

Alignment Process

Goals

Trust

Alignment

Purpose

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the purpose of the alignment process.
2. Identify the components of the alignment process.
3. Identify the effects of a lack of trust on a project.

Developing a common understanding among the key stakeholders of the purpose and goals of the project and the means and methods of accomplishing those goals is called the **alignment process**. It is important to accomplish this alignment during the initiation phase. Project managers usually conduct a start-up meeting that is sometimes called a kickoff meeting. The agenda and duration of the start-up meeting depends on the complexity level of the project. Projects with a limited scope and short duration may engage in a session start-up meeting over lunch. A medium-complexity project will require a four-hour meeting or more while a high-complexity project cannot achieve alignment in a single meeting. Alignment can require several days of activities.

Enhance Alignment Meetings

On one large, complex project, the project alignment required a five-day process. Over twenty members of the project team and client participated in this alignment. To create a relaxed atmosphere and facilitate an open discussion, the alignment meetings and activities were held on a horse ranch in Montana.

A number of companies specialize in designing and facilitating alignment sessions for large, complex projects. Although designed to meet the needs of each project, alignment sessions have some common agenda items:

- Developing a common understanding of the project purpose
- Agreeing on the means and methods for accomplishing the purpose
- Establishing trust among team members

Common Understanding

A common understanding does not mean building a consensus. People may disagree with the direction being developed, but they have the same basic understanding as to the purpose of the project. For a project plan to be effective, there must be a critical mass or sufficient commitment among the critical stakeholders. Therefore, disagreement is not fatal to the project execution, but a unified team with a common understanding is much more

powerful and increases the likelihood of success. If disagreement does exist, an open and forthright discussion will enable the project leadership to address the disagreement in developing the project plan. If the disagreement stays hidden and is not openly discussed, problems will emerge later in the project.

Developing a common understanding can be as easy as an informal discussion that lasts a few hours, or it can be a lengthy, complex process. The methods and processes employed to develop a common understanding are directly related to the complexity of the project. The more complex projects will require more intense discussions around those issues that score high on the complexity profile.

Developing a common understanding among the key project stakeholders requires the following:

- Defining project success
- Determining potential barriers to success
- Establishing key milestones
- Identifying decision makers and the decision-making process

It is difficult to execute a successful project without first defining what makes a successful project. The first part of this discussion is easy: the project must be completed on time, within budget, and to all specifications. The next level of the discussion requires more reflection. During this discussion, reflection on the organization's mission, goals, and related issues such as safety and public perception of the project emerge.

After the team develops a common understanding of project success, a discussion of barriers to achieving that success enables team members to express skepticism. On more complex projects, the goals of a project often seem difficult to achieve. A discussion by the team of the potential barriers to project success places these concerns out in the open where team members can discuss and develop plans to address the barriers. Without this discussion, the perception of these barriers becomes powerful and can have an effect on project performance.

Project Purpose

The project purpose is sometimes reflected in a written charter, vision, or mission statement. These statements are developed as part of the team development process that occurs during the project initiation phase and results in a common understanding of the purpose of the project. A purpose statement derived from a common understanding among key stakeholders can be highly motivating and connects people's personal investment to a project purpose that has value.

A *purpose statement*—also called a charter, vision, or mission—provides a project with an anchor or organizational focus. Sometimes called an anchoring statement, these statements can become a basis for testing key decisions. A purpose statement can be a powerful tool for focusing the project on actions and decisions that can have a positive impact on project success. For example, a purpose statement that says that the project will design and build a free educational website for high-school students will influence meeting educational goals, designs appropriate for cognitive development levels, the cost, etc. When designers are deciding between different types of materials or instructional methods, the purpose statement provides the criteria for making these decisions.



Image by thekenyeung

Developing a common understanding of the project's purpose involves engaging stakeholders in dialogue that can be complex and in-depth. Mission and vision statements reflect some core values of people and their organization. These types of conversations can be very difficult and will need an environment where people feel safe to express their views without fear of recrimination.

Goals

Goals add clarity to the anchor statement. Goals break down the emotional concepts needed in the development of a purpose statement and translate them into actions or behaviors, something we can measure. Where purpose statements reflect who we are, goals focus on what we can do. Goals bring focus to conversations and begin prioritizing resources. Goals are developed to achieve the project purpose.

Developing goals means making choices. Project goals established during the [alignment process](#) are broad in nature and cross the entire project. Ideally, everyone on the project should be able to contribute to the achievement of each goal.

Goals can have significantly different characteristics. The types of goals and the processes used to develop the project goals will vary depending on the complexity level of the project, the knowledge and skills of the project leadership team, and the boldness of the project plan. Boldness is the degree of stretch for the team. The greater the degree of challenge and the greater the distance from where you are to where you want to be, the bolder the plan and the higher the internal complexity score.

Clarity of Objectives Saves Money

A critical online instructional resource was being developed for a project in Michigan. Designers determined that a software upgrade would enable the resource to be developed one month earlier, but at a cost higher than was allocated in the budget. Earlier in the project it was determined that any delays would cost the project over \$100,000 per month.

Because the objectives of the project were well understood, the decision to obtain the more expensive software was made quickly and easily.

Roles

Role clarity is critical to the planning and execution of the project. Because projects by definition are unique, the roles of each of the key stakeholders and project leaders are defined at the beginning of the project. Sometimes the roles are delineated in contracts or other documents. Yet even with written explanations of the roles defined in documents, how these translate into the decision-making processes of the project is often open to interpretation.

A discussion of the roles of each entity and each project leader can be as simple as each person describing their role and others on the project team asking questions for clarification and resolving differences in understanding. On less complex projects, this is typically a short process with very little conflict in understanding and easy resolution. On more complex projects, this process is more difficult with more opportunities for conflict in understanding.

One process for developing role clarification on projects with a more complex profile requires project team members, client representatives, and the project's leadership to use a flip chart to record the project roles. Each team divides the flip chart in two parts and writes the major roles of the client on one half and the roles of the leadership team on the other half. Each team also prioritizes each role and the two flip charts are compared.

This and similar role clarification processes help each project team member develop a more complete understanding of how the project will function, how each team member understands their role, and what aspects of the role are most important. This understanding aids in the development or refinement of work processes and approval processes. The role clarification process also enables the team to develop role boundary spanning processes. This is where two or more members share similar roles or responsibilities. Role clarification facilitates the development of the following:

- Communication planning
- Work flow organization
- Approval processes
- Role boundary spanning processes

Means and Methods

Defining how the work of the project will be accomplished is another area of common understanding that is developed during the alignment session. An understanding of the project management methods that will be used on the project and the output that stakeholders can expect is developed. On smaller and less complex projects, the understanding is developed through a review of the tools and work processes associated with the following:

- Tracking progress
- Tracking costs
- Managing change

On more complex projects, the team may discuss the use of project management software tools, such as Microsoft Project, to develop a common understanding of how these tools will be used. The team discusses key work processes, often using flowcharts, to diagram the work process as a team. Another topic of discussion is the determination of what policies are needed for smooth execution of the project. Often one of the companies associated with the project will have policies that can be used on the project. Travel policies, human resources policies, and authorization procedures for spending money are examples of policies that provide continuity for the project.

Trust

Trust on a project has a very specific meaning. Trust is the filter that project team members use for evaluating information. The trust level determines the amount of information that is shared and the quality of that information. When a person's trust in another person on the project is low, he or she will doubt information received from that person

and might not act on it without checking it with another source, thereby delaying the action. Similarly, a team member might not share information that is necessary to the other person's function if they do not trust the person to use it appropriately and respect the sensitivity of that information. The level of communication on a project is directly related to the level of trust.

Trust is also an important ingredient of commitment. Team member's trust in the project leadership and the creation of a positive project environment fosters commitment to the goals of the project and increases team performance. When trust is not present, time and energy is invested in checking information or finding information. This energy could be better focused on goals with a higher level of trust.¹

Establishing trust starts during the initiation phase of the project. The kickoff meeting is one opportunity to begin establishing trust among the project team members. Many projects have team-building exercises during the kickoff meeting. The project team on some complex projects will go on a team-building outing. One project that built a new pharmaceutical plant in Puerto Rico invited team members to spend the weekend spelunking in the lime caves of Puerto Rico. Another project chartered a boat for an evening cruise off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina. These informal social events allow team members to build a relationship that will carry over to the project work.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The purpose of the alignment process is to develop a common understanding of the purpose, agree on the means and methods, and establish trust.
- The components of the alignment process are discussions of the purpose, goals, participant roles, methods of tracking progress and costs, methods of managing change, and building trust.
- The effects of a lack of trust are delays caused by fact checking or missing information that was not shared because the person's discretion was not trusted to handle sensitive information.

[1] Marsha Willard, "Building Trust: The Relationship Between Trust and High Performance," Axis Advisory 1999, <http://www.paclink.com/~axis/M7trust.html>.



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