Alignment: An Essential Framework for Improvement Interventions
What Is Alignment and How Do You Use It?

What is it?
Alignment is a framework of roles and responsibilities that clarifies high-leverage actions of all the people involved in an improvement intervention that is part of a change goal. The framework consists of roles that are functional roles, not job titles, and each role has unique responsibilities. When the people in the organization understand these roles and responsibilities they are clearer about what they are supposed to do relative to the improvement intervention and the change goal.

This shared, clear understanding of these roles and their unique responsibilities make it possible for those responsible for implementing the improvement intervention to have important conversations with the people initiating the intervention. Concerns can be shared and addressed; problems can be solved in advance. This results in more of an authentic commitment to the intervention and change goal rather than a compliant acceptance.

This shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities helps people understand the flow of authority and accountability regarding the intervention. Throughout the system, individuals understand what they are supposed to do and what other people are supposed to do. There is more collaboration on the implementation efforts of the intervention.

When these roles are fulfilled skillfully and with attention to all the phases of a change conversation there is a greater likelihood that the intervention will be successfully implemented, embraced throughout the organization and sustained. Anyone can begin an improvement intervention that requires a change effort; it takes a shared language and a consistent process to guide that intervention, so it produces the desired change.

Alignment Roles and Responsibilities

Sponsor

The Role:
A sponsor is the person who has vested authority to legitimize the intervention that will produce a targeted change and has direct authority over the individuals who will implement the intervention. In school systems, typically, the line managers are the sponsors. These would be the superintendent, deputy superintendent, supervisors, and principals.

There are two kinds of sponsors.

- One is the executive sponsor, often the superintendent, who legitimizes the intervention and provides the resources to make it happen.
- The second is the sustaining sponsor. Sustaining sponsors translate the improvement intervention for those they supervise and manage its implementation at a local level. For example, supervisors and principals are the
sustaining sponsors of a district-wide change initiated by the superintendent. Without active sponsorship at the district office department level and school level, the change usually stalls.

The executive sponsor is the person with line authority over all the people involved in an intervention. For example, if a principal wants to change the way classroom visits are done in her building, she is the executive sponsor of that intervention. However, if a change involves people outside her building then the role shifts. For instance, if the superintendent decides to change the format of parent-teacher conferences throughout the district, he is the executive sponsor of that intervention and the supervisors and principals are sustaining sponsors. In order for the intervention to be successfully implemented they each need to lead the change process at their respective levels.

The Responsibilities:
An effective executive sponsor:
• Communicates a clear vision, direction and goals for the intervention, the change goal and the problem this intervention is supposed to solve. This responsibility is based on authority.
• Has the ability to be clear and stay in relationship with key organizational members, i.e., can get into their frame of reference, elicit and listen to implementers' needs and concerns while not letting go of his/her vision direction and goals. This responsibility is based on relationship.
• Understands (and seeks to understand) the organizational impact of the change goal and the intervention.
• Understands (and seeks to understand) the human impact of the change goal and the intervention.
• Understands and communicates the scope of the change goal and the intervention.
• Is committed to providing necessary resources.
• Is publicly and privately supportive and reinforcing.
• Is able and willing to deliver consequences, both positive and negative.
• Monitors status and activities related to the intervention and the change goal.
• Is able to remain tenacious and resilient in light of personal, political and organizational costs. She/he is in it for the long haul.
• Insists on clarity of decision-making authority, change-management roles and responsibilities on all key projects.
• Insists on feedback loops during all phases of implementation.
• Builds and supports communication and involvement mechanisms.
• Provides training to key personnel needed to accomplish the goal.
• Is clear about “tight and loose.” He/she is explicit about the non-negotiables relative to the improvement intervention and the change goal.
Effective sustaining sponsors:
- Respond to the sponsor as implementers first. They do this by clarifying the intervention, change goal and its purpose, i.e. naming the problem we are trying to solve. They share their reactions and give input to the executive sponsor.
- Align the purpose and goals of the intervention.
- Clarify their sphere of authority regarding the change.
- Are aware of the impact of the change in their sphere of authority.
- Are committed to providing the executive sponsor with data regarding impact of the change and status of the alignment.
- Are committed to securing and/or providing resources as needed.
- Publicly and privately commit to and reinforce the intervention and the change goal.
- Use rewards and pressures to maintain support for the change.
- Monitor progress and shares this data frequently with those implementing the intervention, with the executive sponsor and agents helping with the intervention.
- Work with implementers and agents to solve problems.
- Commit to sustaining support for the change in spite of resistance.
- Remain tenacious and resilient in light of personal, political and organizational costs. They are in it for the long haul.
- Insist on clarity of decision-making authority, change management roles and responsibilities on all key projects

**Implementer**

*The Role:*
An implementer is the person who is charged with making the intervention work. He/she is the one who has to do something differently. Anyone in the organization may find himself/herself in the role of implementer. An effective alignment process gives implementers a clear understanding of what they are charged to do in the intervention, a knowledge of what is required or non-negotiable, what is optional and an understanding of the problem for the intervention is a full or partial solution.

Teachers are usually the implementers in educational organizations. This frequently means changing something in their practice. For example, in an intervention to move to student-led conferences, the teachers would be the ones changing the way they plan and conduct parent-teacher conferences.

*The Responsibilities:*
Effective implementers:
- Clarify the purpose and goals of the intervention. They know what problem the intervention is designed to solve.
- Identify and communicate issues and concerns in a non-blaming way when they learn about the implementation.
• Provide sponsors with information about issues that might block or impede success.
• Ask for what they want and need to be successful.
• Seek clarity where and when they are confused.
• Take initiative to bring clarity to others.
• Contribute ideas throughout the implementation of the intervention. It is especially important that they contribute ideas about how to sustain the intervention.
• Carry out the assignments they are given regarding implementation of the intervention.
• Monitor their individual and collective implementation efforts.
• Ask for and be open to feedback on their individual and collective efforts.
• Participate in problem solving when issues arise at any point in the implementation process.
• Talk to, not about others relative to the intervention.

**Agent**

*The Role:*

An agent is the person who facilitates the change by bringing their particular expertise to and intervention and change goal. The agent assists the sponsors and implementers. She/he acts as a sideline coach to provide education, information and facilitation to aid sponsors and implementers in achieving success. An agent has no direct line authority over implementers. Clear understanding and focused use of this role is crucial to nurturing and sustaining an effective connection between the district office and the school sites.

Directors and other central office personnel with no supervisory authority are the agents. If the intervention were to institute student-led conferences at all instructional levels, the director of professional development would be an agent if she/he were to offer training to the teachers for the new way to conduct these conferences. She/he would be sharing his/her expertise, but would have no authority to “make” the teachers conduct their conferences in this manner. That is the job of the sponsor.

*The Responsibilities:*

Effective agents:

• Seek clarity about the goals of the intervention.
• Are clear about the support they need from the sponsor and are willing to ask for what they need to succeed.
• Seek clarity for themselves where and when confused.
• Take initiative to bring clarity to others.
• Stimulate the thinking and action of sponsors and implementers.
• Facilitate sponsor(s) and implementer(s) conversations.
• Promote a strong, proactive sponsor/implementer relationship.
• Promote acute anxiety versus chronic anxiety by pointing out where alignment is not in place.
• Let sponsors know their perspectives and reactions quickly.
• Share their expertise in a timely and effective manner.
• Help bring in outside expertise if it is needed.
• Stay well connected to key people in the project or change action.
• Facilitate and assist others in problem solving. They do not solve problems for others.
• Manage their own anxiety, reactivity and vulnerability in ways that calmly help sponsors and implementers face their own challenges.
• Resist the temptation to over-function.

Advocate

The Role:
An advocate is a person with a good idea who is in search of a sponsor. Anyone in the organization can be an advocate.

Effective innovation often comes from within an organization. When a person has a good idea about a possible intervention that would improve the organization or move the organization toward the district goals, she/he must take this idea to someone with authority to sponsor the idea. It is important to note that an advocate who persists with his/her idea without gaining sponsorship becomes a pest.

If a district member had an idea about how student-led parent/teacher conferences could help the district improve parent-teacher conferences, he/she would take that idea to a person with authority to execute that idea and advocate for its inclusion in the district’s approach to conferences.

The Responsibilities:
Effective advocates:
• Identify needs/opportunities for results and/or alignment.
• Talk to the right person to leverage sponsorship. Get into the sponsor’s shoes—show in their own words that they understand the sponsor’s position.
• Link their ideas to the sponsor’s goals and aspirations.
• Invite the sponsor to think about the cost of the status quo.
• Create an invitation to hear their ideas. Find out if the sponsor is interested in their thinking.
• State the sponsor’s position in non-blaming ways. Offer attractive options that speak to the sponsor’s interests, goals, and concerns.
• Find out the sponsor's response to their thinking and initiative.

How Do You Use alignment?
In order to successfully use this framework to help you and your team successfully implement an intervention that would help you reach your goals and sustain them, all
the players need to know their roles and need to know the most effective way to carry out those roles.

This requires:
- System-de clarity about what the alignment framework is.
- Sufficient training in the skills for each role.
- Clear expectations from the leaders for effectively fulfilling the responsibilities of the roles.
- Time to create a map of the change before beginning implementation.
- Time for change conversations at each level of the organization.

This framework is only effective when the roles are enacted skillfully and the change conversations are authentic. The right people need to have the real conversation about the right stuff.

The Results of Effectively Using an Alignment Framework
- There is clarity throughout the district on key interventions, change goals and clarity about each person’s part in reaching those goals.
- Alignment can help ensure that the interventions are challenging, yet realistic in scope and timeline.
- It can help overcome resistance, which is a reaction to most interventions that are part of large change efforts.
- Alignment helps ensure communication, collaboration and problem solving because everyone better understands each other’s roles and responsibilities.
- All effort in the district is focused toward key goals and the interventions that are the paths to reaching those goals. There is commitment rather than compliance to working to achieve those goals.
- People in all roles are held accountable for accomplishing their part of the work.
- Decision-making authority is clear. Decisions can be made at any level, but everyone is clear who makes the decision and who gives input.
- When things get bogged down, clarity about each individual’s role helps people act in ways that have the highest leverage to move things forward. There is less wasted effort and spinning of wheels.
- The collaborative connection between the district office and the school sites results in a more effective, targeted use of the resources available.

Based on the work of Daryl Conner