

Executive Alignment: A Behavioral Framework



As organizations undertake large transformational programs, there is a critical need to ensure executives are aligned to the vision, purpose and goals of the proposed change. This is often called executive alignment. But what is executive alignment? Why is it important? And how do we ensure it occurs? While large transformational programs can fail for many different reasons, executive alignment, or lack of it, is consistently cited as a major cause of failure.^[1]

When organizations conduct formal post mortems on large transformational program failures, they typically find several “soft” causes of failure – poor program or project management, sponsors misaligned on or unclear about the program goals, ambiguity of program leadership accountabilities and responsibilities, ill-defined or inconsistent program governance, a lack of communication to stakeholders or a lack of change or transition management, to name a few. While these causes are all contributors to program failure, together they are symptomatic of a greater underlying root cause: the lack of executive alignment and commitment.

Organizations that regularly assess the results of large programs sometimes recognize these causes and attempt to resolve them in subsequent programs. However, the root cause still eludes them resulting in ongoing failure and frustration. In many cases, organizations are guilty of looking only at evidence that confirms their view of the world. Latching onto one symptom, such as communication or stakeholder management, they prioritize this aspect in the next program as a critical success factor, only to find that even with the increased focus, the program still fails to deliver on its transformational objectives. The organization again asks why it is unable to deliver large transformational programs and rallies around the new symptom de jour or considers outsourcing the program execution to a global consulting organization whose job

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Kenny & Company is a management consulting firm offering Strategy, Operations and Technology services to our clients.

We exist because we love to do the work. After management consulting for 20+ years at some of the largest consulting companies globally, our partners realized that when it comes to consulting, bigger doesn't always mean better.

Instead, we've created a place where our ideas and opinions are grounded in experience, analysis and facts, leading to real problem solving and real solutions – a truly collaborative experience with our clients making their business our business.

We focus on getting the work done and prefer to let our work speak for itself. When we do speak, we don't talk about ourselves, but rather about what we do for our clients. We're proud of the strong character our entire team brings, the high intensity in which we thrive, and above all, doing great work.

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it is to deliver large transformational programs. The fact is there is no single cause. Large transformational programs are multi-variant and require the commitment of several executives and organizations to be successful. While consultants can help deliver large programs and facilitate transformation, actual sustained transformation must come from within the organization.

Through our consulting practice we have developed a framework to define executive alignment, identify potential causes of misalignment and provide recommendations to ensure alignment around mutually agreed outcomes.

Executive Alignment Framework

		Executive Statement						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
		Vision	Strategy	Objectives	LeaderFollower	Accountability	Investment	Communication
		I share the vision and believe it is achievable	I agree with the strategy to achieve the vision	I am committed to the desired objectives/outcomes/results /values	I am prepared to be a leader or follower	I am prepared to be accountable/responsible for success or failure	I will commit funds, time and/or resources to the work	I understand the vision, strategy and benefits
		Root Causes, Approach & Outcomes						
		● Malicious Compliance ●				● Well Meaning Resistance ●		
Misalignment Cause	Lack of a shared vision or lack of belief that it is achievable	Disagreement with the strategy or belief that different or more effective strategies are available	Lack of individual or organizational commitment to the objective or partial selective commitment	Challenge to the leadership or unwilling to be lead by the current leader	Lack of individual or organizational accountability for success or failure or dispersed group accountability	Operational constraints that prevent the individual or organization from committing funds, time or people	Lack of understanding of the initiative or inability to communicate the vision, strategy, objectives of the initiative	
	Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build a collaborative shared achievable vision together Embrace and leverage creative tension Focus on clarity and commitment vs. compliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define strategic options and implications vs. shared vision Prioritize effective over right Agree on the optimal strategy given a shared vision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree on a specific desired and likely outcome/results/value that one can commit to SWARTER approach to objectives Individual and organizational commitment to objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lead follow or get out of the way Leader roles and responsibilities Clear unambiguous decision rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify the accountable executive and work with them Clear definitions of accountability Individual and organizational accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share/uncover operational constraints Solve for the operational constraints Clarity of commitment around funds, time and people (names) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One on one executive communications Organizational communications lead by executives Elevator pitch
Outcome	Smaller or larger or different shared vision among all executives with individual and organizational commitment	Modified or different strategy with shared understanding or implications, commitment and efficacy	Smaller or larger or different specific individual and organizational commitment(s)	Lead, co-lead, lead a portion of the program or leave the team	Mutually agreed accountable parties	Resolve operational constraints first then focus strategically	Executive understanding of the effort and ability to communicate the vision, strategy, outcomes to others	

Seven Elements of Executive Alignment

In our model we define seven elements of executive alignment:

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Vision | 5. Accountability |
| 2. Strategy | 6. Investment |
| 3. Objectives | 7. Communication |
| 4. Leader/Follower | |

For each element of executive alignment we have defined an executive alignment statement. If program executives are unable to confidently make these statements then they are misaligned and need to address the root causes. For each element we address the cause and provide recommendations to achieve alignment and potential outcomes. We have further divided these seven elements of executive alignment into two categories; Malicious Compliance and Well Meaning Resistance. ^[ii]

Malicious Compliance

Malicious Compliance is the intentional behavior of an individual or organization that damages the program through actions designed to create perceived versus actual commitment. It is a particularly invidious form of passive-aggressive organizational behavior. For a large transformational program to be successful malicious compliance must be identified, confronted and removed.

While a change of executive personnel is always an option when faced with malicious compliance, and sometimes necessary to enable a large transformational program to move forward, we are only going to address the situation where the behavior is somewhat addressable, acknowledging that this approach may be the precursor to personnel change.

Well Meaning Resistance

Well meaning resistance describes the behavior that can initially be mistaken for a lack of commitment but simply masks immediate operational priorities or issues, and delays or prevents individual or organizational commitment.

With both malicious compliance and well meaning resistance it is essential to dig below the veneer to truly understand the behavior and its causes. Often the rush to begin a transformational program or need to show immediate progress prevents thorough conversation and subsequent analysis of executive behavior and alignment, often at significant cost later.

Let's look at each of the seven elements of executive alignment in this framework.

Vision

"I share the vision and believe it is achievable.

"Discussions about changing an entire company or a significant element of it can often be fast paced and passionate. When inspirational goals about the proposed change and the future state are put forward people get excited? So often these high level visions make perfect sense, but why is it that only after program failure do you hear executives say "the vision was all wrong" or "people never really bought into the vision". Unless all executives can make the executive alignment statement, "I share the vision and believe it is achievable", there is immediate misalignment.

If one or more executives do not share the vision or do not believe it is achievable, then the approach must be (assuming no new personnel) to build a new shared vision together.^[iii] In doing so the team must embrace and leverage the natural creative tension within it and focus on clarity and commitment versus compliance. These vision discussions may be arduous as each and every word of the vision is discussed. The vision however, is a cornerstone of any transformational program. The outcome may well be smaller, larger or different but shared vision among all executives of the program.

Strategy

“I agree with the strategy to achieve the vision.”

Having agreed on the vision is it critical to have agreement and shared understanding of the strategy to achieve that vision. Too often strategy is mistaken for individual hypotheses in the mind of program executives. One client executive in discussing transformational program failure due to the lack of executive alignment told me “we are really good at the vision thing here, but when it comes to strategy and execution we fail. We all agree on where we are going, let’s say we are going to the moon, but there are multiple perspective how we’ll achieve that goal. All too often one executive thinks we are building a rocket, another thinks we need a new supersonic plane and another thinks a hang glider will do. While we are aligned on the vision we are simply unaligned on strategy and execution”.

Like vision, everyone needs to be aligned on the proposed strategy and associated implications to achieve the agreed vision. These can be long but important conversations. If we try and build it, the monstrosity of the rocket, plane and hang glider combined will always fail to get off the ground or move the transformation towards the vision.

Our suggested approach is to clearly define the strategic options and resulting implications of the shared vision, prioritize being effective over being right and gain agreement on the optimal strategy to achieve the shared vision. Too often strategies lack requisite industry, market or organizational grounding and a clear understanding of the implications. Discussions about implications drive a practical element that is required to be effective. A favorite question of ours is “are you more committed to being right or effective?” A single program executive being right while the workgroup is misaligned may serve an ego but result in the failure of the program and its transformational objectives. Finally, the strategy can only be measured by its ability to achieve the shared vision. Having agreed upon the vision, this can be the only measure of strategic success.

The outcome may well be a different strategy than initially envisioned but with a shared executive commitment to that strategy.

Objectives

“I am committed to the objectives/results/value.”

Along with vision and strategy, executive commitment to specific objectives is one of the key elements of executive alignment. Individual and organizational incentives are one way to ensure executive commitment; these of course need to be aligned to the transformational program. General aspirational objectives with executive head-nodding are often taken as executive alignment. We often see the high-level aspirational objectives such as “Improve on time delivery by 5 percent” or “Improved Value Added Reseller (VAR) experience” or the old favorite “Increased margins”

However, the hard specific conversations need to be had. We recommend SMARTER (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely, Effective and Results Oriented) objectives drilled down to the lowest actionable level of specific performance that individuals and organizations can commit to.^[iv] Again, this process itself creates executive alignment or identifies misalignment. What’s needed is the moment when an executive says “I can (or cannot) commit my organization to that”. Then the real executive alignment conversation can begin.

Leader / Follower

“I am prepared to be a leader or a follower.”

To be a good leader you need to know when to be a good follower. Leadership of executives (leaders) is difficult. Typically each executive in the room during a transformational program is the leader of an organization any one of whom could lead the program itself. In many cases the actual program leader is a more junior executive with other leaders providing strategic advice or forming a steering committee. To achieve executive alignment, executive leaders need to accept and follow the appointed program leader. The passive-aggressive behavior of challenging or questioning the right of the leader to lead a transformational program is particularly invidious. While leadership responsibilities can be transferred or even shared when appropriate once the responsibilities are agreed upon, a lead, follow or get out of the way approach must be taken or personnel changes must be made. Time and time again programs limp forward with the leader’s right to lead and the other executives’ commitment to follow in question ? and these programs typically fail.

Consensus based decision making is the norm in many organizations. A lead, follow or get out of the way approach can be consistent with that approach once the executive group realizes that the leader’s role is to gain that consensus and the follower’s roles are to unambiguously support and implement the consensus decision.

In addition to the lead, follow or get out of the way approach, clear leadership roles and responsibilities are required along with clear and unambiguous decision rights. Establishing decision rights can be challenging as the program is unable to anticipate all decisions. However, the process for establishing decision rights and the agreement of all program executives to follow it can be established and executive alignment achieved on this important element.

Accountability

“I am prepared to be accountable / responsible for the success or failure.”

At the beginning of a transformational program, most everybody wants to be in the room – change is exciting. However, transformational change requires people to commit to actually making it happen. The Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed (RACI) matrix is a popular tool for this but like objectives, it needs to be drilled down to a low level to identify who is truly accountable for what and with decision rights.^[v] Accountability means active engagement and making decisions, versus just role definition and needs to be clearly defined in the transformational program. Ultimately each executive needs to be able to clearly define the accountability for success or failure of the program or part of it. Tying program objectives or performance to executive compensation is very difficult but also very effective in driving individual and organizational accountability. Again the objective is to have the conversations, provide clarity and uncover misalignment.

Vision, Strategy, Objectives, Leader/Follower and Accountability are all elements of executive alignment that are susceptible to malicious compliance if unaddressed they will likely lead to executive misalignment and program failure.

Investment

“I will commit the time and resources to the work.”

Investment and communication are the two elements of executive alignment we classify as Well Meaning Resistance. Often on transformational programs executives are either too busy with several programs or simply lack the commitment to the proposed change. In other cases, while executive commitment is there, resources are not. This can be frustrating and lead to comments such as “if this is important and you are committed, why is your organization dragging its feet?” The true test of individual or organizational investment is the investment of funds, time and resources to the program. Often operational constraints prevent executives from investing. A lack of resource availability is one such common operational constraint. A program limping forward with poor resource availability from an accountable organization is a recipe for failure. True executive alignment occurs when all executives clearly understand each other’s constraints and agree to solve for them. To be successful, a large transformational program needs clarity of commitment around funds, time and people (names).

Communication

Often after the initial marketing message of a transformational program, the executive communication is poor and limited to basic status reporting which is usually shown as solid “green” until the program is in trouble and when the startled executive team finds out it is too late. In other cases there is an assumption by all stakeholders that executive communication is being done but no one is actually doing it. In other cases it is being “done” but in a “Death by PowerPoint” fashion. Real executive communication drives action. The minimum action is to cascade the communication downwards in person. How many times have you seen an executive forward on a presentation from a transformational program with an added comment like “please forward as appropriate”? Sometimes real change or transition management requires one to say to an executive “we have a problem, and the problem is you”. In other cases one on one communication is required. Sometimes the executive actually lacks understanding of the program and requires one on one communication. A succinct clear elevator pitch or 1-Pager can help with one on one communication and also communication to a broader audience. The test is to have the executive communicate the vision, strategy and results to others with individual commitment.

Conclusion

Our framework for executive alignment seeks to specify elements, causes, recommendations and outcomes and encourages those involved in transformational programs to pay meaningful attention to all elements rather than pay them lip service. The realization later that a transformational program lacked real executive alignment is usually part of a post mortem on project failure by which time the executives themselves has often been written off and their career prospects for the future severely damaged. However a real commitment to ensure executive alignment up front and continuously test it throughout the program aligned with the courage to take corrective actions or stop the program when executives are misaligned is required for large transformational program success.

As my client executive friend might have said, “We all agreed, we were going to the moon but we we’re never going to get there unless we all built a suitable rocket together”..

About the Author



Michael S. Kenny is the Managing Partner of Kenny & Company and has over 20 years consulting experience with Accenture, Deloitte and EDS planning and leading large complex initiatives at Fortune 500 companies with C-Level executives. He has led projects in Business and IT Strategy, Business Process, Re-engineering, Enterprise Architecture, Systems Integration, Business Intelligence and Supply Chain. Michael is a former Partner in Accenture.

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Notes and References

[i] The Standish Group International, Chaos Manifesto 2011, reports that over 20% of projects will fail; and another 42% of projects will face significant challenges, such as delays, budget overruns, and / or with end products with less than the required features and functions. It is reasonable to assume that these numbers are even larger for the subset of large transformational programs.

[ii] The term Malicious Compliance is one we like to think we invented ourselves but further research indicates a usage by CNN, NewsNight with Aaron Brown, program date Dec. 6, 2000 that predates our use of the term, although in a slightly different context.

[iii] The concept of Shared Vision was first introduced by Peter Senge. Senge, P. (2006) The Fifth Discipline The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization, Deckle Edge.

[iv] The first known use of the mnemonic SMART for objectives was by George T. Doran. Doran, G. T. (1981). There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives. Management Review, Volume 70, Issue 11(AMA FORUM), pp. 35-36. We add the ER to SMART to further highlight the need for Effective and Results oriented objectives.

[v] Our personal preference is to drop Responsible and just use Accountable in a "RACI" matrix. There is often confusion leading to lack of true accountability between the Responsible and Accountable roles.

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