



# THE ALIGNMENT IMPERATIVE

Building Shared Reality to  
Drive Performance in a New Era

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By David Parkinson and Lindsay Uittenbogaard

# FOREWORD

## The Case for Alignment in the Future of Work

The increasing speed and complexity of change in today's workplaces means it has never been more critical to build a **shared understanding between people**. This is the basis of employee alignment. It is about more than simply lining up objectives and having people memorise the same strategic messages.

Too often at work, we are in such a hurry to meet targets, impress colleagues, and to appear in control, that we make assumptions rather than ask for clarification. Listening to alternative worldviews seems all too difficult in the modern age.

Realising the vast benefits of diversity of thinking involves integrating the views of all relevant parties. And integration involves healthy challenge, agreeing to disagree, and finding compatibility so that people can deliver better together. Effective communication and collaboration at work is one of the fundamental challenges of our time.

This seminal Whitepaper shows how research in neuroscience and the social sciences points to a richer and more relevant definition of alignment. It explains the structured and practical approach that Mirror Mirror takes to build better employee alignment in the workplace and shows two cases as proof of concept.

Alignment is the linchpin by which organizations, at any size or scale, will survive and thrive in our emergent work futures. It is an area in which Mirror Mirror has been working for several years and I am pleased to see this thought-leading Whitepaper on the subject.



**Cathryn Barnard**

Working the Future





01

# The Imperative for Employee Alignment

**The need for employee alignment in organizations is not new.** For decades leaders have sought to align organizations through town hall meetings, team briefings, and sharing stories and messages from the CEO through video, digital channels and interactive social media – **all to help employees understand and engage with the mission and vision, strategy and brand.**

The problem is that these mechanisms tend to be ‘one way’ and while they do help people understand the broader context of their work, their impact is limited. **Even with attempts to use more interactive communications, there is mounting evidence to show that employee engagement levels have continued to decline.** Workplaces are becoming more complex, teams more diverse, and employees are less willing to accept top-down messaging at face value.

**The current shift to remote working also means relationships and trust take longer to build and take more effort to maintain.** Thus, alignment has become more of an imperative, while the task of managing alignment is more challenging.

As traditional communication mechanisms for creating alignment are decreasing in effectiveness, it is high time to take a fresh look at the field of alignment. **How organizations define and create employee alignment will be a key success factor in an increasingly complex, fast moving world.** Alignment is a crucial foundation for engagement, collaboration and ultimately team effectiveness.

In this paper we look at how a new approach developed by Mirror Mirror uses a diagnostic tool combined with structured dialogue to create better cognitive and behavioural alignment in a way that is rapid and scalable. We explore how alignment gaps are identified, measured, and managed; and the benefits this approach has brought to organizations so far.

**Alignment gets people in organizations pulling in the same direction**



**Employee alignment about WHY, WHAT and HOW is an essential foundation for effective work in today's complex and diverse working environments**

## What does alignment in organizations look like?

Many of us can say we have worked in ‘great’ or ‘high performing’ teams. These were enriching experiences where the level of engagement and collaboration resulted in high levels of innovation and productivity. Such teams are characterised by capable, motivated individuals who share a common view of what success looks like, understand the context in which they are operating, and practice behaviours and habits that support effective collaboration.

**Alignment is not people ‘thinking the same thing’, it is compatibility – making room for differences and challenge, new ideas and change.**

The contrast between how it feels to work in a high performing team versus an average or low-performing team is stark. In these teams, there are more instances where views and behaviours conflict. People hold different interpretations of what the team is trying to achieve, what their priorities are, and how individuals should be contributing to deliver together.

Given current levels of misalignment, it is no wonder employee engagement is low. It would be illogical to expect anything other than low levels of confidence, motivation and commitment among employees when conflict and blame get in the way of people being understood and adding value.

## Common signs of misalignment in and between teams



Misalignment produces conflict, and the negative consequences can be immense. It wastes time, energy and resources as people attempt to overcome the barriers presented by conflict and pull in different strategic directions.

Currently, misalignment between people is considered to be part of 'life in business', or it is attributed to other, more visible causes such as incompetence or poor leadership. While this may be the case, some form of misalignment can be found at the root of every problem. It can be about how a role is understood differently, how a decision is understood differently, or about differences in how teams are expected to interact. Potentially, there can be dozens of alignment gaps at play in any given business situation.

Usually, people try to sort out these conflicting differences - these alignment gaps - as they become apparent through conversation. However, this is simply insufficient, not least because social, political, and cultural influences stand in the way of ‘straight talk’.

Trying to unravel who thought what and why, how the differences compare, and how to move forward can quickly become a very convoluted exercise, with clarity getting lost ‘in the weeds’.

But we’re missing an opportunity. **Alignment can be identified, measured, and managed.** Structure and process can be used to convert the risks of misalignment into competitive advantage.



There is a ‘dark side of alignment’. It is when the needs and desires of an individual overtake those of the team, intentionally or unintentionally. Plenty of hidden information, misinformation, and dysfunctional behaviours play out when this happens.

## 02

# The Evolved Definition of Alignment

Traditionally organizations have relied on managerial control to ensure that the efforts of employees are coordinated and organised for maximum effect. However, over the last 20 – 30 years we have seen trends which have steadily eroded the extent to which managerial control can be exerted:

## GLOBALLY

- The overall VUCA environment (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous).
- The recent requirement for social distancing coupled with the technology that enables more remote working.
- The gig economy and the trend for short term contracted staffing - people are less likely to get to know each other, or even meet prior to having to deliver results together.

## ORGANIZATIONALLY

- More diversity in the workplace, which presents opportunities, but also more challenges because there are a wider range of cultures and perspectives to accommodate.
- A pace of change so fast that traditional command and control mechanisms cannot keep up.

## INDIVIDUALLY

- Attitudinal trends - people are now more likely to want to contribute ideas about how to deliver within the broader strategic frame than be told what to do.
- Increasing human productivity and knowledge work – there is an increased span of control at the individual level.

So, while employee alignment has risen in importance, the traditional mechanisms for establishing alignment are falling away.

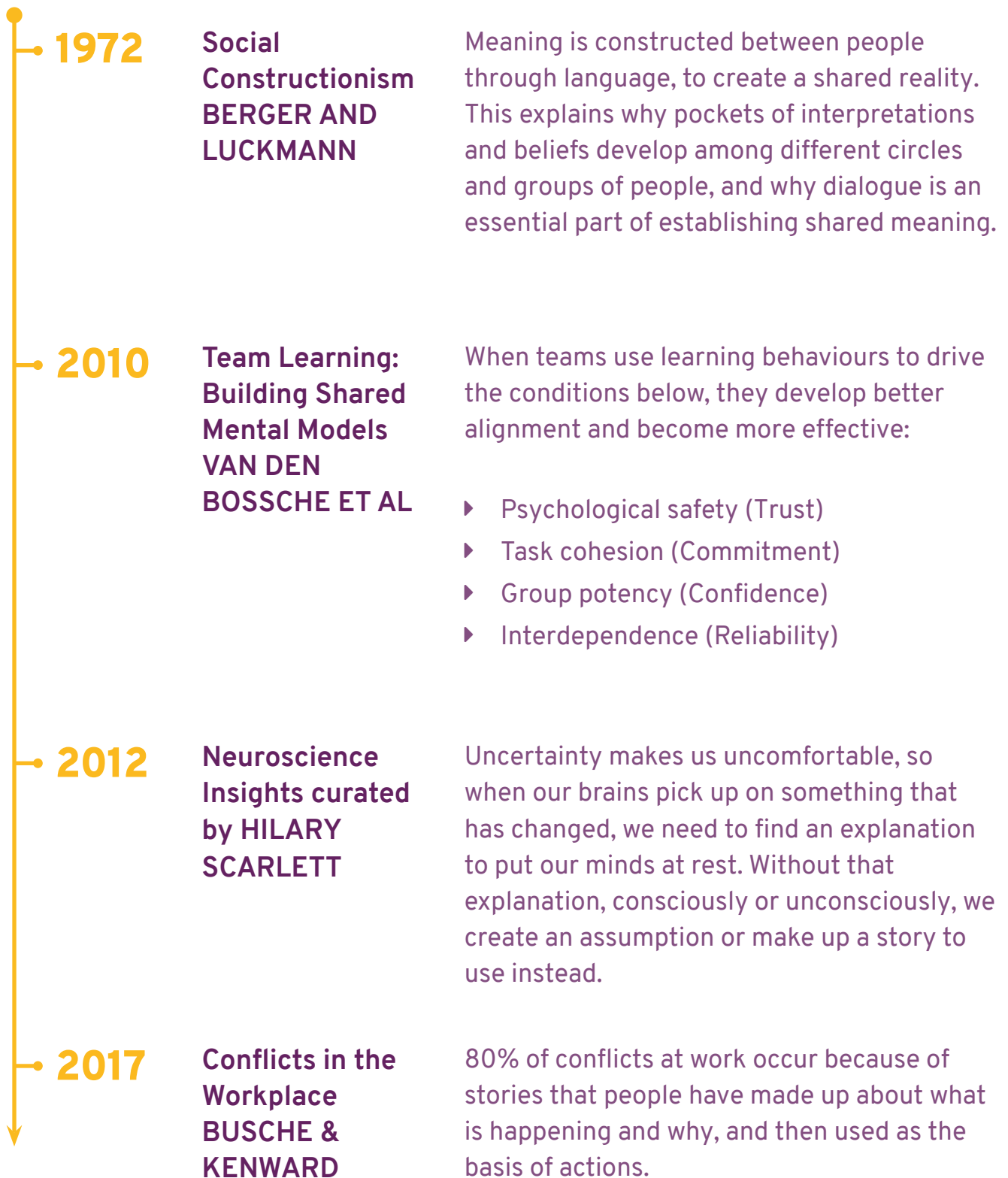
We define alignment as being when people move in the same direction to maximize outcomes and minimize energy loss. In an organizational setting, this means that individuals and teams are able to make decisions and take actions that line up with the wider organization's strategy and priorities.

**Alignment is cognitive and behavioural compatibility, which is inclusive. Conversely misalignment is cognitive and behavioural conflict, which is more exclusive of others.**

Research over the last ten years has shown that a deeper level of alignment, that goes well beyond simply communicating overall direction, is required today. Researchers have found that alignment includes shared understanding and team behaviours. They found that you cannot tell people to align.

People need to make sense of things on their own terms. They need to internalize meaning as relevant to their own context, through a common language with others.

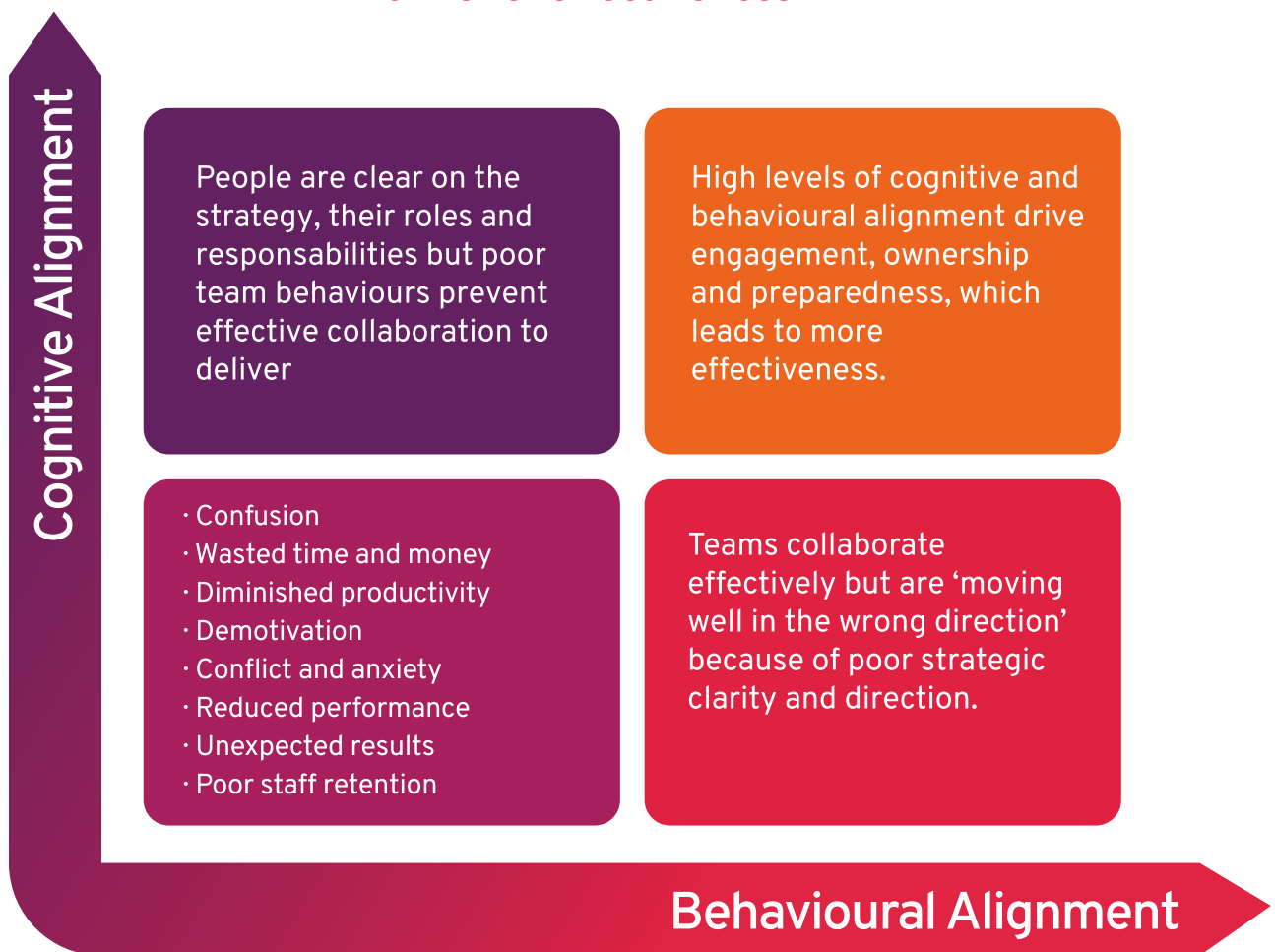
The timeline below shows how research that relates to alignment has evolved over the past 50 years.



*References can be supplied on request.*

By integrating this research, we can see that alignment is made up of cognitive aspects (understanding what the strategic frame and how it relates to the work of the team); and behavioural aspects (understanding how individuals collaborate and take action in relation to their colleagues in the team).

### How cognitive and behavioural alignment interact as a driver of effectiveness



Alignment creates clarity on the What & How. The result is well motivated & coordinated effort.

Misalignment creates conflict and confusion, which leads to demotivated people and poorly coordinated effort.

From the way humans are hardwired to interact, effective alignment needs to include a process of dialogue to check off assumptions and compare perspectives to create actionable clarity.

**At the heart of alignment is the recognition that:**

- When people learn about the views and assumptions of others in their group in a safe and constructive environment, they build more empathy and understanding.
- And when people become aware of mental models that could serve them better, they adopt them, quickly and often unconsciously.



“It is all too easy for ‘alignment’ to become just another buzzword and part of the everyday rhetoric of leadership and organisations. What we are talking about is greater alignment in a human sense: the ability to work with difference, to do conflict well, to form a shared reality while recognizing the ever-changing complexity in organizational life. Proper human alignment is not rhetoric – it is the essential starting point for effective delivery in difficult, uncertain times.”

STEVE HEARSUM

London, UK

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Steve Hearsom is an independent consultant and facilitator and has been described as “the right kind of fly in the ointment”. His interest is in collaborative practice and strategic alignment, focusing on Digital Age Leadership, Organisational change & transformation, and Practitioner development. Steve is writing a book called ‘No Silver Bullet’, on how the need for certainty drives the obsession for guaranteed solutions and fixes in organisations.





“I’m excited to be supporting Mirror Mirror with this thought leadership piece because in 2018, a colleague and I undertook a global study of strategic alignment with a focus on the role of leaders and senior communication professionals. The overwhelming majority agreed that strategic alignment was important to an organization’s success, yet very few actually did it well. We found that when a leader has a gut instinct that something is not right, or sees people are struggling and disengaged, or when they know performance is waning, commonly they’re unsure of where the real alignment gaps are and what to do about it. We know much more about how alignment can be managed proactively today, and in doing so, gain vast benefits and mitigate against the risks of misalignment.”

ZORA ARTIS

Melbourne, Australia

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Zora Artis, GAICD SCMP FAMI CPM is a business, brand and communications strategist, alignment practitioner and facilitator based in Australia. She has researched and authored thought-leading content on strategic alignment, internal communication, and leadership. Zora has won multiple awards for leadership as well as communication excellence and is a board director with the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC).



## 03

# How Alignment Works

If traditional employee communication deals in the currency of alignment but does not deliver it, what else is needed? From our experience of creating alignment with teams and organizations, we have found that two additional steps are needed:

## 01 IDENTIFYING ALIGNMENT

Alignment issues are often ‘invisible’ simply because people are unaware that their understanding or mental models are not shared. In this step to ‘identify alignment’ we use a diagnostic tool to uncover specific alignment gaps. The results provide an informed starting point for team discussions about how to address those gaps.

Some employee surveys attempt to do this but are often designed to test or substantiate alignment in overly simplistic ways. The data tends to be generalized, is not easily actionable, and any follow up process is often burdened by top-down messages or values.

A more granular, discovery-based, systemic approach is required where people in operational units can see how their views compare in a way that exposes the common ground and differences.

## 02 CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR ALIGNMENT

We have seen from the van den Bossche et al study in 2010 on team effectiveness that there are four learning behaviours that together determine the extent to which teams can build shared mental models. When a team, their leader, and ideally the wider organization in which they sit put these learning behaviours into practice, the ‘we’ becomes more important than ‘I’, and alignment is better enabled.

For example, a key determinant of performance in a team is the ability of its members to take risks, challenge one another, and admit mistakes. People are less likely to behave in these ways if they fear they will be criticized, ridiculed, or excluded. If this is the case, people become more cautious and considerations of psychological safety take precedence over the interests of the team.

Conversely, if a team behaves in a way that promotes psychological safety, they are more likely to open-up to each other’s perspectives, trust that there is value doing so, and develop a better shared understanding about the what, why and how of delivering better together.

**“Alignment is both a state and a process. It is a constantly evolving state of understanding between people, and a process that is easier when participants have a growth mindset, trust, and shared commitment.”**

## The Mirror Mirror Approach to Alignment

The Mirror Mirror approach to employee alignment is about giving people in organizations the opportunity to make sense of their shared context in a way that is relevant and actionable.

It does this firstly with a tool that captures anonymous data about how people perceive what is happening and compares the data. This provides a read out of ‘what is’. This allows us to identify and measure the differences and common ground.

**The results on their own are valuable as they provide a clear readout of ‘what is’: how the strategy is currently understood, what people think is holding them back, and what behavioural patterns are at play. Aggregating data for multiple teams reflects the actual culture and direction of the organization.**

We close these gaps through structured, constructive dialogue. The data and the dialogue together create actionable clarity, inspire new ways forward, and help people accept decisions they may not have chosen for themselves. The content covers the strategy and its relevance to participants, it covers team dynamics - what the teams are doing that are helping or hindering their path to being more effective, and it covers how team members feel the organization is supporting them in being better aligned and more effective.

The process is inherently inclusive and non-personal and it emphasises the team first. It prioritises alignment gaps that are considered to be the more significant first, which unravels many of the smaller issues. The outcomes are more engagement, ownership and effectiveness.

Essentially, Mirror Mirror is a rapid and practical approach to creating shared reality so that people can deliver better together.



## How is alignment different from traditional ‘employee engagement’?

The concept of what is known as Employee Engagement has evolved from the ‘command and control’ approach to managing employees. As Nita Clarke, co-author of the McLeod Report ‘Engage for Success’ said “Engagement recognises that people aren’t the problem that need to be managed, they are part of the solution to the organization’s challenges”.

Employee engagement aims to improve how people are treated at work by leaders: valuing, inspiring, recognising and caring to bring more clarity, confidence, and community.

This is an inspired vision, but the practice has been compromised by the need to do things faster, and more cheaply through leaders and line managers who are unprepared, un-trained and too busy to be ‘engaging’. As a result, employee engagement is largely still about the top-down, one-way, messaging.

This is becoming increasingly ineffective particularly in organizations where work is more complex, people are more diverse, and interactions more remote. In some cases, this watered-down approach to engagement is actually disengaging employees, to the extent that it feeds resistance, cynicism and indifference.



## Alignment drives active engagement and effective delivery.

So far, this paper has addressed creating a new level of alignment in organizations as the foundation for engagement, collaboration and ultimately organizational effectiveness.

However, as a next step it is worth considering how to incorporate an alignment process into the strategy implementation cycle itself. This ensures that the alignment needed to implement a strategy across the enterprise is set up from the very beginning.

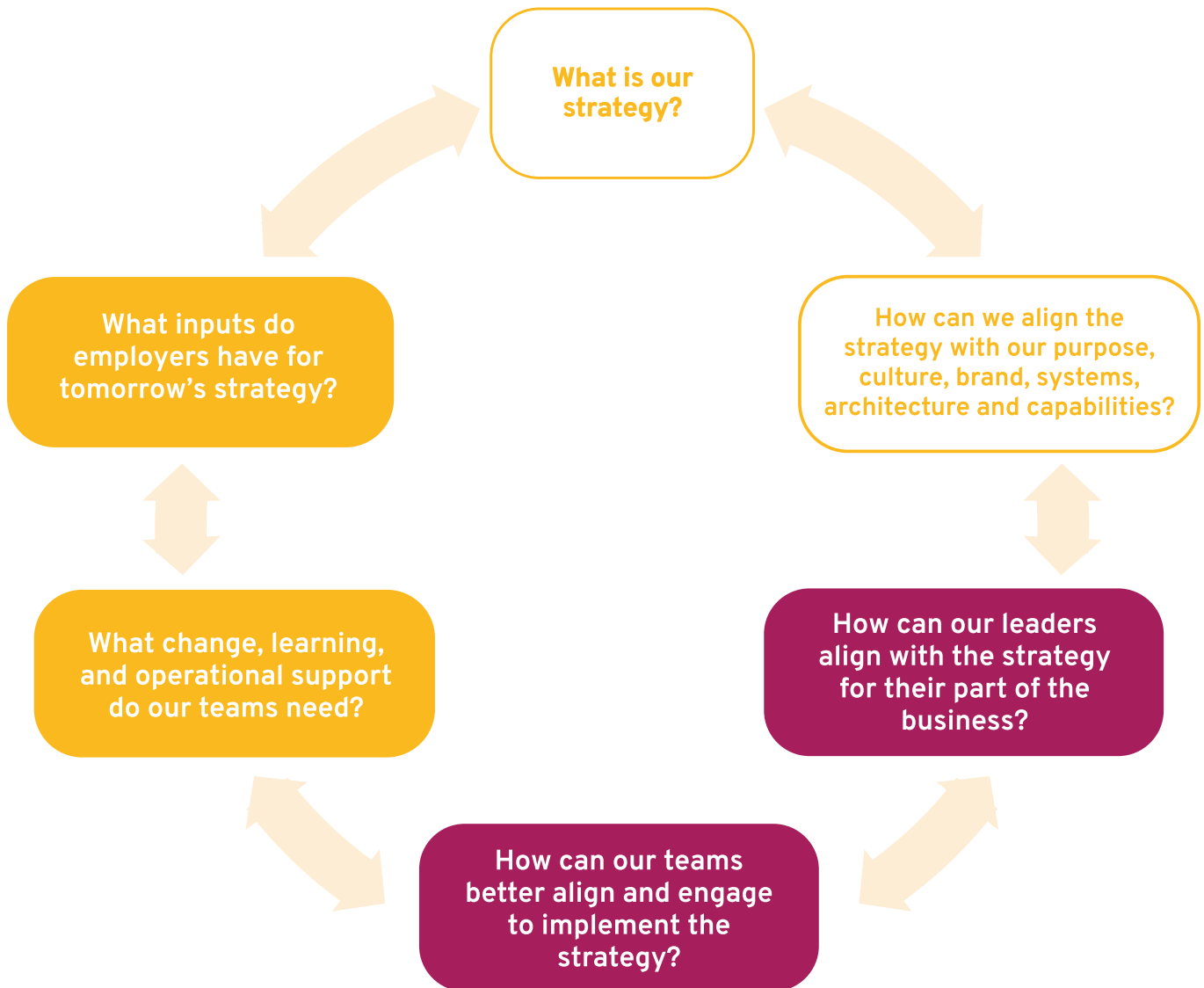
**Alignment data from a whole strategy implementation process can be used to:**

- ▶ Capture ideas and inputs from employees to inform strategic decision making (the employee voice)
- ▶ Understand the current culture and level of strategic understanding within an organization
- ▶ Engage employees with a new strategy or change programme
- ▶ Check what is helping or hindering implementation of the strategy



# DRIVING ENTERPRISE ALIGNMENT

Alignment questions leaders need to answer in the strategy implementation cycle



- Areas dealt directly in the Mirror Mirror process.
- Areas where the Mirror Mirror workshop surfaces insights.

This holistic approach uses the Mirror Mirror diagnostic as a key tool to provide data and insights to help people align and pull in the same direction, within a wider organizational framework.

“Many contemporary approaches to driving engagement still don’t work. They are focused on capturing people’s attention and exerting control rather than meaningfully connecting peers to each other in ways that allow them to succeed. Addressing the context for communication is the key to contemporary, dynamic alignment. People are motivated to accomplish goals and they build loyalty to a team and an organization when they trust each other, when they are a good fit with the culture of that team and organization, and when they all have a shared understanding of direction and priorities.”

MARY E. BOONE

Connecticut, US

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Mary E. Boone is a US-based author and consultant, designing strategic, complexity-based approaches to communication, leadership and large-scale meetings. She and co-author David Snowden received an Academy of Management award and an Emerald Citation of Excellence Award for their Harvard Business Review cover article [“A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making.”](#) Her books include [Managing Inter@ctively](#), and [Leadership and the Computer](#).



“We need diversity to understand, adapt and innovate. But this comes with a cost. We need to work hard to harvest this diversity. Creating common ground, a shared understanding, or alignment - as defined in this paper, is key. We know from research that this is fundamental to team performance. Mirror Mirror reflects this understanding, but more importantly it provides a methodology that fosters dialogue and enables the joint construction of this alignment through constructively dealing with these differences.”

PIET VAN DEN BOSSCHE

Antwerp, Belgium

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Piet Van den Bossche  
University of Antwerp, Professor learning in organisations



# Case Studies

## CASE STUDY 1: EUROPEAN-FUNDED INNOVATION AGENCY

Mirror Mirror was approached by the HR Director of a scientific innovation agency to help them address a number of staff complaints relating to, poor morale, overwork, and a lack of clarity about priorities. She sensed a strong “us and them” mentality between staff and management: alignment appeared to be one of the agency’s biggest challenges. However, she was unable to take action without clarity about exactly where the issues were. Was misalignment rooted in team behaviours, team context, organizational support, or across all of these areas?

The organization comprised over sixty multinational professionals working in seven teams across eight locations. To gauge the level of alignment across all indicators and gain some insight about where the issues were, Mirror Mirror ran an organization-wide online diagnostic survey. A one-day workshop was held subsequently with all teams. The first part had teams working with the results of their alignment reports to address their own gaps. The second part was held in plenary, allowing teams to compare and connect the findings. This was done online and utilised the full report which gave each of the teams’ data about their specific issues both internally and in relation to the wider organization. A full day workshop was held to discuss the outcomes and agree a way forward.

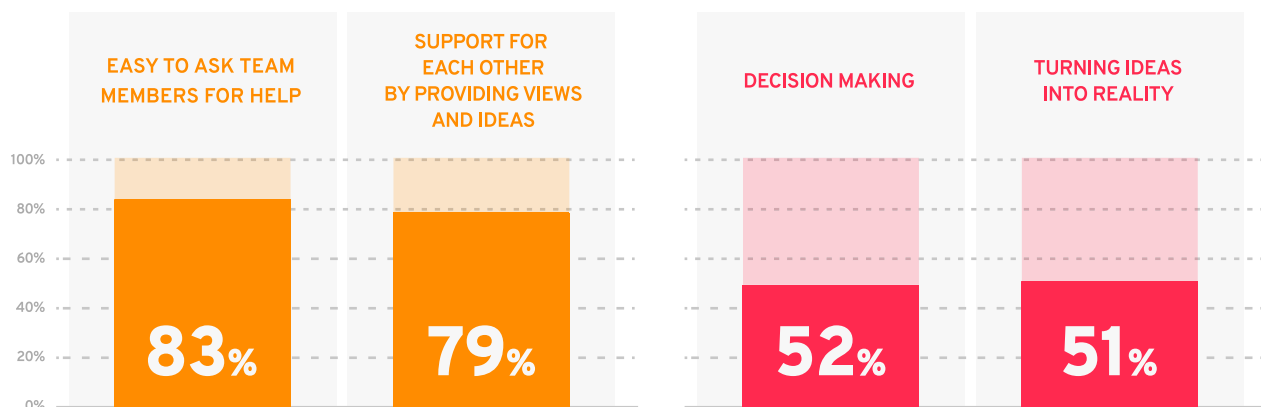
“Looking at how our views compared took us to a much more objective viewpoint. It made me realise how important reflection is, and how valuable it can be to take several steps back and really see what’s happening.”

PARTICIPANT

Each team came out of their own dialogue sessions with some concrete decisions and actions. The big take-away however, was the emergence of a core alignment issue across the organization: there were different interpretations about the definition of the term “self-managed” and how it would work in practice. The Management Team wanted to empower teams to make their own decisions, while each team felt unable to prioritise because they didn’t have clear information about the wider context.

The management team was hard working, ambitious, and wanted to empower their teams to self-manage through delegated decision-making responsibilities.

Aggregated team survey results prior to the away day



We took from these results that while there was strong support between people in teams, delivery and performance could be more effective.

**“The Mirror Mirror facilitators were professional and flexible; the analysis was deep, absorbing all our complexity and diversity; and the follow up was complete. The whole experience that Mirror Mirror offers is unique and competitive. I highly recommend it.”**

HR DIRECTOR

During the plenary session, the key question arose: How could communication to set priorities still take place between the management team and staff in a ‘self-managed’ environment? The outcome was broad consensus for quarterly discussions in which both Management and each team could share information and insights the business, developments and expectations. The link between a lack of prioritisation and overwork became tangible, which can somehow be difficult to see when ‘you’re in the situation’.

**80%**

**Average rating provided by participants on how effective Mirror Mirror was as an enabler of better delivery.**



## CASE STUDY 2: PHARMA R&D EAST ASIA

**Mirror Mirror was approached by Skarbek, a partner consultancy, to help create a new level of alignment in a customer organization in the far east.** This customer, part of a large multinational pharmaceutical company, was underperforming, progress was slow, and it was clear that morale was low.

In their initial analysis Skarbek used a number of traditional team diagnostic approaches which indicated there were tangible problems; poor accountability being one of them. Unfortunately, the traditional team interventions yielded little in the way of insight into what was causing the problems or how to address them. At this point Mirror Mirror was deployed to get to the root of the problems.

It was clear from the data that the team members were working to different, sometimes conflicting interpretations of the team purpose. These differences were subtle – it had been easy for team members to be talking at cross purposes without realising. With this clarity, team members were able to agree specific objectives and develop a plan to achieve them.



“Mirror Mirror is different. It focuses on the understanding and interactions between team members. It’s about alignment, not just strategic alignment but alignment in how those team members collaborate.”

SKARBEK FACILITATOR

After the workshop, measurement of what changed showed the team felt levels of clarity on direction and remit had increased by 42%, and their level of preparedness to succeed was up by 16%.

## RESULTS

**+42%** clarity on  
direction and  
remit

**+16%** preparedness  
to succeed

“Even the best strategies fail to deliver their intended value unless they are executed successfully. Despite the confines of our functional silos, strategy execution demands alignment over strategy. Alignment creates not only a shared understanding of the strategy, but also provides a common purpose and direction. Strategic alignment, therefore, is a critical capability for teams and organizations to achieve sustained competitive advantage.”

MURAT TARAKCI

Rotterdam, the Netherlands

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Murat Tarakci has a Ph.D. in Econometrics and is currently an Associate Professor at Rotterdam School of Management. He is a published author in publications such as the [Harvard Business Review](#), [Financial Times](#), and [Strategic Management Journal](#). He developed a measurement method and diagnostic tool that maps the extent to which teams in whole organizations align with enterprise objectives and has successfully applied this with several organizations such as ING and DSM.





“Especially today, when leaders need to work with remote teams, re-set direction, and manage change, alignment is more important than ever.”

LINDSAY UITTENBOGAARD  
Founder and Director, Mirror Mirror

