

# The Key to Aligned Action

A paper  
from

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## The Key to Aligned Action



Over the past 20 years we have used a model to explain why so much good communication that occurs in corporations with groups of people and other large institutions is ultimately wasted effort. This is particularly the case when leaders seek to communicate information to a group of employees in the expectation that it will lead to some form of aligned action

In the past few months it has become clear how much this framework resonates with clients. Over the years we have received a number of requests to publish it. This paper is a response to those requests.

It will describe the problem, outline a framework and make some simple practical suggestions to foster good corporate communication to bring about aligned action.

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## Context

Any corporate setting, for example a mining company, a hospital, a supply chain logistics provider, or a school is in fact a milieu for a vast amount of data. Data is, if you like, the stream of blood cells that flow through the veins of the corporate body to give it life and energy in order to achieve results and deliver service.

Client after client, in so many different sectors across many countries, complain that they have invested in employee surveys, employee engagement activities, and still the results come back time and again that their people fail to believe or experience good communication from the leaders of the organization. It is even worse when a survey returns a good result, only to be followed by widespread innuendo that communication in the company is in fact not good.

Poor communication invariably comes up as a problem in such settings, and the leaders look about with bewilderment and dismay seemingly saying:

***“What else can we possibly do to improve communication in this organization and bring people along with us?”***

The next step, and it is often not such a large step, is to start to blame the employees for having failed to either read the communication, focus on it, or be proactive to find out what they need to know.

It is almost as if there is some self determination expected from the employee, thereby placing the leader or manager immediately on the moral high ground . One wonders on occasion if this is not almost an excuse to stop trying.

## The problem

Communication in corporate settings is rarely an end in itself. It is usually a means to an end,

and often one of those ends is aligned action.

Aligned action in today's corporate world is often sought around issues that are less than straightforward, simple and linear. More often than not the issue around which aligned action is sought may be large in scope and/or quite complicated or complex.

And leaders seek to communicate with employees, often in group settings, about this issue. But it often seems to fail.

When you delve a little you find there was almost invariably a written document, a PowerPoint presentation or a workshop of some form that involved a lot of explaining or talking to groups of people. It is often prepared with thoroughness and diligence and senior executives are often directly involved in its delivery.

Equally, on less complex issues you sometimes





hear the response “We sent it out in an email to everyone.”

So, when executives receive feedback from employee surveys that communication processes are inadequate, non-existent, irrelevant or confusing to employees it is not surprising they act with bewilderment and dismay. It is particularly distressing to see this occur in settings where executives with goodwill and thoroughness have open feedback face-to-face interactions with groups of people in their organization.

These are often occasions of disillusionment for the employees present and frustration for the executives. Both sides leave such gatherings scratching their heads.

One particularly poignant case that comes to mind is of a company where supervisors and managers were sent in groups to a week long leadership development activity over the course of a 12 month period. Nearly 150 had the experience and during this workshop they invariably complained about the availability, quality, frequency and relevance of corporate communications from senior executives and line

managers.

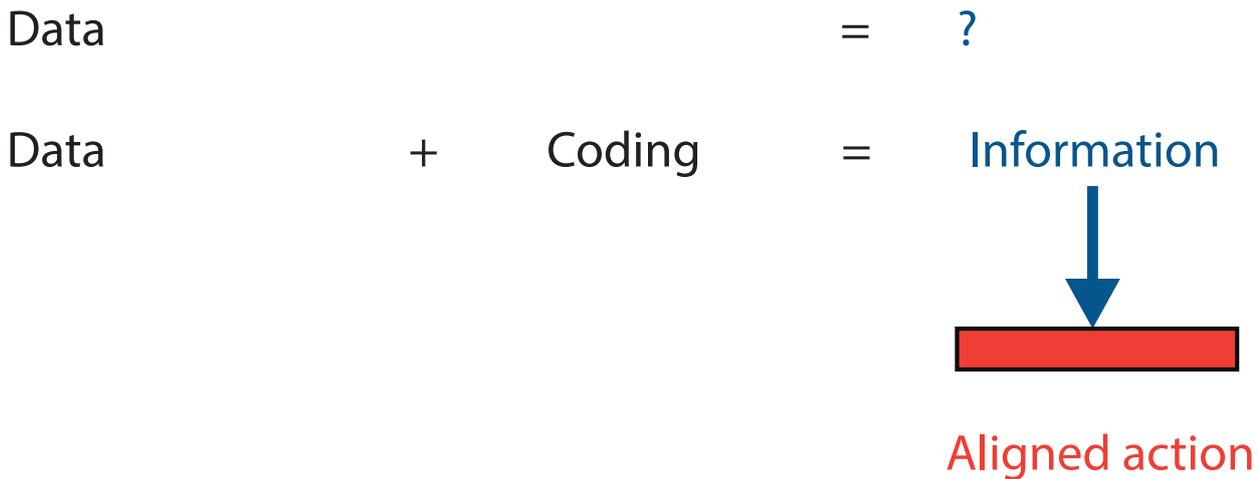
The CEO and top team took this feedback very seriously and set about a training program of their own in communication skills.

They refurbished the corporate communication system and embarked on a sustained effort to communicate better with their employees. Four years on, a different but similar group of employees was giving similar feedback to two of these same executives.

The sad irony of this was that they were sharing their experience with a specific two particular executives who among all were the most committed to employee communication and engagement.

## What is going on here?

As the observer unpacks what is going on, it seems there is a hidden assumption that if I as an executive codify all the data about an issue or topic that is “out there” in visually appealing infographics, simple language that gets to the point, if I stand in front of a group or make a corporate video and have it distributed throughout



the company, if I have my line managers distribute and explain the information to their subordinates .... I will have done my best at communication.

If it then doesn't work, it must be the problem of the receiver not the sender.

There is another dimension that lurks in the corner of this mental model ... The earnest effort and commitment of the top team of this company was to "communicate better to their employees" not *engage better with their employees*. To better understand this distinction see **Jill Tideman's paper** on the differences and similarities between communication and engagement.

The codification of the data can be in many forms, but typically involves spreadsheets, power point presentations (or equivalent), emails, diagrams, corporate videos.

The expectation is that professional, reasonable and thorough delivery will lead to *aligned action*. In fact it is often when there is no difference in the behavior of employees, and when they begin to behave as if the communication event never occurred it is then that the questioning and dismay among executives begins.

This is best depicted in the diagram above.

## What is missing for aligned action?

It needs to be said that in sad scenarios such as the one described above, most involved are acting neither incompetently nor with bad will. Generally, executives take advice from communication and corporate affairs professionals and act with good intent.

Unfortunately, the mental model of corporate communication contained within this rather typical scenario is very simplistic and fails to highlight what is missing.

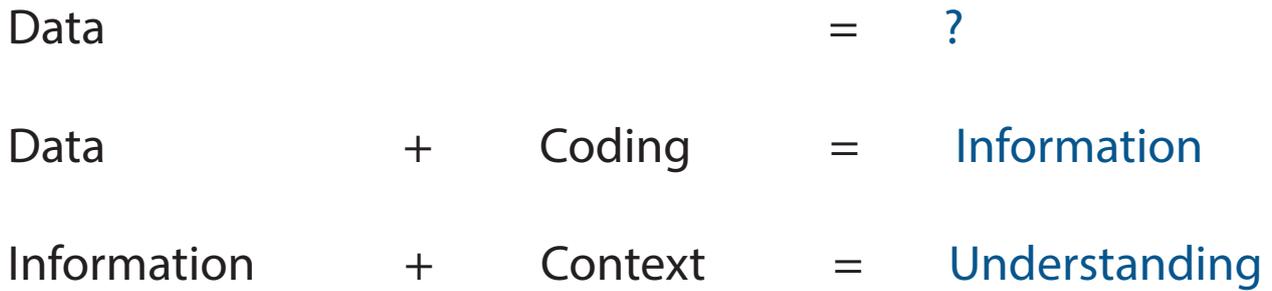
The four major elements commonly missing in good communication processes are

- The background or context
- An opportunity to interact
- A clear sense of the gap between present and desired states
- A plan for action to achieve the desired outcomes.

## Data to information

Organizations are awash with data. Very little of it is information.

When data about anything (corporate plans, strategic initiatives, performance imperatives, etc) is codified in a graphic or spreadsheet or PowerPoint presentation it becomes



information.

But simply sending this information to employees will not engender aligned action, no matter what method is chosen and no matter how well done.

## Information to Understanding

As a student of psychology in the 1970s I learned that human beings can only perceive something if they are able to distinguish a difference. i.e. foreground from background. To my knowledge, this is still the case. Information (foreground) will not be apprehended unless it is positioned against a context (background). The key to turning information into understanding is context. This is depicted in the diagram above.

Context is, to put it simply, big picture **and** reasons. It is **Simon Sinek** who has clearly demonstrated in recent years that effective and inspiring leaders first start with what he calls "the why". In our terms this is providing the reason behind a piece of information and a painting of the broader context in which it sits.

When done well, we find that **William Bridges** frame of the 4Ps is often in use. He speaks of communicating the:-

- Purpose
- Picture
- Plan, and
- Part

We find that it works better as C+4P:-

**Context:** set the history, background, bigger picture

**Purpose:** explain the purpose for the change, initiative, issue, task

**Picture:** depict what success looks like (see the section on desired state below)

**Plan:** outline in broad terms how it is hoped things will unfold

**Part:** outline what part you are hoping members of the group will play going forward

## Understanding to appreciation

The next step in the *process* of communication that leads to aligned action is to provide an opportunity for interaction to occur. Interaction? Yes, with the ideas contained in the information **and** context and with one another. By with "one another" it is meant those who are receiving the information and context. This, of course, includes the provider of the information.

This is so often the step missed. When a group of people receive new information, understand it in its proper context and then have the opportunity to talk it through with one another, to toss the ideas within it around, to test the limits and subtleties of their understanding ... when these things happen, then the understanding transforms into *appreciation*.

In our terms, appreciation has both a cognitive component (understanding) and a kinesthetic

(emotional) component. It comes when the receiver not only sees what is being communicated but experiences some form of emotional shift (however small) to that information. A colleague, Rob Hattiingh, has observed that different people will be moved by different bits in the story, but until they have identified themselves in the story (put themselves in the frame so to speak), it will not resonate and potential alignment is blocked. Without both components there is little chance that an emotional connection (called affect) can be generated and group-level aligned action ensue.

It is the generation of affect that is needed for a group of people to be both aligned and willing to commit to some shared activity.

This is depicted in the diagram below.

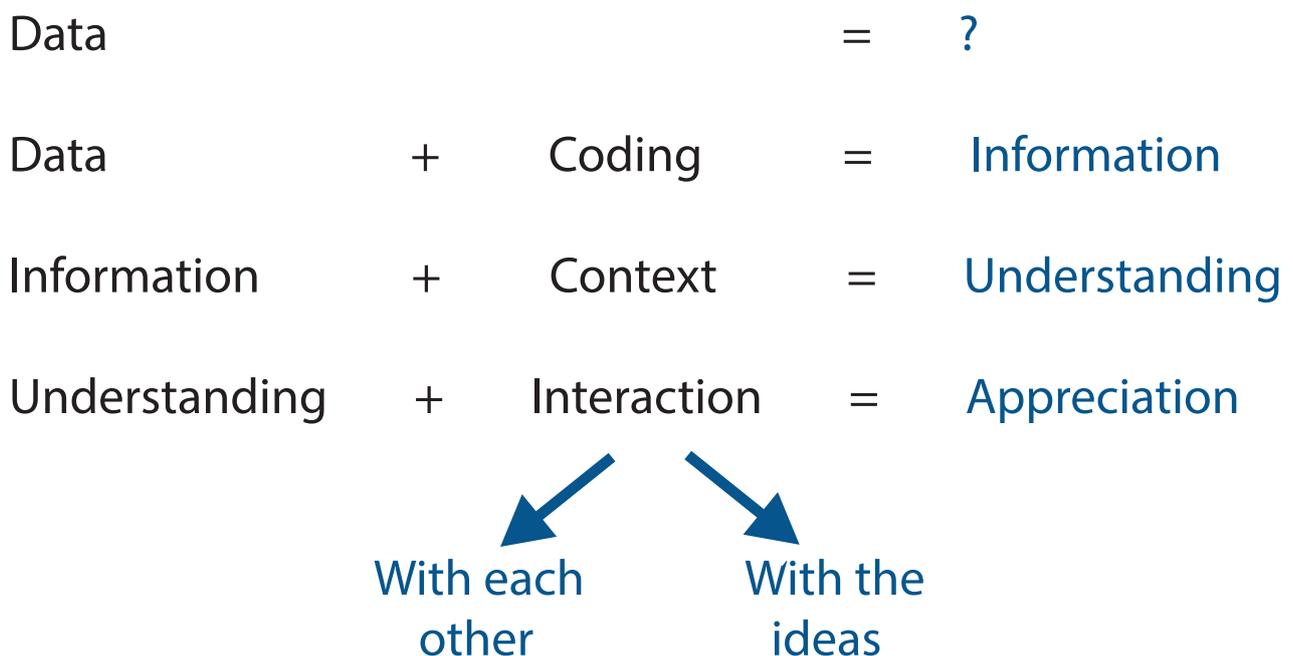
It has become clear to us in the last 3 years that a substantial portion of the time devoted to interaction should account for interplay, dialogue, testing, probing and challenging *the background context*, i.e. the big picture and the reasons for the initiative. For all of this *appreciation* it is still but a waypoint on the journey to aligned action.

## Appreciation to cognitive and emotional alignment

Once we have achieved appreciation the next milestone is a shared sense among members of the group of both cognitive and emotional alignment. Alignment is a form of identification with issue, proposal, idea or suggestion.

I say group, but the process occurs in a similar manner for individuals. In this paper, though, the focus is on those settings where the communication is largely enacted in group settings. Alignment tends to occur if there is a clear and shared understanding of the gap between the present state and a desired state. Without this, it is unlikely that the communication will last as a source of commitment. In fact, the clearer and starker this gap the more engaged individuals are likely to be. The result tends to be a high level of alignment among those present about the worth of doing something to bridge the gap (cognitive) and a sense of commitment to do so (emotional).

But this step is often not achieved for the communication process fails to specify the desired state precisely enough or in a manner that is well-formed.

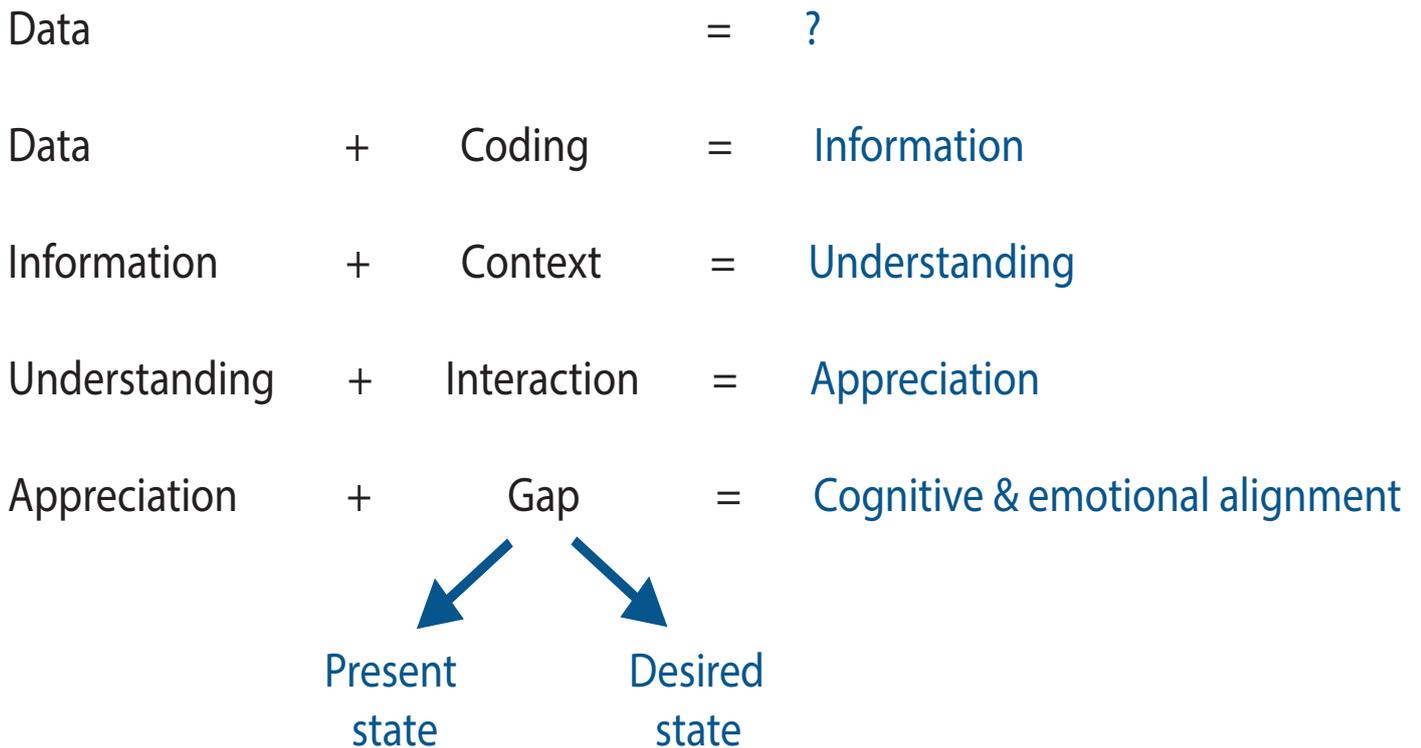


Drawing on the work of **Richard Bandler** and **John Grinder**, a well-formed outcome (i.e. a satisfactory outline of the desired state) must satisfy the following criteria:-

- It must be stated in the positive (cannot be stated as something we don't want)
- It must be specific
- It must be worthwhile, i.e. add value in some way
- It must be ours to do
- It must be possible
- It must be ecological to the setting in which it is to occur

Even when good intentions might get us to this stage in the communication process, the process sometimes fails because those managing the process either

- State the goal as something that must not occur,
- Are vague in their use of language,





## The key to aligned action

- Choose outcomes that in the scheme of things do not add real value or even, on occasion, detract from value,
- Speak of things to be achieved not rightfully within the domain of those present to either do or be responsible for,
- Specify end states that are simply not possible or are too much of an improbable stretch, or
- Are so alien to the prevailing organizational or social culture that they will be rejected by the wider system.

This development from appreciation to cognitive and emotional alignment is depicted in the diagram below.

## From alignment to aligned action

Finally the last step in the process: commitments and dreams without a plan are simply commitments and dreams. This process must provide for the members of the group to

Data			=	?
Data	+	Coding	=	Information
Information	+	Context	=	Understanding
Understanding	+	Interaction	=	Appreciation
Appreciation	+	Gap	=	Cognitive & emotional alignment
Cognitive & emotional alignment	+	Plan	=	Aligned action



participate in formulating a way to achieve the desired state.

When all these steps are in place, aligned action will generally be borne out of the communication. In other words, good communication requires all these elements with groups in the work place. This is depicted on page 9.

So often we see much wasted effort and the consequent problems outlined earlier in this paper. In the light of the framework presented it is relatively easy in such circumstances to identify the common mistakes made:-

- The information was not packaged in an easily digestible form,
- The presenters failed to provide a solid context, i.e. paint the bigger picture and the reasons for particular initiative,
- They failed to provide the opportunity for sufficient interaction to occur within and among group members and with the

ideas embedded in the information

- They failed to paint a clear picture of the gap between the present and desired states, and failed to formulate the desired state in terms that were well-formed
- The failed to engage the group in a plan for how to achieve the desired state.

## Pre-conditions

This framework has been embraced by many over the past two decades and generally adopted as a more effective approach to communicating with both individuals and groups of people. Indeed, one of our global clients uses this template with great effect at every level of the organization no matter whether it is at Board level or out at a site with groups of people.

A colleague, Rob Hattingh, helped me understand where even such good work with the framework can still occasionally fall down. It is in the *preparation* and *mindset* that goes into creating an opportunity for good communication.

He observed the need to first place a context about the need for the communication session well in advance so that expectations for the event are appropriate.

This type of communication cannot be rushed and so executives and communication professionals need to be prepared to invest the time necessary, especially for the interactive element.

And those leading the event and process need to have a mindset that this is not a one-way process, that the receivers are as much or more part of the process than the deliverers.

When these pre-conditions are in place, then the appropriate environment will have been created to allow for the process to unfold and for aligned action to be born.

## The futility of email and intranet postings

It seems so clear in hindsight, but when we hear an executive say “*We sent it out in an email to everyone*” it is relatively easy now to identify the futility and simple mindedness behind such a comment. Such communication rarely if ever provides for good context setting and never allows for interaction.

Intranet postings and corporate videos are only marginally better - it is possible to provide a lot of context with both these media. But again neither allows for the interaction step.

Interaction is so vital to move from a dissociated understanding to an associated sense of real appreciation, which is a necessary step towards alignment and then aligned action.

## A simple process

The problem has been defined and the steps commonly missing have been outlined above. Below is a simple process that will invariably account for all the missing elements and ensure

aligned action.

The roots of this process lie in the Institute for Cultural Affairs – USA which, decades ago, created a set of facilitative processes, some of which reliably produced three types of outcomes simultaneously.

They produced

**Rational outcomes:** tasks done, decisions made, issues resolved, plans established

**Emotional outcomes:** an improvement in *sentiment, confidence and commitment*

**Social outcomes:** an improvement in the functionality of relationships among those involved

Indeed it is possible to say that aligned action is usually a combination of all three of these elements.

One particular ICA-USA process that does this is the Discussion Method which Stanfield has evolved into **The Art of Focused Conversation**

Borrowing from this body of work, it is possible to structure an effective process that will generate aligned action in a group of people around six simple steps.



**What is the context?** - history, background, big picture and reasons

**What are the facts?** – the specifics

**What does success look like?** – articulated in a well-formed structure

**How do we each feel about it?** – allowing for interaction based on emotional responses

**What does it mean?** – exploring implications

**How shall we proceed?** – planning for aligned action towards the desired outcomes

A communication session in the workplace that establishes the right mindset, provides the requisite time for interaction and follows this sequence will generally produce aligned action among those present. Failure to account for these preconditions or all of the questions will generally stifle commitment and clear understanding and result in some version of the unfortunate scenario outlined above.

## Reprise

The depiction of this model of effective communication as a path to aligned action may appear somewhat linear.

The real world is never linear, but any process that ensures all elements are present invariably delivers alignment and aligned action among a group of people, and they never come back to executives and say either they didn't understand, didn't appreciate or can't remember ever being told.

The reader will also have come to the conclusion that good communication that generates aligned and informed action is really just good engagement!

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August 2015



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