

Why Alignment Must Come Before Reform Activity

Reform activity often begins before leaders agree on what must improve, who is affected, what value is at stake, and what evidence should guide the work.

Reform activity can begin with surprisingly little alignment.

A strategy has been approved. A modernization program has been announced. A donor activity has moved into implementation. A leadership team has agreed that something must change. The language sounds shared, and the room may even feel unified.

But beneath that apparent agreement, different people may be carrying different assumptions about what success means.

One group may believe the reform is about compliance. Another may believe it is about faster service. Another may expect cost control. Another may focus on adoption of a new process or system. Another may care most about accountability, transparency, or stakeholder confidence. Each group can support the same reform while quietly defining success in a different way.

That is where many reform efforts begin to lose direction.

The problem is not that leaders are careless. The problem is that reform language can create the impression of alignment before the institution has agreed on the performance result it must produce.

Terms such as modernization, transformation, capacity strengthening, digital adoption, restructuring, service improvement, and institutional reform are useful, but they are also broad. They can hold many meanings at once. Unless leaders clarify the performance gap behind the language, the institution can move quickly into activity without knowing whether everyone is moving toward the same result.

Alignment must come before reform activity because activity without a shared performance anchor multiplies motion while weakening direction.

Reform language can hide disagreement

Institutions often use reform language to create energy. That is understandable. Leaders need a way to name the change, mobilize people, communicate intent, and create momentum.

But broad language can also conceal unresolved differences. A phrase that feels clear at the executive level may become ambiguous when it reaches operating teams. People may repeat the same words while making different choices in practice.

A reform labeled as modernization may lead one unit to prioritize new technology, another to revise procedures, another to reduce approval steps, and another to change reporting expectations. A performance improvement effort may lead one group to focus on efficiency, another on service quality, another on fiscal control, and another on stakeholder experience.

None of those priorities is automatically wrong. The issue is that they require different evidence, different design choices, different responsibilities, and different measures of success.

When those differences are not surfaced early, they appear later as confusion, rework, resistance, or implementation drift. Teams may be busy, but the work is no longer anchored to a shared definition of improvement.

This is why HICD Forward begins the first movement with alignment on performance gaps. It helps leaders move from broad reform language to a clear statement of what must improve, for whom, why it matters, what evidence confirms the gap, and where the boundary of the problem sits.

That is the discipline that turns reform ambition into a performance anchor.

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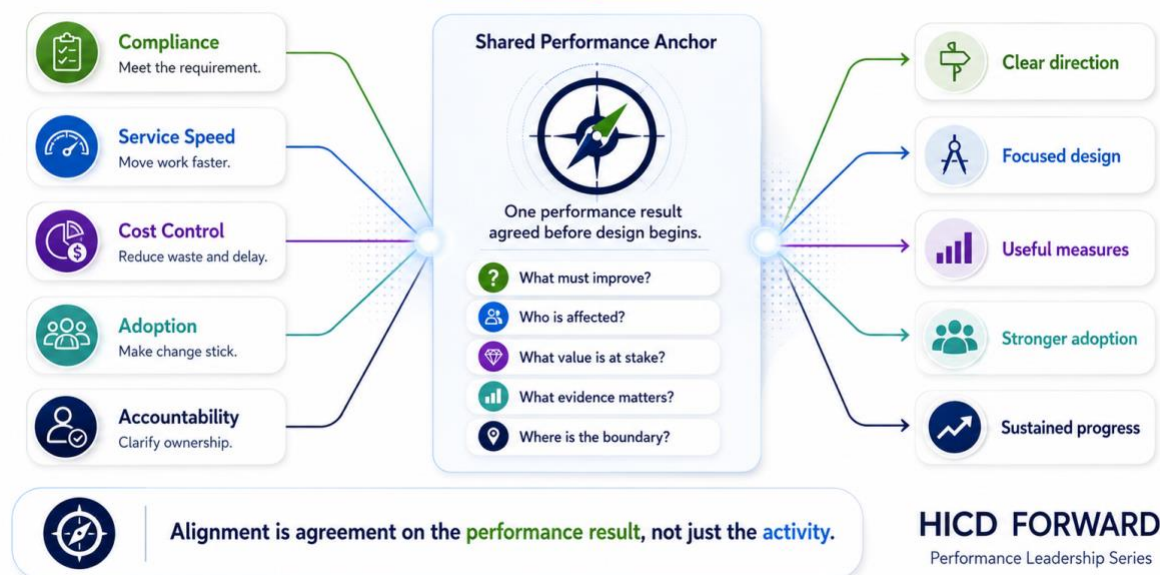


Figure 1. Alignment creates a shared performance anchor before reform activity begins.

Activity multiplies when direction is weak

When alignment is weak, institutions often compensate with more activity.

They add meetings. They request more reports. They create workstreams. They form committees. They revise templates. They launch communications. They ask for training. They accelerate implementation because slowing down to clarify the performance result can feel uncomfortable or politically risky.

The result is familiar. People work hard, but the work begins to fragment. Each team interprets the reform through its own mandate, incentives, pressures, and assumptions. One-unit designs for compliance. Another designs for speed. Another protects existing authority. Another focuses on reporting visibility. Another wants a technology solution. Another wants a process fix.

The institution may still produce outputs, but the outputs do not necessarily add up to improvement.

This is not a coordination problem only. It is a performance alignment problem.

Coordination asks whether people are communicating. Performance alignment asks whether people are working toward the same result, using the same evidence, and understanding the same value at stake.

That distinction matters because many reform efforts appear coordinated on paper. They have steering committees, reporting lines, implementation plans, and workstream leads. But if the performance gap is not clear, coordination can simply organize activity around an unresolved problem.

Alignment begins with the performance gap

HICD Forward changes the alignment conversation by starting with the performance gap.

It asks leaders and teams to move beyond general agreement that reform is needed. The question is not only whether everyone supports the activity. The question is whether everyone understands the result the institution must produce.

What is happening now? What should be happening? What evidence shows the gap? Who is affected by the gap? What value is at stake? Where does the problem begin and end? What conditions should be examined before the institution commits to a solution?

Those questions create a different kind of alignment. They do not ask people to agree that reform sounds important. They ask people to agree on the performance reality the reform is meant to change.

That clarity protects the institution from several common mistakes.

It prevents leaders from approving activities before the problem is defined. It prevents teams from measuring the wrong thing. It prevents technical solutions from drifting away from the work they are supposed to improve. It prevents stakeholders from supporting the same reform for different reasons without realizing it. And it gives later diagnosis, design, implementation, and learning a shared point of reference.

A clear performance gap becomes the spine of the reform effort. Without it, activity has no reliable center.

The first movement creates a performance anchor

Movement 1 of HICD Forward is Align on performance gaps.

The movement clarifies what must improve before leaders and teams commit to reform activity. It defines current performance, required performance, the evidence base, affected stakeholders, value at stake, and the boundary of the problem.

This movement is not a ceremonial step. It is the practical foundation for everything that follows.

If the performance gap is unclear, diagnosis becomes too broad. If the affected stakeholders are unclear, value becomes abstract. If evidence is weak, the reform may be driven by assumptions. If the boundary is vague, the team may try to solve too much or solve the wrong part of the problem. If the required performance is not defined, leaders may celebrate activity that does not produce meaningful change.

Alignment creates discipline. It tells the institution what to examine, what to ignore for now, what evidence to gather, what conversations matter, and what solution choices should be tested later.

That is why alignment is not simply a leadership meeting or a communication exercise. It is a method step that protects reform from beginning in ambiguity.

A simple example

Imagine a public institution preparing a service delivery reform. Everyone agrees that the current system is not working well enough. The reform is approved, and the proposed activities include process redesign, staff training, a new dashboard, and revised reporting routines. The same alignment challenge can appear in a utility reliability program, a donor funded reform activity, or a private sector transformation when different teams support the same initiative while expecting different results.

At first, the reform appears aligned because everyone supports it.

But when leaders begin to clarify the performance gap, different definitions of success appear. The operations team wants to reduce cycle time. The compliance unit wants stronger documentation. The finance team wants better cost control. The technology team wants adoption of a new platform. The public affairs team wants improved stakeholder confidence. Field managers want fewer duplicative requests.

All of these concerns may be legitimate, but they are not the same performance result.

If the institution moves directly into activity, the reform may become a collection of parallel efforts. The dashboard may measure what is easy to report. Training may focus on procedures rather than workflow decisions. Process redesign may reduce steps while creating compliance anxiety. Communications may promise faster service before the operating model can deliver it.

HICD Forward would slow the work just enough to align on the performance gap. For example, the institution might define the gap as reducing average service resolution time from thirty days to fifteen days for priority cases while maintaining required compliance checks and improving the reliability of status information for affected stakeholders.

That statement changes the reform conversation. It identifies the result, the stakeholder experience, the evidence, and the constraints that matter. It gives every later activity a shared performance anchor.

What leaders should do differently

The first leadership move is to separate agreement on action from agreement on performance.

A leadership team may agree to launch a reform, approve a modernization plan, fund a new system, or schedule a training program. That does not mean it has aligned on the result the institution must produce.

Before reform activity begins, leaders should ask whether the institution can clearly answer five questions.

First, what performance result must improve?

Second, who is affected by the gap?

Third, what value is at stake if the gap remains unresolved?

Fourth, what evidence confirms the gap and should guide the work?

Fifth, where is the boundary of the problem?

If those questions cannot be answered, the institution may still need preparation, evidence review, stakeholder clarification, or problem framing before it moves into design. That does not delay reform. It protects reform from wasting energy in the wrong direction.

Alignment is not agreement on the activity. Alignment is agreement on the performance result the institution must produce.

Why false alignment is costly

False alignment is expensive because it does not usually reveal itself at the moment of approval. It appears later as rework, competing priorities, unclear measures, slow decisions, and frustration among the people asked to implement the reform.

It also weakens trust. Staff and managers hear confident reform language, but then experience shifting expectations when different leaders emphasize different results. What sounded aligned in the meeting becomes confusing in the workflow.

The practical discipline is to make alignment visible. A reform team should be able to point to a short performance gap statement and say: this is the result we are trying to improve, this is the evidence, this is who is affected, this is the value at stake, and this is the boundary of the problem.

HICD Forward lens

Before reform activity begins, look for the performance anchor. Ask whether leaders share the same view of current performance, required performance, affected stakeholders, value at stake, evidence, and problem boundary. If they do not, the reform may already be carrying hidden disagreement. The visible activity may still move forward, but direction will weaken as choices become more specific. The deeper question is this: what must the institution agree on now so that later diagnosis, design, implementation, and learning all serve the same performance result?

Practical leadership test

Before approving the next reform activity, modernization step, system launch, process redesign, training program, or governance routine, ask:

Leadership questions before reform activity begins	
1	What performance result must improve?
2	Who is affected by the gap?
3	What value is at stake if the gap remains unresolved?
4	What evidence confirms the gap and should guide the work?
5	Where is the boundary of the problem?

If those answers are unclear, the first task is not reform activity. The first task is alignment on the performance gap.

Closing bridge to Article 4

The next article looks at why leaders must see the system clearly before designing solutions, and why reform efforts need a disciplined view of workflow, decision rights, governance, capability, evidence, and learning before intervention choices are made.

Source foundation: adapted from the HICD Forward white paper, Turning Reform Ambition, Modernization Pressure, and Future Change into Real Operating Capability.