisions about problem-solving and advancing initiatives. Skewed or misaligned mindsets frequently lead to erroneous assumptions, compounded by confirmation bias (e.g., “Everything I see just further proves my point”; “It’s true because I already know it is”), self-sealing delusions (e.g., “They just want to torpedo every initiative I put out because they are antisafety or against me”), situational blindness and other all-too-common self-deceptions that can become roadblocks to higher-level performance (for more, see my articles, “Expanding Leadership: The Courage to Go Beyond Unsubstantiated Beliefs” and “Mindful Leadership: A Strategy for Achieving Significant Change”).

In a continually changing environment, it is vital to understand and utilize mindset realignment for at least two reasons: 1. so leaders can steadfastly refocus their own efforts and resources on what is most important for making significant and efficient improvements without squandering away precious time, people and budgetary resources; and 2. so they can be more effective change agents. Aligning with how others see their world—and their fears and concerns—can be an important precursor toward understanding the best ways to help them move beyond their being held hostage to an old-but-no-longer-effective mindset and toward improving safety and overall effectiveness.

Alignment is critical in various areas. Case in point: Does the ergonomic reminder to keep your wrists aligned to prevent hand and arm injuries sound familiar? But what does this look like? While this is more accurate than the older way of keeping your wrists straight, it is important to distinguish that aligned does not mean straight.

Here is a key powerful internal martial arts principle we convey in my organization that has helped many companies considerably reduce a range of injuries: the more you can get your entire body “behind” or supporting your work (both to “lengthen a lever” and to spread forces that would otherwise concentrate in a smaller body area), the less likely force will pool in, then lead to weakening or damage in the more vulnerable parts such as the wrists, neck and small of the back. In other words, when doing most tasks, my arms and body are aligned in position to “back” my handy work. I know that, like all kinesthetically based principles (e.g., finding your balance when learning to ride a bicycle), this is easier to show than to describe in words. It is partially learning the cues

for the best angles and positions of aligning the hands, wrists, arms and torso. From our training thousands of “instructor-catalysts” (i.e., train-the-trainer), even many of whom are certified ergonomists, we have seen that it is extremely difficult for anyone to determine what is a “straight” wrist by looking at others’ forearms at work. But I also know that most people can relatively easily learn to scan how force transfers with minimal loading in the wrists, and some can also quickly teach others how to self-monitor this where it simultaneously elevates their gripping strength and hand safety. The point is that safest alignment may be better determined internally rather than visually scanned externally, and this is especially so in situations where workers are not being closely and continuously expertly monitored.

This aligned-wrists principle is not only crucial in preventing a range of arm injuries from pushing, pulling, drilling, turning/breaking down nuts and other forceful actions. It is also critical for maximizing precision, control and speed in hand movements as diverse as using a computer keyboard, loading baggage in a plane’s hold, driving a forklift or hitting a golf ball.

It might seem like I’m splitting hairs by distinguishing between aligned and straight, but what I’m suggesting is to separate hit-or-miss, semieffective mindset approaches from more powerful, precise guidance. Often small changes of mindset, focus and angle of action can make a world of difference between someone seamlessly, strongly attaching two boards of lumber versus splitting and ruining one or both. I have seen where having a fixed, unrealistic idea of keeping wrists straight in work, sports and hobbies can limit development and effectiveness, keeping people stuck at a lower performance level.

This concept of internal alignment is key for leaders’ mindsets. Confident leaders continue to elicit feedback from trusted sources. And where they hear that they appear to be deviating from their professed values, leaders reflect and, if warranted, realign their approach. Accepting this undertaking requires both the courage to rise above defensiveness and the effort to move away from the path they had previously set; in other words, it requires high-level leadership.

What Is Alignment?

Dictionary definitions of *alignment* include “to array on the side of or against a party or cause” and “to be in or come into precise adjustment or correct relative position.” While alignment can also mean being in a straight line, this is but one of its aspects. More broadly, aligning ultimately refers to arrang-

ing in correct, appropriate or most usefully supportive relative positions. It is bringing together two or more parts or entities to make something desired or positive happen: Moving in the same direction versus at cross-purposes.

So, to make it easier to read, text can be aligned (i.e., positioned) to the left or right side of a page. Or it can be center aligned or justified (filling out the entire page from left to right).

I would guess that many people associate alignment with automobiles. A car is misaligned when the direction it is steered toward is not where its wheels actually head, either immediately or through more gradual drifting. Are the front or all four wheels together aiming toward the same direction and in sync with the steering wheel? In other words, is the car actually and efficiently heading toward where the driver is aiming to go?

So, what causes misalignment? For a vehicle, it can occur acutely from hitting a pothole, curb or any other obstacle that jars the vehicle out of being true. Misalignment can also develop cumulatively, through linkages deteriorating, as all things do over time, or via a combination of friction, wear and tear in the absence of ongoing early corrective maintenance. A leader's personal misalignment can be exacerbated by stress-created tunnel vision, pressure from others, outside messaging or just from the comfort of falling back into old patterns.

Similarly, organizational misalignment can occur either acutely or cumulatively. Acutely, when there is an unforeseeable event that they unexpectedly hit or fall into (e.g., loss of a top executive, a pandemic). Cumulative misalignment is potentially more predictable but in real life may be difficult to foresee, as changes causing this are gradual or below organizational radar. Or it can come from events that leaders weren't watching for due to distraction or looking too far into the future and not enough at their present condition (e.g., shifts in customer or market needs, changes in workforce demographics, technological changes that impact products or services).

In either case, misalignment can lead to a range of problems from lowered efficiency, additional secondary stresses/wear-and-tear (akin to tires prematurely wearing out), even increased incidents (from reduced controls, confusion, disconnections between safety expectations and operating procedures, etc.). At the extreme, misalignment can trigger an organizational autoimmune issue, where one part of the company actively attacks another; in a sense, many severe organizational politics problems I have seen have roots in misaligned objectives or communications.

And in my experience, neither a vehicle's nor a leader's misalignment will magically correct itself; this requires readjustment.

The Benefits of Alignment: More Than Just Physical

Fostering and nurturing alignment is a critical aspect of safety leadership. Certainly, physical alignment is indeed crucial to both physical performance and preventing injuries to the entire body (e.g., elbows, shoulders, neck, back, hips, knees, ankles), especially related to soft-tissue injuries, strains, sprains, slips, trips, falls and hand injuries.

But alignment is also important for effective communication, teamwork and other cultural carriers. For organizational members to become aligned with valuing personal safety on an individual level, they must willingly embrace a similar perspective on taking the time to scope out potential risks in advance of tasks, then make appropriate preparations to reduce exposures while doing a first-rate job and operating mindfully, and also extend awareness to any changes that might impinge on safe operations. Clearly, real engagement is a driver of alignment. (For more, see my article, "Strategies for Leading Engagement").

So, zooming out to a broad organizational perspective, one of the main aims of stepping up safety culture is to more closely align everyone's focus and activities throughout the company toward valuing and acting with safer principles and methods. To align executives toward enthusiastically

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championing safety and actively supporting safety initiatives with their time and budgetary support. To ally different business units, branches and people with varying roles and responsibilities toward a common safety purpose. Essentially, moving away from disconnection to connection, from lack of concern or undercutting to supporting, from overly short-term thinking to considering future ramifications of all their decisions and actions on their safety and health.

Alignment relies on harnessing the already existing, natural pull to safety and self-protection that is wired within almost everyone as integral to their survival. It means achieving maximum results from minimum efforts. When there is closer organizational safety alignment, available resources or energy are efficiently used with minimal waste from others pushing back for its own sake (as opposed to questioning or critiquing to improve planning). There are fewer instances of resorting to overly forcing others to accept safety goals and methods (recall John Milton's reminder in the classic "Paradise Lost": "Who overcomes by force hath overcome but half his foe").

When safety is well-aligned within a company, safety systems are moving in the same direction with and supporting changing organizational needs. Conflicts tend to be more productive rather than personal, accusatory and destructive. And there is less likelihood of leaders becoming blindsided or startled by others' adverse reactions, which says to me that the absence or opposite of these signs

of strong alignment (unproductive and unhealed/ongoing conflicts, leaders being unaware of workers and others real take on safety) may also be used as cues of misalignment.

Six Principles for Leading Greater Organizational Alignment

In a sense, alignment is a huge issue, with many ways to climb to the top of this mountain. But it can start with understanding that alignment need not require lining everyone up to think and see things the same way. I suggest that leaders keep these focal points in mind:

1. It is important to recognize that alignment does not require everyone having to agree about the issues confronting safety. Leaders might start by acknowledging that things aren't perfect, never will be and that getting better helps everyone. Align your own perspective and expectations: Understand that alignment does not necessarily mean in a straight line or 100% behind everything we proclaim and that some questioning or disagreement is not only natural but preferred. This shows that they are thinking, engaged, interested, trying to make things better, perhaps working out their internal objections to move toward resolution. Also, it doesn't mean subservient or aligned from behind. Alignment could be parallel from a different perspective, as in moving toward similar objectives but from a different point of view. Let go of the desire to control how others think of or view safety; attempting to overly control others' thoughts or mindset inevitably leads to pushback or resistance.

2. Not everyone has to talk about or value safety the same as those most passionate about it. Allow for and respect differences of perspective and expression. Those who are lower key, reflective or more introverted may be more reticent to outwardly jump aboard any bandwagons, but this doesn't necessarily mean they are not committed to safety. Respecting their pacing and lower level of verbal participation may lead to them becoming more active later.

3. Commitment timing differs. Some people by nature tend to embrace change more quickly (i.e., early adopters or pioneers); others may either hold back or have good reasons for delaying agreement. I have seen many who were safety-resistant or reticent develop into advocates over a relatively short time when not pushed.

4. Alignment is based on trust. While the semblance of alignment may go no deeper than workers just going through the motions of safety when they know they are being watched or called on, strong and lasting alignment only comes out of people trusting leaders to have consistent, genuine concern

for them and their well-being, and to work toward making the right things happen, again aligned with the leaders' expressed concerns. One of the best ways to elevate trust is to acknowledge any inconsistencies or your lack of knowledge or experience, rather than pretending to be perfect or all-knowing. Nor overly defending past shortfalls (but do explain reasons why this might have occurred, nondefensively). It also entails being willing to disengage from the past, rather than perpetuate same-old approaches that no longer produce stellar results just because of inertia or ego. Another approach to enhancing trust can be developing the confidence to show lack of confidence or unsureness of what might happen in the future.

5. Monitoring is an important part of safety for many (e.g., behaviors, PELs, signs of mechanical performance). Canvass or monitor the perceptions of the messages you are sending by commission and omission. Are these aligned with each other? Do

they divert or attract attention away from what is truly important? Are these reality-aligned (as in relatively easy to learn and accomplish)?

6. Alignment begins within leaders, not by them trying to get others to do something different. I strongly contend that it is difficult or worse to try to push others to do what leaders themselves cannot do, and that many people will see through this discordance, resulting in reduced leadership credibility. Staying out of

touch and misaligned can result in leaders becoming maligned by others.

Two Leadership Action Alignment Strategies

When it comes down to it, alignment reflects people, departments and business units pulling in the same direction, rather than at cross-purposes, whether driving a vehicle or moving an organization.

Mentally, it entails being consistent, both internally and programmatically, so that leaders' words and actions are heading in the same direction. Not, for example, verbally extolling safety's importance while ignoring the actions of supervisors or managers who quickly get product out while giving short shrift to safety. It means doing our utmost to get done what we as leaders say we are going to do.

Organizationally, this means reducing the clash between:

- messaging words and actual deeds, each of which steer the company toward different destinations. These misalignments can be healed by rooting out and then reducing those mixed messages that all companies have at least to some degree. While doing so, remember organizational psychologist Gordon Lippitt's advice to "Look at the issues coldly and at the people warmly."

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- different actions that might neutralize one another or confuse others (e.g., coming down hard on some safety violations while ignoring others)

- differing words (“safety is number one” vs. “get the work done ASAP”)

Obviously, there is a lot that incorporates principles and aspects of motivation, engagement, persuasion, training, planning and much more. But, as I have indicated the seeds of real change germinate from within, there are two potent strategies that leaders can practice to better align their goals and actions, to get more done while frittering away energy less, to thread related objectives together in an efficient order: batching and sequencing.

Batching means lining up objectives to take one action that accomplishes many positive results. When there are several objectives to accomplish, better to think simultaneously or concentrically (batching) rather than serially (multitasking). Batching saves time and resources. Suppose you are an archer trying to hit three targets. Rather than shooting three arrows, batching here would mean lining up the targets one behind another to penetrate all three with one arrow. For most companies, arrows and other resources are precious, and the time needed to nock, draw, aim and shoot (i.e., plan and schedule) is also limited.

Batching is based on mindfulness; it is the polar opposite of multitasking, which typically entails splitting attention by trying to do several different things simultaneously, like watching a video while composing a message. Separating attention divides effort, such as giving 50% of your thought or awareness to each of two diverse actions.

On a high safety leadership level, batching entails planning at the intersection of three critical organizational targets: 1. productivity and efficiency; 2. safety and health; and 3. engagement and energy. For companies to build sustaining strength, all three of these must be developed. Rather than planning several separate, often disconnected interventions to accomplish each, set into motion actions that reach all three at the same time. Even structurally, organizations can reduce multitasking by aligning professionals, departments and committees to better coordinate and plan for simultaneous actions and to report to the same leader.

So, batching here might begin by leaders asking how they can simultaneously elevate these three critical areas, how safety would be impacted in the proposed productivity plans and how it would affect engagement or communications.

Sequencing means prioritizing which objectives to first address in the action chain of improving batched safety, productivity and engagement (e.g., preheating the oven before mixing up the ingredients, scoping out traffic before stepping off the curb, ensuring that frontline supervisors are informed of upcoming initiatives/changes before they are rolled out to lessen the likelihood of their resisting due to not understanding what’s going on or what’s expected of them, and resenting being caught unaware).

Like batching, strong sequencing also relies on asking the right questions in advance, such as what small obstacles need to be addressed, what logistics must be arranged, and who should be informed or be brought onboard prior to putting this into play.

Batching and sequencing are tools for strategically anticipating potential future misalignments and heading them off in advance before any molehills become larger obstacles that snag or disrupt organizational alignment. Think through what you really want to accomplish and see if you can light on an action that attracts and aligns three different birds with the same song, in the right order.

Beyond Misalignments

The strongest make-it-happen leaders understand it is likely that some misalignments already exist and that others may occur at any time. They watch for these and work to fill in potholes when small before they turn into axle-breakers. Such leaders take the lead in promoting alignment within themselves rather than trying to first get others to change. They focus on consistency in and between words and actions. They demonstrate in words, plans and deeds that they, as safety leaders, are aligned with overall company objectives and concerns, standing with other departments and leaders; that safety is not the only objective of any company but is an essential part of organizational strength and well-being. **PSJ**

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