

Article 26 – Organisational alignment – getting the geese lined up

I guess most of us have read about the reasons why geese fly in a 'V' formation – how by doing so and rotating the lead position, the skein add 70% to its flying range. Doubtless some readers have also seen the documentary on the emperor penguins and how the huddle of brooding birds subtly change position so each takes its turn in protecting the others from the numbing cold of an Antarctic winter. Both these examples of instinctive behaviour in the animal world are powerful metaphors for teamwork - or in the context of this article organisational alignment.

However, in contrast to the animal world, organisational alignment is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Organisations are vastly more complex. They are often scattered across the globe and members more often than not put their own interests ahead of those of their colleagues. But perhaps the most powerful de-motivator to organisational alignment is that, unlike geese and emperor penguins, their lives do not depend on cooperation. There is nothing like the possibility of death to focus the mind on a common objective.

The basic way in which we tackle the complexities of large organisations is to break up the organisation into smaller and more manageable parts. So divisions and departments and strategic business units and product groups are formed and it becomes increasingly difficult for the geese at the back or the penguins in the middle to maintain a sense of direction. It also leads to a large bureaucracy that follows Parkinson's Law that work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion. And so in the search for greater efficiencies and the elimination of non-value adding occupations, the pyramid has been flattened and the levels of management reduced.

However, we also know that the most effective number of people working together is less than ten – and in an organisation of thousands, that's an awful lot of workgroups.

The challenge is not so much that of getting ten people to work effectively together but of aligning the work of each workgroup with that of the organisation as a whole. Using the parable of the stone masons, it's not sufficient just to give each one the dimensions of the stone to be fashioned, they need to know its purpose and where it's going. Thus agreeing on a collective goal for the workgroup inadequate – that goal must be connected to the goal of the organisation itself.

This is why the development of workgroup goals that meet the SMART criteria AND that are linked to the organisation's goals are such powerful tools for forging organisational alignment. For one it forces executive management to develop organisational goals that the rest of the organisation can relate to. Agreeing on a target for the share price or a return on capital or revenue to be derived from overseas students may be uplifting for executive management but it's hardly likely to get the stone masons excited.

Achieving organisational alignment is a double whammy. Not only does it provide a sense of direction for everyone and thus facilitates the achievement of the organisation's goals but the development of workgroup goals is the very basis of teamwork. Without them the workgroup is in danger of becoming a pseudo team – one that displays the outward trappings of teamwork but none of the substance.

If one regards the migratory destination as the organisational goal and each goose in a skein as a workgroup, the one thing that's different about the analogy is that the position of lead goose in an organisation is not rotated.

Which raises another question – given that geese seem to have really got it together when it comes to organisational alignment – why do we use the word “goose” in a derogatory way when it comes to people?

Graham Haines
April 2006