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Move as One™

From Groupthink to Governance

A practical guide to the four shifts for communication leaders

Based on the Clear Leaders global research study on strategic alignment and leadership
55 interviews • 5 continents • Three studies over seven years

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Companion to the research paper:
From Groupthink to Governance: Leadership, alignment and the courage to close the gap.

INTRODUCTION

Why this guide exists

This guide is a companion to the Clear Leaders research paper *From Groupthink to Governance: Leadership, alignment and the courage to close the gap*. The paper draws on interviews with 55 CEOs and senior leaders across five continents. It is the third in a series of Clear Leaders studies spanning seven years.

The research is clear: strategic alignment isn't failing because organisations lack purpose or strategy. It's failing because they lack the shared clarity, ownership, accountability and sustained commitment needed to bring strategy to life across every level of leadership, every day.

Communication professionals already work inside this system. You notice when the priorities being communicated drift away from the priorities being resourced. You hear the side conversations that never reach the executive room. That visibility is valuable when you act on it, and that is the leadership decision at the centre of this guide: whether you will see it, surface it and act on it.

The guide starts with winning the mandate and then works through four shifts that move organisations from groupthink to governance. For each shift, it sets out what communication leaders can do and who they need alongside them.

A note on partnership

Communication professionals can't enable strategic alignment on their own, and the accountability sits with the CEO and the leadership team. You need an alignment coalition. Your closest partners are HR and Chiefs of Staff. Other partners bring their own view of the system:

- Strategy
- Transformation
- Orchestration
- Technology, as the work scales

Build the alignment coalition before you build the program.

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THE CONTEXT

The uncomfortable reality

Leaders say strategic alignment matters. Despite this, few organisations define it clearly, enable it consistently or measure it meaningfully.

> *"Alignment should be a fundamental strategy or management concept in any organisation: people need to be focused in the same direction. To me, strategic alignment is one of those fundamentals."*
>
> Andre Oberholzer, SCMP, IABC Fellow, Group Head Corporate Affairs, Sappi Ltd

> *"Most organisations have a strategy. What they don't have is clarity or ownership of it across levels. And accountability for it is often missing altogether."*
>
> Shel Holtz, SCMP, IABC Fellow, Sr. Director, Communications, Webcor

AI and the pace of change are exposing these gaps faster, as decisions now move quicker than a cascade can carry meaning.

Strategic alignment is currently an exercise in groupthink

THE VIEW	THE REALITY
We know what strategic alignment is.	Widespread variation and doubt about what strategic alignment actually means.
People align to what they're told.	People pursue their own agenda when they mistrust the leaders or the direction.
The executive team is aligned on direction.	Reports of false consensus and individual agendas are common.
Our organisation measures alignment.	Many organisations rely on proxy measures, such as engagement surveys and financial performance.
There is accountability for alignment.	Accountability is blurry. If alignment isn't measured, nobody is genuinely accountable.
A strategy launch comms campaign enables alignment.	Strategic alignment needs continuous attention long after the launch.

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THE COST

The misalignment tax

Every organisation is paying it. Most don’t know how much.

TIME

- Firefighting
- Realigning priorities
- Fixing downstream issues
- Avoiding difficult conversations

CAPACITY

- Duplicated work
- Rework
- Misdirected effort
- Work not completed

SPEED

- Slower decisions
- Delayed execution
- Reduced adaptability
- Go-to-market timelines

RELATIONAL

- Reduced trust
- Higher disengagement
- Reduced talent retention
- False harmony

Only 27% of teams understand their organisation’s priorities and how they contribute.

Cascade State of Strategy Report 2026

An often-silent tax that impacts organisational performance and culture.

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THE SHIFT

From groupthink to governance

Treating strategic alignment as a leadership discipline means developing it as a capability and practising it as part of how work gets done, with the CEO and leadership team accountable for both. That calls for:

- **Shared understanding** of what strategic alignment is and how to enable it.
- **Clear accountability**, supported by transparent, real-time measurement.
- **Executive alignment** on the direction and how to deliver it.
- **Equipped people leaders** who have the capability and tools to have the right conversations.
- **Continuous practice**, embedded in the rhythm of work all year round.

THE FOUR SHIFTS

What the shift from groupthink to governance requires

	FROM		TO
1	**A group of leaders**	→	A leadership group with shared accountability
2	**Proxies**	→	Proof: direct, real-time evidence of strategic coherence
3	**Cascades**	→	Conversations: two-way dialogue that builds shared meaning
4	**Annual**	→	Agile: a continuous rhythm of reflection and adaptation

AI AT EVERY STEP

AI can support each of the four shifts. It can help design alignment sessions and conversation tools, monitor and analyse alignment signals closer to real time, help leaders prepare for strategic conversations, and produce content at pace. The judgement, decisions, trade-offs, behaviours and conversations stay with leaders and their teams.

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BEFORE THE SHIFTS

Start by winning the mandate

None of the four shifts will take hold without executive backing, and evidence is what earns that backing. Before any program begins, the alignment coalition needs a clear read on where priorities are diverging. It also needs a business case that connects those gaps to performance. That case is what gets strategic alignment onto the executive agenda.

WHAT?

Evidence of the need to enable strategic alignment, and an executive business case with a proposed roadmap.

WHY?

Without a mandate, strategic alignment work stays a communication initiative. With one, it becomes part of how the leadership team governs.

WHEN?

As early as possible. Everything that follows depends on it.

HOW?

- **Build the alignment coalition.** Bring together the partners who can influence strategy, people, structure, change and execution. Typically these are HR, Communication, Chiefs of Staff, Strategy, Transformation, and Orchestration. Agree on roles, goals and who will take the case to the executive.
- **Gather evidence.** Start with the alignment pre-scan, an anonymous three-question survey of leaders at various levels across the organisation. Where their answers diverge, you have a signal of misalignment. Then run a short survey and discussion with the alignment coalition to explore what each partner sees and hears from their functional perspective. This adds insight into the say-do-are gaps and the symptoms of misalignment. Together, the two sources give you evidence of the need for the work.
- **Build the executive business case.** Connect what you've found to business impact, risk and the cost of misalignment in time, capacity, speed and relationships. Present the case to win the mandate to proceed.

> *"If the C-suite isn't aligned themselves, communications can't paper over the gap."*
>
> Heather Young, Management and Communications Executive

Build the alignment coalition, gather the evidence and win the mandate to proceed.

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SHIFT 1

From a group of leaders to a leadership group

From a collection of executives with individual agendas to a cohesive leadership team with shared accountability.

When the top team works as a leadership group, the conditions for alignment across the organisation are far more likely to follow. Misalignment at the top multiplies confusion further down. The executive team goes first, because the way it works through difference and owns its trade-offs sets the pattern for everyone below.

WHAT?

A cohesive leadership group that surfaces difference, builds shared context, makes the decision, coordinates action and collectively owns it. This shows up in clear shared priorities, unified messaging, decisions framed by purpose and values, and collective ownership of trade-offs.

WHY?

Silence in the executive room is easily mistaken for agreement. Unresolved tensions travel down the organisation and compound as they go.

WHEN?

Commence once the mandate is received. Return to it regularly, as executive alignment needs ongoing attention.

HOW?

- Collaborate with Chiefs of Staff to run executive alignment sessions. Use an expert external facilitator who sits outside the system and can name what insiders find hard to say.
- Craft the strategic narrative and ensure consistent storytelling from all executives.
- Coach leaders to improve their communication skills: one-to-one, with their teams and at scale.
- Help leaders see and close their say-do-are gaps. These are the places where language, decisions, resourcing, incentives and visible behaviour are telling different stories.

“It’s the ‘what if we get this wrong?’ fear. More commonly it’s personal: What if I look incompetent? What if I don’t really understand this?”

Henry Ruiz, CEO, Lifestyle Communities

Where to start: find your executive partner

You don’t need to own this work. You need to find the right person at the executive level who can.

An executive director of communications and stakeholder relations in a large health organisation did exactly this. She had read the research, recognised her organisation in it, and shared the report with her colleague, the executive director of strategy and transformation. His response was to table it at next month’s executive team meeting. One conversation and one piece of evidence put it on the C-suite agenda.

Move as One™ does not mean think as one.

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SHIFT 2

From proxies to proof

From indirect measures of alignment, like engagement scores and financial metrics, to direct, real-time evidence of strategic coherence.

Healthy proxies can coexist with compounding misalignment. By the time engagement or financial performance signals the problem, the damage has been building for months. You can't improve what you don't measure, and you can't hold anyone accountable for something that isn't being measured.

We call this the Accountability Paradox. Ask a leadership team who is accountable for alignment and what is being measured, and many struggle to answer either question.

WHAT?

A monitoring system that provides consistent, direct answers on interpretation of priorities, aligned trade-offs, and alignment KPIs embedded in dashboards.

WHY?

Clear accountability for alignment drives better decisions and behaviours. Without evidence, the conversation stays in the realm of feeling rather than fact.

WHEN?

Commence once the mandate is received. All future activity should be guided by a clear rhythm and clear measures.

HOW?

- Work through the alignment coalition: HR, Communication, Chiefs of Staff and your other partners.
- Build on the alignment pre-scan. Use alignment diagnostics to benchmark alignment at the level that will be most valuable, for example: functional teams (comms or corporate affairs, marketing, HR, etc), cross-functional teams (eg a transformation project), leadership teams (Exec, senior leadership team, etc), and/or goal-specific contexts (AI adoption, M&A integration, a critical strategic initiative).
- Engage with Clear Leaders to work through an accountability and measurement approach specific to your organisation or situation.
- Develop the metrics and measurement techniques that will regularly monitor alignment gaps and roadblocks.

> *"We own measurement… and monthly dashboards linking communication effectiveness to business outcomes. That's what gets leadership attention."*
>
> Robin McCasland, IABC Fellow, SCMP, Senior Director Communications, Health Care Service Corporation

Measurement creates accountability.
Without evidence, accountability relies on proxies and assumptions.

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SHIFT 3

From cascades to conversations

From one-way communication campaigns to two-way dialogue that builds shared understanding and meaning.

Cascades can move information. Dialogic conversations create shared meaning. People don't commit to what they don't co-create or have genuine involvement in. They commit when they trust the direction and the leadership. Dialogue turns strategy from a deck into lived behaviour.

WHAT?

Leaders, including executives, who actively listen and act on what they hear, connect strategy and values to daily work, and reinforce meaning through good questions, facilitation and story.

WHY?

One-way campaigns can generate awareness. Trust and shared meaning are built through genuine exchange.

WHEN?

Develop the strategic conversation toolkit and conversation lab as quickly as possible. This is a strong early move.

HOW?

- Design conversation experiences that model what good dialogue looks like. Create facilitation tools that help leaders practise in context.
- Pilot a strategy conversation lab in one business unit or with the executive team. Apply two-way dialogue around real strategic topics.
- When proven, open the lab to all leaders.
- Close the listening loop visibly by showing people what changed as a result of what you heard.

> *"Organisations are not good at listening. They're great at cascading information but not at listening and doing something with what comes back."*
>
> Howard Krais, Co-Founder, True Communications

> *"You might spend X on building the strategy, but two to five times that to push it out so people really get it. The failure is thinking that all the value is in building it. It's not valuable until the managers across the organisation understand it—that's when the value is realised."*
>
> Senior Strategy and Growth Executive

Aim for leaders and teams who listen with curiosity, seek out perspectives, and connect strategy and values to daily work through good questions and story.

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SHIFT 4

From annual to agile

From one-off alignment exercises to a continuous rhythm of reflection, perspective sharing, adaptation and coordinated action.

Alignment drifts naturally. It drifts quietly, locally and in ways that seem rational at the individual level, and the cumulative pattern is what pulls the organisation away from where it said it was going. It is a leadership capability and practice. Regular alignment practice keeps teams responsive, adaptable and agile.

WHAT?

An alignment rhythm embedded in day-to-day work: quarterly check-ins, fast feedback loops, and decisions that adjust to real-time conditions.

WHY?

Strategy and alignment are dynamic. The cascade-and-launch model assumes alignment holds once it's established, when in practice it drifts as strategy and conditions change.

WHEN?

Before the next strategy cycle, conduct an organisation-wide listening tour to gather input. This accelerates information from the frontline to the executive and demonstrates trust.

HOW?

- Reference the confirmed alignment audit and measures to develop the ongoing rhythm: enable, monitor, maintain.
- Build alignment practice into existing business rhythms: leadership meetings, planning cycles, manager conversations.
- Embed this approach through communication, capability development and change management.
- Strong, aligned executive advocacy is critical. The rhythm only holds if leaders at the top tiers model it.

> *"Maintaining alignment is work — constant work. It's constant iteration, constant evaluation. Once you have it, it doesn't mean it stays."*
>
> Roy Wells, President and Managing Director, Triad Strategies

Alignment must become a practise embedded in the rhythm of work.

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PUTTING IT TOGETHER

A potential alignment timeline

Timings depend on the organisation's existing rhythm and the mandate you've secured. Treat this as a guide and adapt it to your context.

Win the mandate	• Build the alignment coalition • Run the alignment pre-scan and alignment coalition survey • Build the executive business case and interim plan • Win the mandate
Lay the foundations	• Organisation alignment audit • Finalise the alignment rhythm and measures • Commence executive alignment program • Pilot the strategy conversation lab with the executive and senior leaders • Open the conversation lab to all people leaders
Create strategy and enable alignment	• Seek input into strategic planning from the organisation • Factor input into strategy creation and show how input shaped the strategy • Commence strategy communication program • Commence people leader conversations with their teams
Real-time adaptation	• Monitor the prevailing environment and level of alignment • Act swiftly to address changes before they compound • Continuously close the loop

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YOUR ROLE

Now's the time to lead

Communication professionals are well placed to enable strategic alignment, but are not solely responsible for it. The accountability sits with the CEO and the leadership system. Your role is to enable, influence and build the alignment coalition that makes the work possible.

What you bring to the table

- Understanding of the organisation and its people
- Change communication capability
- Employee engagement expertise
- Communication channels and craft
- Making meaning of strategy for people
- Listening and feedback capability
- Leadership support and coaching

Who you work closely with

- **Chief of Staff:** planning cycle, leadership support, strategic advisor to the C-suite
- **HR:** remuneration, recognition, performance management, organisational development
- **Strategy:** direction, priorities, cadence
- **Transformation:** ways of working
- **Orchestration:** coordinating priorities, initiatives and delivery across functions
- **Technology:** platforms and data

None of these partners can do what you do, and you can't do what they do. That is why the alignment coalition matters.

Where does your function spend its time?

The Alignment Spectrum describes four ways a communication function can show up. Most teams operate across more than one.

Order Taker	Channel Manager	Strategic Enabler	Alignment Architect
Executes what's asked, with little strategic input. Often junior or under-resourced.	Manages platforms and content. Focused on delivery more than direction.	Translates strategy, builds feedback loops and partners with HR, Ops, IT and Finance.	Co-creates strategy, coaches leaders and shapes culture through systems.

See it. Surface it. Act on it.

You see it where decision-making and resourcing are out of step with the priorities, and where priorities are multiplying and conflicting. You hear it in the side conversations and the frustration among leaders. The question is whether you will surface it and act on it.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Go deeper. The full research paper and executive summary infographic are available for download from clearleaders.com.au

Talk to us. If you'd like to talk through the research, explore what it means for your organisation, or understand how Clear Leaders can support your work, reach out to Zora Artis and Wayne Aspland at clearleaders.com.au. Connect with us on LinkedIn: Zora Artis and Wayne Aspland.

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