

BEYOND THE ALIGNMENT SCORE

Why Every Project Suddenly Scores as Strategic — and What the Alignment Number Really Measures

Scoring theatre in the project portfolio, and why a downturn makes it worse rather than better



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The Meeting Where Everything Scored a Four

Somewhere this month a portfolio review is underway, and the mood in the room is not the usual one. The capital budget for the year has been cut — not trimmed, cut — and the instruction from the board is that the pipeline has to come down by a third. Credit is scarce, revenue forecasts are being rewritten every few weeks, and every pound of spend is now being asked to justify itself in a way it was not asked to eighteen months ago.

So the portfolio office has done the sensible, defensible thing. It has reached for the strategic alignment scoring model — the weighted spreadsheet with its tidy columns for supports corporate strategy, revenue protection, cost reduction, regulatory necessity — and asked each sponsor to score their initiative against the criteria. The theory is impeccable. When money is tight, you fund what is most aligned to strategy and you stop the rest. The number decides, not the politics.

The results come back. Of forty-one live projects, thirty-six score four or five out of five for strategic alignment. Four score a three. One sponsor has entered a two, and everyone in the room quietly understands that this project is already dead and its sponsor has simply given up.

Here is the uncomfortable question nobody asks aloud: if almost everything is highly aligned to strategy, what exactly has the exercise told us? We set out to separate the essential from the discretionary, and the instrument has reported back that it is essential nearly all the way down.

The Score Arrives After the Decision, Not Before It

The reason is not that sponsors are dishonest. It is that we have the sequence backwards, and the model quietly rewards it.

By the time a project reaches a scoring template, a great deal has already happened. Someone has fought for it, staffed it, and told their director it matters. Budgets have been spoken for. Reputations are attached. The sponsor does not approach the scoring sheet as a neutral analyst weighing whether the work deserves to live; they approach it as an advocate who already knows the answer they need and is now selecting the criteria and the wording that produce it. The score is not an input to the decision. It is a justification assembled after the decision has, emotionally and politically, already been made.

That is the art of retrospective justification, and a scoring model is superb at enabling it. Give an experienced sponsor a five-criterion weighted model and they will find the reading of their project that lands it at 4.6. Supports corporate strategy is elastic enough to accommodate almost anything, because the strategy itself is written at a level of generality — grow in priority markets, improve the customer experience, build operational resilience — that nothing fails to support. A data-centre refresh supports resilience. A new reporting tool supports the customer experience. The pet project of a powerful director supports whichever pillar it needs to.

A scoring model does not remove politics from the portfolio. It launders it — and hands the same decision back to you wearing a number.

What the Number Is Actually Measuring

It is worth being precise about what a high alignment score correlates with, because it is rarely what we imagine.

- It correlates with the articulacy of the sponsor — their skill at connecting any activity to a strategic pillar. That is a talent, but it is not the same as the work mattering.
- It correlates with the generality of the strategy — the vaguer the stated strategy, the higher everything scores against it. A portfolio whose strategy is precise is one where the scores actually separate; most stated strategies are not precise.
- It correlates with who is holding the pen — self-assessment by the advocate produces inflation as reliably as night follows day. Nobody scores their own initiative a two while they still believe in it.

What it does not reliably correlate with is the thing we wanted: a defensible, evidenced judgement that this investment will do more for the organisation than the one beside it. That judgement needs evidence the template never asks for — the size of the benefit, the confidence we have in it, what we give up by funding this instead of something else. A self-scored alignment number contains none of that.

The Objection — and Why It Does Not Save the Model

The fair rejoinder is that a scoring model, for all its faults, is still better than the alternative. Without it you are back to gut feel, the loudest voice, and the project belonging to whoever sits closest to the chief executive. A flawed, inflated number at least imposes a common language and a paper trail. In a year like this one, with cuts to defend to a nervous board, is a scoring model not exactly the discipline we need?

It would be, if the number were doing the deciding. But it is not. The inflation collapses the model's whole purpose: when thirty-six of forty-one projects score four or five, the score cannot discriminate, and the real decision quietly moves elsewhere — back into the corridor, into who has the sponsor's ear, into precisely the politics the model was meant to displace. The template then does something worse than nothing. It puts an objective-looking gloss on a subjective outcome, so that a decision made on influence can be presented to the board as though it were made on evidence. That is not discipline. It is theatre with a spreadsheet as its prop.

What to Change — and It Is Not the Spreadsheet

The instinct in a downturn is to add criteria, re-weight the columns, and demand more rigour from the model. That is treating the symptom. Three changes to how and by whom the scoring is done are worth more than any refinement of the template itself.

1. Separate the scorer from the advocate. The sponsor makes the case; someone with no stake in it — the portfolio office, a panel of peers, finance — awards the score. The moment the person who benefits is no longer the person who scores, the number starts to mean something.
2. Score against evidence, not intent. Replace "supports corporate strategy — agree or disagree" with questions that demand a figure: what is the benefit, in pounds or in risk reduced; how confident are we, and on what basis; what breaks if we do not do this in the coming year. A criterion you cannot answer with evidence is a criterion that only measures articulacy.
3. Force the ranking, and force it against a line. Alignment scored in isolation will always cluster high. Scored against a fixed budget line that funds only the top of the list, the exercise changes character entirely — sponsors can no longer all be essential, because the line makes essentiality a scarce resource. The useful question was never "is this aligned?" It is "is this more deserving than the project that will be cut to pay for it?"

The downturn is often described as the moment that will finally bring discipline to bloated portfolios. It can — but not through the scoring model, which under pressure bends toward justification rather than judgement. Scarcity does not automatically produce rigour. It produces a stronger incentive to make the number say yes. The organisations that cut well this year will not be the ones with the most elaborate alignment model. They will be the ones honest enough to admit that a four out of five, self-awarded by the person who wants the money, was never evidence of anything at all.