

TO BOOST PERFORMANCE, CONNECT WITH THE CORE

Michael Lee Stallard and Jason Pankau

Every organization's long-term success depends on employees aligning their behavior with organizational goals and giving their best efforts. Yet few leaders are strong in fostering strategic alignment and employee engagement. Long-term research by the Gallup organization shows that 75 percent of American workers are disengaged and 15 percent of this group are so disengaged they regularly work against their organization's goals. In addition, Corporate Executive Board research shows that 40 percent of engaged employees are not aligning their behavior with organizational goals. The bottom line is that only 1 in 10 employees is both engaged and aligned with strategy. These sobering statistics represent a drain on productivity that leaders can no longer afford to ignore.

Organizations with aligned and engaged employees clearly have a competitive edge. Research from the Corporate Executive Board shows that engaged employees are 20 percent more productive than the average employee. That's like an extra day of work each week. Compounding this

advantage over several years results in a considerable difference in productivity and performance. And productivity is only one of several benefits that come from having an aligned and engaged workforce.

Leaders consciously or unconsciously sort employees into three categories: the "stars," consisting of those in management as well as high-potential employees; the much larger "core" made up of solid contributors; and the rest, employees whose contributions and fit with the organization are questionable. Stars typically feel connected to the organization because they have power or influence. Core employees typically don't feel connected. And because they don't feel connected, over time a significant portion of them show up for the paycheck but stop caring and stop giving their best efforts. In addition, they stop fully communicating. As a result, decision makers don't get all the information they need to make optimal decisions. This breakdown in communications, in turn, results in suboptimal decision making and organizational underperformance.

Core employees typically don't feel connected to the organization.

In addition to the negative impact on decision making, diminished communications from the lack of connection reduces the marketplace of ideas inside the organization, which in turn reduces innovation. This happens because innovation occurs when an individual sees a potential connection between previously unrelated ideas—shoes + wheels = roller skates. A diminished marketplace of ideas reduces the likelihood that innovative connections will be made to birth new products, processes, and businesses.

If the sense of connection that exists among leaders and stars does not extend to the core, what can be done? A study by the Corporate Executive Board has shown that emotional factors are four times as important as rational factors when it comes to the amount of effort employees put into their work. In our research, we have learned that leaders whose organizations achieve high levels of employee engagement and strategic alignment understand the power of emotional connections to engage and align employees, and they are intentional about making core employees feel connected to them and to the organization. They have learned to build bridges that extend the feeling of connection to the core. These bridges come in three distinct forms that together create a *Connection Culture*.

The *Vision* bridge makes employees feel proud to be members of the organization. Leaders build the Vision bridge by developing and communicating a mission, set of values, and a reputation that connect with employees. Employees are inspired by the way the leader describes the organization's identity, including its mission and core beliefs.

The *Value* bridge makes employees feel valued as human beings, and for their unique strengths and contributions to the organization. Leaders build the Value bridge by developing a culture where everyone respects the dignity and worth of individuals, appreciates their strengths and contributions regardless of their position in the organization's hierarchy, and helps them achieve their potential. Employees who are well treated will reciprocate.

The *Voice* bridge makes employees feel informed and that their opinions and ideas on matters that are important to them are heard and considered by decision makers. Leaders build the Voice bridge by developing processes and practices that keep employees in the loop and give them regular opportunities to express their views. Knowing that their input has been factored into a leader's decision is motivating and it enhances their future participation.

Connecting the U.S. Navy

One example of a leader who intentionally developed a Connection Culture using all three bridges is Admi-

Emotional factors are four times as important as rational factors in determining the effort employees put into their work.

ral Vern Clark, the chief of naval operations (CNO) from 2000 until his retirement in 2005. Over the course of 2009, Stallard met with and interviewed Admiral Clark and several of the Naval officers who had reported to him.

The CNO is the head of the U.S. Navy. He is the primary adviser to the president of the United States on the conduct of war at sea. When Admiral Clark assumed the CNO role, the Navy was not meeting its sailor retention goals. This is problematic when you consider the Navy's sophisticated surveillance, navigation, and weapons systems and the importance of maintaining the readiness of national defense. Aware of this and concerned about its impact on military preparedness, Admiral Clark made winning the war for talent number one of his "Top Five" priorities.

Following are a few of the ways Admiral Clark and his leadership team built bridges so that everyone felt connected and a part of the Navy.

The Vision Bridge

Admiral Clark employed the Vision bridge and connected with sailors by communicating that the Navy's mission is to take the "war fighting readiness" of the United States to any corner of the world at a moment's notice. He said it was "our turn to make history" by "building a Navy for the 21st century" that would be "strategically and operationally agile, technologically and organizationally innovative, networked at every level, highly joint [with the other services], and effectively integrated with allies."

Admiral Clark's description of who sailors are as members of the U.S. Navy made them feel proud and connected to him as their leader. He would tell them: "What we do matters. What we do is hard work. We intentionally put ourselves in harm's way. We are away from our loved ones for months on end. We do it because it's important and we are people of service. We are committed to something larger than ourselves: the protection of America's interests around the world and democracy." Rear Admiral Frank Thorp, who served on Admiral Clark's personal staff, recounted an occasion when he spotted a sailor with tear-filled eyes after hear-

*They have learned to
build bridges that extend
the feeling of connection to
the core.*

ing Admiral Clark speak. Admiral Thorpe approached the young man to see what was wrong. The sailor told him that he was going to ask his commanding officer to rip up the discharge papers he had recently submitted. Admiral Clark's message had reached his mind and heart and for the first time, he said, "a leader told me why I should stay in the Navy."

The Value Bridge

Admiral Clark described his strategy as using the Navy's "asymmetrical advantages" of the "best technology in the world" combined with the "genius of our people." He made certain the Navy's plans and budgets were aligned with his priorities. There were many ways in which Admiral Clark demonstrated that he valued all sailors as human beings, independent of their rank.

To begin, Admiral Clark strongly supported an increase in pay that was approved by the president and Congress. When Navy budget officials proposed people cuts as part of the annual planning cycle, Clark wouldn't allow it. Instead, he increased the training budget to support personal and professional growth. As part of what Clark called the "Revolution in Training," he established the Naval Education and Training Command with twelve Navy Centers of Excellence. He required everyone in the Navy to have a personal development plan. He changed the performance appraisal system to provide constructive feedback for everyone and added the requirement to leaders' performance ap-

Admiral Clark changed legacy systems that made sailors feel devalued.

praisals that they help sailors learn and grow. To make his point about how much he valued personal growth and continuous improvement, Clark liked to say, “If you are not growing, you’re dead.”

In the Navy, sailors who are part of the enlisted class can at times feel like second-class citizens (the “core”) as compared to the officers (the “stars”). Clark understood this and made it one of his priorities to blur the lines in some respects between the officers and enlisted personnel while still maintaining the necessary decision-making chain of command. When he traveled to commands and bases around the world, Admiral Clark only infrequently held “all hands” calls, preferring to meet with leaders to share with them what he expected. He not only met with commanding officers but also met with master chiefs (who are the leaders of the enlisted class).

He intentionally reached out to the master chiefs to show them he valued them, and he asked the master chiefs to value the sailors under their leadership and see to it that they prospered. Clark told the master chiefs, “These young sailors under our command swear to support and defend the U.S. Constitution from all enemies, and we as leaders need to make promises in return. We need to give them the training and resources to enable them to fulfill their promise. We need to give them an opportunity to prove what they can do.” Clark encouraged the master chiefs to mentor the enlisted sailors, and he often told a story about when he was on his first ship following Officer Candidate School.

“I didn’t know the pointy end of the ship from the blunt end. It was scary, really. But fortunately there was a mas-

ter chief there who took a liking to me, Master Chief Leedy. For some reason, I don’t know what possessed him, but after I had been there about a week he came up to me, and put his arm around me, and he said, ‘Mr. Clark, I’m going to help make you into a fine officer.’”

Admiral Clark said the advice and encouragement from Master Chief Leedy helped make him a better officer and he needed, and our country needed, the master chiefs to mentor and encourage today’s young sailors in that same way.

Clark liked being with the master chiefs and he connected with them. Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Jim Herdt, the head of all of the master chiefs, told me that the master chiefs around the world had the general attitude that “Old Vern [Clark] is counting on us and we can’t let him down.” Clark’s comments made the master chiefs feel valued, and when they in turn reached out to help those under their command learn and grow, it helped the sailors feel valued too.

Clark changed legacy systems that made sailors feel devalued. One such system was the Navy’s job assignment process. Under Clark and a program he dubbed “the revolution in personnel distribution,” the system was changed to a job bidding approach with incentive compensation provided to the jobs and locations that were in the least demand. As a result, the percentage of sailors forced into positions or locations they didn’t want was reduced from 30 percent to around 1.5 percent.

The Voice Bridge

In group meetings with leaders, Admiral Clark encouraged participants to speak up. His own approachable, conversational speaking style set the tone for others to share their ideas and opinions. He asked everyone to “challenge every assumption,” “be data driven,” and “drill down” into the details. He challenged them to “have a sense of urgency to make the Navy better every day” in order to deliver greater efficiencies and readiness for the dollars America invested in the Navy.

Clark was more concerned about getting it right than being right himself. He encouraged what he referred to as “constructive friction.” This made it safe for people to disagree and express views that were outside the con-

sensus. As a result, Clark's leaders felt connected to him and to the U.S. Navy, and they emulated his leadership style, which made the sailors under their command feel more connected.

Vice Admiral Tim Lafleur, the former head of the Navy's surface community, recounted that when data was presented to Admiral Clark showing that a program Clark initially supported was not performing as expected, he shut it down even if it meant job cuts. This made everyone feel more empowered that they could bring about change so long as they made their case supported by data.

Admiral Clark also increased connection to senior civilians who served in the Navy. He was the first CNO to invite senior civilians to attend the Annual All Flag Officer Meeting with active and reserve admirals. In these meetings Clark typically walked around and asked various participants whose actions were aligned with the vision to share with the group what they were doing. Clark called this "letting others take victory laps." Again, this was an opportunity to express one's voice.

Results

Vern Clark is quick to say that he's not perfect. Nonetheless, the Navy achieved some impressive gains during his tenure as CNO, and the naval leaders I interviewed praised his leadership and positive impact. In a little more than a year after Admiral Clark became CNO, first-term reenlistment soared from less than the Navy's goal of 38 percent to 56.7 percent.

As the Navy improved sailor retention and developed greater alignment with Admiral Clark's vision, it became faster and more responsive. Within a matter of hours following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, aircraft carriers, Aegis destroyers, and cruisers were in position to protect America's shores. This was due in part to the fact that naval leaders anticipated what had to be done and took action before they received orders. At the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., command and control of the Navy was quickly reestablished and planning for America's response began while the embers of the fire from the terrorist attack still smoldered a short distance away.

Connecting U2

The principles we are discussing are equally important in a smaller, less hierarchical organization. Consider something completely different from the military: a rock band.

U2 has been awarded a remarkable 22 Grammy awards, more than any band in history. The band consists of four musicians who have known each other since they were teenagers in Dublin, Ireland: lead singer Bono, lead guitar player "Edge," bass guitar player Adam Clayton, and drummer Larry Mullen Jr. These guys have been together for more than 30 years when most other bands eventually fall apart, often because one member becomes recognized as the star and the resulting disconnection breaks down the group. Not so with U2. Bono is clearly the band's megastar but the Vision, Value, and Voice bridges are in place and his fellow band members feel like partners rather than his supporting cast.

The Vision Bridge

Bono has articulated a clear vision of U2, including its mission and core values. U2's mission is to improve the world through its music and influence. Bono calls it "the spark." He feels it sets U2 apart from many other bands. U2's songs address themes the band members believe are important to promote, such as human rights and social justice. The band values excellence in the music it produces and in its concert performances. Bono has described this value as a desire to achieve the band's potential. U2's members value continuous improvement to achieve their own potential, never feeling satisfied that they can't become even better. Another core value of the band is that its members value one another, and this has established the Value Bridge.

The Value Bridge

Bono further unites the members of U2 by appreciating their strengths. Bono has said that although he hears melodies in his head, he is unable to transfer them into written music. Considering himself a "lousy guitar player and an even lousier piano player," he relies on his fellow band members and recognizes that

Bono describes U2 as a tight-knit family and community.

they are integral to his success. To Bono, U2 is “the best example of how to rely on others.”

Like all human beings, the members of U2 have experienced difficult periods in their lives. These experiences have shaped them in important ways. Bono’s mother died when he was 14 years old. Bono describes the period following her death as one in which he felt alone and abandoned. Although he longed for the emotional support of a family, his grief-stricken father was unable to comfort him. Having experienced what it was like to suffer alone, when Larry Mullen’s mother died when he was 16 years old, Bono reached out to console him. This began a close, supportive friendship. When Edge went through a difficult divorce, the band members were there to support him. When Adam Clayton became addicted to alcohol and drugs, the band members reached out to help him recover. Bono has stated that when one of the band members is in need, the band rallies around to support him and they put that need above the performance of the band. It’s no wonder that one of U2’s most popular songs is entitled, “Sometimes You Can’t Make It on Your Own.”

The most dramatic example of this came when U2 campaigned during the 1980s for the observance of a Martin Luther King Jr. Day in America. Bono received a death threat that warned him not to sing the song “Pride (In the Name of Love),” a song about the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., at an upcoming concert. Bono described in an interview that as he sang the song, he closed his eyes. At the end of a verse when he opened his eyes Bono discovered Adam Clayton

literally standing in front of him to shield him from potential harm.

Bono describes U2 as a tight-knit family and community. He has said, “People with a strong sense of family and community . . . are always very strong people.” The commitment to support one another extends beyond the four members of the band. The members of U2 are part of a larger community that includes their families, crew members, and collaborators. Many of them have known each other for decades.

The economic profits from U2’s work are split equally between the four band members and their long-time manager Paul McGuinness. That might surprise some. Given Bono’s status as a megastar, it would not be inconceivable if he claimed more than an equal share of the band’s profits. What better way to show your team members that you value them than to treat them and their unique contribution as economic equals?

The Voice Bridge

U2 is further unified by its participative, consensus-oriented decision-making style. The members of U2 argue relentlessly over their music, which reflects their passion for excellence. Bono has stated that this approach is frustrating at times but that U2 feels it is necessary to achieve excellence. Everybody has a voice to express ideas and opinions.

Conclusion

Feeling “fired up” or “burned out” are emotional states that have a direct bearing on productivity. As

Connecting with core employees is essential to a leader’s long-term success.

we pointed out earlier, research from the Corporate Executive Board shows that emotional factors are four times as effective as rational factors when it comes to the amount of effort employees put into their work.

Leaders at any level should build Vision, Value, and Voice bridges to make core employees into partners and thereby increase strategic alignment and employee engagement. Three areas to focus on are:

- Identify and communicate your group's identity (its mission and values) to make the members of your group proud.
- Develop a culture where all members feel valued for their strengths and feel supported during the inevitable difficult periods in their lives.

- Develop a participative, consensus-oriented decision-making culture that keeps everyone informed and gives them a voice in the decision-making process.

Connecting with core employees is essential to a leader's long-term success. A.G. Lafley at Procter & Gamble, Anne Mulcahy at Xerox, Howard Schultz at Starbucks, and Ed Catmull at Pixar Animation Studios are a few of the leaders who have been profiled in the press who clearly have connected with employees at large. When leaders are intentional about connecting with the core, their organizations realize higher levels of strategic alignment and employee engagement. This, in turn, results in higher productivity, better decision making, and ultimately superior performance.



Michael Lee Stallard is president and co-founder of E Pluribus Partners, a leadership training and coaching firm. Previously he was chief marketing officer for businesses at Morgan Stanley and Charles Schwab. A frequent speaker and workshop leader at conferences and business, government, and academic organizations, he is author of "Fired Up or Burned Out." He writes about leadership at www.michaelleestallard.com.



Jason Pankau is a partner and co-founder of E Pluribus Partners. An ordained minister, he is also the president of Life Spring Network, an organization that helps promote spiritual growth (www.lifespringnetwork.org). Jason frequently speaks at business organizations and churches and serves as an executive and life coach to many corporate executives and ministers.