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The Alignment Conversation Guide

Leadership Conversations
That Matter

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The Alignment Conversation Guide

Rule #1: You are not responsible for creating motivation for your team.

Rule #2: You are responsible for creating an environment where motivation is more likely to exist.

That starts with understanding what energizes people, what drains them, and how their work aligns with who they are naturally.

Step 1: Setting Up the Conversation

Be open with your team about why you're having this conversation. This shouldn't feel like a performance review or a trick question. Position it as an opportunity to better understand how they work best, what motivates them, and how you can better support them moving forward.

You might say something like:

"I want to better understand what energizes you, what drains you, and where you feel most connected to your work. My goal is to create better alignment – not to evaluate your answers."

Give people time to think before responding. Not everyone processes these questions in real time. Consider sharing a few questions ahead of your 1:1 so employees can reflect before the conversation.

The quality of the conversation often depends on how psychologically safe and unhurried it feels.

Approach the discussion with curiosity, not assumptions.

The goal isn't to solve everything immediately – it's to better understand the person behind the performance.



Step 2: Asking the Right Questions

The goal of this conversation is not to “figure someone out.”

It’s to better understand how they naturally work, what motivates them, and where alignment or misalignment may exist.

Try to stay curious and avoid jumping too quickly into problem-solving. Often, the most valuable insight comes from simply giving people space to reflect out loud.

Focus on open-ended questions like:

Energy & Motivation

- What parts of your work give you the most energy?
- What type of work do you naturally enjoy?
- When do you feel most engaged at work?
- What work feels most meaningful to you?

Drainers & Friction

- What parts of your work feel most draining lately?
- What tends to frustrate or slow you down?
- Where do you feel tension or misalignment in your role?

Strengths & Growth

- What strengths do you feel you use most often?
- What strengths do you feel are underutilized?
- What kind of work brings out your best thinking?

Support & Environment

- What conditions help you do your best work?
- What kind of support helps you feel successful?
- How do you prefer to receive feedback or recognition?

Listen for patterns, energy shifts, and recurring themes – not just the words themselves.

Sometimes what people light up around tells you more than the answer itself.



Step 3: Listen Intently

This step is where most of the value happens.

Don't just listen for answers — listen for patterns, energy shifts, and themes. Pay attention to what people naturally light up around versus what seems to drain or frustrate them.

Take notes during the conversation so you can reflect afterward and look for recurring drivers and drainers over time.

Your role here is not to immediately solve every frustration. It's to better understand what conditions help this person feel engaged, connected, and successful.

Common Drivers/Energizers to Listen For

- Autonomy & ownership
- Purpose & meaningful work
- Collaboration & connection
- Creativity & innovation
- Recognition & visibility
- Challenge & growth
- Stability & predictability

Common Drainers to Listen For

- Lack of clarity
- Micromanagement
- Constant interruptions
- Repetitive or low-impact work
- Conflict or tension
- Feeling underutilized
- Excessive urgency or competing priorities

As you listen, take notes:

- What naturally motivates this person?
- What consistently drains them?
- Where do they seem most aligned?
- Where might misalignment be building?

Alignment Audit Checklist

Use this quick audit after your conversations to reflect on what you've learned and identify opportunities to better align your team moving forward.

- I understand this person's natural strengths
- I know what energizes vs. drains this person
- I understand what motivates this person personally
- I understand how I can lead this person in the way they work best
- I can identify where misalignment might be building in their role

Your Score

4–5 checks:

You are building alignment into your leadership. Now take action. Look for one or two small adjustments you can make based on what you learned.

2–3 checks:

There is a foundation, but there may be more to learn. Follow up with more specific questions, revisit your notes, and look for patterns in what motivates or drains this person.

0–1 checks:

It may be worth having another conversation. Spend more time setting up the purpose, creating space for honest reflection, and taking notes.