

The alignment factor: Leveraging the power of total stakeholder support

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ABSTRACT

This critical book review of *The Alignment Factor: Leveraging the Power of Total Stakeholder Support* (Routledge, 2012, 256 pages) determines that the author succeeds in his quest to show that authentic communications are crucial in establishing perceptions among stakeholders. The reviewer praises the extensive use of case studies, tables and flow charts to fuse strategic thinking with tactics in a way that will benefit professional communicators. The reviewer also praises how the author is unapologetic in putting the corporate before the communication and how he demonstrates that the communications function transcends every aspect of the organization and is thus crucial to a company's success.

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There's no shortage of situations and metaphors that stem from the word alignment. Whether you think of the planets and how they line up in the cosmos, your car's tires and suspension system, or even the posture that gives athletes and dancers their high performance edge, the concept of alignment surrounds us. In *The Alignment Factor: Leveraging the Power of Total Stakeholder Support*, author Cees van Riel makes a convincing case that the relationships an organization establishes with its many stakeholders – both internal and external – lead to alignment and represent the most critical factor in determining how well an organization conducts its business. Like a monk who explains the secret to achieving enlightenment, van Riel takes his readers on a journey that reveals the step-by-step strategies needed to achieve the strongest form of alignment, which he terms “total stakeholder support” (van Riel, p. 1).

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Van Riel is widely respected for decades of research and teaching in the field of corporate communication, employee alignment and reputation. He is best known perhaps as founder and head of the Executive Masters of Science program in corporate communication at Erasmus University in the Netherlands, for his work with Dr. Charles Fombrun as co-founder of The Reputation Institute and as co-author of *Fame & Fortune*, and for his 2007 book *Essentials of Corporate Communication*. In *The Alignment Factor: Leveraging the Power of Total Stakeholder Support*, van Riel melds his deep-seated knowledge with the information and inspiration he gleaned from studies of over 2,500 corporations in 41 countries to produce a text that is at once in-depth, practical, timely and insightful.

The Alignment Factor is true to van Riel's mantra that "corporate communication must first be corporate, and only then communication" (p. xiv), meaning that communications efforts always must be executed in support of the strategic objectives of the firm. In so doing, the book succeeds where others may have failed to show why communication needs to be viewed as an executive-level function, how it contributes to operational excellence, and how it helps a company to earn the proverbial licence to operate.

forming a relationship, take into account the social developments that threaten to undermine an organization, and work to convince executive management to pay attention to the needs and interests of others.

The Alignment Factor is divided into two main parts – internal and external alignment – which share the same three-part framework for relationship building, namely gathering intelligence, developing a road map that's based on either negotiation or confrontation, and executing corporate communications.

Unlike other books on reputation which solely stress the importance of customers, media or shareholders, van Riel's dedication of the first half of the book to building internal alignment was refreshing. While I expected the focus to be on building reputation by engaging employees to become the firm's ambassadors, instead he suggests that employees should focus on performing effectively in their roles in order to propel the firm toward excellence. Van Riel dedicates three chapters to the role that corporate communications can play in fostering employee engagement, building authentic relationships and an open climate within the company, helping staff to buy into strategic change, and integrating diverse objectives into a common goal.

To drive this type of internal alignment, van Riel insists that three activities are key – informing, motivating, and capability development. 'Informing' activities pertain to our use of media and messaging to ensure that employees are aware and familiar with what is being asked of them and applying cascading techniques to enable middle management to share in explaining the directives. 'Motivating' involves the use of two-way dialogue about the strategy and the use of public recognition. 'Capability' development is about creating and disseminating the communications resources that help build skills, habits and knowledge. As van Riel summarizes, communication has a critical role to play because it brings "the abstract strategy to life in words and pictures that evoke emotional appeal" (p. 63). To successfully execute internal alignment, van Riel also compels the reader to be mindful of the four characteristics of internal communications (structure, flow, content and climate) and to adjust the framework depending on the type of organization (bureaucratic, accountability, shared meaning or ideology).

Turning to external alignment, the next three chapters focus on the role that corporate communications professionals play in helping the firm to understand the issues, competitive pressures and beliefs that reside outside its walls. Starting with a discussion about the need to continuously scan the external environment for issues that could affect the organization, van Riel offers the interesting notion that issues must be assessed across two dimensions –

the potential impact on the company and their likeliness of occurrence – and suggests that multiplying the two gives a good indication of its importance to the firm. In next discussing the tracking of beliefs, he distinguishes between public opinion, where the emphasis lies on “the impact of issues upon the political decision making process including legislation or litigation” (p. 105) and reputation which is the “perception about the degree of admiration, positive feelings and trust an individual has for another person, an organization, an industry, or even a country” (p.106). The intelligence that is gathered must then be shared with all managers in the firm and be used to develop a road map for external alignment.

Similar to the case for internal alignment, the external road map can be built upon a framework of negotiation (consultation and consensus-building) or confrontation (mirroring and power play). Because firms interact simultaneously with many stakeholders who in turn influence one another, examples for a negotiated road map include the reliance on trade or industry organizations to advocate a firm’s positions and the establishment of its own advisory board to facilitate interaction with the multilateral groups upon which it depends. Other suggestions include one-to-one links with critical constituencies, funding academic research or making philanthropic investments. ‘Confrontation’ pertains to lobbying and advocacy campaigns, which van Riel dubs mirroring because they demonstrate “what your intentions are based on the reflections of reality as perceived by the organization” (p. 125). The most extreme case is litigation, which might not appear to be a strategy for building alignment, though van Riel suggests it can force discussion among parties that were previously unwilling to negotiate.

The section on external alignment ends with a frank discussion of how to build a solid foundation for corporate communication. For van Riel, the cornerstone is a compelling corporate story that incorporates a firm’s unique elements, identity traits and strategic intents. To clarify positioning, a firm can then build out branding, messages, and proof points to help stakeholders build positive associations. To create strategies for specific corporate objectives, van Riel outlines 15 decisions that must be made regarding everything from the branding structure and competitive context to awareness, reputation, stakeholder selection, objectives, key promises, channels, task allocation and evaluation. As building relationships depends on the effort of all managers involved, he asserts “creating mutual benefits with groups outside the firm often starts with healthy mutual respect and cooperation inside the organization” (p. 181).

Finally, the book emphasizes the importance of measurement, both to

ensure that a firm's executives recognize the value that communications brings to corporate performance and to help managers focus on the efforts that matter most. Van Riel writes that the job of communications managers is to raise awareness, appreciation and support for the strategic initiatives of a firm, which he equates with enhancing reputation and building trust with stakeholders. As such, rather than solely measuring its own outputs, the communications function should also track key indicators such as the number of people applying to the firm, employee satisfaction, external awards, shareholder support, influence with regulators, breakthrough discoveries and patents, customer satisfaction, and the extent to which publicity is positive and correct. Van Riel provides sample tables and charts to show how to display the results on a dashboard that benchmarks a firm's scores against its competitors.

In *The Alignment Factor*, van Riel succeeds in his quest to show that authentic communications "can make a substantial difference in establishing perceptions among stakeholders that do persuade them to become believers instead of opponents" (p. 227). Using words like "ephemeral" (p. 214) and "gossamer" (p. 226), he reminds us that alignment, and its output of a favourable reputation, are only marginally under our control. Backed by a wealth of case studies, tables and flow charts, van Riel fuses the high-level with the how-to and speaks to those within and beyond our profession. Unapologetic in his emphasis on putting the corporate before the communication, van Riel extends the literature on reputation by focusing inward, shows how our communications function transcends every aspect of the organization, and demonstrates how communications delivers the strategies and objectives that drive a company's success. Like the alignment of planets, cars, dancers and athletes, van Riel clearly demonstrates how pulling in the same direction helps to enhance results and improve performance.

Reference

van Riel, C.B.M. (2012). *The alignment factor: Leveraging the power of total stakeholder support*. London, UK: Routledge.