
The North Star Alignment Check

Alignment Check

THE NORTH STAR

Seven tests of a direction worth following.

CHECKLIST

A North Star is not a good statement. It is a direction that holds up against seven separate tests, and most of the ones that fail do not fail on the wording. They fail because nobody ever asked whether the destination is actually reachable, or whether it connects to anything this team can genuinely become good at, or whether there is anything stopping it turning into a licence to cut corners.

This exercise puts your direction through all seven with your team. It fits inside a forty five minute meeting, and it works because everyone answers on their own before anybody speaks, so what gets shared is what people actually carry rather than what the room agreed to.

You will need a copy each and the discipline to let people finish.

How to run it

1. Answer alone. Ten minutes. A line or two per question, first instinct. No discussion, no looking anything up, no reaching for the strategy deck.
2. Share what you wrote. Five minutes. Go around the room, one test at a time, and read out what you put. No debating and no explaining yet.
3. Take the two or three biggest differences only. Twenty five minutes. Do not work through all seven. Pick the tests where the answers were furthest apart.
4. Put tests two and six alongside each other before you finish. Five minutes. Do this one even if the answers were close.

THE SEVEN TESTS

1. Clear and picturable

People grasp it immediately, can repeat it in their own words, and can actually see it. A vivid picture pulls where a worthy abstraction does not.

- It is three years from now and we got there. You have just walked into the building. What do you see? What has changed? What is on people's faces?
- Now say where we are heading in one sentence, in your own words.

2. Difficult, not impossible

Challenge lifts performance right up to the limits of ability, and then stops meaning anything. The audacious range, well clear of the cliff.

- Honestly, what are our chances of getting there? Put a rough number on it.
- What makes you say that?

3. Rooted in real capability and real values

Connected to what this team can genuinely become good at, and to what we actually value. Otherwise it earns cynicism rather than commitment.

- What can this team become genuinely excellent at? Not what we are adequate at now.
- Which of our real values does this direction rest on, and where does it sit uncomfortably with them?

4. Owned, not imposed

Internalised by the people who have to pursue it, which happens when the destination feels worth reaching and progress toward it feels possible.

- Whose direction is this? Be honest.
- What would have to change for it to feel like yours?

5. Laddered, with the phase named

The broad aspiration and the near-term steps held together. The breadth that makes a destination meaningful is what makes it hard to locate your own work in it.

- Which leg of the journey are we on right now? Name it.
- What does finishing this leg look like, and how does finishing it get us closer to the destination?
- What are we not trying to do yet, because it belongs to a later leg?

6. Calibrated against honest conditions

Recent performance and available slack read openly before deciding how steeply to climb. The destination does not change with our condition. The steepness does.

- What kind of run are we coming off? Be honest about the last twelve months.
- How much genuine room do we have to try something, have it fail, absorb it and go again?

7. Guarded

Honest measurement and a shared sense of how we behave on the way there, so the destination never becomes a licence to cut corners or game the number.

- If somebody wanted to look like we were getting there without actually getting there, how would they do it?
- Would we know? And what is this direction tied to, in pay or evaluation?

READING IT TOGETHER

Start with tests two and six together. If your team has placed the destination out at the far end of difficult, and has also just told you it is coming off a hard run with almost no room to fail, you have found something important. The research is uncomfortable on this. The organisations most likely to reach for a seemingly impossible goal are the ones performing badly with thin resources, reaching out of something close to desperation, and those are precisely the organisations positioned to be hurt by it. Southwest survived that gamble in 1972 with three planes and a ten minute turnaround, which is why everybody knows the story. The many others who tried the same thing and folded are not around to be quoted.

If that is you, the answer is not to lower the North Star. It is to hold the destination steady and change the steepness, building the resource and the belief back through wins small enough to survive, until you have earned the standing to make a real run at it.

Where the answers differ most. Take the test where your answers diverge most and treat that as this quarter's work. Most teams are closer than they expect on test one and further apart than they expect on test five, which is why they argue about pace and priorities when the real disagreement is about which leg they think they are on.

Where everybody agrees too easily. Test seven is the one teams sail through, and Eight is Great is what that looks like when it goes wrong. If nobody in the room can describe how the number could be moved dishonestly, it is usually because nobody has looked.

WHAT YOU LEAVE WITH

Write these together, before anyone leaves the room. If you cannot agree the wording here, that is the finding.

1. We are heading toward
2. The leg we are on now is
3. We will know we have finished this leg when
4. Given the run we are on, our pace is
5. We will not get there by
6. The test we are weakest on is

Then put a date in the diary to run it again. The destination should hold. The leg will not, and the run you are on will have changed.