



**“Inside-Out” Alignment:
Maximum Engagement
for Superior Performance
Dean Robb, Ph.D.**

A recent national survey of American workers and managers was conducted by Harris Interactive Inc., focusing on the issue of workplace engagement. The survey produced a few key findings: Only 20 percent of workers feel very passionate about their jobs; less than 15 percent feel strongly energized by their work; and only 31 percent (strongly or moderately) believe that their employer inspires the best in them.

Other findings: More than one-third of managers do not care about the fate of their organization. More than one fourth of managers surveyed do not agree that their organizations inspire the best in them, or are unwilling to promote their organization as being a great place to work.

In a nutshell, workplace engagement and commitment are at an all-time low. This represents a crisis as the accelerating pace of global competition acts to create an entirely new market space that is forcing businesses to elicit maximum workforce performance, creativity and innovation. But sustaining that kind of sustainable workforce excellence can only happen where very high levels of workplace engagement and commitment are the norm.

Traditionally, the basic approach for eliciting maximum performance levels has been what might be termed “row harder,” i.e. trying harder, and harder, and harder, at making age-old – and increasingly dysfunctional – strategies work. But the survey results bear witness that the only thing we seem to be achieving is a death rattle... on a national scale.

Regaining high levels of workplace engagement and commitment in the new economy will require a fundamental change in management paradigms and in the underlying social contract. This will require managing a central paradox: Performance is based on alignment. Strategy, structure, processes and, most importantly, people, need to be tightly focused in the same direction and working in concert. This means “convergence of energies” – getting everything and everyone moving in coherent unison toward a single vision or goal. On the other hand, organizational creativity and innovation demands tapping into and amplifying internal variety and differences – diversity and individuality. Here we are invoking “divergence of energies.”

However, since the dawn of the great bureaucracies, the primary goal of companies has been stability: i.e. "protecting" the organization by defending the status quo. Internal differences posing a threat to the status quo of a company have traditionally been repressed and controlled. Maintaining stability by maximizing alignment and minimizing internal differences has been the primary goal. And it is precisely this 'minimization of internal differences' that is so problematic in connection with organizational learning, creativity and innovation.

This legacy shows up in traditional, top-down, command-and-control practices for gaining alignment. The use of command-and-control, for example, flows from a core belief of executive decision-makers that the exercise of dominating power to subjugate other adult human beings is a legitimate and effective practice.

This basic alignment was reinforced through "strong" cultures that shape collective thinking and behavior along relatively narrow (i.e. conformist) lines, believed by senior managers to support strategic goals and objectives.

Gradually, "good corporate citizens" were shaped through reward/punishment systems based on social rewards such as organizational position, level, status, and power. On the flip side, social pressures, especially the threat of loss of position, level, etc. shaped such corporate citizens just as strongly. Another problem has been that the main concern of legacy alignment practices has been centered on gaining behavioral compliance, or getting employees to do what the organization wants them to do (without concern about how they feel about it).

All of these strategies are "outside-in" because they rely on social factors (either positive or negative) that are fundamentally extrinsic to (outside of) the person.

This shows up, for example, in the traditional hospital hierarchical management structure, where there are clear lines of authority and very little downward empowerment. The chief nurse calls all the shots and everyone knows it; the chief of medicine calls all the shots and everyone knows it; the head of operations calls all the shots in his area and everyone knows it. Those who "go outside the lines" are quickly "re-educated."

These alignment practices are deeply problematic in connection with goals of sustainable performance excellence, and in fact seriously undermine systemic capability for creativity and innovation. Their negative impact has been dramatically intensified, stimulated by hyper-competition and by our reactive response to it: remember the "row-harder" syndrome! The effect has been compounded further by constant downsizing, rightsizing, and outsourcing: organizational members live with constant uncertainty and fear of losing their jobs, so they tend to become even more risk-averse, won't stick their necks out on a creative new idea, and make sure to be well-behaved "good corporate citizens".

I've seen this in subtle ways: in hospital systems for example, by an increasing number of personnel who seem to have become sticklers for "following the rules" to a fault with forms, working with systems, etc, where formerly they would be

complaining about excessive “red tape.” The customer seems to have become somewhat incidental! Folks are keeping their head down and their nose to the grindstone, and making absolutely sure that they won’t be called on the carpet for even the least of lapses.

Because these traditional alignment strategies depend solely on compliance, conformity, extrinsic motivation and external (social) pressures, and because they discourage expression of intrinsic, individual or culturally/ethnically-rooted identity (and differences from the organizational norms), many employees eventually come to feel devalued, demoralized and even dehumanized. Many begin to feel and believe that, to the enterprise, they are merely “cogs in the machine.”

This causes employees to become emotionally and spiritually “burned out,” i.e., unmotivated, unengaged, uncommitted, and apathetic. They lose interest in the organization’s well-being. They can even become actively subversive of organizational goals and survival. Consequently, the enterprise often suffers a deep and serious “loss of soul.”

The Harris survey bears this out: on top of the mounting loss of worker and management engagement, it exposes a growing problem with “burnout,” reporting that increasing numbers of employees define themselves as burned out (42 %), while a staggering one-third of employees believe they have reached a dead end in their jobs, and 21 percent express an eagerness to change their jobs!

Inevitably, burnout leads to significant productivity declines, growing hidden costs, loss of creativity and innovation, growing lack of competitiveness, and over time, serious, long-term performance problems. Left unchecked, these problems can result in enterprise failure.

One area of intense concern in healthcare – for which there is no “quick fix”, unfortunately – is the plight of nurses in our hospital system. Currently, there is a serious shortage of nurses; as a result, nurses are overworked – stretched to the limit, and beyond the limit in some cases. Add to that the fact that traditionally, the status of nurses is very low relative to doctors: so overworked – and underpaid – nurses often get “ordered around” (command-and-control) by busy MDs, who don’t “have the time” to pay attention to the “niceties” of nurturing relationships. And as everyone knows, hospital service is in a serious state of decline, and the morale of nurses is, overall, poor.

In an intensely competitive, turbulent marketplace, these somewhat hidden costs can easily mean the difference between success and failure. There is little or no room for the “hidden downside” of traditional leadership and management practices that formerly could easily be borne in a less competitive or rapidly-changing business world.

Sustainable capability to access, unleash and harness collective energy, enthusiasm, initiative and drive can happen only when individual alignment is authentic. This occurs when motivation is intrinsic and when people actually care,

emotionally and spiritually, about the purpose – the *raison d'être* – of the enterprise, and about the part they play in it.

This dynamic plays out best when the foundation of organizational identity, organizational alignment, and individual alignment all act together in service of a mutually-shared “deep purpose.” A foundation of meaning then guides organizational and individual action, binding people together in something greater than themselves. It works best too when grounded in an ethic of continuous value creation that connects the organization to its customers, suppliers and its wider community of stakeholders.

One place this can show up is in healthcare delivery systems (particularly in-patient hospitals) that have reengineered their business model, organizational design and data systems to be truly patient-centered. The heart of this venture is multidisciplinary teams comprised of doctors, nurses, testing personnel and any other relevant personnel, held jointly accountable for the testing, diagnosis, and health outcomes of the patient. These teams are supported by a new, integrated patient data record, offering any and all patient information, from administrative data to test results to digitized scans of X-Rays and MRIs.

To function at a high level, these teams initially need to “work through” the layers of organizational barriers (status, level differences, ego clashes, turf battles, etc.). All of these are socially-derived externals which interfere with the ability of team members inherent, intrinsic – and most importantly, shared – desire to serve and to heal. To be honest, this process often requires the services of an outside facilitator because of the challenges involved.

But as these issues are worked through, what emerges is a high-performance – and often highly innovative – team, characterized by mutual respect and a profound sense of give and take. And the shared alignment with the hospital's primary goal is intrinsic to each member of the team, rather than coerced through compliance or command-and-control.

Sustainable levels of truly excellent performance and continuing organizational creativity can arise only from practices that tap into and nurture intrinsic motivation. Such practices build authentic, two-way alignment between individual and organization, rooted in authentic, two-way give-and-take between individual and organization.

The individual must be valued – and treated - not merely as an interchangeable “role performer” or “task performer” as the organization itself becomes genuinely open to change in response to the ideas, perspectives, needs and drives of its individual members. This “authentic, two-way give-and-take” just mentioned is likewise the source of organizational dynamism and growth!

The resulting renewable enterprise, characterized by shared purpose and a set of core values, produces a culture that is multiple, heterodox, open and inclusive. Self-renewing, adaptable organizations must create conditions that make room for

organizational members to express their essential individuality within the system, without being punished or marginalized as “deviant.” Encouragement of the realization and expression of authentic individual identity within the enterprise taps right into the root of intrinsic motivation, saying to employees “You are valued for whom you really are,” not just because of this week’s numbers, or because you are an excellent role/task performer, but because you are a unique human being who can make a unique and valuable contribution. The organization is thus communicating a simple, straightforward message to its employees: “You matter.”

About Dean Robb, Ph.D.

Dr. Dean Robb is Founder and Executive Director of the Center for Corporate Renewal (www.ctrforcorporaterenewal.com). Since 1994, he has helped numerous domestic and foreign business leaders build high-performing, innovative, entrepreneurial enterprises. His expertise combines 26 years of practical, real-world experience in corporate America with in-depth research in human and organizational systems.

The Center for Corporate Renewal helps senior executives build the capability to:

- Strategic Focus: Make sense of a changing environment and gain focus on the next right strategic move
- Disciplined Execution: Align and mobilize the entire organization behind this new strategic focus
- Creative Renewal: Renew the entrepreneurial spirit by repeating these two actions over and over again.

For information on how Dr. Dean Robb can work with your organization to instill a spirit and ethic of renewable corporate entrepreneurship, email him at drobb@ctrforcorporaterenewal.com or call him at 908-757-4721,

Permission to reproduce this article is hereby granted, given that the contact information is kept intact with the article.