Change Champs and Change Chumps: A Story of Leaders, Burning Ambition, and Alignment
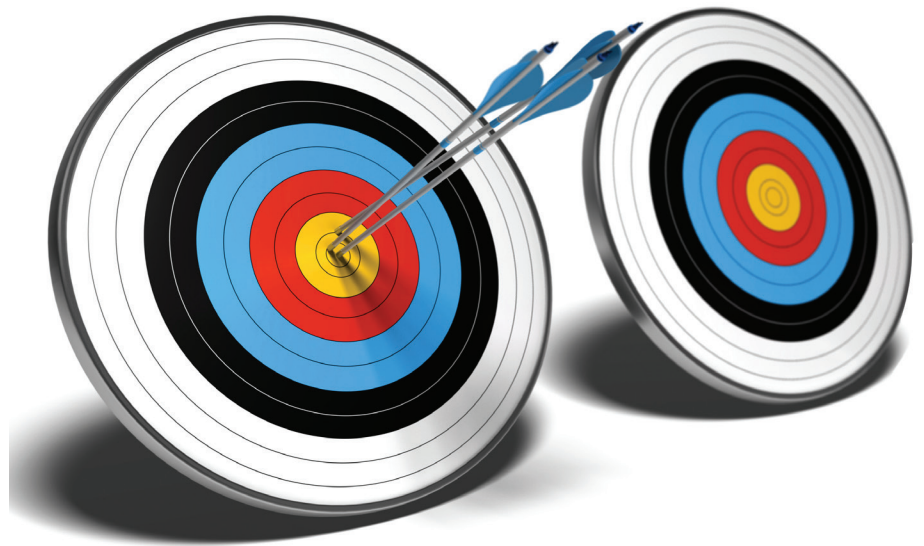
By Peter Fuda and Bradley A. Winn

Most organizational transformation efforts fail. This is because our change management strategies are outdated and misguided. Said another way, "If doctors practiced medicine the way many companies practice management, there would be far more sick and dead patients, and many more doctors would be in jail."[1] Change for the sake of change is not the goal. The goal is the goal.

Leaders understand the need to spark and sustain change, but to what end? When we talk about "change," or worse, a "change program," what people hear is pain, loss, extra effort, increased risk, and greater uncertainty. The simplest way to increase our odds of success is to stop talking about change and start talking about our ambitions. Paint a rich picture of what success looks like. Then move away from a focus on change toward aligning everything and everyone with these ambitions. This is the first step in overcoming the gap between where we are and where we want to be.

Top leaders own the accountability to align organization design, leadership, talent, and culture with a new or refocused business strategy and take the actions required for transformation. Here we will summarize 15 years of research and practice in helping executives align their organizations to their ambitions and overcome the typical change management failures.[2]

From Burning Platform to Burning Ambition

The metaphor of the burning platform is one of the most pervasive in business. Based on the true story of Piper Alpha oil rig worker Andy Mochan, awoken by an explosion that killed 167 of his colleagues in July 1988 to find that the platform ris on fire, he is faced with a choice: stay on the platform and burn alive, or jump more than 150 feet into freezing water?

As the flames engulf the platform, he makes the split-second decision to jump. Somehow, he survives the impact and is rescued by a boat before freezing to death. When asked why he jumped, he replied, "Better probable death than certain death."

This is an amazing story of survival amid tragedy, but it's not particularly helpful for leadership or business transformation. It implies that fear and extreme urgency are not only necessary, but somehow desirable motivators for change—the implication being that in order to change, we need to have our pants on fire.

We use the fire metaphor to describe the motivational forces that start and sustain a transformation effort. Research has shown that this motivation is a dance around four quadrants (see Figure 1, the Fire Matrix).

Quadrant 1:
Organizational Burning Platform

Typically, leaders are readily able to list the problems and issues that have motivated them to undertake a transformation effort. Time after time, we hear statements like, "Our financial trajectory is poor," "Our competitors are more aggressive," "Our customers are squeezing us," or "Our staff engagement is at an all-time low." The burning platform is prevalent. Leaders often operate from the belief that nothing significant happens without a crisis. However, this quadrant often hides a deeper set of fears and issues.

Quadrant 2:
Personal Burning Platform

As executives continue on their quest for more effective leadership, they gradually begin to open up about their personal fears, challenges, and insecurities. For example, they may say things such as, "My reputation is on the line. I'll look bad if I can't build a company of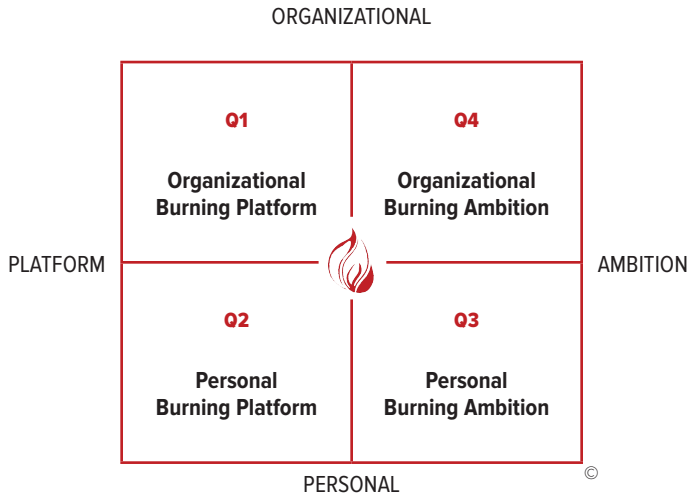 substance," or "Every day I try a different approach, but nothing seems to work," or "I'm physically exhausted. I can't keep going like this."

This more personal motivation for change is often concealed beneath more obvious organizational forces. In an attempt to live up to pervasive notions of the "heroic leader" and avoid looking weak, senior executives will bury or otherwise disguise their personal motivations for engaging in a transformation effort. Understanding one's personal fears allows leaders to shift quickly away from hiding what they fear most and move toward realizing their deepest personal ambitions.

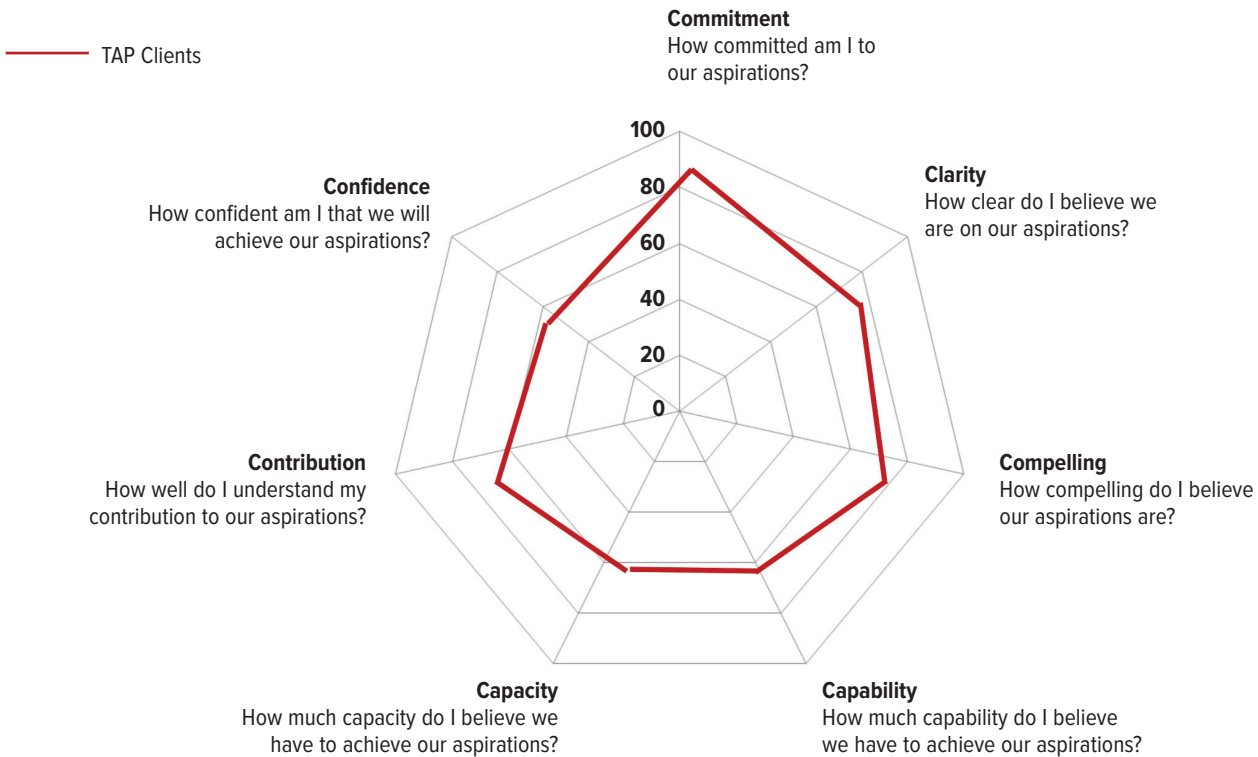## Quadrant 3:
Personal Burning Ambition

It is in the third quadrant, the personal burning ambition, where leaders find commitment. Personal accountability for change then really begins to accelerate. Quadrants 1 and 2 are about running from a fire; quadrant 3 describes a fire that burns inside.

THE FIRE MATRIX©

ORGANIZATIONAL

Q1 Organizational Burning Platform	**Q4** Organizational Burning Ambition
Q2 Personal Burning Platform	**Q3** Personal Burning Ambition

PLATFORM — AMBITION

PERSONAL

TAP 7C ASPIRATIONS MODEL™

— TAP Clients

Commitment
How committed am I to our aspirations?

Clarity
How clear do I believe we are on our aspirations?

Compelling
How compelling do I believe our aspirations are?

Capability
How much capability do I believe we have to achieve our aspirations?

Capacity
How much capacity do I believe we have to achieve our aspirations?

Contribution
How well do I understand my contribution to our aspirations?

Confidence
How confident am I that we will achieve our aspirations?

Change Champs and Change Chumps

ALIGNMENT FACTOR		DEFINITION
	STRATEGY	The focus and tactics required to achieve the aspirations
	SCORECARD	The measure of performance and change toward the aspirations
	STRUCTURE	The formal and informal organization of human resources to enable the aspirations
	SYSTEMS	The systems that enable the aspirations (specifically human resource, management information and critical business systems)
	SKILLS	The capabilities required to enable the aspirations
	STANDARDS	The agreed values and behaviours that enable the aspirations
	STRENGTHS	The collective assets and core competencies that can be leveraged toward the aspirations
	STORY	The communication of the journey toward the aspirations
	SYMBOLS	The symbolic leadership actions, behaviours and rituals that reinforce the aspirations
	SUSTAINABILITY	The commitment, momentum and capability required to sustain continuity toward the aspirations
	LEADERSHIP IMPACT	The manner in which leaders motivate and encourage employees to fulfill the aspirations

The motivation behind a personal burning ambition is evident in statements like, "I want to live a big and authentic life," "I want to increase my health and happiness," "I want to align my work with a strong sense of purpose and meaning," or "I want to fulfill my leadership potential."

When leaders shift their focus away from what they want to avoid toward what they want to achieve, they experience a dramatic shift in energy. They move away from insecurity and perennial urgency toward a calmer and more purposeful disposition. This enables them to apply a more deliberate and disciplined effort toward realizing those ambitions.

Quadrant 4:
Organizational Burning Ambition
Leaders' personal ambitions are surpassed by the lasting impact they wish to have on their organizations, their customers, their industries, and their communities. Leaders who say things like, "I want to leave a legacy of a growing organization," "I want my successor to be set up for even greater success," "I want to transform our industry," or "I want to revolutionize the customer experience," are all expressing the motivational forces at play in this quadrant.

Burning ambitions provide far greater leverage than burning platforms to keep leaders on track. Leaders face days when it just feels too hard, where they encounter opposition, or where they are consumed by short-term pressures that demand immediate attention. Clarity of personal and organizational ambition allows leaders to reorient their focus in spite of these competing pressures, and allows them to accept short-term pain in the pursuit of longer-term gain.

To sustain a transformation journey, shifting from a burning platform to a burning ambition is absolutely critical. This shift allows leaders to become calmer, more purposeful, and more responsive to the inevitable challenges they are going to face. Secondly, it is not only vital for a leader to articulate the organizational reasons for change, but they also need to delve deeper and establish compelling personal motivations for change. Finally, the fire, or the "Big Why," is actually a crucial part of how leaders transform. As Nietzsche said, "he who has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*."

Moving from a burning platform to a burning ambition is a necessary first step toward organizational transformation. Yet while ambition and intention are absolutely necessary, these alone are not sufficient.

Transformation Is a Matter of Alignment

Leaders begin with noble intentions. Few leaders aspire to destroy shareholder value, irritate customers, or alienate staff. Yet the unintended consequence of leadership is often to do just that.

We all have aspirations for our organizations. The real challenge is not properly scrutinizing them. Specifically, is every single person in the organization clear on what success looks like? Are the aspirations compelling? Do we actually have the capability to get there? Do we have the bandwidth? Are we all confident we can get there? Are we all truly committed to this aspiration? Are we clear on our personal contribution?

The 7C model (see page 59) shows how all of the leaders surveyed in this research, in aggregate, have rated their aspirations against seven key dimensions.[3] It turns out that they are extraordinarily committed; they are just not sure exactly what they are committed to, how they are going to get there, or what their personal contribution is.

Once we uncover the gaps, we have the potential to address them. For example, a multinational financial services organization had aspired to 40 percent market share for some time without making any real inroads from its then current state of 28 percent. After taking the 7C Test, the recently appointed CEO discovered that his people were clear about the goal and were committed to its achievement. The leadership team also felt that they possessed the capability and were relatively confident. The key challenge was that they lacked capacity due to competing pressures for resources and conflicting goals emanating from the corporate parent.

Instead of wasting precious time reinventing the organization's ultimate aspiration, the CEO invested all of his focus in aligning the organization's scarce resources, and obtaining buy-in from corporate headquarters focused on the goal. This approach ensured the organization was reenergized around the aspiration, rather than disenfranchised by yet another vision statement. Three years into the journey, the organization went on to surpass its aspiration—ultimately reaching 50 percent market share.

Alignment Is a Multi-Lever, Multi-Layer Process

Transformation may be closer than we think. We mistakenly search for the one big thing that will create success. Success comes from the aggregation of marginal gains. It comes from a making a large number of very small changes that collectively generate the momentum we need.

Hard and Soft Levers

Based on in-depth work with several companies spanning four continents over 15 years, we have found 11 levers that leaders can pull to align their organizations to their aspirations. The more levers we pull at the same time, the more momentum we create.

You may be familiar with the "hard" levers: strategy, scorecard, structure, systems, and skills. However, there are also five "soft" levers critical for alignment: standards, story, strengths, symbols, and sustainability.[4]

The hard alignment levers are like the "bricks" of alignment, while the soft levers serve as the "mortar." The irony of the hard and soft labels is that the majority of leaders are very comfortable with strategy, scorecard, and structure, but struggle with standards, story, or symbols.

Leadership Impact

The final lever, leadership impact, represents the foundation of the alignment approach. This research, documented in *Leadership Transformed*[5], has revealed that the impact of leaders is as important as the other 10 factors combined. This creates the alignment equation $S^{10} x L$, where leadership is the accelerant or handbrake on all other alignment efforts.

Measuring Leadership Alignment

The TAP Alignment Inventory (see page 62) shows the first measure of alignment for all of the companies included in this research. It shows how aligned each of the eleven levers is to the respective company's aspirations. The average score for each is approximately 6.7 giving us an average alignment score of 45 percent ($S^{6.7} x L^{6.7}$).

While not bad, a 6.7 average for each lever is mediocre. More importantly, how can we complain about the marketplace or head office when, nominally speaking, we leave 55 percent of potential value on the table with levers that we control?
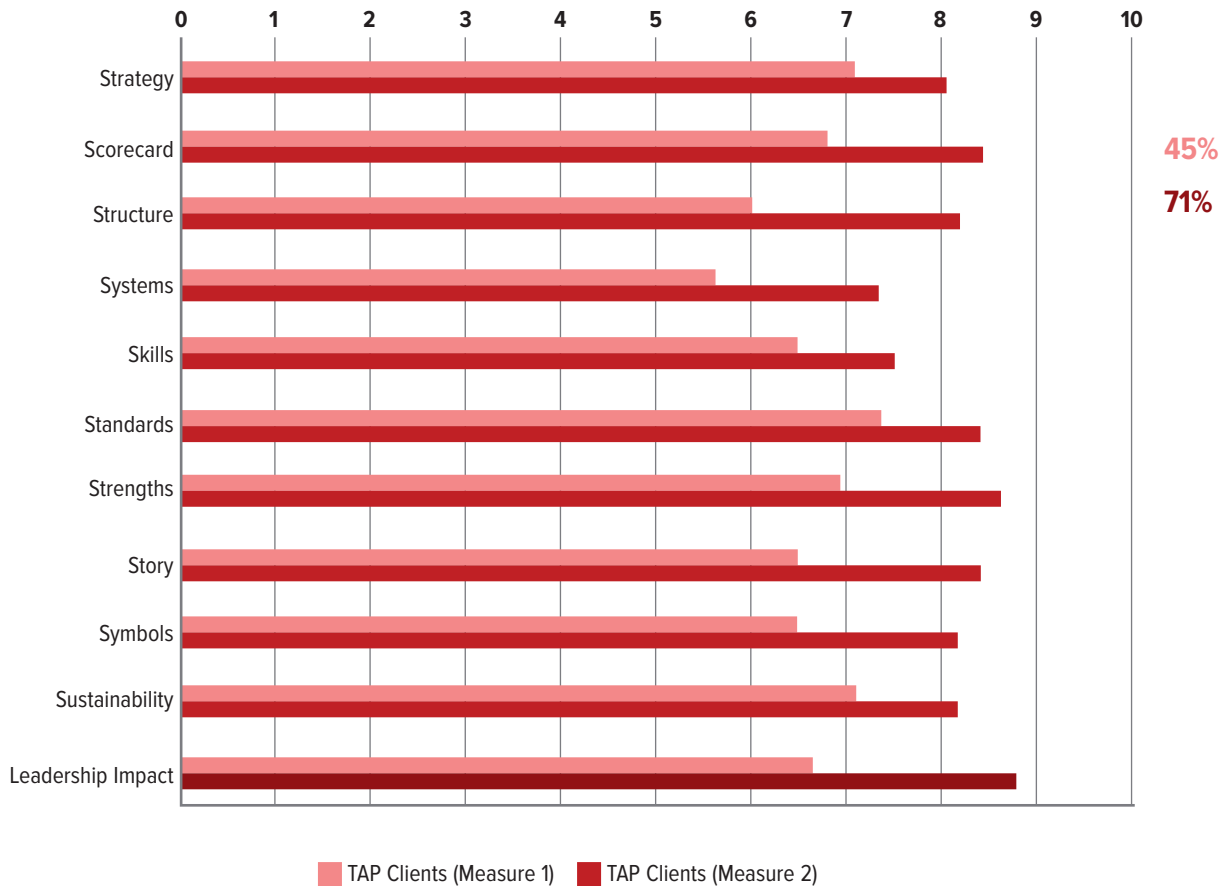
The "re-test" data for the companies in this research that have shown significant improvements across a range of metrics over time included financial

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TAP ALIGNMENT INVENTORY™

Chart axis labels: Strategy, Scorecard, Structure, Systems, Skills, Standards, Strengths, Story, Symbols, Sustainability, Leadership Impact. Scale 0–10.

45%
71%

Legend: TAP Clients (Measure 1) / TAP Clients (Measure 2)

performance, customer advocacy, and employee commitment. Relatively small changes across each of the levers can add up to a significant impact overall.

Articulate Goals

Rather than talk about change, leaders need to articulate ambitions. Once articulated, they need to make sure that those they lead find the goals clear and compelling while also being able to see where their personal contributions fit in. Leaders need to ensure people feel they have the capacity and capability to get there. Only then can they ascertain and increase others' level of confidence and commitment.

With robust ambitions in place, all efforts must be focused on aligning everything and everyone. Alignment is a multi-layer, multi-lever exercise where many small changes combine to make a large impact. The 11 alignment levers, hard and soft, provide the fundamental leverage that leaders need to reach their ambitions and overcome the kind of change failure that has become commonplace in our organizations. ▪

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[2]Fuda, P. & Badham R. (2011). Fire, snowball, mask, movie: How leaders spark and sustain change. *Harvard Business Review*, (89)11.

[3]http://www.tap.net.au

[4]For an alternative list, see http://tompeters.com/2011/03/a-brief-history-of-the-7-s-mckinsey-7-s-model/

[5]Fuda, P. (2013). *Leadership Transformed: How Ordinary Managers Become Extraordinary Leaders.* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. New York.