

Aligning Your Team

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One of the most powerful attributes an organization can have is alignment; the ability to have the orchestrated movement of a significant number of people all heading in the same direction. When you have that, great things can be accomplished. Wars are won, diseases are eradicated, and businesses obtain market domination all when there is focused alignment. Organizational alignment is a nice theory, but it is hard to effectively implement. First, there must be a clear vision for where the organization is heading. As the book of Proverbs says, “Where there is no vision, people perish.” One of the most important aspects of a leader is to make sure there is a compelling vision in place that is communicated clearly to everyone. Even if you have a vision, everyone needs to know what his or her role in the organization is to achieve it. When you disconnect someone’s work from the end result, it is very hard to have alignment. I have found that in great organizations, everyone knows their role and contribution to accomplishing the overall mission.

Sheldon Laboratory Systems is an example of a Mississippi business success story that has excellent organizational alignment. That alignment did not happen by chance. Eddie Adkins, President of the company and his leadership team have done a great job over the last six years of taking a very good organization and making it great. If you can envision your science lab in high school, then you will understand what Sheldon Labs does. They are a leading manufacturer of science laboratory furnishings, and sell to schools in all fifty states as well as internationally. The company has a rich history dating back to 1898. In 1977, the MISSCO Corporation acquired the company and moved the operation from Michigan to its current home in Crystal Springs. In 2003, Eddie Adkins was hired to be President of the company. Adkins, a graduate of The University of Memphis, came to Sheldon Labs from a twenty-one year background with Dover Corporation.

Adkins started with the Dover Corporation at age 17 while in college. Upon graduation, he worked in the accounting department, but found his way into operations while advancing with the company and its affiliates. As I learned more about the success of Sheldon Labs during Adkins’ tenure as President, I was eager to discover more about the secrets of his leadership. Under the current management team, the company has doubled in size in the last five years. One of the first things that struck me about the organization was the enthusiasm and excitement of Adkins. I know from personal experience how important it is to have the tempo of the organization set by the leader. Also, I believe Adkins is a “Level 5” leader as described by business guru Jim Collins in *Good to Great*. Adkins is a servant leader who genuinely cares about his team. His team in turn genuinely cares about the customers. I believe employees and customers know when you truly care about them, and when it is lip service.

As Adkins noted, “We want to have a goal oriented company where everyone on the team knows exactly how they contribute to the overall success.” Adkins and his management team have accomplished this in a number of ways. First, they broke down the walls between the front office and the management floor. They then made sure that everyone understood their unique role in the organization. They also continue to make sure everyone connects with the greater mission of their company. Their customers are schools, and in particular, they are the science teachers educating tomorrow’s leaders. Sheldon Labs has an intimate knowledge of their customer base which allows

them to continually improve their product offerings and add value to their customers. They meet with science teachers on a regular basis to get their input. The company also regularly brings people to the plant. They will have 300-400 people a year come visit the plant and tour the facility. Guests are free to visit with employees and learn about the company's processes and products.

Quality is important as well. Adkins emphasized, "We wanted to make sure we were getting adequate feedback on our products. We opened up greater lines of communication to make sure we were getting the best information possible on how we were doing." They also raised the bar on quality, and encourage people to not only flag problems, but also come prepared with solutions.

The results are evident. Adkins and his team have built a great company that is continually trying to get better. They have an aligned organization which operates well as a team. Employee satisfaction is high and they have little turnover. My research into this company only confirmed my conviction that leadership matters more than we know. They have created a great culture at Sheldon Labs and a model of how a Mississippi based business can be competitive all over the world.

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