

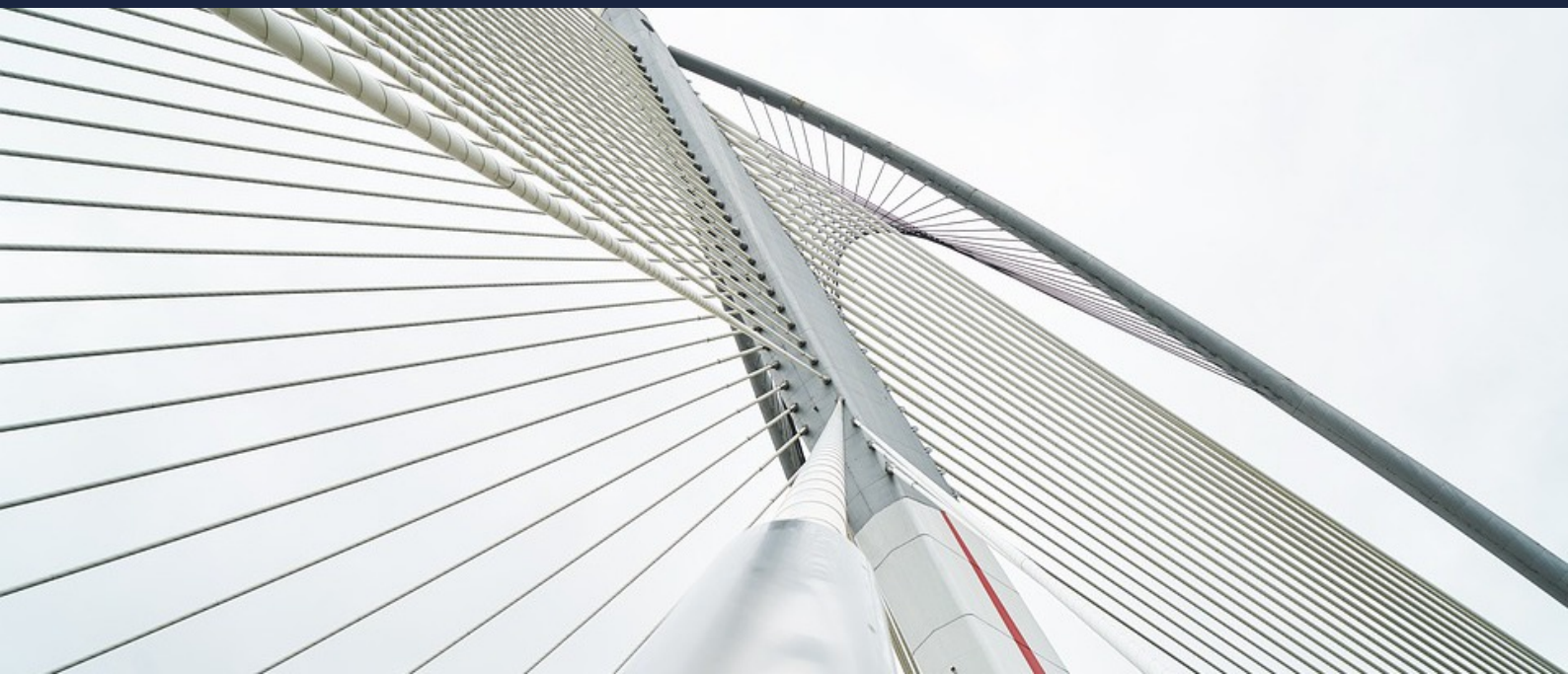
BEYOND CONSENSUS

The Myth of Alignment

A Practitioner's Perspective on Why Strategic Consensus Is Destroying Strategic Intelligence

Giovanni Leonardi

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The Myth of Alignment

Every organisation claims to value alignment. Strategy days are built around it. Town halls celebrate it. Performance frameworks measure it. And yet the most aligned organisations are frequently the slowest to adapt, the last to innovate, and the first to be disrupted.

This is not a coincidence. It is a consequence.

Alignment, as most organisations practise it, is not a strategic capability. It is a compliance mechanism dressed in the language of collaboration. When a leadership team says "we need to get aligned," what they typically mean is "we need everyone to agree with the decision we have already made." The alignment they seek is not the productive tension of diverse perspectives converging on a shared objective. It is the elimination of dissent.

Why Alignment Kills What It Claims to Protect

The damage is structural and operates through three mechanisms that most leadership teams never examine.

The first is the speed tax. Alignment processes — the pre-meetings before meetings, the stakeholder socialisation rounds, the consensus-building rituals — consume an extraordinary proportion of leadership bandwidth. In large organisations, senior leaders routinely spend 40 to 60 percent of their time not making decisions but securing permission to make decisions. The alignment process has become the work, displacing the work it was supposed to enable.

The second is the quality collapse. Decisions that survive alignment processes are not the best decisions. They are the least objectionable decisions. Every round of socialisation sands down an edge. Every stakeholder consultation adds a caveat. By the time a strategic initiative has been "aligned," it has been diluted to the point where it cannot fail spectacularly — but it also cannot succeed meaningfully. The bold bet becomes a cautious experiment. The transformation becomes an optimisation. The disruption becomes an improvement programme.

The third is the accountability void. When everyone is aligned, nobody is responsible. Alignment distributes ownership so broadly that it evaporates. If the initiative fails, the aligned coalition has a collective alibi: we all agreed. This is not shared accountability. It is

shared immunity.

The Discomfort of Productive Misalignment

The alternative is not chaos. It is something far more uncomfortable for most leadership cultures: the deliberate cultivation of productive misalignment.

Productive misalignment means creating conditions where people with fundamentally different perspectives, incentives, and mental models are forced to confront the same problem without the pressure to converge prematurely. It means tolerating — even engineering — tension at the point of decision.

This requires a kind of leadership that most organisations do not select for, develop, or reward. It requires leaders who can hold open a decision space when every institutional instinct screams for closure. Leaders who can distinguish between the discomfort of genuine strategic uncertainty and the discomfort of ego. Leaders who understand that the moment everyone in the room agrees is often the moment the organisation has stopped thinking.

The evidence is hiding in plain sight. The most consequential strategic errors of the past two decades — in financial services, in technology, in the public sector — were not failures of alignment. They were failures of challenge. The decision-makers were perfectly aligned. They were also perfectly wrong. And the alignment itself was the mechanism that prevented anyone from saying so.

What This Demands of Leaders

Productive misalignment is not a technique. It is a leadership posture that requires three things most organisations actively discourage.

First, it requires structural dissent. Not suggestion boxes or anonymous feedback tools, but formally empowered roles whose explicit purpose is to challenge the prevailing direction. Not devil's advocates appointed for a meeting — that trivialises the function — but permanent institutional mechanisms that make challenge a first-class activity rather than a career-limiting one.

Second, it requires decision architecture that separates exploration from commitment. Most organisations collapse these two phases. The moment a direction is proposed, the alignment machinery activates, and the organisation begins committing resources, building plans, and socialising outcomes before the idea has been genuinely stress-tested. Productive misalignment holds these phases apart — creating a protected space where ideas can be attacked without the attacker being seen as disloyal and without the proposer being seen as defeated.

Third, it requires leaders who measure themselves by the quality of the disagreements they provoke, not the speed of the consensus they achieve. This is the hardest shift, because every incentive in every organisation points the other way. The leader who delivers a unanimous board recommendation is celebrated. The leader who brings a

genuine strategic dilemma to the board — with two competing options, each with articulate advocates and real trade-offs — is seen as unprepared. This perception is exactly backwards, and until it changes, organisations will continue to optimise for the appearance of strategic coherence at the expense of the reality of strategic intelligence.

The Question Nobody Asks

There is a simple diagnostic that reveals whether an organisation's alignment culture is productive or performative. Ask any leadership team: when was the last time you made a major strategic decision where significant, well-informed dissent persisted after the decision was made — and the dissenters were not punished, sidelined, or patronised?

If the answer requires thought, the organisation does not have an alignment problem. It has a thinking problem. And no amount of strategy days, away-days, or alignment workshops will fix it.

The only thing that will fix it is leaders who are brave enough to be misaligned — and organisations that are wise enough to value them for it.