A Company’s Greatest Speed Boost

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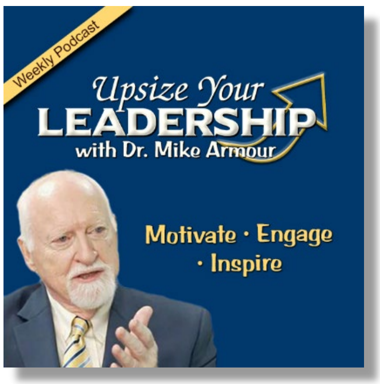

Imagine a rowing crew. Eight people, eight oars, one boat.

When they're out of sync — each pulling on their own count, at their own angle, in their own rhythm. The boat doesn't just go slowly. It *fights itself*. Every stroke partly cancels another. The water churns, the effort is enormous, and the boat crawls. Eight strong people producing the speed of two.

Now they find their rhythm. Same eight people. Same eight oars. Same muscles. But every stroke now lands in the same instant, in the same direction. And the boat doesn't go a little faster. It *leaps*. It moves with a speed that none of those eight could have produced alone, and that all eight together couldn't produce a moment ago.

Nothing changed except *alignment*. And that single change didn't add the rowers' strength together. It *multiplied* it.

That's the whole subject of today's episode. And it's the most underestimated source of speed in any organization.

This is the fourth episode in a six-part series on what I call the Five Essentials of Leadership. Last week we looked at Cultivating a High-Trust Culture. For leaders to be trusted, we pointed out, they must Exemplify Exceptional Character, which was the first essential in this series.

Today, we take up the third essential, Maximizing Alignment around Values, Vision, and Strategies. Just as character was a necessary precedent for leaders to be trusted, trust is the necessary precedent for leaders to be able to maximize alignment.

In the second episode in this series, we defined the essence of character as congruence: the alignment of what you value, what you say, and what you do. Character is congruence *within* a single person.

In the episode, we maintained our emphasis on congruence. There we applied it to trust – congruence *between* people. This congruence is built through reciprocal contributions to the value of the relationship and destroyed when a party squeezes value out of the relationship, but does not provide commensurate value to the relationship in turn.

And running underneath all of it is the construct that I introduced in the first episode: the **Congruence Accelerator™**. The Congruence Accelerator is the animating dynamic that brings out an organization's full potential for agility, speed, and innovation, which I've described as the three kingmakers in today's hypercompetitive business climate. Every enhancement to congruence adds a multiplier effect to the speed of the organization's capabilities.

Today, as we move to alignment around values, vision, and strategies, we move from congruence *within* you and congruence *between* you, to congruence *among* you.

I ended the last episode with a claim I now want to expand on: you cannot align people who don't trust the person guiding the alignment.

Think about why that's the case. Alignment asks people to point their energy in a direction that *you*, as the leader, have a hand in setting. That requires them to believe two things: first, that the direction is sound, and second, that your intentions in setting it are good. Both of those are forms of trust. Take the trust away, and you don't get alignment. You get **compliance**. People will face the direction you point. They just won't *pull* on the oars.

And here's the trap: compliance looks like alignment from the front of the room. Everyone's nodding. Everyone's facing forward. But their oars aren't in the water. Compliance is misalignment disguised as agreement. And it's more dangerous than open disagreement, because you can't fix what you don't see.

So, trust comes first, because trust is what converts compliance into commitment. And commitment makes workers open to the benefits that come from maximizing alignment. Importantly, however, this is not alignment merely for the sake of alignment. It's maximized alignment around values, vision, and strategies.

Each of these elements strengthens alignment by answering a vital specific question.

Values are alignment on *what boundaries we will not cross*. Think of them as defining the channel within which we row. They answer the question, *"What standards do we hold to?*

Vision is alignment on *where we're going*. What is it that we ultimately want to achieve. It answers the question, “What is our destination?”

Strategies are alignment on *how we'll get there within the boundaries that we hold ourselves to*. Strategies map the way. They answer the question, “What is our path?” Or to stay true to our nautical analogy, “What is our course forward?”

Boundaries, destination, path. When your people lined up on all three, you have full alignment. When any one of them is fuzzy or contested, the boat starts to fight itself, even if everyone is working hard. Hard work in different directions isn't progress. It's just expensive churn.

On the other hand, alignment multiplies impact. Now, that could sound like a mere motivational slogan. It isn’t. It’s at the heart of why alignment adds speed. Increased speed derives from two distinct things that alignment contributes.

First, alignment recovers the energy that misalignment was canceling. Go back to the rowing crew. Out of sync, every stroke partly works *against* the others. In other words, it not only works at cross purposes to speed. It actually affects speed *negatively*. Misaligned effort doesn't just fail to help. It actively subtracts. So, when you align, you don't start from zero. You recover the speed that misalignment was canceling. That alone creates marked improvement in performance.

Second — and this is the part that turns addition into multiplication — alignment creates resonance. When people are genuinely pointed the same way, something happens between them that doesn't happen when they're merely coordinated. They anticipate each other. They cover for each other without being asked.

Alignment compounds trust, because shared direction is itself a form of congruence. And we know from this entire series that congruence reduces friction between people. Each aligned person makes every *other* aligned person more effective. That's not eight people adding up. That's eight people each amplifying the other seven.

When it comes to alignment, the governing formula is this: performance equals recovered energy times resonance. That's why aligned forces don't add. They multiply. And it's why a smaller, perfectly aligned team will routinely outrun a larger, misaligned one. The math isn't on the side of size. It's on the side of alignment.

We named two gaps in character that undermine it: insincerity and inconsistency. Two gaps in trust: imbalance and unpredictability. Alignment breaks in two ways too, and naming them tells you exactly where to look.

The first gap is divergence. This is genuine disagreement about direction — people pointed at different destinations, holding different values, betting on conflicting strategies. The marketing team optimizing for growth while finance optimizes for margin.

Two leaders quietly pursuing incompatible visions. Divergence is the rowing crew pulling at cross-purposes. It's loud trouble, but at least it's *visible* trouble.

The second gap is ambiguity — and it's the more common and more insidious of the two. Here, people aren't opposed at all. They *want* to align. They simply can't, because the direction was never made clear enough to align to. The vision is a fog. The strategy is a slogan. The values are a poster in the lobby that no one can recite. These people aren't pulling against you. They're pulling *blind*, each filling the vagueness with their own best guess. And a hundred sincere best guesses scatter just as badly as a hundred deliberate disagreements.

Here's the leadership lesson hiding in that second gap: **most misalignment in organizations is not a conflict problem. It's a clarity problem.** The people are willing. They just can't see the target. And a target no one can see is a target no one can hit.

Let's connect this back to our engine — the Congruence Accelerator — and watch what alignment does to the three kingmakers.

Agility: An aligned organization pivots *together*. Because everyone shares the same vision, you can change the *strategy* — the path — without relitigating the *destination*. People understand the "why," so they adjust the "how" on their own. A misaligned organization can't pivot. Every change reopens argument about the proper destination.

Speed: This is the big payoff, and it comes from removing what I'll call the *directional verification tax*. It's similar to the verification tax that we saw with trust, except the scope is narrower. As its name implies, the *directional verification tax* is a toll that is levied on speed due to the frequent need to verify direction.

In a misaligned organization, every decision has to climb the management ladder. "Is this what we want? Does this fit?" Directional verification enters the picture when no one below the top is sure of the direction.

In an aligned organization, people can make decisions about direction locally, because they already know what being aligned with strategy looks like. Decisions that required escalation now happen in the periphery, in real time. Multiply that across thousands of daily choices, and that constitutes genuine organizational speed.

Innovation: In our last episode, we noted that trust enables innovation. Innovation needs freedom. But freedom without alignment breeds chaos. What alignment gives you is *bounded* freedom. Clear values and a clear vision create the edges of the sandbox. Inside those edges, people can take creative risks without asking permission, because they know what counts as "on-mission."

Remove the alignment, and you face an ugly choice. Either you lock everything down and kill innovation, or you open it up and watch effort scatter. Distributed, autonomous initiative is a gear that *never engages* at low alignment. Not that it engages slowly. It doesn't engage at all.

There are also other adverse consequences of low engagement. And they can be severe. Misalignment doesn't just slow an organization. It sets the organization *against itself*. A misaligned initiative doesn't merely fail to contribute. It actively drags against the aligned ones. Duplicated effort. Internal competition for the same resources. Territorial politics. Teams quietly working to make each other fail so their own bet looks better.

That's not a slow organization. That's an organization at *war with itself*, spending its best energy on internal friction instead of external results.

Operationally, the system burns its resources fighting itself. Psychologically, people feel the drain of working hard and getting nowhere. It's only a matter of time before they disengage. Which, not coincidentally, is exactly where we are headed with the next episode.

So, let me close with an action plan for immediate steps to turn around weak alignment. I'll offer you five moves.

One: Make the vision concrete, then repeat it past the point of boredom. If your people can't say the destination back to you in their own words, it isn't shared — it's stored, in your head only. Alignment is a communication discipline before it's anything else. In fact, if you're not receiving feedback that you talk too much about vision, you've probably not talked about it enough.

Two: Name your values out loud — especially the trade-offs. Values only align people when they tell people what you'll *refuse* to do for a win. Vague values align no one. Costly values align everyone.

Three: Draw the line from every strategy back to the vision. People align to a path when they can see how it reaches the destination. If they can't trace that line, the strategy will feel arbitrary. And people respond to arbitrary strategies with quiet resistance.

Four: Surface divergence. Don't paper over it. False alignment — everyone nodding while privately disagreeing — is more expensive than open conflict, because it costs you later after it has unleashed immense damage in the dark. If two of your leaders are pointed different ways, get it on the table and reconcile it. Real alignment can only be built on real agreement.

Five: Treat alignment as a maintenance responsibility, not a milestone. Alignment decays. New people arrive, conditions change, the message drifts. The leaders who stay aligned aren't the ones who aligned once — they're the ones who re-align constantly. It's a rhythm, not an event.

Now, notice the chain that we've built in the first four episodes. Character makes you predictable. Predictability earns trust. Trust gives you the influence to align people around a shared direction. And alignment tells everyone *where* to go.

But knowing where to go is not the same as *wanting* to go there with everything inside you. You can have a perfectly aligned organization that is also a *tired* one, people who know the destination, but are merely complying with the journey. Alignment doesn't *create* energy in an organization. It channels the energy. It directs energy to where it can have its greatest impact.

But the energy must be generated elsewhere. Which brings us to the fourth leadership essential: **engaging people in ways that motivate and inspire them** — turning aligned compliance into aligned *commitment*, the discretionary effort that people give only when they want to. That's where the boat doesn't just move in sync — it moves with everything those rowers have. We'll take that up next time.

Dr. Mike Armour is the founder and president of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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