

Alignment in a Rugby Program

Level 3 Assignment – Les Kiss

Purpose:

The purpose is to explore the subject of ‘Alignment’ as it applies to the implementation of a rugby program. The success of a rugby program is dependent upon many components working and integrating well. ‘Alignment’ is a key element that in my opinion is not fully understood in terms of its application and impact on the end result.

The following text will give meaning to the term ‘alignment’ and offer a simple way to factor it into an operation and allow it to be part of a coaches thinking. Suggestions will also be provided to give depth and substance to the vital nature of this function.

This document is by no means exhaustive and complete however it is more intended to bring to the surface an area that if acknowledged, understood and factored into a coaching approach, will facilitate the successful outcome of a rugby program.

Alignment Explained:

In the process of developing a rugby program a coach will consider many philosophies, principles and methods that will define and give direction for his coaching and management. The amount of detail, structure, and process in a program will vary considerably for each coach. One coach’s perspective of what constitutes a priority over other elements will vary from other coaches. The very methods and principles of the on field rugby component and the delivery of such in preparation will be unique to each coach. There will be a vast difference in each coach’s vision, key philosophies and ideals that will give direction and drive behaviour for his team. In other words no rugby program will be identical. Each will have its own substance reflecting the values, beliefs, ideas and past experiences of the coach who writes it. And of course it is important to note there will also be many things synonymous in each rugby program.

One could say there is no right or wrong way for a rugby program to be written or operate provided it follows key core principles in coaching and management on and off the field.

However a key area where most programs fail to reach their potential is when what is done and delivered is not congruent with what was said or stated in the first place. This possible lack of 'alignment' is a hidden danger. If your action plan does not reflect your written plan then you are off course. This may seem obvious however this situation is a regular occurrence, I assure you. Alignment is one of the major factors that will determine the successful application of a rugby program.

In a nut shell alignment is 'walking the talk'. It is being honest in your operational delivery in such that it is congruent with what you extol in your rugby program. It is the ability to link your behaviour, actions, dialogue and language with your plan to ensure the best possible outcome.

The interesting fact here is that most coaches/teams believe they currently operate in alignment to their program. This may very well be true. It may well be happening in some or most segments of your operation but missing in other parts. The truth is most operations do have a level of alignment that is visible and obvious however the key is to have more of your program operating from the context of congruency and consistency.

Why is this concept of alignment vital? Because if it does not exist the people in your organization will smell it and the integrity of your program will be compromised. There will be an increasing lack of commitment and belief in where the team and people within the team are going. This will be particularly evident in periods of adversity for a team when usually some people become confused, frustrated, disgruntled or feel hard done by.

Winning is usually a fix for most teams and can disguise some issues of concern, however the fact is everyone will have tough times to endure. These tough periods will determine whether your program stacks up as good enough or not.

As the leader and driver of your program you and your staff must be the example. It must be clear that what you are doing and saying is consistent with the overall objectives of your rugby program. This will have an enormously positive effect on your team as they will be more likely to align their behaviour, actions and ambitions with something they can believe in and trust.

In her recent book, 'Walking The Talk', Carolyn Taylor describes alignment as vital to building cultural muscle:

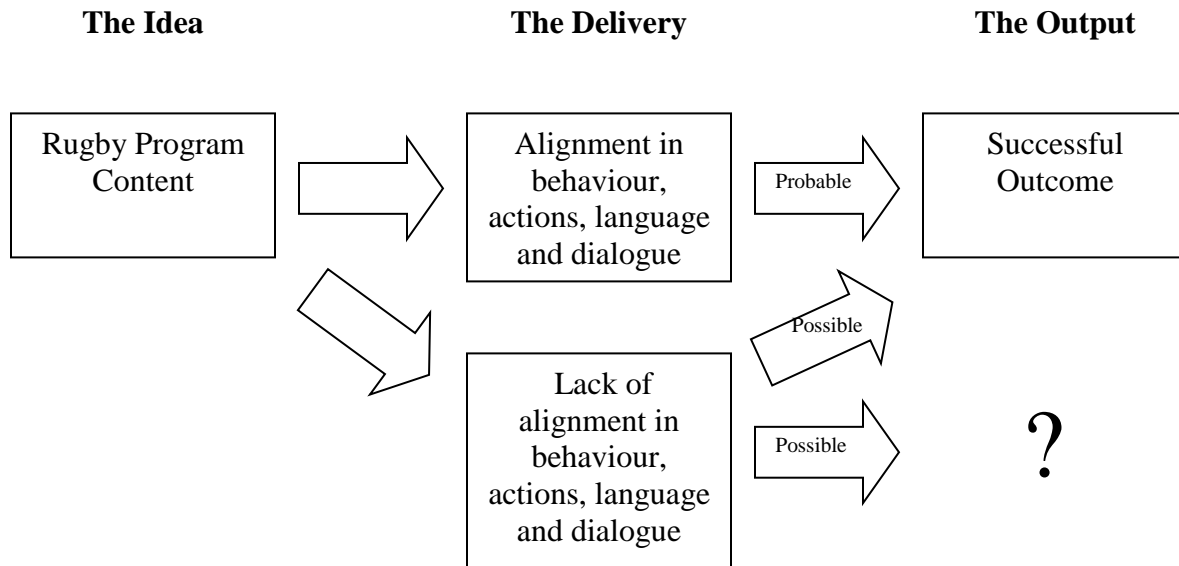
“Alignment must be the goal of all great organizations. When each of your employees has a line of sight between what they do and the overall goals of the organization, their action will fall more closely into alignment. The process for achieving this builds cultural muscle because it brings different people and units closer together and feeling more closely bound to the tribe. Whilst this process does not strongly embed any particular value, it provides the glue which holds your overall culture together.”

Lack of alignment is often not obvious and in all probability the actions, language and dialogue existing in the implementation process is well intentioned. It is also quite real that what is being applied is sound in terms of good rugby coaching and management. The point is, if what you are delivering or saying is not equal to what was said or stated, then it is not the direction the program should be entertaining.

It is important at this stage to also acknowledge that a program can be successful if alignment is not apparent in total or in part. It is possible for an outcome to be acceptable and indeed a competition can be won if the operation and delivery is haphazard or inconsistent in terms of alignment. Enough alignment may exist to make it 'possible' to realise a result that meets the demands of an organization. The key word here is 'possible'. The term that is more reliable is 'probable'. The more congruency evident between a process and a plan, the more 'probable' the outcome will be the one desired.

The Mindset of Alignment:

The diagram below consolidates the concept discussed above. This simple representation outlines the flow from Idea to Output. 'The Idea' is the program itself. It is the actual philosophy, principles, goals and methods that explain what is to happen and how it will happen. 'The Delivery' is the implementation and operational phase. It is how, why and what is done in the delivery of the plan. 'The Output' is the result. It is the realization of the idea. Put another way it is the outcome.



So what does this all mean to a coach? First and foremost a coach must accept that this alignment process may well be an issue worth considering in their operation. At the very least one would expect that a coach would be in a constant mode of monitoring his program from the perspective of alignment.

Where does a coach start in terms of ensuring ‘alignment’ is a part of his plan? An important starting point is to understand that ‘alignment’ is not the significant element in the actual written program but rather is more vital in the delivery and doing. Obviously the program should be valid, consistent, logical and make sense to all engaged in it. It is the very operation and associated language and dialogue that should be consistent with the actual content and ideals of the rugby program.

Importantly, the recognition and realization that alignment may be lacking is essential. The coach must be in tune with his operation and have his radar on constantly. It would therefore imply that if a coach is aware of such he should then be able to adjust the approach to ensure this alignment process is prevalent.

Just as a coach must have the ability to plan, he must also possess the ability to align his plan. A coach will either thrive or wither based on this ability.

Staying On Track:

Now that it is established what ‘alignment’ is in terms of a rugby program, how is it used or indeed integrated into our thinking and operational functions to make a difference in the performance? How does this concept become a part of our planning, doing and achieving?

The most effective method is to develop an internal inquiry habit. Use the below matrix of questions based on the above diagrammatic as a constant reminder and vigilance regarding alignment.

Examples and further expansion are provided below on noted questions.

The Idea	The Delivery	The Output
Can I live up to these ideals, values and standards?*	Does my language and dialogue support the values, ideals and standards?***	Is this outcome good?
Am I and/or my assistants capable of coaching this style?*	Am I coaching the style I stated?***	What areas of operation contributed most to result?
Do I have the players to implement this style of game?*	Does my language and dialogue support the game style stated?***	What level of alignment does this result indicate?
Does this style of game reflect the strengths, skills and talent of my team?*	Does the training and technical coaching support the espoused game style?	Where and how should my program move forward?
	Does player and team feedback reflect the style of game stated?*****	
	Does staffing reflect the plan?	
	Are resources used appropriately to ensure effective operation in line with the plan?	
	Does my retention, recruitment and succession plan align with the plan?	

* If any of these questions are answered with a 'no' then you must readdress. There is little chance of applying something effectively if one of these is a 'no' and therefore alignment is compromised. Only put in your program what you can live up to and deliver.

** As an example, if the style of game outlined in your program stipulates that the team will play an expansive and risk oriented style of rugby then it is vital that your coaching techniques, drills and preparation align with this. In this example alignment would not exist if the coach delivered a very conservative training and game plan. If the coach forcefully demands that he wants no errors, drop ball etc. then how would a player perceive this internally – “I thought we were encouraged to play an expansive, risk oriented game and coach won't allow us to make errors at all. This is confusing - mistakes will happen if we chance our arm every now and then – I had better not make a mistake because coach will not be happy and I don't want to be dropped. Better to play it safe.”

This simple example happens too often at all levels of footy. A coach extols the expansive game and then demands perfection in training and game – this is impossible for starters and as described above this irrational demand only serves to tighten a player up and the team ends up being tentative and hesitant which is antithesis to an expansive and risk oriented game.

*** The area of language and dialogue is often overlooked. Be sure your very words and conversations with staff and team members is consistent with what is committed to.

If your values suggest that players will be treated with dignity and respect at all times then be sure that this value exists when talking to a player and when talking about a player when he is not around. Too many times a system breaks down when a coach say one thing in front of a player and then bags or comments about that same player at his expense behind his back. Be very careful here. Once a person see this activity in your program, trust will begin to deteriorate. This lack of alignment is an expensive error to make.

The words and language you use to describe your rugby, players, staff and their actions will need to be selected wisely. Avoid anything that is not consistent with your program. Indeed, if your program resonates with your personal core values and standards then this should not be a problem because you will naturally use language that is congruent with the ideals and philosophies of your program.

**** What you provide as feedback and how you give this feedback is very important. Let's take the above example of an expansive and risk oriented style of game.

A player in this system should feel a strong level of freedom with an emphasis on adventurous decision making as opposed to cautious and safe decision making.

Therefore it stands as common sense that the feedback provided in this environment should assist the player in maintaining a positive attitude and approach to his game. Showing and exaggerating his errors in an inappropriate fashion through stats, vision and reports obviously would not align with the above style. He should be aware of any decision making that can be improved but not to a degree that he will stop making decisions because he will now be afraid to make a mistake. In fact your match review stats should be designed and delivered in a fashion that allows for maximum alignment with your rugby style.

Alternatively if a core theme of your game is to show discipline in terms of infringements during a game and a player constantly gives away a lot of penalties, then he should be dealt with properly. Hard factual feedback needs to be presented and a course of action designed with the player to improve this area or he will have to risk being replaced. If this feedback is not given other players will begin to question the validity of such a core theme and alas the integrity of your program will begin to be comprised. Dangerous ground.

Many other examples and discussions could be entertained. We have only scratched the surface. Many other key questions can be added that demand inquiry into the focus, format and structure of your onfield training plan and the type of drills and games you use. Does your strength and conditioning work align with your plan to ensure you are developing the type of physical attributes that will be required to play your game style.

One fact is certain. The ability to plan is not enough. A coach must have the ability to effectively align a plan.

The internal inquiry method above is an ideal starting point. This will raise the necessary awareness and allow effective focus on appropriate behaviour and action. It will ensure you constantly evaluate your strategic, tactical and technical elements of preparation. Make it a habit to regularly question what you are doing, thinking or saying. Energy and action will follow focus. So focus on staying on track. Be honest and committed to your plan.

Listed below are a few more key recommendations that will provide an enormous benefit to your operation. They help to keep mindsets and attitudes consistent with core elements of your program.

Model the behaviour you want to see from your team:

It is extremely powerful for team members to observe their leader do the actions or behaviours they are requesting from them.

Create a set of core themes that reflect the principles and methods of your rugby program:

Have these themes frequently sighted by yourself and your team through wall posters, headers or footers in documents and game plans, daily messages in diaries etc. This will provide a consistent reminder for all.

Organise strategic conversations with your people:

Hold regular strategic conversations with dialogue that centers around the core themes. Let people have their say and contribution to the process. Build confidence and internal security about the authenticity of the process.

Have your staff and yourself police themselves and others:

Provide feedback when there is failure to 'walk the talk'. The senior group must be accountable to each other and for their own behaviour.

Summary:

Alignment will, in all likely hood, not be 100% at all times. However, when alignment reaches an optimum level it allows for a momentum to build. A certain threshold is overcome when everything flows with purpose and meaning at a level of understanding and acceptance for everyone. Everything makes more sense. Hope will be less apparent and rather belief, clarity and synergy with purposeful actions will be abundant.

Members of your staff and team will engage their hearts and mind in the challenge of achieving the team goals. At the same time they will have confidence and trust that through this vibrant environment their personal goals and ambitions can also be realised.

Alignment is this powerful. The lack of it is counter productive.

The ability to align a plan takes effort and vigilance. The above processes provide a simple yet effective method to assist in the daily reminder to be proactive in monitoring the consistency between your actions and plans.

This document only begins to explore this subject. The concept and function of 'alignment' needs to become an integral component of a coaches mindset, his plan and subsequent plan of action.

Ignoring this will only invite frustration. Embracing it will offer improvement across all aspects of your operation making success a more 'probable' outcome.