



# THE ROAD TO ALIGNMENT.

Lessons from 2020  
for alignment and  
communications.



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# 1. ALIGNMENT IS...

All about unity... **the power of us**

# 2. RESEARCH SHOWS ALIGNMENT IS CRITICAL TO ...



CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE



STRATEGY EXECUTION



TRANSFORMATION



AGILITY



COLLABORATION



M&A

# 3. ALIGNMENT IS A BLIND SPOT FOR MOST ORGANISATIONS ...

Lack of **awareness**

Lack of **cohesion**

**Silos Empires Politics**

Why? **A lack of Executive and Communications commitment**

# 4. THE ROAD TO ALIGNMENT HAS FOUR STEPS ...



One VISION



One STORY



One TEAM



One VOICE

# 5. AND FIVE PRINCIPLES ...

**Know your enemy**

**Alignment starts at the top**

**Shared clarity first. Alignment second**

**Less communicating... more enabling communicators**

**Don't stop**



# 1. INTRODUCTION

**In late 2018, we joined forces to launch a new paper:**

**[‘Strategic alignment – how communicators can change the face of leadership’.](#)**

As we stated at the time, the purpose of the paper was to consider alignment from a communication perspective.

- Are the world’s organizations aligned?
- If not, where are the roadblocks?
- What can communication professionals do to create more aligned organizations?

We sought to do this by surveying over 200, mainly senior, communication professionals from around the world. We also conducted in-depth interviews with a number of people.

Shortly, we will summarise the findings of this study. You can explore the findings in detail if you wish. The paper, which has been downloaded several thousand times, is still [readily available online](#) today. You can also watch an [IABC webinar](#) which covers the findings.

Since the release of this paper, it’s fair to say a lot has changed.

- We have conducted further (largely secondary) research.
- We have both learnt a lot by practicing in the field.
- The profile of alignment as an important communication activity has increased substantially.
- And, of course, COVID-19 hit. The subsequent move to virtual and/or hybrid workforces has magnified the importance of alignment even more and forever changed the way it is achieved.

Subsequently, we have chosen now as the time to write ‘chapter two’. As part of this, we have had conversations with 27 senior communication professionals and leaders across our own country (Australia) and the World. They work either in-house (in the private or public sector), or they are expert consultants in this space.



## 2. 2018 IN A NUTSHELL: THE ORIGINAL STUDY

Let's start by revisiting the headlines from the original study.

### **Alignment is about unity**

It's about ensuring that all your people (and partners) are 'on the same page' – working together, doing the right things, moving in the same (the right) direction and having shared meaning.

Another way to think about it is this...

Every organization has a story... who you are, where you are going and how you will get there. The real goal of alignment is to embed this story so that it effectively becomes the organization's DNA or heartbeat.

This involves ensuring that everyone:

- Gets the story... They collectively understand it.
- Buys the story... They buy into the story. It makes sense.
- Shares the story... They are able to (and want to) talk about it.
- And, ultimately, lives the story... It underpins their actions and decision-making.

### **A side note about shared understanding and alignment**

It's worth adding a post-study mention of shared understanding (or shared clarity). Over recent years, shared understanding has emerged as a growing area of focus among communication professionals.

In fact, shared understanding is one of the eight measures in [Atlassian's Project Team Health Monitor](#). They describe it as:

*"The team has a common understanding of why they're here, the problem/need, are convinced about the idea, confident they have what they need, and trust each other."*

There are two things to appreciate about shared understanding and alignment.

First, both are vital. In fact, you can't build alignment without shared understanding.

Second, shared understanding can be achieved through effective leadership and communication. Alignment, however, also needs to involve planning, policies, processes, goal setting, reward and recognition, performance management and a range of other activities.



## Alignment is important

An exceptional 97% of respondents agreed that strategic alignment is important to the successful achievement of their organization's goals. 74% of them strongly agreed.

### In reality, our organizations are a long way from being aligned

In the original study, 57% of respondents believed their organization was strategically aligned. A mere 13% strongly agreed. That's not a great result but, technically, it's a pass.

Unfortunately, when you dig a bit further, some very large cracks appear. Think about the 'get, buy, share, live' model mentioned earlier. The bulk of respondents reported that their colleagues didn't understand and buy their organization's story. As a result, they can't possibly share or live it.

- **Only 26% of respondents felt that their colleagues saw the corporate strategy as key to the way they do business. The results weren't much better for purpose (35%), vision (32%) and values (39%).** This is a frightening result when you consider how many organisations claim to be 'purpose-led' or 'values-led'.
- **Only 42% felt that their colleagues' team and individual plans clearly aligned with organizational priorities.**
- And, overall, respondents believed that **only 36% of their colleagues would be able to recall their corporate story.** That equates to only 18 out of every 50 colleagues.

## Our leaders and, sadly, communication professionals are holding us back

Respondents felt there were a wide range of issues holding them back.

- **35% reported that they struggled with a lack of senior leadership or middle management buy-in.**
- **44% reported that they lacked a clear strategic narrative or, alternatively, they had multiple narratives that didn't line up.**
- **44% reported that their organization had an overly tactical, rather than strategic, focus**
- **31% reported that they didn't have the available resources or expertise to drive strategic alignment.**
- And more than half – **54%** – **reported that they worked for a siloed organization where team and corporate strategies were disconnected.**

Clearly, organizations are facing a wide range of problems. The study found, however, that there were two core factors underpinning all these alignment issues.



The first was that *leaders weren't committed to driving strategic alignment*. This applied to all levels of leadership – CEOs, executive teams and senior leadership. Importantly, we found that *strategic alignment outcomes rocketed when leadership was committed*.

The second core factor was the most surprising of the study. *Organizations weren't aligned because communication professionals weren't committed to alignment either*.

Only about 40% of respondents believed that *purpose, vision, values and strategy were a key part of their employee communications, external communications and marketing*.

## **Strategic alignment is an exciting opportunity for the communication profession**

You could easily lament these results, but they present an enormous opportunity as well.

Pushing for alignment was shown to be a valuable way for organizations to improve their performance and competitive differentiation (see Section 3: The business case for alignment).

And, for communication professionals, shared understanding and alignment is an opportunity to build our impact and influence. This reality was conclusively demonstrated by the following findings.

**Of the of the 227 communicators who responded to the study, ten strongly agreed that:**

- Their people see the organization's strategic narrative as key to the way they do business
- Their CEO, executive and senior leadership team all see strategic alignment as an important priority.

**Of those ten high performing respondents:**

- 100% believed they can influence their leaders
- 100% reported strong partnerships with Strategy, HR, Marketing, Legal and Finance
- 90% reported to the CEO.



## 3. THE BUSINESS CASE FOR ALIGNMENT

One of the first things we did following the release of the original study was to consider the importance of alignment.

To do this, we reviewed secondary research to look at the drivers and barriers that underpin a wide range of corporate capabilities. What we found surprised even us. The business case could not be stronger. As shown below, alignment plays a critical role in:

### Strategy execution

- A lack of understanding of the strategy outside the C-suite is a serious barrier to the successful implementation of strategy.

### Transformation and change

- A clearly understood change story is one of the building blocks of successful change and a significant driver of success in digital transformations.

### Agility

- A clear view of what we are trying to achieve is critical to building agility (and a serious misstep for those who don't do it).

### Trust

- Purpose, vision and values are central to building or restoring trust. This applies to both employee and public trust.

### Customer experience

- Aligning operations and people behind a clear customer aspiration and strategy is an important step in achieving a positive customer experience

### An executive's first hundred days

- Building alignment around vision and strategic direction are rated as the most important task for new executives.

### Delegated decision making

- Having a clearly understood strategy is the first step to improving delegated decision making.

### Analytics

- Being aligned on strategy is the first step to getting value from analytics.

### Collaboration and ecosystems

- A clear understanding of strategy and goals is fundamental to driving a collaborative culture. This applies both internally and externally.

### Employee engagement

- A visible and strong strategic narrative is central to engaging employees.

The supporting research behind these can be found in Appendix 1.



# 4. THE ROAD TO ALIGNMENT

As part of the original paper, we identified a methodology for building alignment. Based on the further work we've done since, that methodology has evolved into the following four steps:

- **One vision:** Executive support and set for success
- **One story:** Build the narrative that unites everyone
- **One team:** Align operations and enable leaders
- **One voice:** Hold tension on the story.

These steps are detailed below.



**One VISION**  
Executive support and set for success

Measure alignment

Business case

Align Executive

Core team



**One STORY**  
Build the narrative that unites everyone

Audit existing story

Build external context

One pager

Narrative



### One TEAM

Align operations and enable leaders

Role clarity & training

Launch

Contextualization

Operationalize



### One VOICE

Hold tension on the story

Align all comms

Don't tinker or stray

In applying this methodology it is important to appreciate that every alignment task is different. They vary due to a wide range of factors, including:

- The type and scale of the task. Are you trying to align people to a purpose, a strategy, a culture, a change or transformation program. And how large is the organization or team you are seeking to align?
- The current context and what you are trying to achieve.
- The current leadership, organizational culture, capabilities, and architecture.
- The size and complexity of the team, including the number of leadership layers.
- The operating model: for example, does the team adopt a model such as Agile or a more traditional operating model.

Even issues such as your geographic spread and ability to reach people will have a significant impact on the methodology you adopt.

So, the way you approach building and maintaining alignment can vary and this methodology would need to be managed accordingly.

There are, however, five principles that must be observed if you are to succeed in aligning your organization or team. They are covered in the following section.



## The five alignment principles

As stated, the way you build alignment can vary substantially depending on a range of factors. However, the conversations we held suggested there are five principles that are mandatory if you hope to succeed in any alignment attempt. They are:

- **Principle 1:** Know your enemy
- **Principle 2:** Alignment starts at the top
- **Principle 3:** Shared understanding first. Alignment second
- **Principle 4:** Less communicating... more enabling communicators
- **Principle 5:** Don't stop

The following is an outline of these five principles and how they map to the methodology discussed above.



### One vision

#### Principle 1: Know your enemy

You can't build alignment without an understanding of your starting point. This is why knowing your alignment gaps is so important. Thankfully, insights into the alignment of an organization or team aren't that hard to find. You can study employee engagement and other internal surveys. Interviewing key players is also insightful. And there are proprietary tools, such as [Mirror Mirror](#), you can use to measure the alignment of teams to purpose, values, strategy and to each other.

*"How can we generate the right conversations to be had within the context of aligning a group of people, if we're not open about where the gaps are, if we're not honest and open about where the gaps are? I think that has to be the starting place."*

Richard Atherton

#### Principle 2: Alignment starts at the top

If your senior leaders aren't aligned, your organization or team won't be either... no matter what you do. Leaders (and team leaders) need to understand and completely agree with what the organization is trying to achieve, why it's important and what they need to do.

Leaders also need to be aligned about alignment... why it's important and how to do it. There needs to be a clear pathway forward. Leaders need to agree on what the alignment gaps are and how to address them. They also need to co-create and agree to the implementation plan and the role they will play.

Ultimately, your CEO and executive team need to be your strongest advocates.

*"When your senior executives aren't aligned, then you've got no hope in hell of getting alignment across the organisation."*

Danielle Bond



## One story

### Principle 3. Shared understanding first. Alignment second.

Our original paper focused on the need for communication professionals to take ownership of strategic alignment. But there's a step before that – a vital step. It's **shared understanding**.

We all know the importance of building understanding. But shared understanding is different. It's where everyone shares a united view of who we are, where we're going and how we'll get there.

As such, shared understanding focuses on the performance of the team, not just the individual. It emphasises teamwork, alignment and collaboration... not silos and soloists.

To state the obvious, the first step in building shared understanding is having a story that people can understand. That's why this is all about your story. It doesn't matter if you're working with a new strategy, change or transformation, purpose, process... whatever.

- If it's new, you need to build alignment.
- And, if you need to build alignment, you need shared understanding first.
- And, to build shared understanding, you need a great story told really well.

So, make sure that the story you tell is simple, credible, inspiring and, most of all, consistent.

*“For alignment, there has to be clarity. Clarity on the real purpose of what you're really aligning to, because I think some people are aligned to the wrong thing. They're aligned to a secondary priority, or they align to a red herring.”*

Andre Oberholzer

*“There was a corporate strategy refresh done in April. It became a very pure notion of 'serve customers well and help our communities prosper'...We've just boiled it back to why we are here... how we work, which are four basic principles that everybody needs to follow.. It gave us, as a function, the ability to align our three-year strategy directly to the corporate one, because when it's simple, it's easier to align...You can basically Lego block from corporate strategy, corporate affairs strategy, a single-year work plan and individual work plan, quarterly ambitions. So at any point in time, you can lead straight back to the strategy and what your work is doing relative to the top line. And that's been pretty transformational.”*

Jason Laird

*“At the beginning of the year, the head office communication team sit with the top management team and they create the narrative for the year... I always find it amazing how they even in this crisis now, they still tend to check their messages against the core narrative for the year. So this is an organization which is very mature and they use the communication professionals well.”*

Dr Amanda Hamilton-Attwell



## One team

### Principle 4: Less communicating... more enabling communicators

Alignment is ALL about context. People need to be aligned not just on the strategy, but on the role they play and how it contributes to the whole. Only their manager can help them do this. Moving forward, training managers and people leaders will be a growing opportunity for communication professionals. Training not just to communicate the strategy and reinforce behaviour but, to contextualise it with their teams.

*"I think it's important for the Communications department to help leaders and also employees to become better communicators. So, we are not doing all the job for them, but supporting them and showing them how to communicate better."*

Toni Perez

*"A lot of research has shown that, as a communicator, as you grow your career, you need to become a trusted advisor. And one way to do that is moving from executing communication, facilitating and enabling communication and connection across the organization, which is exactly what we're talking about here, alignment."*

Sharon Hunter

*"Aligning is about having people really share meaning that is relevant and actionable towards performance."*

Lindsay Uittenbogaard

To do this effectively, you need empathy so that you can understand the people you're working with. How they feel, what they're up against, how they work. The more you talk (and listen), the more effective your alignment work will be.

*"It's the old adage. The reason you have two ears and one mouth is you've got two ears to listen. So you should be listening double time to how much you're speaking. To me, it's all about listening. And a good communicator should be a really good listener. You need to understand your target audience better than they understand themselves."*

Derrick Rozdeba

*"Always acknowledge the human element first when communicating and let your company's purpose be a key decision-making tool."*

Maya Donevska



## One voice

### Principle 5: Don't stop

Alignment takes time to build... and no time to lose. It requires more than slide decks and leader scripts. You need to walk a long road – communicating, compelling, training and measuring all the way. You need to be all in, all the time.

You also need to continuously review and improve. Accept that you will never have perfect alignment. Try to understand what worked in certain circumstances and, of course, what didn't. Learn, adapt and iterate.

Finally (and most importantly) don't stop. Alignment is emergent and demands continuous commitment. As soon as you take your foot off the pedal, you'll lose it.

*"We've got to communicate, communicate, communicate. So we've got to keep up the drumbeat. So as a communicator, you need more resilience than ever."*

Michael Ambjorn

Having said that, it's important to play the long game... but not too long.

*"If it takes too long, you'll find that the organisation has moved somewhere else... Yes, it does take time, but you don't want to get to a situation where the top of the shop is now turned in a different direction, but you're still telling the rest of the organisation to turn left, as it were."*

Russell Grossman



## 5. THE VOICE OF THE PROFESSION

It's always fascinating to talk with leaders in the communication profession, and particularly about a topic that they all recognise as critical to the success of their organizations. Over twelve hours with 27 senior communication professionals, we discussed what impact, if any, the past two years have had on alignment in their, or their clients', organizations and the role of communication in that.

We could potentially write a book about this, but let's boil this down to what we feel are the key takeouts.

### **Aligned? It depends.**

Some are better aligned than others, some are the same as eighteen months ago, whilst others have continued to struggle with alignment. Why? It depends on their context.

Those who already had a meaningful purpose, strong cultures and organizational capabilities, and embedded strategies were well placed to deal with major disruptions. There was a sense of preparedness and we could deal with this, and quickly adapted to look after their people, their operations and respond to change.

*"As a company, we're traditionally pretty well aligned. We've got a really strong purpose, really strong values. People know what they are – that those are our north stars. What has happened with the pandemic is that it's just elevated the need for people to be in alignment when they're not together."*

Jenifer Bice

Irrespective of COVID-19, a number of organizations had already recognized the need for major organizational transformation, restructures or a strategy reformulation. Those processes were either in place or well underway through the pandemic and, for some, the pandemic helped to accelerate or provide sharper focus for the executive and senior leaders.

*"COVID-19 and the other issues we face has allowed us to reposition the value the function can bring in helping leaders at the executive team think about driving alignment across our business globally... The step change he's ( CEO) trying to drive is around creating greater alignment in the organization, not just around the strategy, but the aspirational or ambition of the business over the long-term... we've made significant progress, but still have a long way to go"*

Melissa O'Neill

*"COVID focused the organization around strategic alignment and there was much less noise from competing priorities. Consistent messaging at all levels also helped and seeing results from alignment reinforced the momentum"*

Maya Donevska



*“What’s that tension between the group focus, the regional priorities and regional focus? What about if there are three regions at slightly different paces?... That is a tension that is probably always there until your organization reaches a level of maturity that very few get to and potentially is always linked to personality. And once the personalities change and new people come in with new plans, then that organization drops down and has to rebuild that level of maturity as far as alignment is concerned.”*

Andre Oberholtzer

*“The people who will come out of all of this are the people who went in well-prepared for all of this. And that speaks to solid values, solid cultures and so on.”*

Michael Ambjorn

After the initial wave of COVID-19, the cracks in organizations and in particular, strategic alignment, were exposed. Organizations without a clear purpose, misaligned values and disconnected strategy struggled. As we had seen in our original study, there was a lack of commitment to strategic alignment at both leadership and by communication professionals. Arguably, focus became heavily tactical and short-term, dealing with the pressure of business survival, layoffs, uncertainty and fear.

*“Organizations who are not necessarily central to the recovery from a pandemic are really struggling... it’s still about the numbers. When you talk to people within organizations, they’re still incredibly pressured by meeting numbers because it’s now become about survival. And so the need for survival is overriding the emotional and intellectual understanding this is about following a strategy that is long-term and has fundamental principles, values and beliefs at the heart of it.”*

Jane Mitchell

*“One client I have is struggling with alignment. And, I’d say lockdown has made it worse just because everyone is trying to do that job, plus the extra work because of COVID-19.”*

Suzy Giles

#### **Numerous roadblocks to alignment were identified:**

- Organizational capability, architecture and systems
- Ill defined purpose and values
- Government COVID-19 restrictions and the impact on revenue generation and cash flow
- Other external factors, such as sensitive political and trade relationships, inequity, global supply chains
- Differing employee experiences working from home, in essential workplaces, digital connectivity, and conducive home working environments impacting health and wellbeing
- A remote or hybrid workforce where you need to make the extra effort to coordinate the right people to make decisions has, in some cases, made the communications production process slower.
- On screen fatigue is real.



*“Operational capability and the ability for the sub-tiers to align themselves... it’s one thing for rhetorical alignment with vision or purpose but, when the systems, process, remuneration, internal competition and all of those cultural levers aren’t also aligned with that alignment, then communication is just... shouting into the wind.”*

Jonathan Champ

*“There’s a wave coming for alignment but people don’t yet call it alignment. They’re still attributing alignment to other factors like good leadership and good communications indeed. When what that’s got in common at its base is fundamentally either a way to inculcate good alignment or be better aligned as an outcome.”*

Lindsay Uittenbogaard

*“One of the alignment issues that you have in an organization stem from the weak language in the kind of ideological framework – the vision, purpose, mission – and in the effort to make it more inclusive it becomes less specific. And everybody can align themselves with it but, they’re aligning themselves really with different things.”*

Mike Klein

## Going back to your core

In 2019 we saw a mix of forces, including the rise of [Glass Box Brands](#), climate change, rising inequality, political instability, and changing societal and stakeholder expectations, lead to a growing number of corporate leaders espousing the need to purpose-led organizations and thinking beyond the bottom-line. In a [Fortune/McKinsey](#) study, 40 CEOs talked about purpose being a crossroads for leaders, particularly in a crisis. “If you stay true to your purpose and it is very clear to every person that is working in this company, then there is a very clear direction, there is a compass, there is a star that is telling you this is where we all go,” said Pfizer CEO, Albert Bourla. “That unites the organization, creates cohesiveness, and brings results.”

Our conversations with senior communication professionals do support this and they felt that it made a significant difference to aligning people in dealing with disruption and change.

*“Those organizations that thrive are the ones that are really clear about the fact that purpose is the core to what they’re doing and that they’re not afraid to say, well hang on, we may have got some of it right, but we’ve got to adjust here and be agile about how they do it.”*

Jane Mitchell

*“Understand where you are in the cycle and how you need to adapt... Organisations with a really clear sense of purpose rally to the call when crises hit. They understand their role in responding to the event but also how to adapt as circumstances change. They demonstrate their leadership through clear communication with all stakeholders and this helps them to navigate their way through the challenges.”*

Damien Batey



Those organizations that were guided by their purpose, strategy and values, were well placed to create a set of guiding principles for decision making. This helped organizations to align to the broader principles but adapt as needed to the local environment quickly.

*“When there is license to act quickly and communicate well, with no other competing priorities, strategic alignment is much easier. In a crisis, communications is both the glue that holds it all together and also the function that drives decisions to be made quickly, which, if used well, can truly demonstrate how critical communications is with regards to strategic alignment.”*

Maya Donevska

*“You had to make quick decisions and often without as much insight or information as you might normally have. What I saw our leaders do was use the strategy as their lens... Let’s stay focused on people’s health and safety, looking after our clients, staying in business... let’s just focus on that... some of the other stuff floated away and that made us more efficient. It made it clear what the job to be done was. Some in the business probably felt our future focused strategies didn’t get the airtime, but I think we got the balance right.”*

Danielle Bond

*“Empowering site leaders to make decisions about how they would handle it (decisions and communicate) locally under a global framework... We set out a list of criteria... So this was very helpful to site leaders... What they didn’t want from Asia Pacific or from worldwide was saying you must close your office, you must open your office, nor what to tell the employees about it. So we gave them samples... which they used and adapted.”*

Genevieve Hilton

## It’s people first

It is clear that each of us experience the pandemic differently and this has shone a light on employee health and wellbeing. Aside from public health and safety, employees have anxieties they’re dealing with, and in turn, organizations are dealing with. Communication professionals help team leaders to connect as well as build the resilience capability, to reduce the risk of stress, fatigue and burnout associated with uncertainty and accelerated disruption.

*“What is the information our people should get? When you add on COVID, the shutdowns, working from home, particularly if you don’t have anyone else there. It all comes down to mental health and the stress created that a lot of people have shut down. Then it’s hard to build them back up.”*

Sheila Carruthers



*“Sometimes, I’d sit in my office location (at home) with 200 line managers talking [virtually] about some mental health issues and how we are going and what should we be doing? And I thought, we should hold on to that. That didn’t often happen in the in-office space.”*

Danielle Bond

Recent [McKinsey research](#) found that frontline employees who were connected to organizational purpose are up to four times as engaged as those at organizations where purpose is not activated and aligned to that of individual employees, and twice as likely to stay in the job. But it was not just the alignment to purpose is important here, but to values and culture. People were placed front and centre, and the role of communications, particularly internal communications was in overdrive. It proved critical to elevating trust, alleviating fear relating to disruption, addressing misinformation, and adapting to new ways of working.

*“I mean, my advice to anyone always is to care. You know, care about the people who you work with and make sure they know it, care about the job that you’re doing.”*

Jenifer Bice

*“With COVID-19... it was firstly about care for employees, care for customers and care for business partners. At an emotional level, I feel like that had a significant impact on creating stronger strategic alignment within organisations. People re-connected with organisational purpose and it brought us closer together. Having that very open dialogue about care and trust from the early stages enabled organisations to build considerable good will among their people.”*

Damien Batey

## Creating connection

Moving to dispersed workforces and new ways of working forced leaders to find alternative ways to connect with their employees, wherever they were. Managers and leaders found that to connect they had to be more intentional, coordinated and planned.

*“We used media very deliberately to reach team members... their families... customers too. We also went kind of old school using direct eDMs... So a lot of feedback we get is not just from the team members themselves, it’s from their mum or dad, or their partner saying thank you.”*

Alistair Marshall

*“They’re (team leaders) making time to have those kinds of general conversation with no specific agenda... the difference is in the physical world that happens accidentally or when you bump into someone by the coffee machine and have a chat. In a virtual way of working when everyone’s at home you need to schedule it in and that requires deliberate effort and purpose.”*

Stephen Welch



Our conversations revealed a juxtaposition between the flexibility of working from home (for those who did) and not being able to separate your work and home life. Being able to see into people's home environments was humanizing for many but uncomfortable for others. Many managers and team leaders either made the effort, or communications helped them to create the connections to check in beyond operational work stuff.

*"COVID-19 has forced us to a completely different way of working as a community... people feel more connected and they are more of a community. We want to maintain that at the end of the day."*

Russell Grossman

*"Going back to basics, look after your people... We are doing town halls, not the typical town halls us vs them. It was more ... to talk about what's going on and the mood was we're all in this together and so there were pointed questions and that was OK...When we ask people what they're getting out of them, it wasn't about the Q&A. It was a connection... I know it sounds so obvious to check in with your people and make them feel like the community they are."*

Heather Young

With serendipitous conversations and connections occurring less with distributed workforces, communication professionals are working with their leaders to enable them to connect.

*"Staying connected with the executive leadership has been vitally important. That's the shared experience... Just hearing from leaders is comforting."*

Shel Holtz

*"I'm not sure I know how to separate alignment and communications because in my world they're so closely tied together. But I have found it much easier to get leadership over that hurdle of 'tell them what you know when you know it'... So many times they just want to hold it tight until they have it all figured out... It's always been hard to get them to share what they know when they know it, let the story unfold with everybody, together. With COVID they've learned this lesson."*

Ginger Homan



## Capability beyond expectations

A recent [survey](#) of global executives found that COVID-19 had led organizations to accelerate digitization of their processes by three to four years. And share of digital or digitally enabled products in their portfolios has been accelerated by seven years. This was supported by a few of the organizations we spoke to, where they already had digitization and/or Agile methodology as a core pillar of their strategy and ways of working.

*“We’ve been readying ourselves for the digital impact on our business and the COVID crisis actually fast tracked us in a way where in a year’s time we otherwise would have been saying ‘we’ve really got to get people to work more digitally and they’ve got to use these tools’. That’s possibly the single biggest blessing, that organizational inertia has gone because we had to.”*

Danielle Bond

*“It’s given them this story. Look what we can do when the purpose is clear, we have a deadline, the time frames, and it’s vital to do it.”*

Shawn Callahan

Others found that they were able to deliver what they would not have expected a year before, or discovered how valuable the introverts were when given the opportunity to work differently than in an office (open-plan) environment.

*“What I think it has done within the function... is that people deeper down have had roles and responsibilities of a magnitude they normally would not have had. And for us, it’s not just about the aggregate outcome, it’s that we’ve uncovered some complete gems because we put them under a high level of pressure and they’ve risen to the challenge, which has been amazing.”*

Jason Laird



## 6. WRAPPING UP

It is clear that the challenging events of 2020 have raised the stakes on both alignment and communication.

The perceived importance of shared understanding and alignment were already on the rise when COVID-19 entered our lives. Since then, the focus has only accelerated. This is particularly so as organizations face into working with largely remote workforces.

At the same time, the withering crisis and accelerated change we have experienced in 2020 has increased the demand for communications. It has also shone a light on the profession and how it can help to drive organizational performance.

From here, communication professionals would do well to appreciate that this ‘halo’ is transient. Our opportunity is to now build on what we’ve learned and achieved. Either that or return to where we were.

And, of course, building shared understanding and alignment is one of the most powerful ways the communication profession can improve an organization’s capabilities and performance.

The secondary research mentioned in section 3 and cited in the appendix makes that abundantly clear. It is also clear from the input of our contributors that shared understanding and alignment are now a significant communications priority.

At the same time, our contributors have identified many other priorities in this post-COVID world. Interestingly, these many priorities seem to bubble up to one thing.

People matter. The more we try to understand, engage, support and care for the people around us, the more effective we will be. After all, isn’t that what an organization is for... creating value for others?

Speaking of caring, our sincere thanks goes out to the 27 senior communication professionals who cared enough about this topic to give us their time and viewpoints. This paper would not exist without you.

In closing, we hope you find this paper useful, whether you’re a seasoned proponent or you are taking your first steps towards alignment.

**Zora Artis**, GAICD SCMP & **Wayne Aspland**



## 7. ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**ZORA ARTIS,**  
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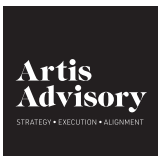
Zora is CEO of Artis Advisory – a strategic advisory practise focused on helping clients succeed whether it’s solving a business problem or leveraging opportunities through better organizational

alignment, engagement and communication.

Zora has almost three decades of experience in business, marketing, communication, advertising and branding. She provides strategic advice and counsel to senior leaders seeking to bring out the best in their brands and their people. Zora has worked with a breadth of organizations including ABInBev, adidas, AusNet Services, AIA Australia, A2 Milk Company, GSK, LendLease, Weir Group, Marsh, the Victorian Government, Destination NSW and more. Zora has researched and authored thought-leading content on strategic alignment, internal communication, and leadership.

Zora is a licensed facilitator and network partner of Mirror Mirror – a proven team alignment diagnostic tool and facilitation process in one.

She’s a current director of the Asia Pacific Region board of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), Vice Chair for the IABC World Conference 2021, and past director on the IABC global executive board. Zora has won multiple awards for communication excellence and leadership, and is an awards judge for the IABC Gold Quills, WARC Awards, and the Australian Marketing Institute Awards.



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**Wayne Aspland**  
Principal, The Content Factory

Wayne Aspland is a writer and communicator with more than 15 years’ experience in corporate, leadership and internal communications (including Head of Function). He has also lectured in

communications at Deakin University, and a member of the IABC Victoria Board (past) and the IABC APAC Board (current).

Wayne believes the purpose of all corporate communication is to bring people together... to create a connection. It’s the CEO seeking to unite her people behind a strategy or transformation. The group of stakeholders trying to find common ground. The salesperson and his potential client thrashing out a deal. The marketer creating collateral that will hopefully turn browsers into buyers. It’s all communication and it’s all about bringing people together. That’s how you get things done.

He also believes that, in a world of accelerating change, communication has never been more important to organisational performance and health. That’s because it’s the first step in:

- Realising a vision or goal
- Executing a strategy, transformation or project
- Leading your people and culture
- Helping high performing people become high performing teams
- Building a customer relationship, brand or reputation
- Commercialising an idea, innovation or start-up.



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## 8. APPENDIX

### The business case for strategic alignment

The following are the specific findings that support the claims in Section 3.

#### Strategy execution

90% of companies find lack of understanding of the strategy beyond the C-Suite is a significant barrier to [strategy] implementation. Sixty-three percent of respondents say the lack of understanding by middle and line managers specifically is a problem. From the [Economist Intelligence Unit and the Brightline Initiative](#).

#### Transformation and change

Organisations who have completed successful digital transformations are 3.1 times more likely to report that “Management team established clear change story for transformation” as a key factor. From [McKinsey&Company](#).

“Create a strategic identity” is one of the “four building blocks that are central to every major change effort”. From [Strategy+Business](#).

#### Agility

“North star embodied across the organization” is one of the five hallmarks of an agile organization. From [McKinsey&Company](#).

“Not having alignment on the aspiration and value of an agile transformation” is the first of seven missteps in agile transformations. From [McKinsey&Company](#).

“The companies that emerge stronger from the COVID-19 crisis will be the ones that address three critical factors in the coming months: cost, speed, and resilience... Agility at scale is the corporate capability that can move the needle on all three factors simultaneously. Strong alignment around purpose, strategy, and priorities means teams can work independently more easily, improving resilience. Stronger connection between teams and business goals, combined with fewer handovers and better coordination of roles, improves both efficiency and effectiveness.” From [BCG](#).

#### Trust

Values, vision and mission/purpose are 3 of the top 5 communication topics that are most effective in increasing employer trust. From [Edelman](#).

To restore public trust, “Sixty-eight percent of Australia’s CEOs strongly agree that it’s more important than ever to have a strong corporate purpose reflected in an organization’s values, culture and behaviors.” From [PwC Australia](#).



## Customer experience

“...superior customer-experience programs require a shared aspiration, which can serve as a guiding light for strategic decisions and execution.” From [McKinsey&Company](#).

“Organisations that have a clear customer strategy, align their operations behind it, and get their people on board from the start will present a consistent, open and responsive face to their customer.”

From [KPMG Australia](#).

## An executive’s first hundred days

“Creating a shared vision and alignment around strategic direction across the organization” was voted as the most important activity a leader should take as they ascend to the C-suite. From [McKinsey&Company](#).

## Delegated decision making

“Ensure that your organization has a well-defined, widely understood strategy” is the first step to improving delegated decision making. [McKinsey&Company](#).

## Analytics

“Aligning on strategy” is the first thing leaders need to do if they are to optimize their analytics investments. From [McKinsey&Company](#).

## Collaboration and ecosystems

All partners in an ecosystem must have a clear understanding of the strategy: the vision, business case, prioritization and the roadmap. From [Accenture](#).

“Alignment on parent and partnership objectives” is the number one driver of success in complex business partnerships. “Effective internal communications and trust is number two. From [McKinsey&Company](#).

## Employee engagement

“Visible, empowering leadership providing a strong strategic narrative about the organisation, where it’s come from and where it’s going” is the first of Engage for Success’ four enablers of employee engagement. From [Engage For Success](#).