



MEETING PROFESSIONALS INTERNATIONAL

Driving Global Corporate Alignment in Complex Organizations

A Position Paper from Meeting Professionals International's
Global Corporate Circle of Excellence

Organizations most often use the term “alignment” to describe the vital – and continuous – process of mobilizing resources to meet their objectives. Alignment unites a company’s plans and processes with the people that execute them, and a fully aligned business can easily demonstrate how the unification of strategies, stakeholders’ actions and outcomes drive success.

However, in today’s increasingly complex organizations – especially, but not exclusively, multinational corporations the existence of multiple decision-makers, teams and agendas makes it difficult for organizations to unify these entities in support of common goals. Although most successful companies clearly have strong mission statements, brands and goal orientations, many still struggle to unify their disparate teams (which may be spread regionally, nationally and/or internationally) to support an overarching organizational vision. A big challenge involves how to align integral resources with corporate strategies, and in turn, how organizations can implement the message locally with customers. How can organizations bring employees into alignment with overall strategy while accounting for differences in agendas, operational idiosyncrasies, regional differences, and local culture? This is made even more complex by elements driving the global economy, such as shifting global centres of economic activity, demographic influences, shifts in work behaviour caused by technology (24/7 world), and new market regulations.¹

¹Ian Davis and Elizabeth Stephenson. McKinsey Quarterly. Ten trends to watch in 2006. January 2006

The purpose of this paper is to explore alignment as a product of both strategy and culture, from the macro level of the global economy to key organizational processes that can be managed effectively at various levels of the organization to produce desired results. Through discussion of stakeholder roles, alignment processes, teamwork and coordination of networks, the paper looks at balancing local innovation and needs with global integration within the context of the strategic meetings management process. “Global” in the context of this paper refers not only to geography but to an organization’s strategy, vision and policies. “Local” refers to the customer-driven area. This paper will be a useful resource for strategic meetings managers as well as other senior managers within organizations.

Alignment: The Global Perspective

The alignment process starts with a business mission and vision, and a list of desired results. In turn, the mission is translated into strategy -- a set of goals and objectives against which the organization develops appropriate processes that can be broken down into tasks that yield the desired results. Additionally, the organization’s culture (values, practices and behaviours) influences the outcome. Strategy dictates *what* needs to be done; culture dictates *how* to do it.²

Traditionally, most organizations focus on strategy -- the objectives, goals, and tactics. But the culture is at least as important. Values and the way the strategy is communicated and implemented need to be compatible with the strategy itself in order to be effective.³

Maintaining an aligned organization ultimately requires sound decision-making about direction and intent, beginning at the macro level – what the organization is in business to do *and* what is critical about how it does business. In today’s global economy, it also requires knowledge of the changing marketplace, shifting demographics of the workforce and consumer, work behaviours and new labour and economic regulations. This involves not only alignment of mission and vision, but also processes and knowledge.

2 Donald Tosti and Stephanie F. Jackson. Organizational Alignment. Vanguard Consulting. www.vanguardc.com/org_align.html

3 Donald Tosti and Stephanie F. Jackson. Organizational Alignment. Vanguard Consulting. www.vanguardc.com/org_align.html

Organizations seeking alignment ultimately must ask three fundamental questions:

- Where are we? (Mission)
- Where do we want to go? (Strategy and vision)
- How do we get there? (Tactics, values, messaging)

Key Organizational Processes

On the macro level, key areas of focus include culture, landscape, mission, vision, strategic plan, policy, brand, content and values. Processes that support these include:

- Technological tools
- Risk management
- Data management and measurement
- Brand management and consistency
- Human resources
- Content development
- Policy development
- Purchasing / spend reduction
- Meetings, events, travel
- Education and training
- Internal and external communication

Effective management of these and other elements on a macro, or global, level and then giving local/regional stakeholders the tools to understand and execute in these areas ultimately enhances productivity and the focus on achievement on the micro level.

Stakeholder Roles and Responsibilities

Strongly aligned companies have shared visions of what they want to achieve and why. Companies that have yet to achieve alignment strive for it in various ways by breaking down silos, integrating systems and coordinating business activities to achieve objectives. In pursuit of alignment, organizations must focus on including appropriate stakeholders and ensuring they understand overarching missions and visions.

Translating key global organizational objectives into locally relevant and executable objectives is not easy, and front-line stakeholders' first responsibility is to be proactive in grasping and comprehending the global message before striving to execute against it.

In this document, "global" means the big picture. It's not only a geographic delineation but also an organization's strategic direction, strategy, and overarching policies and

development. “Local” designates the customer-driven area, where the execution of the strategy is delivered. Graphically, it might look like this:



“In addition to reconsidering what might constitute a geographic region, one can imagine being even more creative and redefining distance—and regions—according to non-geographic dimensions: cultural, administrative and political, and economic.”⁴ These descriptors can also indicate markets, both internally and external to the company.

Sustaining Alignment Among Stakeholders

As organizations grow in size and scope, it becomes increasingly difficult to achieve and sustain alignment among all stakeholders. Businesses can try to achieve it through several platforms, including:

- Shared technology
- Shared data
- Communication vehicles
- Educational programs / meetings

⁴ Ghemawat, Pankaj. The Regional Slice of Your Global Strategy. Harvard Business Review Working knowledge. December 19, 2005

Using these and other approaches, companies drive the notion of shared ownership to each stakeholder. It is then each stakeholder's personal responsibility to drive business, regardless of their role. Consider Starbucks Coffee Co., which tries to instill this ethos by calling all of its employees "partners," or the Walt Disney Co., which refers to its employees as "cast members" to emphasize the team approach to creating an experience for its customers.

"Creation nets" or "open innovation" describes how networks of people both inside and outside of an organization collaborate to create new knowledge, learn from one another, and build on each other's work⁵. Examples of this include the development of the iPod, Linux computer operating systems, and even the internet itself.⁶ This gives access to better data, knowledge, experience and creativity. The key is that it goes through one network organizer, giving coordination and direction to the potential chaos. So, although creation nets are free-flowing in terms of knowledge, they are specific on goals. The value of such networks lies in the speed of change in today's global economy. The evolution of the knowledge economy now recognizes that although knowledge is valuable, it has a limited shelf life. Sharing information and building on it benefits everyone. In this process, technology is a key driver, enabling diverse players to come together instantaneously.

One way to leverage this idea on a smaller scale for meeting professionals is through the development of an "event collaborative group" or "global event council", a group of stakeholders that meets regularly to discuss and brainstorm ways in which they can work together. Group members may include representatives of marketing, sales, finance, procurement, travel and corporate events departments. Suppliers, vendors and customers may also be included, because the alignment process can involve internal and external constituents. This type of council has been successfully implemented in several corporations.

⁵ Creation Nets: Getting the most from open innovation. John Seely Brown and John Hagel III, The McKinsey Quarterly. 2006, Number 2

⁶ William C. Taylor and Polly LaBarre. Mavericks at Work. William Morrow, 2006.

Organizational missions, visions, values and strategic plans are not dynamic. Stakeholders need to ensure that their alignment efforts are evolving to address the ever-changing, overarching strategies.

Bringing Teams Together

Going back to the concept of open innovation and creation nets, these approaches to management will enhance their success in:

- ◆ Coordinating network activities
- ◆ Balancing local innovation with “global” integration
- ◆ Designing effective action points
- ◆ Establishing feedback loops⁷

Coordinating Network Activities

Within global organizations, alignment means teams must come together across divisions, departments and even geographical borders and cultural boundaries to achieve unity in establishing goals, messaging, programming and processes. In the end, alignment is about developing relationships and giving stakeholders a voice so they know their input is valued. Meeting planners are often responsible for bringing strategic teams together because of the cross-functional nature of meeting projects and because they have access to personnel at strategic levels.

Balancing Local Innovation with Global Integration

How does an organization bring regions into alignment with global strategy while accommodate regional differences, and obtain buy-in from distant areas or local offices? It empowers individuals from local and regional teams to be key parts of the global communications effort, thereby facilitating valuable information exchanges. These exchanges show respect for individual and team capabilities and contributions. Giving people a voice at the macro level ultimately ensures effective implementation at the micro level, allowing organizations to accomplish three things:

- ◆ Access and develop globally diverse talent
- ◆ Provide local context
- ◆ Effectively integrate diverse creations⁸

⁷ Creation Nets: getting the most from open innovation. John Seely Brown and John Hagel III. The McKinsey Quarterly. 2006 Number 2

Although it might be tempting to develop guidelines for global organizations that are the same for each region or unit, this may not be the best way to reach organizational objectives. Companies must also strive to understand “glocality”, or how globalization impacts local implementation:⁹ “Multinational firms have understood for some time that certain activities, such as marketing, must remain local in concept and execution to be successful.”¹⁰

Designing Effective Action Points

Processes can be different on micro levels, as long as they align with overall organizational goals. The key: clear roles and processes. Although some global process mandates may exist, there will undoubtedly be aspects of processes with more latitude to execute independently. In turn, best practices that emerge from new approaches at the micro level can be shared to facilitate exemplary execution at other local levels.

- ◆ Share information and data within the organization. Technology, which drives much of the global economy, also makes greater integration of information and measurement possible.
- ◆ Leverage global processes where possible. This may include purchasing, cost/spend management, communication vehicles, policy, and technology.
- ◆ Recognize local differences that may affect successful implementation. These may include culture, socio-political systems, and language. Coca Cola is a global company that does this well. It adjusts its product offering and marketing based on country.

Establishing Feedback Loops

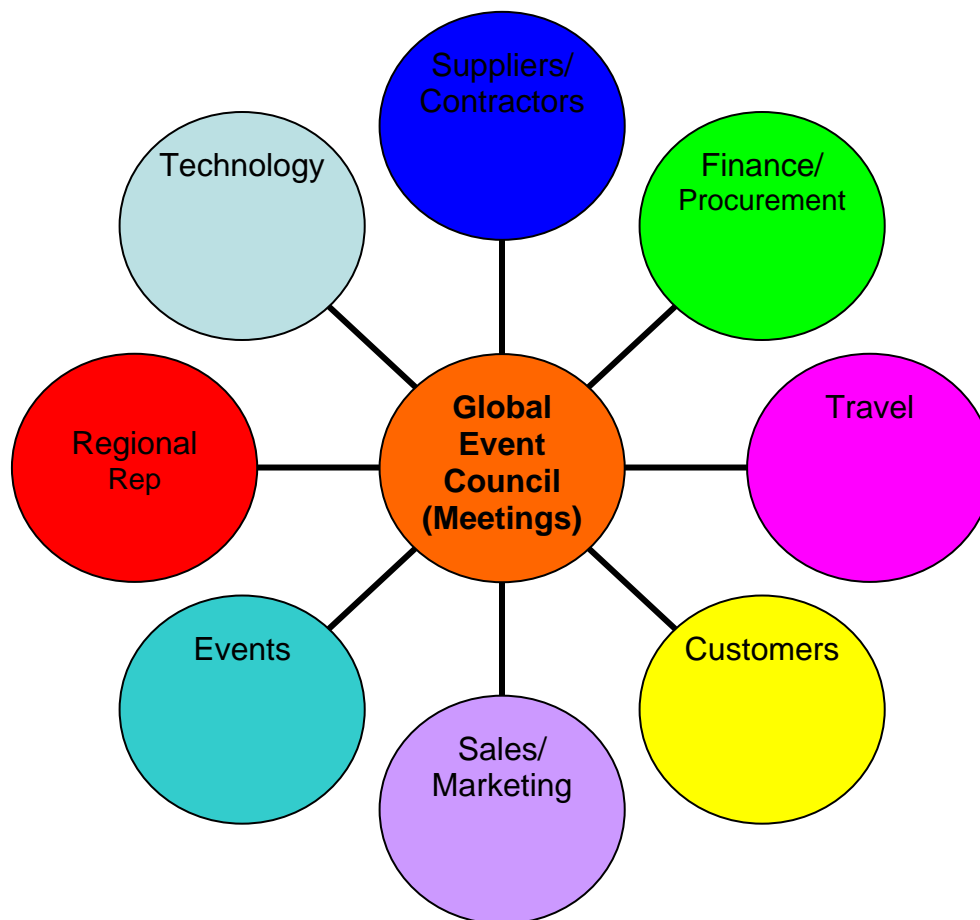
A global alignment program may encounter issues related to regional and local execution and implementation. An organization should give stakeholders objectives, and then allow latitude for how the objectives are accomplished to see what works at that level. Subsequently, a collaborative council consisting of global and local/regional representatives can serve as a communications vehicle to ensure messages from each

8 Creation nets: Getting the most from open innovation. John Seely Brown and John Hagel III. The McKinsey Quarterly. 2006 Number 2

9 Harvard Business School Working Knowledge Archive. Credited to Stuart Carr, author of Globalization and Culture at Work: Exploring Their Combined Glocality

10 Emmons, Gary. The New International Style of Management in The Harvard Business Review Working Knowledge. July 2005

entity are heard while providing feedback regarding objectives that work or do not work in support of the organization's broader goals. This type of council might look like this:



The purpose of this stakeholder group is to analyze events, identify processes that could be streamlined globally, consolidate vendors, recognize local adaptations, measure success, optimize events and use the synergy of an “open innovation” group to generate new possibilities and solutions.

Where Meeting Professionals Fit In

In an aligned global organization, everyone has a common understanding of the organization's mission, vision, values and goals, although local implementation can be modified to meet the needs and expectations of diverse audiences. While this scenario is clearly difficult to achieve, meeting planners can play key roles in driving the process.

Understand the need to mesh the “what” with the “how”. Most companies focus on strategy and ignore the “how”, or the values, practices and behaviours. Meeting professionals are uniquely placed to take knowledge of strategy and make it effective through organizational values and cultural differences.

Balance local with global integration. Plan meetings that use local messaging to achieve strategic objectives. Meetings are the most valuable communication vehicle in an organization, serving to crystallize an organization’s mission, vision, values and strategic objectives. Ensuring that these items reach the audience they are aimed at is essential, taking into consideration customs, socio-political systems, language and local economics. Global drivers to be considered include available technology, local regulations and laws, and the demographics of both the workforce and the market.

Sustain alignment by leveraging global processes. When an organization has streamlined macro policies and procedures that do not affect the outcome locally, use them. These include technology, risk, data management, brand and purchasing. Even some of these factors (for example, the availability of certain technologies) may vary locally.

Coordinate activities. This might be achieved through shared technology or through the implementation of a strategic meetings management program. If trying open innovation techniques, be the network coordinator to keep participants on-track.

Know what global and local mean to your organization. Your organization may be international in scope, where global means the world. It may also be an organization where “global” refers to a state or province, with local referring to differentiations between cities or other regions. It may also be economic, not geographic.

Consider use of open innovation. Take advantage of open innovation and creation net processes. Technology is available that allows companies to work with multiple stakeholders across geographic and time boundaries. An example of this is the global event council.

Use technology appropriately. Technology is a driver of the global economy. It also drives the sharing of information within organizations with easy measurement and tracking. It also allows companies to take advantage of a global knowledge base through open innovation concepts. Even if people don't work for you, they can still work with you and this will strengthen your knowledge and success.

The Bottom Line

The rewards of alignment include satisfied internal and external customers. Meetings offer critical strategic support to global business alignment and local implementation of strategy. As drivers of a dynamic, collaborative alignment process, meeting professionals harness the global values, objectives, messages and resources of their organizations to deliver clear, focused, locally relevant events and best practices.

BACKGROUND

Members of MPI's 2005-2006 Global Corporate Circle of Excellence (GCCOE) convened in Zurich, Switzerland, in March 2006 to develop this position paper, the sixth in a series. The previous five papers are:

1. *The Power of Partnership: Capitalizing on the Collaborative Efforts of Strategic Meeting Professionals and Procurement Departments*
2. *360 Degrees of Influence: Demonstrating Professional Value Through the Development of a Strategic Meetings Management Program*
3. *360 Degrees of Partnership: Uniting Planners and Suppliers Through Collaborative Business Processes in Strategic Meetings Management Environments*
4. *Defining a Strategic Meetings Management Program: How Meetings Drive Business in Partnership-Focused Companies*
5. *360° of Teamwork: How Meetings and Travel Professionals Can Build Strategic Synergies to Drive Results*

For more from MPI's Global Corporate Circle of Excellence—including the group's previous position papers and a toolkit offering several indispensable resources, documents and templates for meeting professionals—visit www.mpiweb.org and click on the "Publications & Research" link. ##