A Book Report on

The Transformational Power of Executive Team Alignment

by Miles Kierson

(Book Report by Gary Tomlinson)

Preface: Executives spend much time, energy and money on new strategies. Then they let these same strategies become mere shadows of what they originally envisioned through poor execution – not because they do not have the desire, the will or the right people, but because they just have not developed an organizational culture of disciplined execution.

CEOs pay little attention to the state of the executive team. In fact, calling most executive groups *teams* would be a stretch of the imagination since by definition a team is a group of people who are working on some common end together. And the idea that a group of executives are going to be able to achieve successful fulfillment without meaningfully engaging the next levels of leadership and the rest of the organization is ludicrous.

This book Is what every CEO is looking for - a methodology for getting the people around him (her) to understand and be a partner in the fulfillment of what he (she) sees inside his (her) own head.

A Typical Executive Team: There are a number of things I can state about executive teams. For example, the typical team:

- Is a group of executives who meet once a week or less and talk about some issues and reports on their divisional or departmental progress (or lack thereof).
- Is not a team at all, but closer to a committee.
- Is not a force in the fulfillment of the company's vision and strategy, even though individually each member may be powerful and successful.
- Is a group of people at least some of whom will say one thing in the meeting and a different thing in their minds (They will agree with the CEO by nodding their heads, but inside they are vigorously shaking their heads and saying "Not on your life!").
- Spends a lot of time in meetings in conversations that often don't get them anywhere and do not turn into action.
- Is one in which each member has his/her own agenda.

The highest paid people in the company will come together for a substantial period of time and talk about things that are mostly non-strategic issues without meaningfully communicating with each other, without reaching many conclusions, rarely reaching any alignment and without really "moving the ball forward" in the company.

Executive teams are typically not really teams and are not really a force for driving accomplishments with the organization.

"Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results."

Andrew Carnegie

Defining Alignment: Alignment is a way to describe your relationship to decisions. This means that you have a relationship to decisions whereby you own them completely. Alignment is a relationship to decisions where you own decisions as if they were yours. Alignment is the most powerful relationship you can have to a decision. And alignment is a choice.

Alignment and Commitment: Alignment is also a commitment to have a decision work. If you are aligned, then you own the decision like it is yours and you are committed to making the decision work. It's important to remember that alignment is not a one-time thing. It must be sustained over time. Think of it not as an event but as an ongoing commitment. An aligned executive team needs to be sure each team member is committed, which means that they will own every decision once it is made. Alignment is agreed upon as a team principle and is sustained over time.

Executive team alignment is only powerful when it is a function of a commitment that has been made *in advance*. The commitment is this: Whenever a decision is made, I will align with it. This is radically different from anything most of us have participated in before.

A second commitment that is part of alignment is to make a decision work. Once a decision is reached, you go out and do what the decision requires with an attitude of making it work. A company strategy, for example, is a series of decisions. It has been my observation that most companies make strategic decisions, do not reach alignment on them and then the strategies fail to be implemented successfully.

Alignment is an Individual Capability: Alignment is a function of individual choices and individual capabilities. An aligned team is one in which the individuals have agreed to own every decision and to be committed to making the decisions and each other successful.

Executive Team Alignment: Executive team alignment is a phrase to describe leadership that is the driving force for the fulfillment of the enterprise's vision, mission and strategy. They are truly performing their roles as executives and they are being a real team – they are working together toward a common end. They have transformed themselves from a group of people with titles who get together and report to a team of executives who have real power.

They have chosen to be an aligned team. This choice is the transformational moment. And once they have chosen to be an aligned team they are stating both individually and as a group that they will own every decision with a commitment to have it work. They will move together as one body of people who demonstrated an authentic and sustainable commitment to the success of the enterprise.

I am not saying that the team reaches alignment after every decision. I am saying that once they agree to be an aligned team, they will be aligned to every decision. That is, once a decision is reached, they have agreed in advance to be aligned.

Think about that for a minute, because the implications are huge.

If you're going to be aligned with every decision, then that means you agree to align with decisions even when you don't agree with them. In other words, you agree to step off the right/wrong, agree/disagree continuum and choose to align regardless of where you happen to fall on that continuum.

Is this a challenge? You bet!

I will often ask people who have difficulty with this conceptually, "Haven't you ever been wrong?" This will usually stop them in their tracks. And I will add, "Even when you really were sure you were right?" Of course they have.

It's important to point out here that we are not talking about sacrificing your values or your ethics. If a decision is reached that breaches your values or your ethics, you owe it to yourself and to the team to let them know that you cannot align.

The Top 10 Benefits of Executive Team Alignment: They are:

1. Everyone on the team pulls in the same direction.
2. There is a basis for sustaining momentum.
3. There is an element of certainty about successful implementation.
4. There is a shift from an executive group to an executive team.
5. There is clarity around decision making.
6. Decisions and implementation are made with greater speed.
7. If a better decision could have been reached, you are likely to know this much sooner.
8. Executives express themselves and contribute more.
9. The executive aligned team is an example for the rest of the organization.
10. Being an aligned executive team creates the foundation for the success of the company.

Key Elements of a Successfully Aligned Team: They are:

- A shared understanding of alignment. To be an aligned team, there needs to be a shared understanding of what is meant by alignment.
- An understanding of the decision-making process. If you are going to be part of an aligned team, which means you are going to own every decision that is reached, the first thing you'd want to know is who makes the decisions and how they are made.
- Saying what needs to be said. You must be willing to say what needs to be said while you have the opportunity to say it. If you hold back and don't say what you see or what you think and a decision goes against what you thought, then you are guilty by omission. It will be more difficult for you to authentically align with your team. You must be willing to champion your point of view.

- Being committed to each other's success. If alignment means ownership, then the executive team is now a team of co-owners – or in other words, partners. Being a partner means you must be as committed to your partners' success as you are to your own – in fact, their success is your success and vice versa.

Sustaining Alignment Will be a Challenge: Maintaining any new behavior is a challenge and being an aligned team requires many new behaviors that may seem counterintuitive to the way you live.

Although the CEO is ultimately accountable for the success of the enterprise as well as the success of his team, as his "partner" each and every executive has a huge stake in the game and can and must play as big as role in the team's success as possible. If you think of yourself as the CEO's partner, you will act differently than if you think of yourself a passive receiver of hierarchical direction. It can be said that you are a leader because of your willingness to be responsible for creating the future. This is a proactive and full commitment that needs to be operative in every aspect of your work. Sustaining alignment requires this degree of ownership as well.

Here are some tips that apply to every team member:

- Monitor your own speaking in your own unit or department. Be responsible for speaking in a way that represents your ownership of the decisions. When you catch yourself slipping (and you will), clean it up.
- Coach others when they slip. Just let them know that you observed them speaking or acting in a way that is inconsistent with being an aligned team member. As their partner, you want to remind them of their commitment everyone made. You can share with then that you've found yourself doing the same thing (if this is true), but that everyone needs to help each other be successful.
- Be true to yourself in the executive team meetings. Remember, ultimately alignment is an individual capability and only you knows what it going on inside yourself. Speak your mind. Say what needs to be said. And when it's time to let go, do it.
- If your CEO is not managing the sustaining of alignment, consider talking to him or her about it. You have to be the judge of how to best do this.
- When a decision is reached, make sure that you understand exactly what the decision is and what it means. Ask for clarification if you are not certain.
- Watch to see that you are staying true to being committed to each team members' success. If this means getting together with one or more of them and discussing things, then so be it. The biggest outcome from all of this is what happens when you have formulated your partnerships with each of the team members.

One Last Piece of Advice: I call this a journey because it happens over time. You have to be willing to be in it for the long haul and one way to do that is to appreciate the small wins and rewards as you go along. Small wins on many teams have big impact. When you get discouraged, do not let it stop you. To take any journey, it is the ability to be unstoppable that predicts one's success or failure.

Message from Gary Tomlinson:

I hope you enjoyed reading these notes. If you are a CEO or a member of an executive team, it's important to understand that this document should not take the place of you reading; "*The Transformational Power of Executive Team Alignment.* This is an incredible book. You'd be doing yourself and your organization a disservice if you didn't buy it and read it cover-to-cover. You can learn more at www.kiersonconsulting.com. You can also obtain a copy of his book from www.amazon.com.

Enjoy the education and wisdom contained within this book report and feel free to share it with other because the "illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn."

About Gary Tomlinson: Gary is a business consultant and motivational speaker. As a business consultant, Gary specializes in strategy-execution. He works with CEOs to help establish a culture of knowing how to plan and execute while overcoming the daily surprises that always seem to get in the way. As a motivational speaker, Gary's key presentations are the *Art of Telling* (professional speaking education for professionals) and *Top Ten Messages from Ten Top Books* (great business education). Regardless of his topic, Gary's guiding coalition is that the golden rule not only makes good moral sense, but it makes good business sense too! You can engage Gary at gary@gary-tomlinson.com. If you like this book report and want to read his others go to www.gary-tomlinson.com.