

## **Integral Top Team Alignment** **Pleuntje van Meer**



It is possible to evolve top-teams for the twenty-first century, even in today's turbulent and challenging times. Achieving high performance at the most senior executive level of company divisions and business units requires a team to engage in an alignment process that takes time, focus and personal commitment. The task is not an onerous one, though it does require a clear mindset and a sharpening of skills and capabilities that go beyond many executives' previous individual business achievements.

We have conducted research with the executive management teams of some of the largest companies in Europe, Asia and the Americas over the last 7 years. Observing and working with global teams, we have identified three pre-requisites for achieving high-performance amongst these senior echelons of corporate divisions and business units:



1. **Authenticity**—Individual congruence of thought, speech and action for each individual.
2. **Alignment**—Working effectively as a group. Overcoming different agendas and investing in each other's success.
3. **Action**—Contribution to the outside world. A strategic dialogue leading to a common agenda, support structure and collaborative actions.

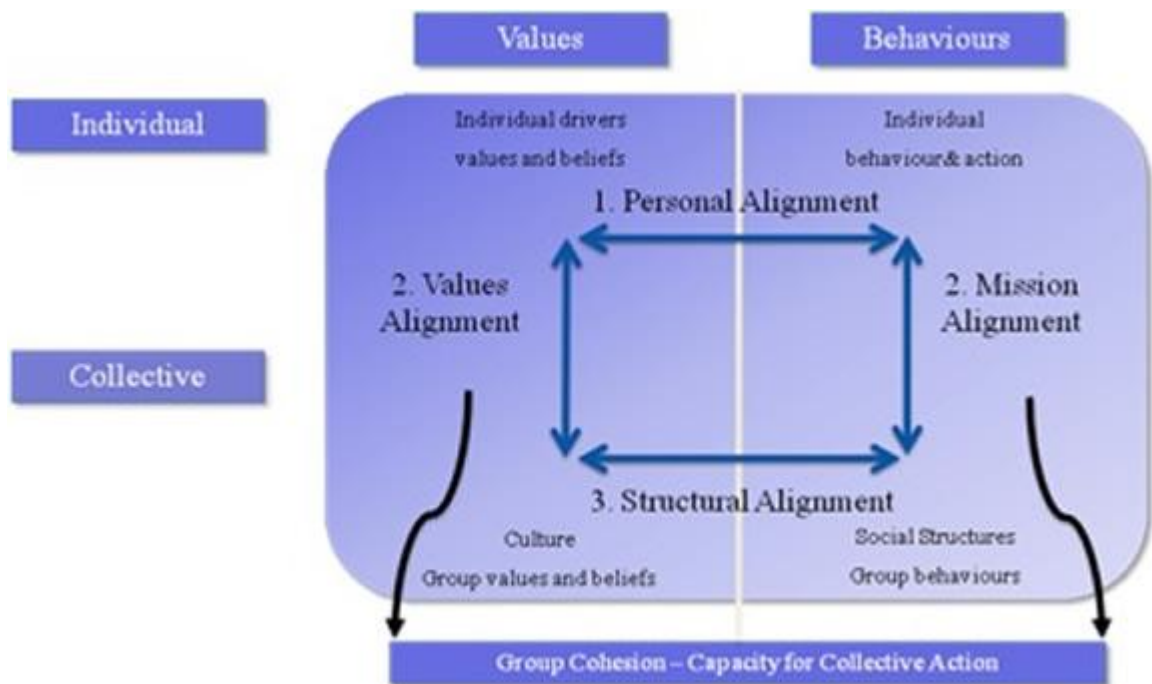
This article describes top team development as reflected in three concentric circles, that represent stages towards optimal collaboration. These stages are not linear or independent, yet they are interdependent, impacting on the individual, the team and on the organisation.

### **Top Team Alignment in Practice**

A top team alignment process typically evolves over a 6–12 month period. It requires each team member to be oriented both towards developing their own performance, as well as to increasing the balance and capacities of the team overall.

The model that Ken Wilber (1996) uses for describing human systems, later modified by Richard Barrett (2006), clarifies the shifts that takes place in this alignment process. The four quadrants in this integral model represent the different areas of the team-system. With this pattern in mind, the interventions can also be described as:

1. Creating stronger personal alignment by matching an individual’s internal drivers with outer behaviours. (Authenticity)
2. Focusing on the congruency between values and mission of the team. (Alignment)
3. Creating the necessary structures and actions to support desired contribution to the outside world. (Action)



## Model II: Ken Wilber’s 4 quadrants for describing Human Systems

### Enhancing Authenticity

The first stage in this journey requires strengthening self-awareness and individual learning in order to create a stronger “walking the talk”.

In most companies there is a lack of honest ‘upward’ feedback, which is needed to fuel learning and development. Another part of developing authentic behaviour, therefore, is to do a reality-check by organizing clear and simple feedback from outside stakeholders. This can be done through a 360 leadership values survey, supported with structured interviews. In the survey clients, colleagues and employees are invited to give honest feedback on a

leader's espoused values and capabilities, combined with open feedback on strengths and improvements. Looking into this mirror reveals blind spots. Together with the individuals' personal vision, these hitherto overlooked elements form the basis of a personal leadership plan in which the individual's key messages become clear.

A challenging director was referred for coaching. His proud behaviour and need to control had become an obstacle to his effectiveness as a leader. Finding this out during the sessions was painful and offensive to him. Yet as he related some months later, this wake-up-call was exactly what made him decide to continue the conversations and ask for more feedback.

### **Values in Leadership**

An individual's values are the keys to unlocking the corporate black box of effective leadership, for this can only take place if each leader acts in line with his or her values and aspirations. Getting clear on this aspect is one part of the work but in itself is not enough. The leadership model helps to organise this feedback into seven levels of leadership, each of which is pointing at one piece of the influencing spectrum. The key espoused values, communicated and expressed in day-to-day situations, show what role models a leader embodies and how effective he or she is in enabling and stimulating specific behaviours in their environment. This also distinguishes whether the leader is focused on self-interest, transformation or the common good. The feedback highlights how executives who are driven predominantly by anxiety and self-interest create disengagement and fear in the organisation.

Any dissonance between stated preferences, personal values and the feedback may be used as inputs in the leadership development process. This benefits the individual on various levels and helps to create a balance between physical, emotional, mental and existential needs. The resulting equilibrium leads to greater alignment of the individual (model II: personal alignment). To quote Otto Scharmer :

Profound change today not only requires a shift of the mind, it requires a shift of will and a shift of the heart. I have come to refer to this deeper shift as 'presencing.' A blend of the words 'presence' and 'sensing,' presencing signifies a heightened state of attention that allows individuals and groups to operate from a future space of possibility that they feel wants to emerge. Being able to facilitate that shift is the essence of leadership today.

### **Towards Alignment within the Team**

Members of a top team are typically successful in their own function but often far from forming a collective agenda to openly and collaboratively address their challenges. For sustained high-performance to occur, the team as a whole must be collectively responsible for developing and executing market strategies.

In this second stage, the focus is on team dialogue and qualitative feedback among top team members. Typically each individual brings their personal leadership development plans (drafted at the end of phase one) to a workshop where a dialogue between the top team members takes place. Speaking through these plans openly and asking others for feedback and support can be quite a challenge. This process requires mutual respect, honesty and willingness to grow as a team. The group must now focus on the fact that they are all working towards the shared objective of increasing their performance as a team and need to take on board that they are collectively responsible to their shareholders, employees and customers.

On one occasion, we worked in the food industry, in which one team member had just been given a new role. He received feedback from his staff on his fear-based style. This man's initial response was to point at external causes and challenges, whereupon his peers gave him a clear pushback. They felt this team member had not been fully present in the team, that he was mainly focused on his own agenda, and that he was taking out his uncertainties on others. Applying tough empathy, his peers helped him recognise a pattern of overwork and self-deception, and enabled him to realise the limiting effects of his behaviour.

As this example shows, a sharing phase is crucial to creating a new quality of presence in each leader. It enables team members to discover, reveal and develop their own unique leadership preferences and qualities within the organisation, and to acknowledge areas for self-improvement. The objective is not to ask individuals or a team to undergo radical transformation, but rather to enable them to act with cognisance and empathy. One example of this phenomenon is the fairytale of The Emperor's New Clothes. This metaphorical tale shows that steadfast adherence to the 'leader is always right' philosophy does not work and can lead to awkward but avoidable predicaments.

In an atmosphere of increased transparency, honesty and trust a shift will take place within the dynamics of the team. By this point, the team no longer consists of a collection of individuals, but is now an aligned and engaged group of peers who feel responsible for supporting each other's growth and success. There is now a shared sense that the ultimate performance of the management team is superior to the combined sum of individual contributions. At the very least, the group is aware that withholding feedback is counterproductive. Team members realise that going along with dysfunctional individual and team behaviours diminishes the individual and team potential that lies within them.

At this stage, the executive coach or facilitator needs to lead a dialogue with the management group that focuses on understanding the stated leadership values of the top team. The result of this phase is an enhanced values alignment between members of team, as well as a stronger alignment to a shared leadership culture (model II: values and mission alignment). This dialogue also concentrates on the way that these individuals function together to support the core business and its future strategic requirements. This part of the process clears the path for phase three.

### **Third Condition: Into Action**

Here, the focus is on future strategies, operational agendas to execute this and on each team member's contribution to the objective. This stage involves asking whether the top team profile meets the future company needs. The third step in improving the performance of the top team requires both ongoing individual development and a dialogue on the team's direction and responsibilities. In this phase we move the focus to outside the team and go beyond empathy for each other's strengths and development requirements. Now, we concentrate on creating a shared vision and mission for the company, division or business unit—the foundation for an aligned strategic agenda.

One example of this alignment occurred when we worked with a global bank. From the first meeting onwards, the managers with business line responsibilities were fighting their corporate colleagues. There was a general lack of trust, inadequate decision-making and a lack of clarity in their future direction. This difficult situation created a chaotic organisation with low engagement and underperformance. It was only at the action phase that a significant shift took place.

Defining the core business was not a problem, but setting a shared vision was clearly hindered by the differing interpretations that the corporate and business lines had on how to perform their roles. Detaching from personal agendas and areas of responsibility required great discipline from the team, which was only possible in the newly created atmosphere of trust. Revisiting roles helped break old silo-patterns, and imparted a great impetus to improving each other's competencies in working towards a common goal.

Setting the future agenda provides a mirror to reflect on the current and desired team roles, as well as on the necessary changes for improving individual and collective performance. Some useful tools that underpin this dialogue can include a mission and vision exercise. It can also ascertain the core and operating values. This process involves:

1. **Mission/vision:** Describing the 'what?' (mission) and the 'why?' (vision) enhances clarity about the future agenda. Here we use the '4 Whys' process (model IV) that creates a short, authentic and inspiring vision and mission statement in less than half a day by looking at it from the external and internal perspective. In Richard Barrett's book, *Liberating the Corporate Soul*, there is a description of a short process that helps to retrieve a mission and vision statement in four steps.
2. **Core and operating values:** In the foregoing discussion we defined the foundation for the agenda. This step now looks at the 'how?' When working with core values, we often see top teams creating a 'wish-list' opposite to where they are in the present and calling this their core values. This reactionary list actually indicates the operating values necessary to break through the current situation towards a determined goal. Operating values are the active focus points that help to overcome current hindrances. They concentrate attention on a certain part of the operation that requires particular attention in the present. Core values are long-term navigators and are likely to be used for many years. We use core values as

a basis for day-day behaviour and decision-making. By identifying the core values of the company, we aim to create an anchor in what, above anything else, grounds and represents the company. Therefore these values are based in a common future, as well as in the present.

3. Strategic agenda: This last step sets a clear future agenda for the organisation, as well as for each individual within the leadership team. It also synchronises these two aspects and brings in the performance indicators and market and stakeholder analysis.

Taken together, these new alignments can lead to changes in the way the leadership team is organised in terms of roles and responsibilities. In turn, this leads to a stronger structural alignment (see model II).

### **Model III: Diagnostic Leadership Values Framework**

In our experience, Richard Barrett's model for leadership provides the best framework for the dialogue mentioned in phase 1. This model, based upon the hierarchy of human needs described by Maslow, distinguishes seven leadership styles that enable specific developments in the journey of a leader. Research completed with top leadership teams over a period of more than 10 years, shows that the most successful leaders consciously focus their energy throughout the full spectrum of all seven levels of consciousness. Such leaders exhibit this scope in leadership values that are revealed in the way they operate in work and life. These leaders have the ability to respond appropriately to internal challenges and external threats, while taking advantage of opportunities for the organisation to grow and develop.

The principal focus of levels one, two and three in this model of leadership consciousness is on creating a financially stable organisation with a strong customer base that has efficient systems and processes. The principal focus of level four is on transformation, so that the organisation can be responsive and adaptable to changes in its internal and external environment. The principal focus of levels five, six and seven is on creating vision, mission and values for the organisation. This trio of elements build internal and external connectivity through strategic alliances and by making a contribution to society.

### **Model IV: Mission and Vision**

The process for creating authentic mission and vision statements (referred to as the '4 Whys' process) is described in greater detail described in *Liberating the Corporate Soul*. The uniqueness of this approach lies in combining the internal mission and vision (which is related to the organisation's purpose) with the external mission and vision (which indicates how the organisation operates in the world).

### **Conclusion**

Improving the performance of a top team involves reflecting on each person's own philosophy of leadership and on their openness to feedback and learning. It demands an ability to empathise with a team of equally capable peers, who may view the world of business through very different lenses. Most

importantly, it requires a commitment to act as both mentor and mentee, which involves giving honest feedback and actively supporting the development of all other team members. This foundation equips senior teams to address their current challenges, and enables them to better meet and tackle future challenges. Above all, it enhances a team's capacity to embrace change rather than fear it.

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