

Aligned for Success: Removing Organizational Barriers

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

Is your organization preventing its employees from succeeding? Do you have employees who are frustrated by their inability to contribute fully to achieving organizational goals?

My observation is that people want to feel they are part of, or connected to, something larger than themselves. Often they choose to work for a specific organization because they want to “do good.” Yet their dreams of achieving great things often are dashed by unintentional obstacles to that success, such as crippling bureaucracy, archaic assumptions and processes (i.e., the “we’ve always done it that way” syndrome), or what I call “contextual misalignment,” which I explain below. In such environments, employees become disillusioned, burned out, and/or disengaged – and the organization suffers the consequences of the resulting misalignment.

Recently I heard a sermon in which the priest said, “People come to church looking for the ‘boom’ (i.e., a connection to something bigger than themselves) but all we give them is organized religion.” It struck me that this idea often is true in business: in addition to making a living, many people join organizations to make a contribution and/or to feel connected to a cause or group in which they believe or to which they want to belong. Yet their initial excitement and enthusiasm often is extinguished by institutionalized barriers to their success.

What things are getting in the way of the “boom” that your employees are seeking? Organizational blockages may take many forms, including environmental, structural, process, and interpersonal. For example, a culture that seeks to place blame when mistakes are made rather than to learn from the mis-steps sends the message that risk-taking is punished. A hierarchical structure in which people’s ideas or talents are sought because of the positions they hold rather than because of their expertise in a given area short-changes the organization and frustrates talented and underutilized employees. Executives who refuse to consider changes to processes that have worked in the past signal that innovation and creativity are not respected. Inconsistencies between the values organizations espouse and the behaviors managers exhibit create a cynical and resentful workforce. None of these scenarios allow the organization to be successful.

Another way in which organizations unintentionally block their success is by practicing what I call “contextual misalignment.” Contextual misalignment results when a practice or behavior that serves an organization well in one area is repeated in other areas even when it causes dysfunctional outcomes. I have seen this phenomenon in organizations that I would characterize as first

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responders, such as fire fighters and police officers or public works employees and organizations that spring into action when natural or man-made disasters occur. In such situations, responsiveness is key to containing the damage, and that characteristic serves everyone well. However, that same level of responsiveness may be dysfunctional when there is no disaster at hand. Failing to question the assumptions underlying the reasons for those actions can have unintended consequences. For example, first responder managers who provide immediate answers to questions may limit the amount of thought that goes into them – and then the answer becomes a policy or procedure that may not be in the best interests of the organization. In addition, leaders need to take the time to sit back and develop a strategy, a luxury they do not have in the midst of a disaster but a necessity to ensure the organization's long-term success. Leaders who do not distinguish clearly between situations in which responsiveness is critical and those in which a thoughtful and deliberative approach is appropriate unintentionally short-change the organization and create obstacles to its long-term success.

Here are two steps you can take to identify and correct the misalignment between employees' willingness and ability to contribute to organizational success and the elements needed to support those efforts (e.g., environment, structures, processes, and skills).

1. Find out whether your employees are able do their jobs easily, without impediment by asking them the two questions below. Listen carefully to what they say. Support the elements that enable desired performance and remove as many of the barriers as possible.

A. What aspects of the organization enable you to be successful?

B. What obstacles prevent you from contributing as much as you would like?

2. Seek out instances of contextual misalignment. What behaviors, actions, or practices that serve you well in one part of your organization cause dysfunction in other areas?

Imagine how quickly your organization could achieve its goals if your employees were unimpeded by institutional barriers that hinder their success! I invite you to begin today to take the actions necessary to make that picture a reality. ➔

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