

# GIVE YOUR ORGANIZATION A TUNE-UP

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS OF ALIGNMENT & FOCUS

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Is your organization out of alignment? Has it lost its focus? Here's a way to tell.

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**D**o you ever have an uneasy feeling that your organization could be performing better? Have you ever wondered if you're really meeting people's needs? To answer those questions and make the necessary corrections, follow the steps below:

### **STEP 1 REVIEW YOUR ORGANIZATION'S ALIGNMENT & FOCUS.**

There are four essential elements in your organization:

1. Mission and vision
2. Staff (including administrators, boards, committees, and volunteers)
3. Strategies
4. People the organization serves.

For your organization to function effectively, you must align these four elements properly along two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. Your organization is in proper *vertical alignment* when all staff members understand their roles in pursuing your organization's mission and shaping its future. Your organization is in proper *horizontal alignment* when your strategies are effectively meeting the needs of the people you serve.

Once you've aligned the vertical and horizontal dimensions individually, you need to bring these elements into harmony with each other to attain a clear focus. Your organization is properly focused when you've synchronized your mission and staff with the strategies that help meet the needs of the people your organization serves.

## STEP 2 UNCOVER PEOPLE'S OPINIONS.

The next step is to measure the relationship between the vertical and horizontal dimensions from two perspectives—internal and external. To do so, you need to gather the perceptions of your key *internal* groups—board members, administrators, paid staff, volunteers—and your key *external* groups—your donors and a select group of those being served.

Give these key people copies of the following statements. Ask them to rate each statement from 10 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree):

### MISSION:

- \_\_\_ The organization's mission guides identification of skills, knowledge, and resources needed by the staff.
- \_\_\_ The mission is clearly communicated to everyone involved in organization activities.
- \_\_\_ The staff is willing to change when the

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mission requires it.

- \_\_\_ The entire staff understands and supports the organization's mission.

### STAFF:

- \_\_\_ Information from the staff is analyzed as to how well activities are or aren't working.
- \_\_\_ The accomplishments of each department are recognized and rewarded.
- \_\_\_ Everyone within the organization cooperates to meet the needs of those being served.
- \_\_\_ Whenever strategies are changed, the results are measured, and the staff's reactions are assessed.

### STRATEGIES:

- \_\_\_ Staff members are concerned about how strategies are accomplished.
- \_\_\_ Strategies are reviewed regularly to evaluate how well they're working.
- \_\_\_ When strategies aren't working, the underlying reasons are corrected so that similar problems won't occur again.
- \_\_\_ Strategies are assessed periodically to ensure that they help achieve the organization's mission.

## PEOPLE THE ORGANIZATION SERVES:

- \_\_\_ There is an agreed-upon, prioritized list of the concerns of those the organization serves.
- \_\_\_ Staff members are given useful information about the people being served, including their concerns and complaints.
- \_\_\_ The mission is reviewed periodically to ensure it is meeting the critical needs of those being served.
- \_\_\_ The needs of those being served are regularly reviewed to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies used.

## STEP 3 ANALYZE RESULTS, AND FOLLOW UP.

When your key groups return their evaluation forms to you, analyze the results without delay. If scores dip much below 7, you will need to take corrective action as soon as possible.

Even if you receive perfect 10s, don't let yourself become complacent. Your mission and strategies can slip out of focus and alignment at different times and on different issues. Thus, it's important to follow up on a regular basis. Continually ask the following three questions to keep tabs on your organization's alignment and focus:

1. Do our strategies allow for optimum results in fulfilling our vision?
2. Do our staff members understand the mission? Do they have the correct training and incentives to work toward the vision?
3. Are the organization's strategies and staff's approaches focused on the organization's mission?

This analysis is the correct way to initiate strategic planning or total quality management (TQM). If your organization has implemented either process, this assessment is the proper tool to determine its effectiveness. In addition, this assessment should be part of your feasibility study if you contemplate a capital campaign.

## STEP 4 DIAGNOSE PATHOLOGIES.

Identify any symptoms in your organization that may be causing poor alignment. Here are some common pathologies and their symptoms:

- **Work Fatigue:** Strategies lead to activities that fail to satisfy people's needs.
- **Strategy Impetus:** Great strategies have been developed but aren't being properly implemented.
- **Daydreaming:** People's needs aren't being met, or their needs have changed.

**Has your organization lost touch with the needs of others because it sees itself as the solution?**

- **Slurred Speech:** The mission is clear, but there are mixed messages as to carrying it out.
- **Self-Centeredness:** The mission is out of touch with people's needs.
- **Loss of Sight:** The organization has lost touch with the needs of others because it sees itself as the solution.

If you recognize any of these pathologies, you need to seek out the cause so you can treat it. As with any disease, it's important to focus on the source of the problem. Your key groups' evaluations will point the way. Once you have diagnosed the problem and identified the root causes, you can apply the proper remedy to meet the needs of the people you serve. Only then will your activities produce the results you desire. ■

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These publications are available from the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center, 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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