

## CHAPTER 5

# ALIGN FOR IMPACT

BY CYNTHIA MILLS,  
FASAE, CAE, CMC, CPC, CCRC

Five decades of life. Three decades of business.  
One foundational truth – *Align for impact.*

My family loved camping – time together, nature walks, campfires, fishing, friends, and the freedom of wandering back roads. Ready for our next adventure, Dad would inch the truck backwards towards the trailer’s hitch, while Mom guided him a little to the left and a little to the right. With eyes locked on lining up that metal ball, partnership flourished, dents were avoided, and we were speedily on our way. Frequently, I watched Dad’s ability tested as he coaxed our trailer into a campsite between a tree obstacle course, angling the truck in puzzling directions to perfectly align our weekend home. When Mom and Dad were functioning from full partnership, his skills were operating at peak performance, goals were clear, roles were assigned, and their communication was unobstructed; our preparations were seamless, execution was perfect, and joy from being together was sweetened.

For several years, a campground was our summer home. With a stunning waterfall, inviting swimming lake, Saturday night dances, hayrides, and loads of friends, it was high-impact family time. My parents bartered a campsite in return for running weekend recreation events and Dad’s Sunday preaching. Camping was in alignment with our values, interests, and finances; and good stewardship benefitted all. Years later, the owners’ children carry on the traditions with Sunday services, wholesome family fun, and community building – continuing high impact experiences

throughout the decades. My parents' lifelong choices to remain in step with their values and callings created high impact for our family and wore a Sherpa's path for others to follow that is still impacting thousands of people; many whom they never met.

Alignment is a discipline and practice that requires clarity on the desired outcome, self-awareness, patience, consistency, persistence, sacrifice at times, skill, boundary identification, and a little guiding hand from others. We're pulled into early contemplation from childhood when adults begin asking the dreaded, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" They are really asking us, "With what jobs do your talents and interests align?" A better question is, "*Who* do you want to be?" - which points us to, "How do you want to have impact throughout your life, upon whom or what, and to what extent?" Therefore, "With what and whom should you align, and why?" With these answers, we can design our lives and identify behaviors and actions that, when consistently practiced, leverage our impact to unprecedented heights. Failure to do so accelerates us like an untethered elevator, plummeting to the depths of chaos; leaving us floundering to avoid the abyss of a disjointed journey.

If there is one question that plagues adults throughout their lives, it's a version of, "Did I make the right choice?" – which leads to, "Is there something else I want to do?" "What if I've gotten my life wrong?" There is nothing more traumatic than not recognizing yourself – in the choices you've made, the jobs you've taken, the family you do or don't have, and the God you do or don't serve. In those crisis moments, we see our misalignment and our failure to create the maximum positive impact for others and ourselves. That culmination usually requires taking what feels like the biggest risks in life and making the deepest sacrifices to dramatically alter our course and increase our impact.

The agony most often heard from CEOs, executives, young professionals, wives, mothers, fathers, and husbands is a fear of letting go of the very entrapment causing the misalignment. Their pain is palpable and yet, oddly known and comfortable. It manifests in illness, acting out behaviors, depression, anxiety, broken relationships, job failures, and despair. The irony is that it goes beyond getting the same thing from continuing to do the same thing.<sup>1</sup> It becomes a deliberate choice to stay frozen and not create impact. In that moment of recognition, no one else

1. Attribution to Albert Einstein, though unconfirmed, "The definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results."

can be blamed for your misalignment. If not altered, you are now doing it to yourself, choosing inertia. When paralysis is replaced by stepping towards unknown territory that magnetically resonates with our talents, values, and calling, it is staggering how quickly personal healing shows up. . . voices get lighter. . . possibility appears. . . new people enter lives. . . resources show up. . . energy is magnified. . . the road map unfolds. . . light replaces darkness. . . new lives are created.

We can mistake this journey to alignment as only personal, perceiving that it's about an individual finding their reason for existence or intersection with their passion. Transforming lives is one outcome of aligning for impact, and it can be powerful. However, it's just as relevant for values-driven companies and organizations when precisely aligned with vision, resources, complementary people, and skilled execution. The experience is similar, both positively and negatively.

Much has been written about Southwest Airline's alignment, marketplace disruption, and enduring success. Fueling employees' devotion, passengers' enthusiasm, and financial fruits, Southwest is a true illustration of positive alignment of vision, values, leadership, behavior, and rewards for all parties - employees, stockholders, and customers. The resulting impact was leveraged exponentially, magnified, and *shared!*

More recently, alleged improprieties at a corporation are unfolding. It appears that the value of greed may have superseded integrity; that making the numbers was more important than treating employees and customers with respect and honesty. The influence of this apparent corporate culture has had great negative impact via media coverage, lost jobs, brand impact, and uncertainty. Recovery is hard after a trustbuster of this magnitude. Light shone upon core operations and leadership may indicate values, beliefs, behaviors, and actions showed up in a way that may be out of alignment with laws and customer expectations. It matters with what you are aligned. Alignment for impact is not an insurance policy for positive results, without ascertaining carefully with what you associate. It matters with whom you do business and how you choose to conduct it.

Early days as the tree care industry's CEO validated the business owners were folks with whom my parents would want me to associate; primarily family-owned businesses, from a billion-dollar corporation to small

operations – God, family, and apple pie. Smart, successful leaders, they performed physics calculations in their heads, protected commercial properties and people’s homes, helped keep the lights on, provided jobs, and took care of the one renewable resource we have in this world.

There was opportunity to exponentially increase their impact from accredited businesses to certified safety professionals to expanded marketplaces to responsible regulation to transforming the industry for the next century. The Board, the members, and the staff took it on. Seventeen years later, their association has an even higher stature with more staff and representatives nationwide and fabulous leadership. Their coffers are full. They have saved lives. They take pride in their professional gifts, the protection and beautification they provide, their employees’ successes, and their contributions to the world. They are in alignment with their transformational vision, core values, purpose, how their companies do business, and how their association represents and supports them. They are aligned for maximum positive *impact*.

This state does not appear in a flash, because you decide that you or your company will seek alignment and desire to have greater impact. It requires concerted effort and commitment to make sure the components are in place to design the environment in which it can flourish. When assessment first begins, it is not unusual to start from a slightly arrogant assumption that we are already aligned, and just need to tweak it a little for more impact. However, circumstances are often not as anticipated and require significant attention and dedication to redesign. In fact, as we commit to align for impact, there can be a momentary personal or company breakdown when reality hits that necessitates outside expertise to navigate.

Align for impact *is* the big secret, both personally and for companies and organizations. Below are starting points to begin your walk from both perspectives.

If you are undertaking this assessment solely for yourself, there are others with whom you must share your new understandings and from whom you will need support. Some will not understand your new behaviors and will question why you are walking away from what they thought was your clear path.

Examination to reveal clarity for impact must include honest self-awareness, patience when the journey is longer than anticipated, consistency in our efforts, persistence towards the greatest impact, unexpected sacrifice at times, enhanced skill, boundary identification, and a little guiding hand from others who possess needed proficiency. Experts in facilitating this work can be helpful in nurturing you or your organization through some of the painful admissions, authoring new plans, encouraging you through the sacrifices, guiding you through implementation, recruiting others to be partners, and helping you create your new stories so you can communicate, communicate, and communicate some more.

It takes an average of seven times for new content to stick. If your company is altering its message for impact, who do you think must get it first - your employees or your customers? Your employees! If they don't internalize the message, it doesn't get passed on to marketing, emphasized in collaboration, incorporated into how performance is measured, utilized in budgeting decisions, included on strategic agendas, and of course, communicated to your customers. Your alignment matters in the fabric of your culture. Its texture, dye quality, colors, thread count, durability, and story are all revealed in how you execute on your alignment. Culture will determine the paucity or abundance of your impact.

Ultimately, we seek:

- I. You *being* everything for which you were created and making your greatest positive life impact, while avoiding wasted time, resources, and distractions.
- II. Your company or organization *living* a vision of significance, emboldening its mission, and aligning values, culture, and capacity to replicate maximum positive impact in perpetuity.

When these conditions exist, frustration is diminished, collaboration is natural, innovation bursts forth, processes support ideas, capacity multiplies, engagement accelerates, relevance is obvious, and value is evident. In this state, people, ideas, and impact integrate at unparalleled rates.

## 12 STEPS TO PERSONAL ALIGNMENT FOR IMPACT

Consider these twelve steps to maximize your personal alignment, contribute your greatest positive life impact, and *be* everything for which you were created.

1. I feel most alive when: \_ \_ \_
2. I believe my gifts and talents are: \_ \_ \_
  - 2a. Others compliment me on these attributes, skills, and abilities:  
\_ \_ \_
3. My core values are: Personally: \_ \_ \_ Professionally: \_ \_ \_  
If they differ, I know why: \_ \_ \_
4. My personal mission statement (purpose in life) is: \_ \_ \_
5. My vision for my life is: \_ \_ \_
6. I could increase my vision's impact by: \_ \_ \_
7. I am out of alignment in these ways: \_ \_ \_
8. Corrective steps I am willing to take over the next week, month, quarters, and year are: \_ \_ \_
9. I allow myself to provide negative self-talk in these areas, which creates barriers to my impact: \_ \_ \_
10. I need this person/these people as champions for my vision's ultimate impact: \_ \_ \_
11. My resources to create my greatest impact are (time, people, money, prayer): \_ \_ \_
12. When I die, my obituary will say, "\_\_\_\_\_’s life impact was \_\_\_\_\_."

## 12 STEPS TO COMPANY AND ORGANIZATION ALIGNMENT FOR IMPACT

To replicate maximum positive impact in perpetuity, consider these twelve steps to visions of significance, emboldened missions, and aligned values, culture, and capacity.

1. Without looking at any document, can you, the leader, share the clear vision, mission, and values statements by which decisions are made and to which employees can point as they execute daily? Can your employees share it as well?

*If the company's direction is clear, are you setting the example by walking the talk, easily integrating strategic impact language into every dialogue?*

2. How do our employees demonstrate our values daily with our customers?

*Do employees know our intentional discipline of how we deliver on our promises?*

3. How do leadership, governance, advertising, performance reviews, policies, budgets, behaviors, rewards, and employee and customer experiences align with our core beliefs?

*Are we creating a culture from our strategic expectations and values that is woven into our corporate soul?*

4. When we have to make difficult decisions, to what do we turn first - the bottom line, stockholders, stakeholders, the competition, vision/mission, values, strategy, our people, evaluation and adjustment, or innovation?

*Are we consistent with the drivers behind how we do business so that we remain relevant and sustainable for the long-term, or do we slide to lesser goals and reduced impact during tough times?*

5. During our most robust periods, the way that we share our success with our customers and our employees can be witnessed by...?

*Is impact defined just by our bottom line, or can we detail how we are responsible to our people, our community, and those to whom our success can be attributed?*

6. Is our strategic plan the guide for our owner/board meetings and the major topic for our leadership team's meetings?

*Are we constantly viewing our present and future through the lens of our intended outcomes' impact, or are we caught up in the busyness of "doing," without knowing what the diversions cost us?*

7. Do we conduct at least one annual strategic session to refresh our plans, select our focus for the coming year, and responsibly use our capacity?

*Are we disciplined in our pursuit of impact, celebrating our achievements, targeting the next logical steps to leverage our strategy, and keeping clarity and communication at the forefront of our interactions with employees?*

8. How do our employees demonstrate to us regularly that they are focused on the impact we are attempting to achieve?

*Without having a meeting, can I see our vision coming to life through the daily actions of our employees?*

9. How do we respond culturally to an employee or a customer who calls us out on misalignment or our failures to live up to our values or customer promises?

*Do our employees point out where we are falling short, help us to improve, and take pride in our corporate culture to seek impact?*

10. What is the greatest impact we can complete in the next year?

*Do we know how to set short-term wins to keep the momentum toward ultimate impact going; creating a celebratory culture for employees and customers?*

11. What level of impact could set us apart from our competitors?

*Have we done our homework to ascertain what relevance means in relationship to our core competencies?*

12. Since any company can set and achieve a financial target, for what do we want to be remembered?

*What problem can we solve that creates unforgettable impact?*

One foundational truth – ***Align for impact.***  
*Will yours be positive, negative, or unnoticed?*



## About Cynthia

Cynthia Mills is Founder, President & CEO of The Leaders' Haven, a consultancy partnering with clients to align for impact and exceed expectations.

**Transformation Architect:** An award-winning national and international CEO, Cynthia designs transformational and sustainable impact in complex companies and organizations as business strategist, succession planning and transition facilitator, board consultant, leadership development catalyst, executive coach, change management guide, and speaker. Serving a diverse client portfolio, Cynthia brings depth and unique perspective to each engagement, matching culture and enhancing corporate soul for relevance in business and industry, finance, energy, healthcare, co-op, legal, retail, agriculture, senior living, real estate, environmental, publishing, media, transportation, construction, education, entertainment, safety, philanthropy, and faith sectors.

**Leader Cultivator:** On her journey from student government representative to international CEO and consultant, Cynthia parlayed her expertise building strategy, people, and teams into lauded designer of corporate leadership programs and executive coach. As New England College adjunct faculty, Cynthia also developed curricula and taught strategic planning and policy, the dynamics of governance, and thesis preparation to master's degree candidates.

**World Citizen:** A small town girl with big dreams, Cynthia has been blessed to live and speak abroad, represent organizations in Asia, Europe, Scandinavia, the UK, Mexico, Canada, Bermuda, the Caribbean, and the U.S.; and lead diverse teams, engaging with professionals globally. Her suitcase stays partially packed, ready to go.

**Eternal Student:** Cynthia holds an MA from the University of York, England, earned as a Rotary International Ambassador Scholar, and was purported to be the first U.S. southern student to attend, after earning a dual BA from Queens College as a Presidential Scholar. She is a member of the Institute of Management Consultants, Association of Charlotte Area Consultants, International Coach Federation, International Coaching Council, American Society of Association Executives, Association Executives of North Carolina, Georgia Society of Association Executives, and Strathmore Who's Who Worldwide. Cynthia is certified as a Master Coach, Professional Coach, Christian Coach, and Association Executive.

**Peer Recognition:** Strathmore *Who's Who Worldwide* selected Cynthia as Professional of the Year in Consulting, Coaching and Professional Development. Business Leader Media named her Business Leader Woman Extraordinaire. TCIA recognized Cynthia's

CEO leadership twice with The Chair's Award. Queens College identified her as one of Ten Who Make a Difference and bestowed the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award. ASAE named Cynthia a Fellow, granted to less than 1% of the profession, and colleagues subsequently elected her Fellows Chair. GSAE honored her with the Clifford Clarke Award, President's Award, 90 Movers & Shakers, and Lifetime Honorary Membership. Cynthia was also named the inaugural Association Executive of the Year by Southeastern Association Executive Magazine.

**Author:** *The Big Secret* is Cynthia's fourth book, following *CEOs First 90 Days: Breathing Tips for the Other End of the Fire Hose* and *The Empty Front Porch: Soul Sittin' to Design Your porch to Porch Plan*. She is also a co-author of *The Female Factor: A Confidence Guide for Women*.

To align for impact and exceed expectations, you can reach the author at:

- [CynthiaMills@TheLeadersHaven.com](mailto:CynthiaMills@TheLeadersHaven.com)
- [www.TheLeadersHaven.com](http://www.TheLeadersHaven.com)
- [www.twitter.com/TheLeadersHaven](http://www.twitter.com/TheLeadersHaven)
- [www.linkedin.com/in/leadershavenceo](http://www.linkedin.com/in/leadershavenceo)