

# Chief Learning Officer Magazine

## Executive Briefings

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### Alignment Is Everything

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A cartoon showed a rapidly sinking boat with people furiously bailing out water at the nearly submerged end. At the momentarily high-and-dry end, one person happily says to another, “Wow! I’m sure glad the leak isn’t at our end!”

And there’s the problem. Too narrow a view of development — one that hopes for development in this industry or that region, within this educational level or that social stratum — ultimately leads to feeble results. If the boat is sinking, only some may drown, but eventually everyone gets wet.

Perhaps we have more talk than results on economic development because we haven’t taken the time to define alignment, the great goal of transforming leadership. We’re mistaken when we assume alignment means compromise, losing diversity, micromanagement or “to put in a straight line or bring into line.” At its best, to align is to bring oneself into agreement or alliance with a cause. It implies voluntary movement toward a compelling vision. It gives people something bigger and better to devote themselves to than their self-interest.

There is power in alignment and waste when that alignment disintegrates. An ill-defined sense of alignment can cripple the ability to bring energy and resources to bear on long-term economic development. If leaders debate who is in charge, even as they try to dodge responsibility, they’re telling us they are ill-equipped to define a cause. Although it is impossible to have leaders devoid of self-interest, it is equally impossible to have sustainable development devoid of selfless leaders.

The benefits of alignment around a set of unifying themes are huge. When aligned, we can:

- Avoid presiding over an evaporating realm. I watched self-centered leaders let this happen in my hometown of St. Louis, once the fourth-largest city in the country and now a dilapidating disaster.
- Take our focus off of the petty and try to develop more profits — in the full sense of that word — for everyone.
- Create a sense of urgency around important actions.
- Inspire many to find countless ways to create real value.

How can we hope to produce effective alignment in any community or organization riddled with conflicting interest groups, confusion about direction and misunderstandings about what constitutes good government and economic development?

Leaders have to:

- Face reality. Leadership has to acknowledge the presence and severity of obstacles — political, economic, social, technological and structural — that prevent cohesion. Only then can it address and eliminate them.
- Find common themes. You can't beat something with nothing. There has to be agreement on a central core, the vision and values that will pull the community or organization into the future. When there is agreement about the kind of community we want to become, we can defeat small-minded opposition.
- Welcome positive discontent. Leadership should welcome discontent, a real enemy to inertia and lethargy and friend of always hard-to-get growth, even as it sets guidelines for civil disagreement.
- Create safety nets. Leadership works hard to eliminate cheap shots at big-picture players. It never lets a special interest annihilate the general interest.
- Major on the major. Leadership faces a million challenges but stays focused on the things that can have significant impact on development.

We can't have harmony if everyone sings the same note. Alignment is not about uniformity or squelching dissent, but rather about building a commonly accepted vision against which we can check our priceless, but rowdy diversity. It's easy to talk about change because it makes us feel good. But it's hard to actually change because changing is difficult.

Great leadership finds a way to pull people together around a few great, unifying ideas that will allow them to go beyond surviving change, and it creates an environment where change is welcomed and exploited for the common good. Most communities and organizations don't have this kind of leadership. But anything less isn't leadership at all. It's egotism with a very big title — and very little impact.