

BEYOND FORMAL CONSENSUS

Executive Alignment Does Not Happen in the Meeting — It Is Tested There

Why disciplined pre-alignment is the difference between formal consent and executable commitment



Executive Alignment Does Not Happen in the Meeting — It Is Tested There

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“The executive meeting should make alignment accountable, not discover its contradictions for the first time.”

1. Unanimous in the room, conditional outside it

A programme board approved a new regional operating model in 22 minutes. Every executive supported the recommendation. The minutes recorded a unanimous decision.

Before the week ended, the operations director had told site leaders that implementation depended on a service guarantee that was not in the paper. The finance director had withheld the transition budget pending a revised baseline. The technology director believed approval covered design only, not deployment. The sponsor believed all three had committed.

Nothing unusual had happened. The meeting had compressed four different decisions into one word: approved.

The pattern that recurs across enterprise change is that executives rarely become aligned through the formal meeting. The room is where alignment should be tested, made visible and attached to accountability. The actual work of understanding consequence, exposing constraint and shaping commitment has to begin before the agenda item opens.

This is not political housekeeping. It is a leadership discipline.

2. The formal meeting is designed for decision, not discovery

The textbook prescription appears sound: prepare a clear paper, bring the right executives together, debate the options and let the chair drive a decision. Where disagreement exists, the collective forum should resolve it.

In practice, the executive meeting carries conditions that make first discovery expensive.

Time is short. Papers have already established a preferred narrative. Participants are conscious of rank, reputation and the need to appear enterprise-minded. A late objection can look like obstruction. A local constraint can sound parochial. Once the sponsor has publicly described the proposal as ready, exposing a missing assumption may feel like challenging the sponsor rather than improving the decision.

Executives therefore use conditional language.

- "I support the direction."
- "We can work through the implementation detail."
- "Provided service is protected, I am comfortable."

- "The principle is right."

These phrases are not empty. They are incomplete. Each can conceal a different view of scope, timing, authority or cost. The formal meeting rewards movement; conditional language allows movement without requiring the condition to be settled.

Pre-alignment creates a lower-cost place to make those conditions explicit before they become post-meeting surprises.

3. Alignment means commitment, not agreement

We regularly mistake a shared opinion for alignment. Executives may all prefer the same strategic outcome and still be unable to deliver it together.

Executable alignment requires four conditions.

- Common meaning: leaders understand the decision in materially the same way.
- Visible consequence: each leader knows what the decision costs, changes or risks within their area.
- Real authority: each participant can make the commitment attributed to them.
- Named obligation: the organisation can observe what each executive will do after approval.

If one condition is absent, apparent consensus remains fragile.

A business-unit leader may favour consolidation but lack authority to release capital already committed locally. A functional leader may support standardisation while retaining controls that make the standard process impossible. A technology director may accept the target model but have no capacity within the current release plan. These are not disagreements about aspiration. They are gaps between enterprise intent and executive obligation.

The executive meeting should make alignment accountable, not discover its contradictions for the first time.

4. What experience teaches about the hidden objection

The most consequential objection is often not the one voiced in the room.

Consider a composite programme in May 2008. A federated organisation planned to move customer administration from six business units into two regional centres. The case promised £9 million in annual savings, common controls and improved management information. The sponsor believed the executive team had already aligned around the strategy.

The final approval paper requested budget and authority to begin migration. Formal comments were favourable. Yet bilateral conversations during the preceding week revealed five different reservations.

- One business-unit leader intended to retain 17 local roles as a protective layer, reducing the forecast saving by £780,000.
- Another could not migrate during a contract renewal and needed a six-week delay.

- Finance had excluded £1.3 million of data-cleansing cost from the transition case.
- The technology plan assumed interfaces that had not been approved.
- Operations understood the regional centres to be advisory for complex cases; the design made them accountable.

None of these points appeared in the formal responses. Each executive had answered the strategic question — whether the model was desirable — and reserved the operational question privately.

The sponsor did not need another presentation. The sponsor needed to convert reservation into decision.

The case was revised. The protection layer became eight time-limited roles with a closure date. One migration moved by six weeks. Data-cleansing cost entered the investment case. Interface capacity became a condition of deployment. Accountability for complex cases was stated explicitly.

The benefit forecast fell to £7.6 million. The decision became stronger.

This is the paradox of genuine alignment: it often makes the paper look less certain while making the organisation more capable of delivering it.

Pre-alignment earns its value when it lowers the apparent certainty of the proposal and raises the reliability of the commitment.

5. The meeting before the meeting is not a sales call

Poor pre-alignment asks, "Can I count on your support?" Good pre-alignment asks, "What would you be committing if this decision passed?"

The first question recruits. The second reveals.

A disciplined conversation should test:

- what the executive believes the decision includes;
- which benefit and burden land in their area;
- what authority they personally control;
- what constraint they cannot remove;
- which condition must enter the formal paper;
- what they will authorise if the condition is met.

The sponsor's task is not to eliminate every objection. It is to distinguish the objection that should change the proposal from the objection that legitimate authority must overrule.

This distinction matters. Some local concerns expose a real failure in the enterprise design. Others reflect a preference that cannot outweigh the collective interest. Pre-alignment allows both to be understood before the room is forced to treat every disagreement as either wisdom or resistance.

6. The strongest objection: private alignment corrupts governance

There is a serious case against the meeting before the meeting.

Private conversations can manufacture a fait accompli. Sponsors can isolate dissenters, trade concessions that never reach the record and present the formal forum with an outcome that appears inevitable. Executives who were not consulted may be placed at a disadvantage. The official meeting becomes theatre.

This risk is real, and it explains why pre-alignment sometimes carries the smell of manipulation.

The answer is not to pretend that executives arrive in the room without prior conversations. Influence will happen somewhere. The discipline is to connect prior conversation to authorised decision.

Pre-alignment is legitimate when it:

- surfaces rather than suppresses disagreement;
- improves the options and evidence available to the formal forum;
- records material changes and concessions in the paper;
- leaves the authorised body free to decide;
- makes each executive's commitment explicit in the minutes.

It becomes manipulation when it:

- seeks promises of support before consequences are understood;
- portrays a contested issue as settled;
- conceals the price of agreement;
- prevents a credible alternative from reaching the room;
- uses hierarchy to make dissent personally costly.

The difference is not whether discussions occur privately. It is whether they enlarge or diminish the formal meeting's capacity to exercise judgement.

7. Alignment is built through consequence

Executives can agree comfortably while the proposition remains abstract. The real test arrives when the decision requires something scarce: budget, experienced people, local discretion, timetable or reputation.

A useful pre-alignment discipline therefore moves quickly from general support to consequential questions.

"What will your function stop doing?"

"Which budget will move?"

"Who will you release, by name and date?"

"What decision are you delegating?"

"What local measure will conflict with this outcome?"

"What will you tell your managers when the enterprise decision disadvantages them?"

These questions are not implementation detail. They are the substance of commitment.

A sponsor who leaves them until after approval has not preserved strategic altitude. The sponsor has deferred the test of alignment until the organisation is already expected to act.

8. The chair must protect the integrity of the decision

The chair has a particular responsibility. A smooth meeting is not necessarily a well-governed meeting.

Before a major decision, the chair should know:

- which executives have been consulted;
- which material conditions were raised;
- how the proposal changed as a result;
- what remains disputed;
- whether participants possess the authority they are exercising;
- which obligations should appear in the decision record.

The chair should be suspicious of effortless unanimity around a proposal that imposes uneven burdens. Either the design has achieved something rare, or the burden has not been discussed.

This does not mean rehearsing the entire meeting beforehand. It means ensuring that first discovery is reserved for genuine judgement, not preventable ambiguity.

9. The discipline continues after approval

Alignment is not a ceremony completed when the minutes are issued.

Assumptions change. Evidence weakens. A leader discovers that a commitment was based on the wrong capacity estimate. A new executive inherits an obligation they did not shape. If the organisation treats any reopening as disloyalty, disagreement returns underground.

A mature executive team can distinguish between revisiting the direction and governing the conditions of delivery. It can require evidence, decide whether a change is material and reaffirm or amend the commitment without pretending that alignment is permanent.

The meeting before the meeting therefore has an echo after the meeting: continued bilateral attention to where obligations are weakening before they become public failure.

10. What the formal meeting is for

The formal executive meeting is not diminished by pre-alignment. It is made more serious.

It remains the place where authority is visible, options are challenged, unresolved tensions are judged and commitments enter the record. But it performs those functions only when

participants arrive knowing what the decision means for them.

The practitioner's lesson is direct. Do not use the meeting before the meeting to secure a vote. Use it to expose the decision that the formal meeting actually needs to make.

When pre-alignment is disciplined, the room does not merely record agreement. It binds meaning, consequence, authority and obligation into one executive act.

When it is absent, the meeting produces consent and the organisation spends the following weeks discovering the conditions hidden inside it. When it is manipulative, the meeting produces theatre. When it is honest, the meeting produces a commitment that can survive the morning after.