

THE GAP BETWEEN OUR ASPIRATIONS AND REALITY

IT'S NEVER BEEN MORE DIFFICULT TO LEAD

While it's never been more difficult to lead, it's also never been easier to blame external forces for problems of our own making. Many of us are dealing with multiple layers of change and disruption, whether that be in our industry, organisation, division, team, role, personal life, or some combination of all of the above.

This disruption could be driven by the relentless march of new technologies, the transformation of traditional business models, political volatility, increasing accountability to more powerful and varied stakeholders, or the ongoing impact of Covid-19, among many other forces.

We are facing persistent levels of pressure and uncertainty at the very same time that we are expected to project greater confidence and certainty. Many of us are struggling to survive, let alone thrive. Even those of us who have achieved great 'success', often feel we've had to trade happiness, relationships or health to get it.

Our experience encourages us to focus on the external forces that inhibit our success; such as our competitive environment, government regulations, or impositions from head office. On the one hand, this focus is entirely understandable. On the other hand, it's not very helpful; it encourages us to become helpless, destroy value and exhaust ourselves in the process. Perhaps more importantly, it's a sentiment that is unsupported by the data. The root causes of our problems are not external to us. Here are just a few insights from two decades of research and practice, with some 20,000 senior executives, from more than 100 organizations on four continents.

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About the Author

For two decades, Dr. Peter Fuda has been a Sherpa to leaders, teams and organizations across the globe as a consultant, coach, speaker, researcher, teacher and author.

Peter is the Founder and Principal of The Alignment Partnership (TAP), a management consulting firm founded in 2001, and an Adjunct Professor of Management at Macquarie Business School.

OUR CHALLENGES ARE LARGELY SELF-INFLICTED

Whenever we start a new client relationship, we ask the most senior executives to describe the greatest challenges they face. Below is a simple 'word map' analysis of their responses, in aggregate. The bigger the word, the more prevalent the sentiment.



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If we strip out the elements from the original version that represent factors mostly out of our control, we are still left with more than half of the original content. As you can see below, it turns out that a large number of our problems are self-inflicted, even in our own estimation.



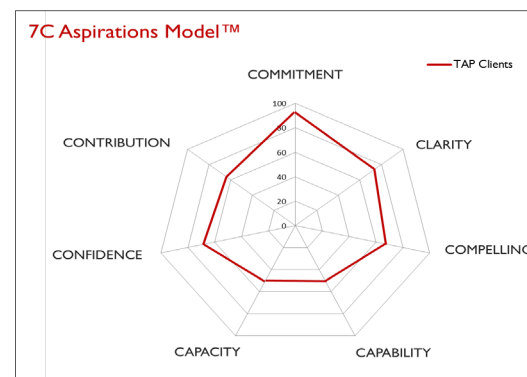
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OUR ASPIRATIONS LACK SUBSTANCE

We all have goals for our team or organization, which are referred to broadly here as our 'aspirations'. In the early days, we used to think it would be really difficult to get a group of executives to agree shared aspirations. As it turns out, this is not too difficult at all. Most aspire to pretty similar things. In fact, if we showed you the aspiration statements of every organization we've ever worked with, you would be hard pressed to determine the respective industry, let alone the organization.

The real challenge is that we don't properly scrutinize our aspirations. To ensure they are robust and substantive, we need to ask some basic questions. Is every single person in our team crystal clear on what success looks like? Are our aspirations compelling? Do we actually have the capability to get there? Do we have the bandwidth? Are we all confident we can get there? Are we all truly committed to them? Are we each clear on our personal contribution?

The '7C' model below shows how all of the leaders in our database, in aggregate, have rated their aspirations against seven key dimensions. It turns out that we're super committed; we're just not sure exactly what we're committed to, how we're going to get there, or what my personal contribution is! Every day, in organizations all around the world, good people with noble intentions are wasting enormous amounts of time, energy and money, pursuing aspirations they have little chance of achieving.



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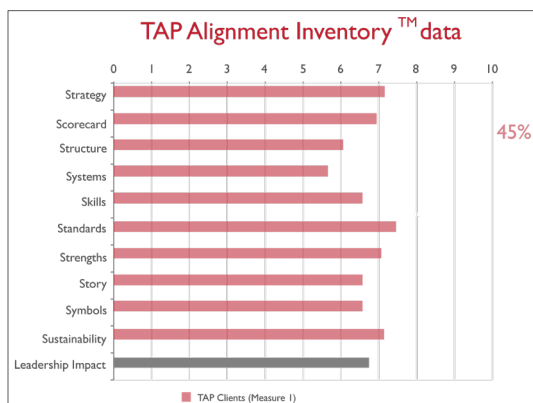
“Most of our problems are self-inflicted.”

WE TOLERATE MEDIOCRITY

Let's assume for a moment that your aspirations are substantive. Our research and practice have identified eleven levers that leaders can pull to reach those aspirations. Five are so called 'hard' levers: strategy, scorecard, structure, systems, and skills. Five are so called 'soft' levers: standards, strengths, story, symbols, and sustainability. The 11th lever is leadership impact: this lever is as important as all the others combined: it acts like a handbrake or accelerator.

Each of the 'S' levers is worth one point in our alignment model (though we have represented each lever out of ten in the graph below for visual impact). The leadership impact lever is worth ten points. So, your alignment score is $S10 \times LI$, which gives you an alignment score out of 100.

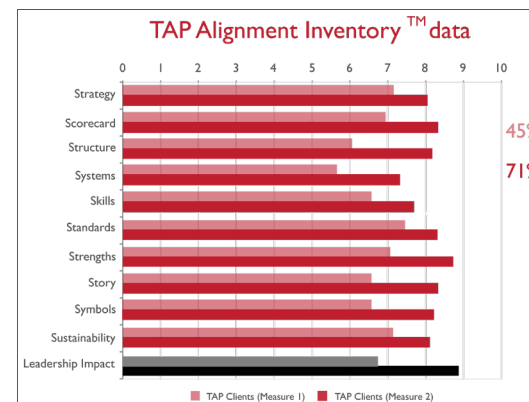
Below is the first measure of alignment for all of our client organizations. That is, the measure of how aligned each of the eleven levers is, to the respective organization's aspirations, in the opinion of the organization's most senior leaders. As you can see, the average score for most levers' hovers between 6 and 7, which is how we get to an average alignment score of 45% ($S6.7 \times L6.7 = 44.89\%$).



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How can we complain about the marketplace, our competitors or head office when we score, on average, 6 or 7 across all of these levers? We accept mediocrity in our organizations and waste enormous amounts of time, energy and money as a result. The good news is that relatively small improvements can have a very significant impact.

Here is the 're-test' data for our client organizations who have achieved 'transformation'; that is, significant improvements across a range of metrics including financial performance, customer advocacy, employee commitment and leadership effectiveness. As you can see, relatively small changes across each of the levers can add up to a pretty significant impact overall.



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THERE IS A GAP BETWEEN OUR LEADERSHIP VISION AND IMPACT

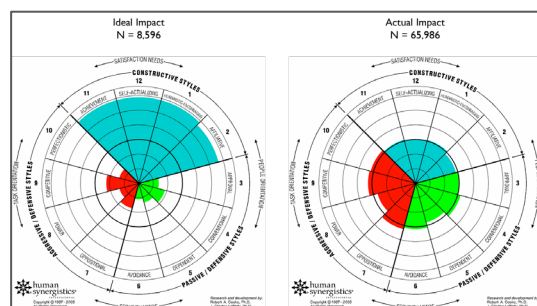
There are countless books, theories and experts on leadership. Here's the shortcut; it doesn't matter what your noble intentions are, whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, or whether your mother loved your brother more than you as a child. In order to dramatically increase your effectiveness, we need to know three simple things: How would you like to motivate and encourage others to behave? How do you actually motivate and encourage others to behave? And if there is a gap between the two, which there almost certainly will be, how committed are you to close it?

“Relatively small improvements can have a very significant impact.”

This is the concept of leadership impact. When leaders are asked to articulate their vision for their impact, they generally articulate a desire to motivate and encourage team members to reach high levels of achievement, approach their work with creativity, develop others and work effectively as a team.

When we measure their actual impact, which we do using a highly valid and reliable instrument developed by Human Synergetics International called Leadership/Impact™, we find they often motivate a very different set of behaviours. These behaviours include motivating others to follow the rules, oppose ideas, compete with their peers and avoid responsibility.

The picture below is a graphic representation of the gap we're describing. On the left is the average 'ideal' impact. On the right is the average 'actual' impact. The color blue denotes those behaviors highly correlated with effective leadership. The colors red and green denote those behaviors highly correlated with ineffective leadership.

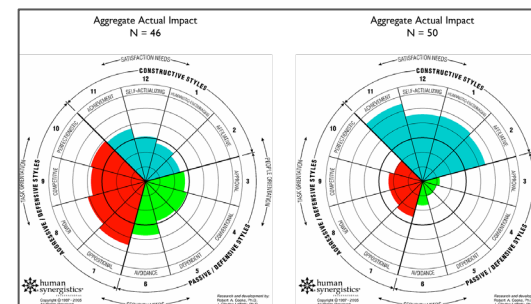


There are three main reasons for the gap between our intentions and reality. Most of us are unaware of our impact on others. This can be because we've never asked, because others are too afraid to tell us, or because nobody in our environment knows any better.

We judge ourselves by our intentions and everyone else by their actions. This is a phenomenon social scientists call 'illusory superiority'; a cognitive bias that causes us to overestimate our positive abilities, and to underestimate our negative abilities.

We are also the product of our environments and conditioning. We may genuinely value creativity and innovation, but unfortunately, we may operate in an environment that demands compliance. In spite of our noble intentions, consciously or unconsciously, we actually reinforce the status quo.

Here is the 'test/re-test' data for the leaders in our doctoral research. On the left, you can see that their first measure, in aggregate, is even worse than the average of all leaders in the database. On the right, you can see that their re-test data looks like an 'ideal' impact.



THE POTENTIAL UPSIDE IS HUGE

Understand that we're not describing hopeless leaders or broken organisations. Our data comes from some 20,000 executives, from more than 100 organizations, across the broadest range of industries, on four continents, and includes some of the world's most reputable brands.

The root causes of our problems may be mostly self-inflicted, but that means we have far more opportunity to affect our outcomes than we typically realize. There is a gap between our aspirations and our reality; that much is clear. What we do with the gap is a whole other matter. Ignore it and we destroy value and exhaust ourselves. Embrace it and we unleash enormous value in our organizations and vitality in ourselves and our people.

“We judge ourselves by our intentions, but everyone else by their actions.”