

PROJECT ALIGNMENT

Ensuring Successful Development and Implementation From Day One

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Most performance improvement projects begin with the best of intentions. Too often, however, they end up producing nothing more than a set of CDs or binders that sit on someone's shelf, a course that no one completes, software no one likes, or job aids that remain unused. None of these efforts impacts the organization's bottom line or meets expectations, much to the chagrin of executives, stakeholders, the project development team, and end users. Why this disconnect?

Many of these failed projects share two common traits: They fail to plan adequately for the development effort, and they treat implementation as an afterthought. Taking such an approach is like laying the foundation for a building just before the occupants move in. Successful development and implementation do not happen by accident; they are the consequence of careful planning that begins on Day 1, beginning with project alignment. Using the project alignment strategies and tools in this article, you can help ensure the successful development and implementation of your own efforts.

Project Alignment Defined

Project alignment is about making sure a project begins with a shared vision of success. Alignment is about ensuring that both the project team and the representative members of the larger organization are playing in the same ballpark from the day the effort starts. Successful project alignment lays a foundation on which any resulting performance improvement interventions will rest. Alignment is about specifying the factors that will make the project successful, as well as their corresponding measures. Alignment is also about gaining all necessary commitments and buy-in from project stakeholders and team members. Successful alignment avoids conflicts and makes sure project delivery is in line with business expectations, goals, and strategic business objectives. While alignment begins with the start of the project, it is also an ongoing process, revisited on the completion of major project deliverables as well as when new players enter and leave the project.

Alignment Phase

Given its importance, alignment should be the first phase of any performance improvement effort. The alignment phase lays the foundation for successful development and implementation efforts, as well as ensuring that any resulting performance improvement interventions positively affect the organization's bottom line by providing a positive return on expectations. For a larger effort, inputs to this phase are fourfold:

- Any client-provided information that the project team can use to come up to speed
- Preliminary prototypes of the potential performance interventions based on early understanding of project requirements and design considerations

- Project plan specifying the project's scope of work, estimated costs, and schedule
- An alignment packet.

The process of alignment occurs during a facilitated alignment meeting. During this time, participants review the prototype, project plan, and alignment packet. They note any necessary changes to these materials. The alignment meeting can last anywhere from two hours to a full day, depending on the size and complexity of the project; the experience of the development team, sponsors, stakeholders, and end users; and the organization's readiness for the project.

Who should attend? In addition to key members of the project development team, this meeting should include representatives from any part of the organization that the intervention will affect: key sponsors, managers, supervisors, subject matter experts, end users, IT staff, human resources staff, and the like. At least one representative from each of these groups needs to be part of the alignment meeting because each group has its own set of interests and directives that will affect the project's success or failure. By having all the key players in the same room at the same time, reviewing the same issues, everyone can have a voice in creating a clear, shared picture of "where we are, where we want to go, and how we get there." Moreover, the increased complexity and criticality of most projects benefit from such pooled expertise. The sum of the collected expertise is greater than any of its individual constituents.

The major outputs of the alignment phase are revised versions of the inputs and include the following:

- Preliminary prototypes, which will be modified and further detailed in subsequent analysis and design efforts
- A project plan, which will be revised again if necessary, pending completion of the analysis and design efforts
- An alignment packet, which will be distributed to all participants shortly after completion of the alignment meeting.

The project plan and alignment packet will be revisited throughout the project to keep the project aligned. As new individuals rotate into the effort, they will bring their own beliefs, expectations, and experiences. Meeting with these individuals to review these documents can help keep the project aligned over time. For smaller projects, the alignment phase may not include all of these inputs, processes, and outputs.

Project Alignment in the Professional Literature

Interestingly, issues relating to project alignment often appear in the professional literature describing project management. However, they are only now starting to appear in the instructional design (ID) literature. In the human

resources section of the Project Management Institute's *Handbook*, Wilemon (1998) addresses the term "alignment" in the context of poorly functioning cross-functional teams, noting that its absence results, in part, from a lack of careful team building and consensus building around goals early in the project (p. 296). In the same text, Pinto and Slevin (1998) provide a 10-factor model of critical success factors in project development. Finally, project management or planning references appear in many ID models (Morrison, Ross, & Kemp, 2001; Seels & Richey, 1994; Gentry, 1994; Diamond, 1989). The issues raised below can be raised during an alignment phase and then monitored through the course of the effort:

- The feasibility of the project mission
- Obtaining top management support
- The specification of project schedules, milestones, staffing, and equipment requirements
- Consultation with end users
- Personnel recruitment, selection, and training
- Obtaining the necessary personnel with requisite skills, knowledge, and technology to perform implementation and other tasks
- Client acceptance of the completed project (comprising the final stage of the implementation process)
- Monitoring and feedback
- Adequate communication channels
- Troubleshooting project implementation issues (pp. 386-390).

In another Project Management Institute text, Stuckenbruck (1981a) notes that most projects fail because of either internal conflict between project management and line organization or inadequate authority granted the project manager (p. 9). To guard against these causes, Stuckenbruck (1981b) argues for two strategies that lie within the project alignment umbrella: the issuance of a project charter and the creation of a project-procedures guide. The charter spells out the responsibilities and authority of both project and line managers, specifies adequate resources, lists the people involved in the project and their roles, and obtains the continuing support of top management (p. 37). The project-procedures guide details how the daily business of the project should occur. This guide should address the following:

- Duties and responsibilities of staff reporting to the project manager
- Duties and responsibilities of functional personnel working on the project
- Time-keeping methods
- Methods to determine priorities
- Methods for resolving priority and conflict problems
- Type and frequency of project management feedback
- Formal and informal reporting and review procedures.

Noting that relatively few companies comprehend how powerful project management can be, Forsberg and coauthors

(2000) contend that failures often result from confusion over what is involved in managing a project from inception to completion and repeating either the technical or business mistakes of others. To counteract such failures, they advocate a project management model comprised of four components, many of which can be related to the issue of project alignment:

- A common project vocabulary
- Project teamwork resulting from common goals, acknowledged interdependency, mutual respect, a common code of conduct, shared rewards, and team spirit and energy
- A project cycle beginning with decomposition and definition activities at increasingly smaller levels of detail that subsequently lead to integration and verification activities at increasingly larger levels of detail
- Situational project elements addressing project requirements, organizing, project team, planning, opportunity and risk management, version control, visibility, status, corrective action, and leadership.

Taking an even larger view, Benko and McFarlan (2003) argue the need for enterprises to align their multiple projects, creating the equivalent of an internal portfolio of their organizational investments. One of the strategies for reaching this goal is to facilitate an alignment workshop.

Conversely, alignment is often missing from discussions of project management in ID and development literature. Part of the reason may lie in the lack of preparation that project managers of any type generally receive before assuming their responsibilities. A recent survey of project managers conducted by Thomas, Delisle, and Judgev (2001) found that 58% of participants agreed that “project managers have little or no formal training” (p. 11). This lack of training and experience may be surfacing in the ID literature. Of the 16 ID models that Gustafson and Branch (2002) describe, only four contain components that address project management, and none mentions alignment per se.

Fortunately, there are exceptions to this trend. In his text describing ID project management, Greer (1992) describes a kickoff meeting that addresses many of the elements of project alignment:

- Clarification of the materials to be created
- Clarification of roles and responsibilities
- Creation of a feeling of common purpose among the team members

- Procurement of each team member’s commitment to complete tasks by specified dates
- Ensuring that team members have what they need to be productive at the completion of the meeting.

He also notes, “There is no meeting that is more important to the overall project success than the kickoff meeting” (1992, p. 82).

Noting that all projects naturally change from beginning to end and that project stakeholders themselves also influence and change the project over its course, DeWeaver & Gillespie (1997) advance a development approach consisting of opportunity, commitment, implementation, and conclusion stages. Their concurrent opportunity and commitment stages address many of the issues that fall within the purview of project alignment. During the opportunity stage, the project manager works collaboratively with project stakeholders to determine the goals and critical success factors of the project. The most important of the four stages, opportunity answers the questions: “What are we trying to accomplish?” “What do we want to have happen as a result?” “How will we know we have accomplished what we set out to do?” In the commitment stage, both project manager and stakeholders pull together the necessary resources to create an agreed-on work approach. Commitment-stage questions include: “What are the ground rules?” “What will we produce and when?” “What resources will we need?” “What technology will we use to work together?” (DeWeaver & Gillespie, 1997, p. 63).

Alignment and Misalignment With Strategic Business Objectives

The principal goal of the alignment phase is to ensure a given project is aligned with the strategic business objectives (SBOs) of the organization. SBOs are specific, measurable goals that are developed collaboratively at all levels of an organization. When the goals of a project are aligned with all levels that comprise the enterprise and its SBOs, you can consider the project itself successfully aligned. Why is such alignment important? In their review of more than 400 impact studies, Phillips and Phillips (2002) found that lack of alignment with business needs and objectives is the top reason training and development programs fail.

A matched example and non-example may be useful. Figure 1 shows an example of learning strategies that are aligned with SBOs of a hypothetical pharmaceutical sales training firm. As you can see, training initiatives such as making

Strategic Business Objectives	Human Resources/Learning/Performance Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce time to market • Increase niche market product share 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated interventions available 24/7 • Focused, data-driven sales/marketing/education tools available on a 24/7 basis

Figure 1. Example of Aligned Learning Strategies and SBOs.

“integrated interventions available 24/7” tie directly to SBOs such as reducing time to market. Product representatives who have access to the performance interventions

Strategic Business Objectives	Human Resources/Learning/Performance Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce time to market • Increase niche market product share 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase course enrollment • Increase stick time • Increase student satisfaction

Figure 2. Example of Misaligned Learning Strategies and SBOs.

they need—when they need them and in the form they need them—are far more likely to bring products to market quickly. Seizing this opportunity should produce a measurable impact on the organization’s bottom line by improving productivity and increasing revenues, as well as meeting organizational expectations regarding these efforts.

In contrast, Figure 2 shows a misaligned situation. The training-related strategies here include items that have no direct relation to the SBOs. The performance improvement group can raise course enrollment, increase “stick time,” or improve student satisfaction, but without a focus on SBOs, there is no direct impact on time to market or any other result that executives care about. Any positive effect from pursuing such strategies will be purely coincidental, along with any ability to meet or exceed organizational expectations.

Alignment Goals and Components of the Alignment Packet

Given the importance of the alignment phase, we contend that human performance technology practitioners should facilitate a formal alignment meeting to launch a project.

Alignment Phase Goal	Alignment Packet Component(s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure alignment with the organization’s strategic business objectives and the project’s critical success factors • Establish a shared vision of project success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of preliminary prototypes • Review of the project plan • CSFs, measures, and sources*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain consensus and buy-in regarding project roles and responsibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles and responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and manage risks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk management*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalize project control • Minimize potential for scope creep 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specified review process • Project change management process* • Change request form* • Formal sign-off sheet* • Action items

* Tools included in this article. (Online versions of these tools can be downloaded from www.dls.com.)

Figure 3. Alignment Goals and Packet Components.

Critical Success Factor (CSF)	Possible Indicators	Measures	Sources
1. The just-in-time training and online support will reduce time to market by 20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time-to-market data, collected quarterly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are new biochemists moving from training into full-scale development work more quickly? • Is development bringing new products to market more quickly? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training department summary sheets • New product rosters • Development logs
2. The marketing tools will enable sales managers to increase niche market share	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sales data, collected quarterly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does our niche market share for (products) compare to the current baseline? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compiled sales reports

Figure 4. Sample Critical Success Factors, Indicators, Measures, and Sources.

During this meeting, participants should collaboratively review and note changes to an initial version of the alignment packet. Each component of the alignment

packet helps the participants of the alignment meeting achieve specific project goals, as depicted in Figure 3.

Alignment With SBOs

To ensure alignment with the organization’s SBOs and establish a shared vision of project success, participants use one section of the alignment packet to specify critical success factors (CSFs) that the project should meet. These factors affect the project sponsor, organizational stakeholders (executives, managers, supervisors, other departments, and end users), and the project development and implementation team. As illustrated in Figure 4, sample CSFs can include increased sales, increased customer satisfaction, improved productivity, and reduced time to market. The CSFs should be directly related to the organization’s SBOs; otherwise, people begin to focus on individual CSFs without thinking about their relation to the SBOs. Participants can also choose to add various enabling CSFs, such as end user acceptance of the performance interventions, test scores indicating mastery, or measures of transfer to the job. However, these enabling CSFs should not be used in place of higher-level factors more in line with SBOs.

Each CSF should be paired with one or more measures, as well as their sources and mechanisms for collecting them: information that is either already being gathered or will be gathered to determine that the CSF is being met. As Roger Addison has stated (personal correspondence, March 30, 2004), you can often find the important measures, such as the ones that CSFs should address, by reviewing the contents of executive and manage-

Risk	Probability	Impact	Owner	Mitigants
1. Project team members may disagree on the design approach.	<input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Low	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Low	Project manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define consensus early in the project. Agree on a process for obtaining consensus on subject matter expert reviews and for a necessary tradeoff to meet project requirements. Others
2. Sponsors, stakeholders, partners, supervisors, and end users may refuse to collaborate in creating the performance interventions.	<input type="checkbox"/> High <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Low	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Low	Project manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain a sponsor with signatory authority. Assess the readiness of the organization and adopt specific education and marketing efforts to address any issues that arise. Others

Figure 5. Sample Risks and Mitigation Strategies.

rial reports. Furthermore, establishing CSF measures before implementation will allow subsequent comparison once the project has been completed. Subsequent communication of these pre- and post-measures can demonstrate impact and help shape the organization’s return on expectations.

Consensus and Buy-In for Roles and Responsibilities

An important part of any alignment meeting involves identifying the key players who will move the project to completion. One goal of the alignment meeting is to ensure that all these players understand their roles, responsibilities, and time commitments, and to answer foundational questions such as: What will the approval process be for each deliverable? Who will have sign-off authority on project deliverables? To whom does the development team escalate any project-threatening delays?

By deciding these issues early, a project team can avoid unpleasant surprises later in the project and avoid time and cost “bugaboos” associated with failure to plan the efficient handoff of deliverables.

Identified and Managed Risks

Most projects have “known obstacles” that can jeopardize their success. Think of these as roadblocks on the critical path to a successful project that meets business objectives and their specific CSFs. For example, unavailability of subject matter experts, lack of organizational buy-in, end user resistance to change, or budget limitations can all prevent performance interventions from being successful. Identifying these risks up front is the first step in avoiding or minimizing them. For each risk identified the team should formulate a set of mitigants or actions it can take to neutralize the risk, as well as the probability and potential impact, and the team should identify those responsible for applying the mitigants and updating the team. Figure 5 depicts a tool we use to identify and manage project risks.

Formal Project Control

“Scope creep” can play havoc with a performance improvement project, where a series of small, gradual increases in a project’s scope push the project beyond the available sched-

ule or budget or reduce its quality to unacceptable levels. To avoid this situation and ensure the team knows how to work together to move the project forward, the alignment packet also specifies four tools for formal project control. The first tool is to formally specify, using a flowchart and timeline, the review process the team will follow.

The second tool is a formally specified process for managing changes in project scope, schedule, or budget. Figure 6 depicts the process that we use.

Changes can begin with either the development team or the client. Once the potential change is reported using the Change Request Form depicted in Figure 7, the client and developers determine if it is worth pursuing and disseminate results as appropriate.

We use this tool proactively to identify and resolve potential scope issues. When the project team identifies a requirement that was not specified in the initial scope of work and that could affect the overall quality, budget, and

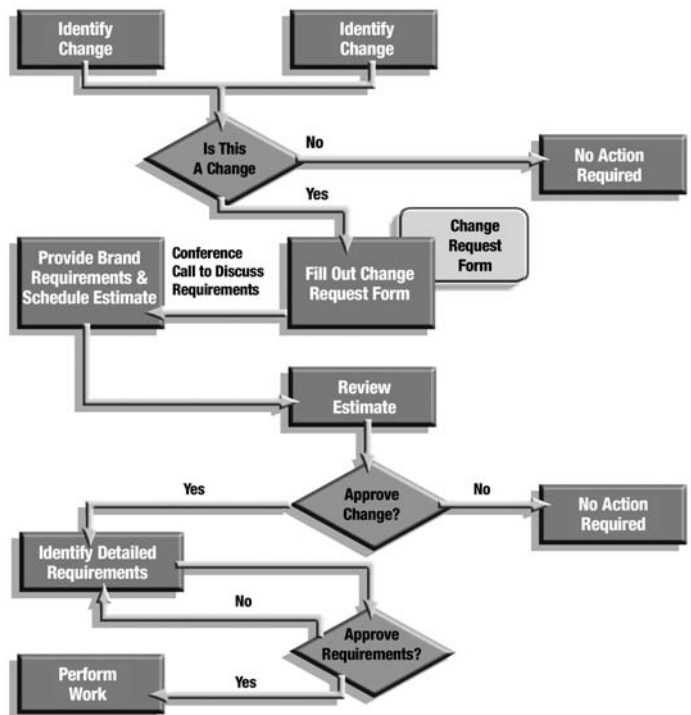


Figure 6. Project Change Management Process.

<u>7/8/04</u> Date Prepared	<u>Sample</u> Prepared By	<u>7/10/04</u> Response Required by Date
Instructor Guide Mods 4-5	Product Development Process Training	555
Component	Project	Project #

Change Description: Add a section on annual compliance review	Estimated time 2 days	Cost \$750
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Supplemental Material Attached		
Impact Assessment:		
Estimated Cost	Schedule Impact	
<input type="checkbox"/> Supplemental Material Attached		
Comments:		
Client Project Manager Approval:	Signature	Date

Figure 7. Sample Change Request Form.

schedule, the scope change request form clearly shows how the project will be affected. Based on this information, the team can make an informed decision on whether to proceed with the change. The goal of the process and form is to identify and resolve potential scope issues early in the project, when these project management factors are still flexible.

The third tool provides formal sign-off sheets listing all project deliverables. Figure 8 depicts a sample sign-off sheet that lists the deliverable, when it was sent to the client,

Delivery Date:	xx/xx/xxxx
Subject:	Storyboard for Module 3, Lesson 4
Requested Return Date:	xx/xx/xxxx
Instructions:	Please review the enclosed materials. Please call or email the project manager with any questions or content concerns you may have during your review. Please fax this sign-off sheet by <u>date</u> , to: (Contact info here)
Approval Signature:	
I have reviewed the storyboard and believe that, with my changes (if any), it accurately reflects the information that I have provided and is technically accurate and complete. I understand that additional major changes to the content of this material after today may adversely impact the project's scope, quality, cost, or schedule.	
Signature	Date

Figure 8. Sample Client Sign-Off Sheet (Source: Adapted from Greer, 1992).

when the developers would like it returned, and contact information for the reviewer. This tool provides a mechanism for reviewers to indicate their approval of draft deliverables and their understanding of the potential impact of later changes to the project's schedule and budget. Signoff sheets impart a sense of ownership on the part of reviewers and help identify potential scope issues early in the project. They also provide a valuable means of tracking the approval status of projects that have many moving parts.

The fourth tool is a blank table for managing action items. New action items inevitably are discovered during an alignment meeting, and these should be recorded before they are forgotten. The team should assign each item an owner and establish a deadline for its completion. The team can then update the status of these items at the next meeting. Also useful is a "parking lot" to record unresolved

issues and useful ideas that lie beyond the scope of the current project but could be useful at a later time.

Conclusion

In summary, no performance improvement project should begin without its own alignment phase, meeting, and packet. Furthermore, alignment should continue throughout the remainder of the effort: as project requirements, design approaches, and consensus change, new people rotate in and out, the organization changes in response to competitive pressures and other competing initiatives, and the project team collaboration results in deeper understanding of the actual deliverables.

By collaborating with sponsors and stakeholders throughout the project to establish a shared vision of what a successful project would look like, verifying that this project supports the organization's business objectives, and using effective tools, your project team can ensure measurable impact on the organization's bottom line and meet expectations for investments in performance improvement projects. 🌟

Note: The authors wish to thank Lori Gillespie for the information, comments, and insights she provided in reviewing this draft prior to its submission.

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