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Building Team Alignment for Better Project Outcomes

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- Over 20 years of healthcare experience specializing in clinical quality, patient safety, and performance improvement
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Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Differentiate between task-related delays and deeper team alignment failures.
2. Describe the purpose of each step in the CLEAR framework.
3. Analyze real-world cases to identify the true costs of misalignment.
4. Use specific questions and phrases to prevent communication-driven project failure.





Let's Hear It



What creates the most drag in your environment?

1. Unclear priorities
2. Unclear ownership
3. Delayed decisions
4. Repeated conversations with no progress
5. Support in the meeting, weak follow-through after





Task Issue or Alignment Issue

Task Issue

- The work item is incomplete, late, or technically wrong
- Requirements or resources are missing
- Someone needs capability, time, or support to finish the task

Alignment Issue

- People are acting on different definitions of success
- Competing priorities have not been named and leveled
- Roles, escalation paths, or decision rights are assumed instead of clarified
- Hidden assumptions or unresolved risks are driving rework
- Everyone leaves the meeting with a different version of what happens next



Why Alignment Deserves Attention

Project Work

- Project Management Institute (PMI) states that power skills, including communication, leadership, and strategic problem-solving, are critical for project success (PMI, 2022)

Healthcare Work

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) finds that teamwork training improves communication and safety protocols, leading to safer patient care (AHRQ, 2019)

Human Impact

- The Joint Commission warns that breakdowns in hand-off communication can cause harm to both patients and care teams (TJC, 2017)

Misalignment shows up as delay, rework, distrust, burnout, and avoidable risk.



What Project Failure Feels Like

For Frontline Staff

I am being asked to change my workflow without proof that this will help the people I serve.

For Project Leaders

I am defending progress in status meetings while trust is quietly collapsing in the real work.

For The Organization

We already invested time, credibility, and money. Pulling back now feels painful, but pushing ahead may be worse.

People resist when they feel **unheard, unsafe, overburdened, or set up** to absorb the consequences of decisions they did not shape.



CLEAR Framework

**C**

Clarify The Outcome

- What are we trying to achieve?
- May include: charter, problem statement, success criteria, stakeholder goals

L

Level Priorities

- What matters most right now and what trade-off are we making?
- May include: stakeholder analysis, priority mapping, impact vs urgency, MoSCoW-style sorting

E

Establish Roles and Decision Rights

- Who owns, who gives input, who approves, who decides
- May include: RACI (Responsible Accountable, Consulted and Informed), RAPID (Recommend, Agree, Perform, Input and Decide), governance map, decision matrix

A

Air Assumptions, Risks, and Gaps

- What are we assuming and what has not been said clearly?
- May include: assumptions log, risk register, dependency mapping, issue log

R

Review Next Steps and Follow-Through

- What happens next, by whom, by when, and what remains unresolved?
- May include: action plan, owner-next step-deadline tracker, milestone review, decision log



Real Case: When a High-Stakes Project Lost Clinician Trust



- Cedars-Sinai invested about \$34 million over 3 years in a new computerized provider order entry system
- After go-live across much of the hospital, many physicians reported added work and workflow disruption
- Resistance intensified and the rollout was suspended
- The loss was not just money. It was trust, adoption, and implementation momentum



Polling Question Practice Together: Clarify the outcome



What outcome was this project trying to achieve?

1. A fast technical go-live
2. Safer, more standardized ordering that worked in real clinical practice
3. Better reporting for leadership
4. A more modern image for the organization

Drop one number in the chat



Polling Question Practice Together: Level priorities



What competing priority seemed to take over once the system went live?

1. Staying on schedule
2. Workflow, usability, and patient care in the moment
3. Executive visibility
4. Financial tracking

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Polling Question

Practice Together: Establish roles and decision rights



What role or decision-right issue seems most likely in this case?

1. Frontline clinicians were expected to adopt the change without enough influence over what needed to change
2. Finance had too much authority over the rollout
3. Patients were making the implementation decisions
4. No executive sponsor existed

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Polling Question

Practice Together: Air assumptions, risks, and gaps



What assumption appears to have gone unspoken?

1. If the system was technically sound, clinicians would adapt
2. Physicians did not care about safety
3. Training materials were unnecessary
4. Standardization did not matter

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Polling Question

Practice Together: Review next steps and follow-through



What would have been the best next move once resistance increased?

1. Push harder for compliance
2. Pause, gather frontline input, fix friction points, and relaunch in phases
3. Remove all physician input
4. End the project immediately

Drop one number in the chat

Quick Self-Check

Think of one current project, initiative, or workflow change you are a part of.

Rate it 1 to 5 on each part of CLEAR

Clarify the outcome	Level priorities	Establish roles & decision rights	Air assumptions, risks, and gaps	Review next steps and follow-through



Scenario 1



The Dashboard Everyone Approved but No One Could Use

A military treatment facility is preparing to roll out a dashboard for access, staffing, and quality reporting.

- The program manager says the build is nearly complete
- Finance wants standard metric definitions
- Operations wants rapid deployment
- Clinical leaders want dashboard trust and frontline relevance
- IT says the tool matches approved requirements
- After demos, concerns emerge that key metrics are defined differently across departments.



Scenario 1 Discussion



Step	Questions
C	What is the team trying to launch successfully?
L, E, & A	Where is the biggest alignment gap: priorities, decision rights, or readiness?
R	What is the first move the team should take before launch?



Scenario 1 Debrief



Likely Alignment Gaps

- The team had motion, but not a shared definition of usefulness
- Speed and trust were competing priorities that had not been explicitly leveled
- Decision rights over metric definitions and launch readiness were too fuzzy
- Approved requirements did not equal operational readiness

One Strong Next Move

- Run a pre-launch CLEAR reset with the metric owner, operational leader, clinical leader, and implementation lead
- Leave the meeting with one agreed outcome statement, one launch threshold, one decision owner, and one date for readiness confirmation.



Useful Language for Realignment



Before we move into tasks, can we confirm the outcome we are solving for?



What matters most right now if we cannot optimize for everything?



Who owns this, and who decides if there is disagreement?



What has to be true before we say this is ready



What assumptions are we making that may not be shared?



Let's leave with one owner, one date, and one unresolved issue that we still need to close



Scenario 2



The Medication Workflow That Looked Ready on Paper

- A facility is preparing to implement a revised medication ordering and verification workflow
- Physicians want medications available faster
- Pharmacists are concerned about verification burden during peak periods
- Nurses want clearer status visibility and escalation pathways
- IT confirms the requested changes are built
- Training materials have been distributed
- The implementation team believes go-live is on track
- However, different groups are working from different assumptions about readiness

Use your "Useful Language" phrases to stop the drift.



Symptom #1: Different Definitions of "Ready"



You hear the implementation team say "go-live is on track" because the software is built.

You hear Pharmacy say they are concerned about their ability to handle the verification burden during peak periods.

Which question do you ask?

1. What matters most right now if we cannot optimize for everything?



2. What has to be true before we say this is truly ready?



Symptom #2: Unclear Escalation Paths

You hear the nurses say they want "clearer status visibility and escalation pathways".

They know the new workflow will have issues, but they don't know who has the authority to solve problems in the moment or who to call when things break.

Which question do you ask?

- A. Who owns this, and who decides if there is disagreement?
- B. What assumptions are we making that may not be shared?



Symptom #3: Competing, Unspoken Priorities



You hear the physicians say they want medications available "faster."

You hear the pharmacists say they are concerned about the "verification burden."

These two priorities—speed and safety/workload—are in direct conflict, but no one is addressing the trade-off.

Which question do you ask?

1. Before we move into tasks, can we confirm the outcome we are solving for?

2. What matters most right now if we cannot optimize for everything?





Scenario 2 Debrief



Likely Alignment Gaps

- "Ready" was defined technically, not clinically
- Speed and safety were competing, un-leveled priorities
- Escalation paths for nurses were assumed, not defined

One Strong Next Move

- Before go-live, hold a cross-disciplinary CLEAR check with physician, pharmacy, nursing, IT, and implementation leads.
- Confirm one readiness statement, one escalation path, one safety risk threshold, and one follow-up check after launch



What Aligned Teams Do



1

Name the outcome clearly

2

Make tradeoffs visible

3

Clarify who decides

4

Surface what feels risky early

5

Close with concrete handoffs

The CLEAR Conversation Guide

Ask these five questions:

C- What are we trying to achieve?

L- What matters most right now?

E- Who owns, contributes, approves, and decides?

A- What assumptions or risks could trip us up?

R- What happens next, by whom, by when?



Personal Action Plan



- Where is alignment weak right now in one project, workflow, or change effort?
- Which letter of CLEAR is being skipped most often?
- What question will you ask differently in your next meeting
- What follow-through behavior will you improve on?

Commitment prompt: Within 7 days, I will use CLEAR to reset _____.



Key Takeaways



- Alignment is not agreement; it is shared clarity on the path forward
- Misalignment is quiet; the costs of rework, distrust, and burnout are loud
- Unclear teams work *harder*; aligned teams work *smarter*
- Use the five CLEAR questions to slow down, surface conflict, and move forward together



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