

How to do More Than Just Survive in Your Organization

Set Your Goals and Know Your Environment

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Lessons from SCUBA Diving

It may seem an odd correlation; however I recently discovered how similar setting goals and understanding your environment are in both SCUBA diving and in business.

Recently, my daughter trained and became certified to SCUBA dive – a process that I experienced a few years ago. As I watched her learn for the first time it took me back to my initial training and I was reminded that the first important step in diving involves setting goals. Divers must decide how serious they are about this new venture they are undertaking. Do they want to dive wrecks? Dive in caves? Dive in open waters? Or simply dive in shallow waters and have fun with the fish?

Once their goals are set, divers must learn about the underwater environment into which they will enter. They must acquire new skills and behaviors that will help ensure their survival in these potentially dangerous conditions and surroundings. Most, if not all, however want to gain the knowledge, understanding, and skills that will enable them to enhance their diving experience and go well beyond the basics.

Like those divers, organizations and the people in them want to do more than simply survive. They want to excel and reach their goals.

Setting & Aligning Goals

The old adage, “if you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there,” still holds true.



Just as diving instructors must understand divers’ goals to teach the necessary skills and behaviors, employees must be made to understand their organizations’ goals to effectively align their skills and behaviors to reach those goals.

Most organizations set goals – whether they are long-term and strategic or short-term and tactical. When setting their goals, organizations often ask themselves why they exist. For many organizations the answer lies in a mission focused on satisfying their customers. In order to achieve that mission, organizations then work to accomplish five primary supporting goals:

1. Producing their products or services
2. Operating safely (both emotionally and physically)
3. Making quality intrinsic in everything they do

4. Making customer satisfaction their basic driver
5. Achieving profit and/or budget attainment

This works however, only when the organization is successful in communicating and aligning these goals throughout the organization. In addition, the organization must invest the time, effort, and money it takes to equip their people with the necessary technical, social, and business skills to support that alignment.

Dealing With Different Environments

SCUBA divers deal with two distinct environments, above the surface and below it. Each presents its own unique challenges. Above the surface, selecting the right site, marking the area appropriately to warn other boaters, and proper equipment maintenance are important. Once underwater, divers must consider things such as air consumption rate (I learned that one quickly), depth, and pressure.

Two critical environments also exist in organizations: the technical environment and the social environment.

The **technical** environment includes the equipment, materials, supplies, and tools that organizations use to produce their products or services.

The **social** environment is made up of communications between individuals, groups, and departments as well as the conflict resolution and problem identification and problem solving processes. It also includes the interaction, or lack thereof, between people. Because the social environment is more subtle and complicated, organizations often ignore its impact.

When these two environments are healthy and thriving, organizations and their employees achieve their established goals. For the technical and social environments to be healthy, they must be aligned.

Consequences of Environment Misalignment

When conditions are not right either above or

below the water during a dive, things can go bad in a hurry.

When the technical and social environments of an organization do not align, those organizations suffer and do not meet their goals.

Consider these questions for your organization:

- What happens when there is misalignment in the technical environment?
- What happens when equipment is not meeting expectations, not running properly, or is not even the right equipment?
- What happens when materials and supplies are not to specifications?
- What happens if the required tools are incorrect or unavailable?

As technical problems go unresolved, organizations' goals are further impacted. Production is negatively impacted, quality slips, and workplace safety is sacrificed to play catch up. Ultimately, the customer becomes dissatisfied, budgets experience overages, and profits are lost.

The same holds true for the social environment – the most overlooked environment. When the social environment is misaligned, organizations experience critical breakdowns in communication. Employees are unable to meet expectations, and negative conflict emerges.

When both the social and technical environments are misaligned, organizations typically resort to defensive mechanisms such as finger pointing and self-protection, rather than engaging in more productive activities such as open communication, investigation, and problem solving.

Achieving Organizational Alignment

What then is required for successful organizational alignment?

Start with the most ignored first – the social environment. Successful organizations have the right people in the right jobs doing the right things. Here is how they make this happen.

Thriving organizations ensure that their employees have the technical skills, such as supporting a network, to operate effectively within the technical environment; the social skills, such as effectively coordinating and communicating with other crew members on a change over, to operate effectively within the social environment; and the business skills, such as ensuring that their decisions are meeting customer needs to ensure they use sound judgment.

Leaders in flourishing organizations help their employees develop new understanding, skills, and abilities and then encourage them to use the power they possess, to do what is necessary to excel in their role within the organization.

Succeed – Don't Just Survive

A definition of survival is to avoid dying and, as a consultant, I've seen too many organizations that are merely working to survive.

In SCUBA diving, achieving the first priority of pure survival can be stressful. During my first solo dive I was focused on surviving the dive – trying not to die during the process. Unfortunately, due to my stress level, I went through sixty minutes of air in less than twenty minutes. By focusing on merely surviving, I was unable to be comfortable and enjoy the underwater experience. However, once I became qualified and skilled as a diver (aligned), I began to appreciate all the unique beauty the underwater environment has to offer and I now make the most of my time in that environment.

Organizations can also become myopically focused on survival and can forget the joys and satisfaction of achieving success. Whenever organizations miss their goals - product/service, safety, quality, customer satisfaction, or profit – they should view this as an indication that they are out of alignment and do whatever is necessary to get back into alignment.

Working together, being aligned both technically and socially, is an organization's only hope for a successful, thriving future. Each employee can have a significant impact upon that alignment and success by being made to feel a part of and contributing to a culture that encourages focus, change, and innovation in order to meet the organizational goals.

Here is my advice then, for both organizations and underwater divers: Set goals to be accomplished – goals that will help you succeed not just survive. Understand the environments in which you will be working. Acquire the knowledge, skills, and experience you need to fulfill your goals. Ensure that everyone involved in your goal attainment is aligned and working toward the same outcome. If you do these things, you will not only find great success – you will likely find yourself enjoying the experience as you work toward that success.