

# AN EXHAUSTING DAY

---

by Joe Smerkers

It was a couple of weeks ago, about six o'clock on a Tuesday evening when I arrived home after facilitating a strategic planning workshop for a client.

I was exhausted. Before Leaders Anonymous, before I heard of 'reflecting' I would have considered it part of the cost of doing business; part of what I get paid for. Now I ask myself: why? Why did it have to be so tiring?

We didn't do anything spectacular on Tuesday. In attendance were the CEO and seven vice presidents. The stated objective was straight forward, develop a consensus list of strategies and programs for the upcoming budget. We brainstormed some vision attributes, identified a few goals, and by the end of the day had our list of strategies. No one seemed tremendously surprised or vehemently opposed. So why was I so tired?

Peter Senge in The Fifth Discipline writes about a concept called *alignment*, "when a group of people function as a whole." He states,

*In most teams the energies of individual members work at cross purposes...The fundamental characteristic of the relatively unaligned team is wasted energy. Individuals may work extraordinarily hard, but their efforts do not efficiently translate to team effort.*

Senge compares team alignment to that which happens when a sports team or jazz group gets into a 'groove' and play almost unknowingly as one. He writes, "when a team becomes more aligned...there is less wasted energy. In fact, a resonance or synergy develops."

When I was in graduate school there were about eight of us in a study group for a finance course. For each class we had to analyze a different case. Our group would meet for hours at length -- talking, debating, challenging. Time was not an issue because for whatever reason we came together as a team. We most certainly

could have accomplished the analysis in half the time. But for some reason we enjoyed the process. We left our meetings not exhausted but revitalized and re-energized.

The class met in an amphitheater. Our group would sit together down-front on the far right. After a few classes the professor would avoid calling on us when we would raise our hands. It was not until no one else in the class could respond that he would look to his left. That was our signal. It was our turn.

There were many students in that class who were brighter than us. Many teams worked as hard as we did. But there was something special that we had. As individuals we were very different. But as a team we were aligned. Aligned not in pursuit of answers or grades but in the joy of our encounters. And every time the professor wanted to take the discussion to the next level he knew which team to call on. Others got their grades, their rewards, at the end of the semester. We got ours every time we met.

On Tuesday we were not 'one' but nine individuals trying to accomplish a task. We all worked very hard. We all left very tired. We all expended our energies. It had begun with a sense of expectation: a new consultant, could he do it? Could I facilitate the group and achieve the stated objectives? Yes. Could I bring about alignment? No.

In this story I am the lucky one. I was able to return to my 'safe place,' my office oasis away from the insanity that these executives, and those in many other organizations, must deal with on a daily basis. Everybody in that room on Tuesday was tired. Everybody but I had to face the same realities again on Wednesday, and the next day, and the next day.

I am learning something about myself. I couldn't do it. I couldn't exist in an environment that everyday drains me emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually. I have been spoiled. I KNOW what an aligned team

feels like. And knowing prevents me from accepting anything less.

This group, this story is repeated thousands of times in almost every organization. I can only image the enormous price CEO's and others pay. How do they do it? Where does the energy come from? What can be done?

I recall a friend telling me what her father had told her, "You would be surprised at how many people go to Church every morning just to get the energy to get through the day." When I shared my Tuesday experience with another friend and asked how he did it he informed me that every morning he stops somewhere to get 'ready' for another day.

Since the beginning I have thought of Leaders Anonymous as a safe place for senior executives to share their experiences, hopes, and frustrations. Now I understand it can be much more if we let it happen. Leaders Anonymous can be a portal through which energy and entropy, the negative energy we accumulate, can be freely exchanged. As we come together in community to express and reflect on our vulnerabilities we dump our entropy, regain our strength and re-energize ourselves. Figure One.

As leaders we enjoy, more than most, the gift of choice. We can choose to bemoan the destructive cultural realities of our organizations. We can erect costly 'workarounds.' We can go to Church in the morning, meditate, or attend an L.A. meeting to get re-energized. We can hire consultants that act as temporary sources of energy. We can look for new ways to 'get through our days.'

If however we retain our basic assumptions of what works, if our organizations remain full of unaligned resistive cultures, in the best of worlds we become nothing more than containers, transporters of costly energy much of which is wasted. In the worst of worlds we 'burn out.'

There is an alternative path. One that leads to a place where things just go right. Where expectations get fulfilled. Where creative ideas are the norm rather than the exception. But who will show us the way?

Is it the CEO Manager who, unwilling to reflect on their own behaviors, embrace training programs that promise improvement through change in others. Who sends their executive team off to learn the newest ideas on leadership and organizational change with the expectation that the individuals, having seen the light, will return to the organization and suddenly embrace each other and become more open and trusting.

Organizations spend billions on trying to change the underlying assumptions of their executives, managers, and frontline employees. Look around. Is it working?

I founded Smerk & Company in 1983. For 11 years I provided a range of strategic consulting and training services which, while achieving project goals, failed in most cases to have a lasting impact on organizational performance.

I recall how I felt during workshops. I would motivationally put out an idea. Then I would probe, ask questions of my audience. I would get them involved in the discussion. They liked it. I liked it. It was a real show. I was considered a great workshop facilitator. And interestingly people actually left with some new ideas.

But their underlying beliefs were not being affected. I thought that being Socratic was a way to do this. But what I have discovered is that we were acting out our roles in a kind of perverse play. By effectively presenting and asking questions centered around my message I in fact enabled my audience to avoid discovering the truths of their own realities. They learned the new ideas, but never gave up their old assumptions. Over time when the stimulus, the trainer, was removed they quickly forgot and reverted back to old behaviors.

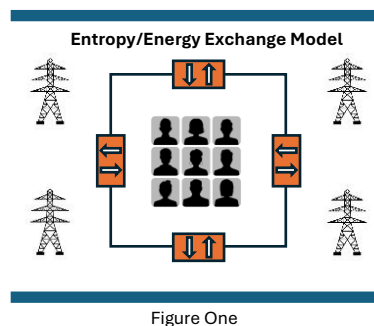


Figure One

Alignment results when people share a common vision, values and objectives. Alignment results when people choose to change the framework of their thinking. Change means they have to give up old habits and adopt new ones, and people only truly adopt new assumptions themselves.

I was in a meeting recently when a union representative was discussing how collective bargaining negotiations worked. He commented that typically "management has their basket and we have ours." "Wouldn't it be nice", I said, "if there was one basket". Would a training program have done more?

If not the Manager who then will show us the way? Is it the Warrior/King who, admitting they cannot change people, opts to manipulate and control them? Who trusts no one and lives in a marginless world of their own making. Who, when errors inevitably occur, are unable to admit their part and casts blame on others.

Kets de Vries and Miller describe such an organization in Leadership Styles and Organizational Cultures: The Shaping of Neurotic Organizations.

*Suspicious top executives generate organizational cultures that are pervaded by distrust, suspicion, and the identification of enemies....An adversarial relationship can develop, making coordination difficult as secrets abound and a "protect yourself" ethic prevails. Paranoid firms tend to react rather than anticipate. Fear often entails being afraid to innovate, to overextend resources, or to take risks.*

The Warrior CEO maintains an aligned executive team through sheer willpower and fear. But at what price?

The Master chooses a different path. They utilize their energy reserves to look at themselves first and 'lead change by example.' They possess the courage to let go of 'trying to change or manipulate others' and the self-confidence to rebuild the organizational culture on a foundation of 'choice.'

They recognize that they cannot align the team. Each member must choose to align

themselves. Choice remains with the individual. They have faith in themselves and in their peers, and they deal openly and honestly with the consequences of this strategy for themselves and others.

Within this value system they willingly accept their responsibility and accountability for the economic life of the organization. They face competitive, organizational and market realities as they are, not as they wish they were, and act. They do so with civility and respect, striving to balance their obligations to shareholders, customers, their communities, their employees, their families, and themselves.

The results they achieve are the envy of their peers. Is it some secret magic potion they drink that gives them great powers? Or is it their ability to create an environment that harnesses the organization's energy, its human potential, and directs it to substantive versus politicized purposes?

They have discovered how to lead through vision, values, and ideas; not training programs, rules and manipulative tactics. They are a voice of hope for the future and a symbol and model of what can be. They have as Gardner says that unique ability to "lift us out of our petty preoccupations and unite us in pursuit of objectives worthy of our best efforts."

In a world where so much energy is wasted trying to make things happen, these Masters seem to be at the right place at the right time. Carol Pearson wrote in The Hero Within, "It is not that they make the sunshine, the rainfall, or people work harder in their office, but when they are there, things work right - apparently effortlessly."

Each of us at some point in our lives have known someone like this. Each of us has been on a truly aligned team. What then is the secret that these leaders, these Masters know that we don't?

Masters, I believe, are a product of a journey of self-discovery. At some transformational point in their lives they turn inward to discover who they are and what they have become. They face the truth of the reality they have made.

They decide that it's time to abandon the old ways, and they come to put their faith in a power greater than themselves. They spend time reflecting, writing, looking deeply inward to decide for themselves what they wish to be.

They become driven by a personal vision, a 'vivid inner theater' [Kets de Vries] or a 'purpose story' [Senge]. Their common goal is a legacy of meaningful difference. They possess that unique ability not only to develop to their full potential but also to create environments that enable others around them to do the same.

Their journey not alone, for they attract others like them; some who have gone before, some like them, and some still searching. But it matters not because for the Master life is the continuing journey of self-discovery, of learning, of becoming a leader.

Enjoy the journey.

This story was originally published in INNOVATING, an academic journal of The Rensselaerville Institute, Winter 1996 under the title *In Search of Alignment*.