

Rowing in Sync

Seven ways to get your team aligned

by: Dale Stein, Technology Assurance Group (TAG)

As an advisor to hundreds of businesses and someone who has sold an eight-figure business, I've noticed there's one similarity among all the "winners" I've met in life. This applies to founders, managers, salespeople, employees and even organizations that "win." But here's the odd thing: I didn't glean this insight from the hundreds of CEOs I've advised. Instead, it came from a simple man who took my wife and I on a gondola boat ride one day.



The Blind Gondolier Who Saw the Meaning of Life

I'll never forget the sunny day I joined a San Diego, California, charity sailing event. As my wife and I boarded the boat, our cheerful, sunglasses-wearing captain greeted us and distributed coats in case the weather got chilly. We took our seats in the gondola and marveled as he expertly navigated us out of the marina and into the open waters of the San Diego Bay. As our gondolier weaved between passing jet skiers in the busy harbor, I noticed the waves lapping up against the side of the boat and was impressed by how well he avoided all of the other vessels and buoys.

After a few minutes, I struck up a conversation with him and asked how long he had been doing this kind of work. As he stood on the stern, he said he had been doing this kind of work for so long he could do it without looking.

To my utter shock, it turned out that wasn't just an expression. We were stunned to discover that he had tragically lost his sight and was blind. Yet, despite this hardship, he radiated joy, a passion for life and a clear mastery of his craft.

Eventually my wife asked how he managed to stay so positive when he had every right to be bitter about the circumstances of his life. He replied, "You know ... I tried life the other way around and that way didn't work out so well. So, I chose to live like this."

Even though no one would have faulted him for blaming his circumstances, I was in awe of his strength to make the conscious choice to focus on happiness rather than sink into misery. His story was so touching because it proves

that it's never about what happens to us in life, but how we respond to the challenges we're presented. It shows that no matter the situation, you can always choose happiness — which is the ultimate success.

Not only was this inspirational at the time, but it clarified something I've tried to describe to the business owners I've spoken to for decades: No one goes through life un-

scathed, and while we all have our own unique crosses to bear, we can always choose success.

While I'll be the first to say that you must know your KPIs like the back of your hand and that if you're clueless about your metrics, there's a minuscule chance you'll ever reach great success, I've also learned how important core traits like these are to forge successful people and successful companies. Just like how "soft skills" have seen a resurgence in importance, I refer to these traits as "soft KPIs" that have a tremendous capacity to shape your organization.

Seven Questions to Get Your Team Aligned

Most organizations will succeed up to a certain level, but to propel themselves into the higher echelon of success they're really after, here are the seven "soft KPIs" you can use to assess whether or not your company culture is breeding "gondoliers" or victims.

These principles apply equally to every founder, C-level executive, manager, employee or entire organization I've worked with and will literally dictate your company's future potential. If you're building organizations, you're also in the business of building the people who comprise those organizations, too. I want to share the blueprint that forges successful individuals, teams and, eventually, companies.

(1) Is everyone constantly learning new things? While the concept of a "fixed mindset" versus a "growth mindset" has exploded in popularity among executive management teams, the principle that underpins it is one we teach, preach and embody.

Your team must be full of lifelong learners. These people are

passionate, vibrant and infectious to be around. They also have tons of great ideas because they're exposing themselves to new, disparate fields and bringing the best back to the company.

You might not know if your team is full of lifelong learners or those who are dogmatically set in their ways. Just like how stagnant water breeds disease, stagnant minds also stifle organizational creativity. Conversely, as long as water remains in motion, it remains pure — just like the minds of your team members.

In order to foster innovation, you must encourage curiosity. The clearest evidence of your company's ability to foster innovation is whether or not your team members feel like they have permission to make mistakes. Do your team members feel free to try out new ideas, or are they terrified that any time they make mistakes they're going to get the inspiration scolded out of them? While good organizations can optimize to certain levels of success, if your team members are scared to make mistakes, you'll never be able to innovate like the bold companies that define industries and achieve record-breaking profits.

(2) Do your team members visualize? In 1960, Dr. Maxwell Maltz conducted an experiment with college basketball players. One group physically practiced free throws for 20 days while the second group spent the same amount of time just visualizing themselves making free throws. Players were then tested without being allowed to practice and the visualization group improved by 23% compared to only 14% for the physical practice group.

These findings suggest that visualizing a skill can improve performance more than physical practice. Mental visualization activates neural patterns that are similar to the actual execution of the skill.

In business, there are tons of skills that can be practiced. The first place you need to instill a winning mindset is in the imagination of your employees. To foster this, we instruct all of our clients to help their team members develop "Life Business Plans" that clarify all of their financial, health, career and relationship goals so they can clearly visualize themselves succeeding in ways that are most authentic to them.

This is the actual first step behind painting a compelling vision of the future for your company: Assisting your team members in clarifying their own exciting personal visions for their futures. It is then that your employees view company goals as means to achieve their personal goals.

(3) Do your team members know "the platinum rule" of communication? We all know "the golden rule," which reminds us to "treat others as *we* want to be treated." However,

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in communication, it's far more effective, influential and rapport-building to learn how to communicate in a style that others prefer over our natural style. Essentially, "the platinum rule," is to "treat others as *they* want to be treated." We utilize the DiSC personality assessment to teach the four communication styles and to make sure our companies excel by using clear communication. Here's a quick recap of the four styles, but if you want

do a deeper dive, we wrote about this in more detail in the April 2023 Office Technology article, "Company Culture":

- D — Dominant and direct: Focused on results, problem solving and the bottom line.

- I — Inspiring and interactive: Focused on interacting with people, having fun and/or creating excitement.

- S — Supportive and steady: Focused on preserving relationships, peace and harmony.

- C — Cautious and correct: Focused on facts, rules and correctness.

(4) Do your team members view change as an opportunity or a threat? Most people are grossly dissatisfied with the status quo. However, they remain stuck because they can't stand the idea of trying something unfamiliar, even when that new idea is highly beneficial for them. But successful people, teams and leaders know that inherent in every single uncomfortable disruption lies a golden opportunity. Some examples:

- MP3s disrupted CD sales, but created a music streaming industry.

- Laptops disrupted desktops, but birthed remote work.

- Smartphones disrupted flip phones, but created apps.

- Amazon disrupted brick-and-mortar storefronts, but opened up e-commerce.

Change brings opportunity, which is why it's so important to foster an appetite for calculated risks.

(5) Do your team members write down their goals? Do they share them? Goal-setting paired with visualization is extremely powerful because it helps us align our actions and shape our priorities. A goal that is just a thought remains a thought. However, once it's written down, it starts to become real. It can be broken down into action steps. It ensures focus. It creates personal accountability. And, most importantly, it allows for collaborative contribution. People want to help others, but until they know their goals, it's difficult for them to do so.

I've taught goal-setting in group environments for years and I can't tell you how many times someone would share that he (or she) had a personal goal to run a marathon, for example. Then, oddly, someone else in the group would reveal that he used to run marathons or that his brother just

completed one and he would flood the goal-setter with resources, training programs, expertise, gear, etc., so the goal-setter could accelerate his progress. So even though it's rare to find an organization that doesn't write down goals these days, I recommend you ensure your team members are sharing their goals with each other on a regular basis.

However, it's not just up to them to contribute to one another. As the leader, it's your job to lead by example. Do you have any employees who are saving up to buy houses? Who in your network do you know who could help them out with learning how to invest more intelligently? Are your employees looking to get connected to "high-profile" mentors who can accelerate their careers — in addition to them working with you? Which friends of yours have you introduced them to?

(6) Are your team members passionate? Think of the most passionate, highly engaged high-performers on your team. Aside from their individual strengths, I guarantee they all share one thing in common: They have huge personal motivations for success. This isn't because you've given them stricter quotas, KPIs, deadlines, etc. Their motivation comes from within. While metrics are valuable, the core trait that separates a successful person from an unsuccessful one is his level of passion. When someone is personally passionate about what he's doing, there's no way to stop him.

We summarize this when we teach our clients, "If the *why* is big enough, then the *how* doesn't really matter." If you want a high-performing team, everyone must be highly passionate. But for most organizations, that's not the norm.

However, if that's your company, I want to challenge you. Show me a disengaged, complacent or indifferent employee and I'll show you a manager who has no idea what that person is passionate about. Passionate people don't work to satisfy quotas or to get managers off their backs. They work because there's a deeper, far more meaningful reason fueling them.

Here's exactly how to tap into an employee's purpose and to understand the core of what is driving him: For any goal he has, ask him this question: "Once you have X, what will having that do for you?"

Do it at least three times and I promise you, you'll find his core passion. (Note: This only works if you've established trust previously.)

Here's an example:

Manager: "So, what's your biggest goal right now?"

Employee: "I really want to double my monthly sales goal."

Manager: "And once you've doubled your sales goal, what will having that do for you?"

Employee: "I mean, the bonus check sure will be nice!"

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Manager: "Once you have that bonus check, what will having it do for you?"

Employee: "Honestly, I'll finally be able to take my wife on vacation. I've been saving up for a year already and she's been waiting patiently for such a long time. She's been dreaming about going to Florence, Italy, for years."

Manager: "Once you get to take her on that vacation to Florence, what will having that do for you?"

Employee: "I'll feel so proud of myself for having given her something she absolutely deserves. She's an amazing woman and I guess it would make me feel like a good husband."

And just like that, you've uncovered your employee's core passion. That's why he works hard. That's why he hits quota. That's why he perseveres. And if he doesn't share anything meaningful with you, it's typically because you haven't created enough rapport with him yet.

Even though this employee might be passionate about being generous with his wife, other employees might be passionate about improving the lives of their families, establishing financial security, building investment portfolios, buying luxury cars, supporting charities, being role models for their kids, getting six-pack abs, etc.

Imagine how powerfully you could understand your employees if you took the time to ask them those three simple questions. Did you ever have a manager, mentor or investor who took the time to discover your passions? How would you feel if a manager had been that personally interested in you?

(7) Is your company giving more to its team members than it takes? With the millions of factors that contribute to the answer to this question, it's obviously challenging to measure. But how many of us know a fellow business owner who regularly complains that "nobody wants to work anymore."

This isn't because "nobody wants to work." It happens to him because his company — or even he — has earned a reputation of taking more from others than it — or he — gives.

This is no way to live, nor to run a growing company, but as leaders, it's our job to make sure that we raise the tide so every boat rises along with it. The secret is to err on the side of generosity. It is to understand that sharing knowledge and mentoring compound growth.

Ultimately, this means that we recognize our company is a vehicle for others to achieve their own successes in life and it's our job to give them the opportunities, resources and support they need to achieve the highest levels of success they can reach.

Not only does running your life this way breed tons of goodwill with your team, make your company more attractive to others and persuade people to want to be around

you, but it feels good to live life this way. When you give freely and live generously, life always finds a way of bringing the benefits back to you — tenfold.

But it all comes back to a decision. You can live defensively, micromanaging every interaction and building transactional relationships, or you can become a force for the greater good who gives more to others and knows how generously he's contributed to the lives of so many people.

Cultivate These Seven Attributes Throughout Your Organization

Remember, success begets success. Surround yourself with passionate, growth-oriented talent. Enable your employees to visualize, focus, collaborate, adapt and give back.

It's a choice to breed winners or losers. Which will you be? The blind boat captain chose to create his own tailwind rather than go adrift. Companies can make that same choice. Surround your crew with passionate, growth-

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oriented talent. Navigate toward the vision of success you paint. The journey won't always be smooth sailing, but the right culture breeds winners. ■

Dale Stein is co-founder of Technology Assurance Group (TAG), an organization of managed technology service providers (MTSPs). Collectively, TAG's members do \$800 million per year in IT, cybersecurity, telecommunications and video surveillance. They are located in 148 cities across the United States and Canada, and are presently serving more than 780,000 SMBs. He is responsible for developing TAG's strategic planning and guiding its business development. In addition, Stein is the managing partner for TAG's MTSP, i-NETT, and also serves as its president. He also founded Westec Security Corp. and served as its CEO. Stein can be reached at dales@tagnational.com. Visit www.tagnational.com.

