
AoP Newsletter: Why are leaders so crap at creating team alignment?

1 message

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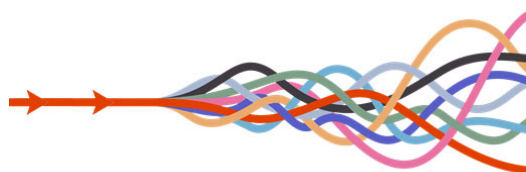
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AdamOnProjects Newsletter

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What's happening in the world of AdamOnProjects?

This edition: Where do people get their strategies?

People and their Theories**Why are project leaders so crap at building team alignment?**

It's almost axiomatic that some project teams thrive while others fail, even with the same tools and instructions. The secret isn't the tools—it's alignment. Most team leaders fail abjectly on this one essential

element of project team dynamics. Given that alignment is far more crucial to project success than any tool or technique, why do project leaders not do a better job?

Team Alignment - what a buzzword!

"Team alignment" sounds like a teambuilding cliché; and it is when it's left as a slogan or tag line. Project leaders fail or do a poor job at building alignment because they have one or more of several mental blockages:

1. They don't really know what alignment is.
2. They don't know how to diagnose misalignment and how to facilitate convergence.
3. They have a naive and optimistic perspective on the range of non-alignment.

In this yarn, I'm focusing on blockage #3.

A Couple of Caveats

Ok, so it's not all on the leader. The more all team members strive to surface misalignment and resolve it, the more likely the team will converge. Having said that, the rest of the team have "day jobs" and the leader has only one: to help the team be its best self. So, a lot of this falls on you, mate.

And secondly, it's not like there is some pre-ordained convergence point. It's certainly not the team leader's perspective. For true alignment it has to be something truly shared by the team. Where the team lands may not be where anyone started out.

A Recent Experience

So, this may seem like a weird association but bear with me - it will become obvious in a couple of paragraphs.

Recently, I read through thousands of ballot papers from the NSW Council elections—maybe 15,000 to 20,000 of them. Don't worry about why or how I did this - it's irrelevant.

It's what I noticed that's relevant.

What I noticed was a vast range of voting strategies that people applied - and misapplied - to their voting process. There were many

patterns and many more unique outliers, but the range was huge.

When I noticed a new pattern, my recurring inner question was

"How did they think of this one? What did they think they were trying to achieve?"

The voting instructions were starkly simple—shorter than a tweet—so how could anyone not understand what was required?

Simple instructions, but a complex context.

The context within which those instructions were applied ranged from the dead simple to the incredibly complex. Up to 60 candidates, 12 groups, and the option to vote "above" or "below the line" led to diverse and often dysfunctional strategies.

The instructions were intended to make voting much simpler in those complex cases.

But so many voters managed to make simple situations more complex, and complex situations, well, crazy.

It reminded me of the challenge project leaders face: underestimating the vast range of strategies team members might adopt—some totally off-track and even detrimental to project goals.

The Source of the Symptoms

There are many origin points for these symptoms:

1. Historical - people educated on older, stricter, voting rules)
2. Fuzzy tacit knowledge - people think they know what to do so they don't read the instructions
3. Reverse engineering - looking at the paper and figuring out for themselves the right way to do it
4. Misreading & Misunderstanding - Just got it wrong
5. Arrogance - the "I know better" syndrom

There are probably many others.

But these boil down to one simple root cause: ignorance.

David Deutch of Oxford University says that ***all evils in the world are caused by ignorance***. He calls this his "Principle of Optimism". Ok, he specifically says "lack of knowledge", not "ignorance", but I wanted to make a point.

All 5 of those surface symptoms reflect a lack of knowledge but the willingness to act anyway.

This reminded me so much of project teams.

Project Teams

Just like voters, team members bring their own mix of knowledge and assumptions, biases and mental models. Everyone has a history that produced whatever collection of these is in their heads when they join the team.

It's not always easy to identify this mental makeup, especially when our work discourse is full of technical terms and buzzwords. We certainly can't look inside anyone else's heads to see what's cooking.

I think it's common for people to assume that other people are more or less like us, with some slight variations.

We can't assume everyone is "close to the objective"; we must be ready for massive differences in understanding. Unlike the voting process where voters don't get feedback, project teams have an opportunity to learn and adjust.

Add to this that the human brain creates plans all the time, based on their models of the world and the information that their senses feed them as they go about their work.

Not only is there a different starting point for all team members, but they will actively generate new versions of their own plans based on what parts of the project they see.

And we can't forget the lesson from the ballot box which is the range of variation will likely exceed anything you can imagine.

So, what's a Team Leader to do?

We can't look inside people's heads, so we have to find ways to externalise their positions so we can detect misalignment.

The key is continuous and explicit validation. Unlike voters, project teams have the advantage of real-time feedback if they choose to use it.

Team leaders must facilitate the circumstances that identify misalignment and mediate the process by which the gaps are resolved.

Alignment is non-negotiable for successful projects. Tools and methodologies are important, but without alignment, they won't be effective. I stand by this: team alignment is the foundation for any tool or technique to work.

But isn't that what Agile does?

It's true that agile provides many mechanisms for feedback and validation. But sadly, many teams don't use them effectively, being ignorant of the true purpose, or unable to facilitate intentional and mindful participation. Often there is just perfunctory execution as a process check off, or side-stepping/avoiding.

An example of this is daily standup: so many teams just rattle off the standard lines thinking it's a once-a-day opportunity to see where folks are up to. This is incorrect. A standup is a once-a-day opportunity to detect team dissonance.

And the idea that this is done only once a day further compounds the problem. Validation and dissonance identification should be happening in every interaction.

What about non-Agile Practices

Plan-based practices don't tend to have built-in and frequent alignment validation activities built-in, but there's nothing wrong with adding some into the team's daily work. But not if they are just check-off processes that don't do anything.

Winston Royce in his famous paper designed in some important feedback loops, like "Critical Design Review" and similar, which some enterprise methodologies have built in, like Telstra's.

But every team interaction can have a validation point built in if there's a will to make them real.

The Bottom Line

Reading those ballot papers was like a Rorschach test—revealing people's internal strategies and identifying the scary range of possibilities in a very simple act.

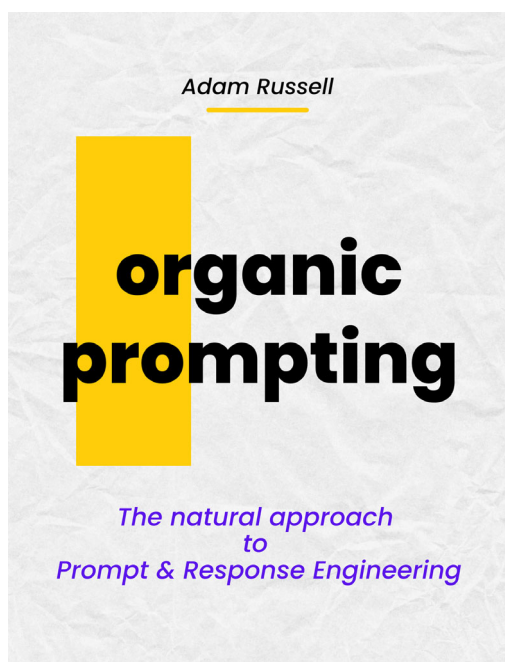
Individual strategies are inevitable, but collective alignment and feedback determine success.

Teams can learn and adapt together—something we must leverage to navigate complexity effectively.

Constantly validating alignment means ensuring that everyone's explicit and tacit knowledge is directed towards the same goal.

Feedback, discussion, and continuous adjustment are key. If we want our teams to succeed, we need to shape individual theories into a shared understanding and adapt together.

But only if it's done for real.



Book News

Organic Prompting

Book updates soon

I'm updating the book [Organic Prompting](#) this week with some ideas I've had in the last couple of months.

4C Model of Prompt Intent

The main addition is the 4C Model of Prompt Intent which helps prompt developers fully implement an evolutionary prompt development cycle. This model categorises prompt intent in four ways:

- **Context** elements intend to set the background to the prompt and put GPT in the correct "frame" for interpreting the prompt.

- **Content** elements intend to provide the core information that GPT should process to achieve the result.
- **Control** elements intend to provide guidance or direction for GPT about how to execute the task and output the response.
- **Construct** elements intend to define the structure and strategy of the prompt.

This enables you to assess the success of each prompt content category in terms of how it appears in the response, so you can go back to precisely the prompt element that needs work.

Stay tuned.

Organic Prompting Email Course

The [7-part free email course on Organic Prompting](#), is up and running - check it out.

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