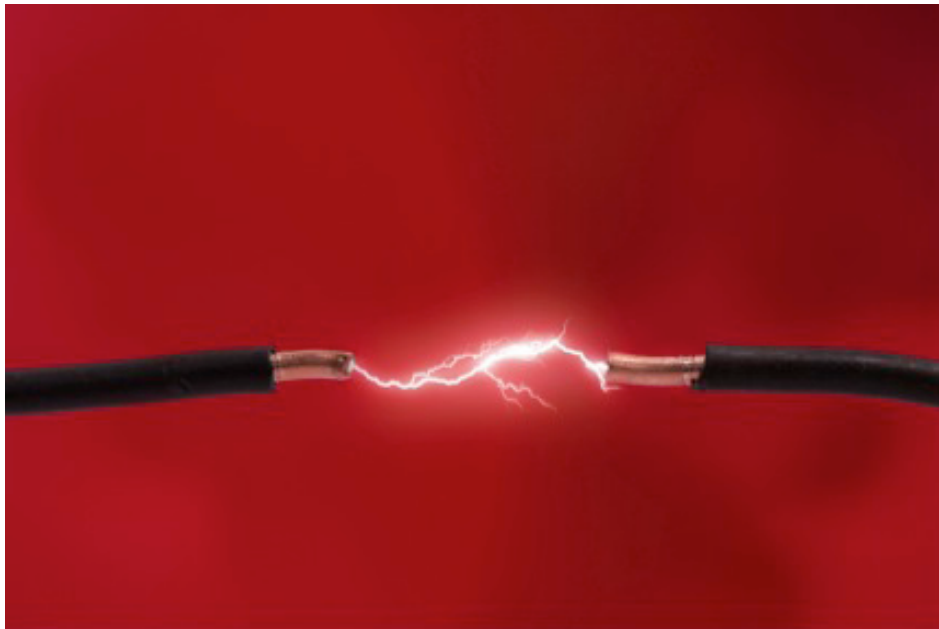


# Customer-Inspired Authentic Alignment

## *The Power of Authentic Alignment*



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# Customer-Inspired Authentic Alignment

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In today's business world the most admired products, companies and individuals are often referred to as brands as a way to acknowledge their high performance. High performing products are often referred to as "the leading brand," the most admired companies may be labeled as "employer brand of choice," or the highest achieving individuals are referred to as "strong personal brands."

Brand equals high performance. What are the common qualities of high performers? High performing brands, whether personal, company or product, have three common characteristics: authenticity, alignment and the proven ability to make a distinctive difference.

High performing brands get their strength and confidence from their authenticity. They get their power by aligning and focusing their strengths on the needs of others (individuals or customers). Their distinction is the result of consistently applying their strengths in a way that makes a difference that others can't match.

Brand is the effect and authentic alignment is

the cause. Leveraging the power of authentic alignment is the key to becoming known as a high performing brand. This principle applies to individual performance (personal brand), team performance (team brand) and company performance (corporate brand).

How can individuals, teams and organizations take advantage of the power of authentic alignment to drive high performance? It's not complicated or some mysterious quality that can't be defined and implemented. It's a straightforward process consisting of:

- ▣ A tool to help individuals define their authentic qualities
- ▣ Affirming the organization or team's outstanding authentic qualities
- ▣ Facilitate a group process to discover alignment of employees' and the organization's affirmed authentic qualities and focus the alignment on making a difference for customers or company goals – customer-inspired authentic alignment
- ▣ Provide on-going reinforcement and coaching activities to sustain authentic alignment in the culture

This article will provide an overview of the process and some lessons learned that will enable you to take advantage of the power of authentic alignment.

## Authenticity Energizes

Authenticity is the new platinum for high-performing individuals and teams. Today's high achievers thrive on being authentic and are highly motivated by authentic leaders. They are inspired by organizations they believe in and are supercharged when working with others that act genuinely.

What do we mean when we say authentic? Simply stated, when an individual or an organization is authentic they consistently demonstrate a genuine commitment to their values.

If authenticity is the elixir to high performance, why don't more employees embrace it? There are two reasons, one is a practical reason and the other is environmental. Our research strongly suggests that most people are not sure about or able to articulate their authenticity. Many individuals comfortable with their authenticity are not sure it is valued or how it will contribute to their success.

There is research emerging that adds credence to an individual's hesitancy to operate with an authenticity-forward style. One study pointed out that 53% of employees believe that being authentic may have negative consequences for their career. 41% feel that a strategy of "fitting-in" is an effective strategy for success with their employer. Authenticity is an important driver of employee engagement. A recent research study reported that when a culture values authenticity it can positively impact employee engagement

by as much as 30%.

Employees worry they may be taking a career risk showing their authentic self and therefore will look for signs that authenticity is valued and will help them succeed. Organizations need to openly encourage and empower employees to act authentically. Employees choosing to act in a genuine, authentic way look for clear signals from their work culture that authenticity is encouraged and recognized.

Employees confident that their authenticity is valued will definitely agree with the following statements: "I feel comfortable being myself;" "We're all encouraged to express our differences;" "More than one type of person fits in here and every employee is given a chance to develop." Employees will act more authentically when they feel and see that it's encouraged and rewarded.

An organization can demonstrate its authenticity in many different ways with employees and customers. Employees can observe authenticity when leaders consistently "walk the talk." Another example of internal authenticity is on display when the core values of an organization are used to address tough decisions, especially when the outcome negatively impacts business results.


Customers recognize authenticity in the way an organization is consistent in its decisions and policies. Customers pay particular attention to situations when the company is faced with tough decisions that can result in a negative financial consequence. The more distinctive an organization is compared to its competitors is a true sign of its level of authenticity. This is further exemplified when customers demonstrate a high degree of sustained brand loyalty.



In an article in MIT Sloan Management Review, authors Daniel M. Cable, Francesca Gino and Bradley R. Staats cited the importance of authenticity as a fundamental virtue in supporting a high level of confidence demonstrated by the highest achievers. According to the authors, “For several decades psychologists have suggested that people have a deep desire to behave authentically and to have others acknowledge the true attributes of their identities. To be authentic, people must align their internal experiences (such as feelings, values and perspectives) with their external expressions. They want others to see them as they see themselves. There is an abundance of research showing that authentic self-expression is the key component of high self-esteem.”

Recently while getting my car washed I observed how a very caring customer provided his mittens to the cashier whose hands were very cold as a result of a malfunctioning heating system. The expression on her face and thankfulness surely made him feel warm in his heart. This feeling was punctuated when another customer walked up and shook the generous customer’s hand and commented on his caring gesture.

In “Creating the Best Workplace on Earth,” published in Harvard Business Review, authors Rob Gaffee and Gareth Jones add further credence to the importance of authenticity, when stating “Recent research by our London Business School colleague Dan Cable shows that employees who feel welcome to express their authentic selves at work exhibit higher levels of organizational commitment, individual performance and propensity to help others.”



**Authenticity builds strength from within; alignment applies that inner strength to achieve.**

## Authenticity Aligned Begins with Authenticity Defined

Choosing to act authentically takes courage and is rife with vulnerability for individuals. Authenticity needs encouragement. The power of authenticity is unleashed through alignment. Those individuals that discover a way to align their authentic qualities with the interests of their employer are consistently successful and high achievers. Authenticity builds strength from within; alignment applies that inner strength to achieve. In the end, authentic alignment can work wonders for a company’s success.

To make it work, employees must believe they are authentically aligned with the organization they work for. They must also believe the organization is authentic and aligned with its customers. Believing there is authentic employee-organization-customer alignment creates authenticity<sup>3</sup>. This super-level of authentic alignment inspires employees because they know their authentic strengths make a difference for customers. Authentic alignment that has a clear line of sight for making a difference for customers adds purpose to an employee’s sense of accomplishment. It’s accomplishment that is more personal and less corporate. Authenticity<sup>3</sup> provides individuals with the confidence that their commitment to authenticity is a real asset in their on-going success.

Aligning the interests of employees, the company and customers seems logical and common sense. So what gets in the way of more organizations taking advantage of alignment<sup>3</sup>? As much as individuals consistently declare the value of acting authentically, our work over 10 years clearly suggests that as a rule people struggle with defining their values. In a similar way, our work helping companies define their differentiating qualities strongly suggests it is not uncom-

mon for there to be a lack of a clear articulation of organizational authenticity. Authenticity must be clearly defined before alignment can take place for all parties.

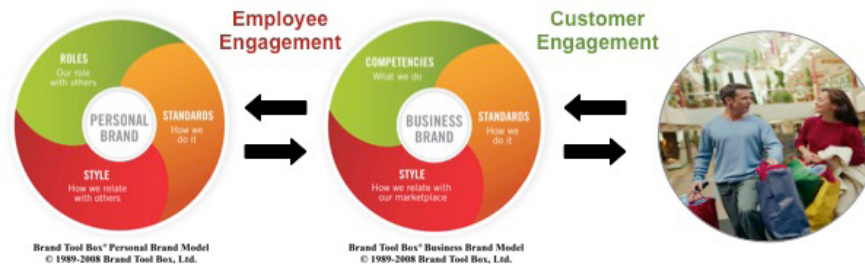
We have found that using a practical, universal framework of brand is a powerful tool to help individuals and organizations define authenticity. In its native form, the concept of brand is built on authenticity with an intention on aligning to the needs of others. Strong brands (personal or corporate) have as their base a set of proven authentic values, a proven ethos, so to speak. To be a distinctive brand that is consistent in its actions one must be authentic. To be valuable a brand must be highly competent at aligning its authentic qualities with the needs of customers. The result is a loyal relationship built on the brand's differentiated qualities. This is the market version of authentic alignment.

In addition we have discovered that through the use of a practical process individuals and organizations can effectively articulate their authentic qualities. In this context we use a practical personal brand tool to help individuals articulate their authentic qualities. This same type of brand-based framework can provide insights in learning to align their authentic qualities with the needs of other individuals and teams. We have developed and refined over 20 years an analogous tool for organizations.

For individuals the process of defining their authentic qualities begins with guiding them through a three-part process to determine their five most authentic qualities. Based upon the "big data" analysis of the results of thou-

sands of individuals it became clear that many individuals have little awareness of their authentic qualities. This conclusion is reinforced based upon the anecdotal evidence reported by our many facilitators who work closely with individuals to define their personal values, as the starting point in the process.

Bottom line, we have found that with the help of a practical tool individuals can effectively define their authentic qualities. (Following this process employees develop a set of situational action plans to apply their authentic qualities at work, more on that later.)



Another part of our firm's practice is working with the leadership teams of our clients to define

their corporate brands. In a nutshell, our process begins with an organization's basic leadership platform (mission/vision/values) and extends it into a framework that concisely articulates how the authentic qualities define their culture and ultimately create distinctive value for customers.

After 25 years of experience it is clear that leadership teams struggle as much as individuals at the process of defining their authentic qualities. To add further credence to our experience Gallup reports that on average over 40% of employees report they have little or no understanding of their employer's distinctive qualities and how they create value for customers. This lack of awareness varies across industries, ranging from 30% to over 70%. I am confident that the lack of awareness is due primarily to the lack of definition, not simply as a result of a lack of effective internal communi-

cations. I most wholeheartedly agree with Marshall McLuhan - “If I can’t name it, I can’t know it.”

I have observed many, many times the excitement that is created among a leadership team and across a culture when the authentic qualities of an organization are made known.

## Authenticity<sup>3</sup>—The Power of Brand Alignment

Customer-inspired, authentic alignment is the name we have given to the process we have used to help our clients create aligned cultures that thrive on authentic alignment of employees-company-customers. The framework of customer-inspired, authentic alignment is built upon three pillars:

- ▣ The authenticity of the individual, i.e., their personal brand
- ▣ The authenticity and customer focus of the organization, i.e., its corporate brand
- ▣ A process to discover the alignment of the two brands and focus employees’ everyday behaviors to leverage the areas of authentic alignment

This innovative process boosts the organic strengths of the culture by focusing the authentic strengths of employees’ personal brands on the critical behaviors that will deliver the most value for customers and nourish employees’ desire for authenticity in their work.

Customer-inspired authentic alignment is a powerful and proven framework to inspire high achievement. It’s powerful because it’s personal and encourages individuals to be more of who they are. It’s powerful because it focuses teams on delivering what’s most important to customers, the basis for achieving success for the business or a team’s objectives. It’s proven because it uses reliable tools that have been widely implemented. Organizations and teams implementing a customer-inspired authentic alignment process will have the “special sauce” that separates the overachievers from the underachievers.

What are the key characteristics of a culture built on customer-inspired, authentic alignment?

- ▣ The organization values and encourages employees to act based upon their authentic values.
- ▣ Employees are given the tools and a process to define their values and personal brand. Training and coaching help individuals align and apply those qualities in various situations and relationships.
- ▣ The organization or team clearly defines its authentic operating ethos and demonstrates how the core elements of the ethos show up as behaviors that are applied to critical success factors.
- ▣ Employees are encouraged to discover their authentic alignment with the operating ethos of the team with the specific intent of discovering where they can leverage their authentic strengths and values to contribute to the success of the team. The implicit promise is that employees will be successful by being more of who they are, i.e., acting authentically. This sense of authentic alignment will inspire over-achievement.

A team or culture that embraces customer-inspired authentic alignment unleashes extraordinary discretionary effort to overachieve because it’s real, organic and natural. The process clearly values the authenticity and power of every individual’s values and contributions, enabling every team to perform to the Power<sup>x</sup>.

## Lessons Learned

We have gleaned various lessons learned from developing and implementing a framework to create cultures that thrive on customer-inspired authentic alignment. Here are a few:

### 1. **Brand is authentic and customer-focused.**

We have found that using a practical form of personal and organizational brand is a very powerful learning and alignment framework. Distinctiveness is one of the core principles of brand, which supports the individual contributions of an employee. It is universally accepted that authenticity is a prime and necessary requirement of any strong personal or organization brand. Finally, for a brand to be consistently strong and valued it has to create distinctive value for “customers.” By its nature brand sets a powerful framework because it stresses authenticity and it emphasizes the importance of aligning to deliver what is most important for customers.

### 2. **Authenticity defined can be energizing.** We have strong evidence that proves that given a practical tool and some encouragement individuals can be very articulate about their authentic qualities. Moreover the process of consciously articulating their authenticity breeds an excitement to apply it at work and home.

### 3. **Test the authenticity of the authenticity.**

Conducting a “personal brand assessment” is an important part of the process of individuals defining their authenticity. A personal brand assessment is a tool that provides individuals with immediate feedback how authentic they are with others. Based upon the results of their “authenticity assessment” individuals may choose to refine their authentic qualities. They may also receive positive feedback and encouragement of their authenticity. We used a similar process to get internal and external feedback on the proclaimed authentic qualities of the organization.

### 4. **Create the opportunity to discover alignment.** Using a universal framework of brand for individuals and organizations to define their authentic qualities is the ease of discovering alignment. The number of employees who believe they have true authentic alignment with their team or organization rises significantly after providing them with a practical, transparent process to discover their level of alignment. The self-awareness of authentic alignment is the direct result of the straightforward comparison of both brands using simple congruent models of brand.

### 5. **Authenticity<sup>3</sup> creates purpose and stronger customer relationships.** Discovering authentic alignment between an employee and the organization results in higher levels of engagement, but it is only the beginning. Targeting that engagement to make a distinctive difference for customers adds purpose for employees and high performance for companies. This process of authenticity<sup>3</sup> - aligning employee-company-customer needs to be done in a structured action-learning framework. We have observed measurable increase in employee engagement and key customer performance metrics. Our experience also informs us that a regularly scheduled program of reinforcement is required to maintain a high level customer-inspired authentic alignment across the organization.

## About the Author



Karl D. Speak is a global expert known for his pragmatic and unconventional approach to using brand as a leadership platform for gaining customer loyalty and employee engagement. Karl's innovative work on corporate brand strategy, personal brand and internal brand building has been implemented in companies in 23 countries. His best selling book, *Be Your Own Brand*, is translated into 12 languages and has sold over 80,000 copies. A revised and expanded version of *Be Your Own Brand* was recently released to leverage the global success of the first edition and the growing popularity of personal brand.

Brand Tool Box, Ltd., the company he founded 30 years ago, is the global leader in developing and implementing internal brand-building programs. It is a unique professional services organization melding world-class brand expertise and organizational development best practices to help organizations build and nourish customer-centric culture alignment. Brand Tool Box's consulting processes, training programs and organizational development tools have been successfully implemented in companies across virtually all industry segments, non-profits and governments.

Brand Tool Box has successfully packaged its intellectual property into a portfolio of training workshops, coaching and consulting templates. The products have been used in a range of business and personal development applications, ranging from internal brand building, sales training, to leadership-development coaching.

Through Brand Tool Box, Karl has implemented his contemporary approach to brand management and internal brand building with a wide range of corporate clients. Clients such as 3M, LeadingAge, American Express, AT&T, BASF, BMW, Cabela's, Cargill, Consumers Energy, EDMC, FedEx, Honeywell, IBM, ING, Mosaic, Motorola, National Church Residences, Securian, Skandia, Sony Corporation, St. Jude Medical, Syngenta, Target Corporation, The Scotts Company, The Wall Street Journal, Toro, and Walgreens have benefited from Karl's consulting and internal brand-building programs.

Karl also serves as an "expert witness" in legal cases involving matters relating to brand.

Karl holds a Masters Degree in Economics from the University of Minnesota. Karl has taught in the MBA programs at University of Minnesota, St. Thomas University, and has been guest lecturer at University of Westminster in London, Capella University, ESADE University in Madrid, among others.

Karl's boardroom experience includes being a board member of Mesa Holdings, VocalEssence, MAP and serving as the chair of the board of The Design Management Institute.





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