

Minding the (Failure) Gap

Closing the Space between Agreement and Alignment

Julie Williamson, Ph.D. | Chief Growth Enabler, Karrikins Group

Executives are charged with meeting a dizzying array of expectations, including delivering on quarterly financials, investing in long-term growth, providing reassurance to jittery customers and markets, disrupting the status quo, introducing new products, reliably delivering on legacy products, maintaining employee focus and productivity, and managing rapidly shifting distribution models (just to name a few).

Executives are often in their senior roles because they've proven adept at navigating those often conflicting expectations while delivering consistent financial results, perhaps with just enough innovation to keep a Board happy. Unfortunately, these skills don't translate well when an organization needs to massively shift across its value chain, from the inside out.

Significant organizational transformation requires visible leadership from executives who might be better at delivering operational excellence

When that's the case (and we'd argue it is the case for many organizations today, whether they realize it or not), it is easy to fall into the **Failure Gap** – the space between agreement and alignment. This is where good intentions flounder.

We see the Failure Gap most often when executive teams come to agreement on priorities, strategies, opportunities to pursue, or transformational changes that are needed without doing the hard work of aligning to what needs to be done. The bigger the change, the wider and deeper the Failure Gap grows. Changes might be necessitated by a new purpose, a significant strategy shift, or in response to a disruption in the market. Whatever the reason, everyone **AGREES** that changes must happen. Then, nothing changes. The same decisions, investments, and priorities are maintained across the organization. The result? The desired transformation gets sucked into the Failure Gap.

When asked why transformations fail, executives consistently rank culture as the number one reason. They point to employees and peers who resisted change in ways that directly impacted the efforts to transform. They blame the customer – saying things like ‘we were in front of the market’, or ‘customers weren’t ready for us to change’. Or they point to the investment community, griping that they couldn’t catch a break. All of these are legitimate challenges a senior team faces when trying to transform an organization. Here’s the hard truth. The single most consistent factor in many of these types of situations is that the most senior leaders of an organization must change personal mindsets and behaviors to make change happen, and they aren’t doing that work.

Unfortunately, executives are far less likely to look inward, to the mechanisms of the leadership team and **how they choose to lead** through the transformation. Change starts with self, and leaders must be willing to go first and take the leap from agreement to alignment before they ask anyone else to do the same. By going first, leaders build a bridge for the rest of the company to join them in transforming individually and organizationally.

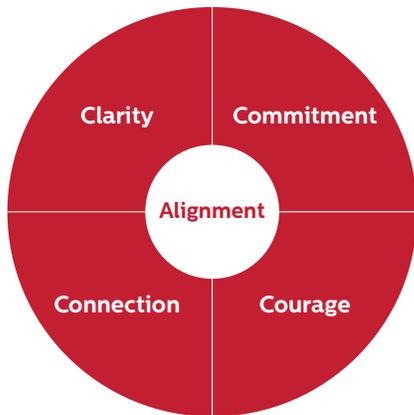
What does it look like to go first as a leader? It means taking the time to test yourself, to evaluate if you are shifting your mindset, behaviors, and environments to support the transformation. And then look again to see if you are making your own change visible. Are you intentionally changing the stories you tell and how you tell them? Are you redirecting resources? Are you uncomfortable with the impact on your own role? Are you sharing that with your team? Leaders who make the leap into alignment are willing to share their own experiences to help others see the path forward.

Agreement means leaders nod their heads, and maybe forward on some well-designed emails. Alignment means they tackle the hard work of changing themselves and taking action. We’ve found 5 key actions that tell us executives are serious about transformation, and most of them have to do with letting go of traditional symbols of power, success, and status, and creating a new image of what leadership excellence looks like. They include:

1. Stopping pet projects and investments that don’t support transformation
2. Reallocating human and financial resources to other areas of the organization, even if it means giving up personal status and power
3. Honestly assessing people in the organization to determine if they can learn, develop, and grow into the needs of the future
4. Changing the stories that are told about success and finding new ones that define success in the future
5. Delaying or renegotiating short-term results, even if it means experiencing a sense of personal impact or loss
6. Doing things for collective success that might feel personally painful

Leaders who are going through transformation and haven’t done something in all these areas, may be stuck in agreement. Or worse, they may have fallen into the Failure Gap. Digging out means knowing what alignment looks like, and how to get there.

We believe that alignment is defined through clarity, commitment, and connection, and fueled by the courage to change yourself first.



Clarity brings focus and attention on how to lead individually and collectively to deliver on strategies, plans, and transformations. Too often, leaders are deeply invested in what needs to be done but fail to give equal energy to how they will change personally to deliver on it.

Leaders need a **connection** not only to the goals of the transformation, but also to each other as they take on the hard work as a team. Most executive teams underleverage the power of the collective leadership experience. By working differently as a leadership team, executives can hold each other accountable to delivering a transformed organization.

Leaders must have a **commitment** to personally doing what needs to be done to transform. We often see leaders making commitments for others or exhorting their employees to commit to doing

things differently. When that behavior isn't backed up with a personal commitment to visibly change, it has a fraction of the power needed to accelerate transformation. You might get there, but it will be slower and more expensive than you anticipated.

It takes **courage** to change yourself before you change others

It takes **courage** to change yourself before you change others. Here's why. **If a transformation doesn't require the most senior leaders in an organization to change, it probably isn't much of a transformation.**

So leaders need to ask three questions:

1. How am I willing to go first and work differently to make this happen?
2. How will my success look and feel different when we go through this transformation?
3. Do I feel so charged up about what will be different that I will move mountains to make it happen?

Until a leader has honest answers to those questions, it will be very difficult to move from agreement to alignment without falling into the Failure Gap. Leaders who are willing to be brutally honest with themselves and challenge how they are showing up to lead transformation are the ones who deliver successfully in the end.

Contact Us:

For more information, reach out to us at hello@karrikinsgroup.com. We'd love to talk with you about how we could inspire your leaders to move from agreement to alignment and deliver amazing results for your organization.

KARRIKINS GROUP

About Karrikins Group

Karrikins Group is a global behavior change company that aligns leadership and organizations to accelerate transformational change. Find out more about the Karrikins Growth Journey at www.karrikinsgroup.com.

AMPLIFYING IMPACT / ACCELERATE GROWTH

