

Aligning Internal Organizational Factors With a Service Excellence Mission: An Exploratory Investigation in Health Care

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Abstract: In today's competitive health care environment, service excellence is rapidly becoming a major differentiating advantage between health care providers. Too often, senior executives talk about their commitment to a mission statement that extols the virtues of providing world class service to their patients only to undermine those statements with what they do, write, and say. This article presents an exploratory investigation into a new application of an internal mission alignment instrument that seeks to assess the extent to which an organization's internal processes are aligned with its service mission. This instrument was sent to 250 randomly selected employees from all clinical departments of a large southeastern hospital to explore the underlying alignment factors. A factor analysis of the data revealed eight factors that predicted beneficial employee outcomes such as organizational commitment and satisfaction with the job and organization.

Key words: health care, organizational alignment, service excellence, service mission

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Research from the growing literature on organizational alignment indicates that having a mission statement concerning the organization's commitment to service excellence is not sufficient to actually achieve service excellence. Implementation of that mission statement requires alignment of that organization's strategic and tactical actions, human resource policies and procedures, and its internal systems.^{1–3} If the organization says one thing in its mission statement, but does not also ensure that its policies, practices, and systems support and reward achievement of that mission, the likelihood of fulfilling the mission is substantially diminished with rare exceptions.⁴ Despite its importance, assessing the degree to which an organization's strategy/tactics, staffing, and systems are aligned with its service mission and its success in achieving its mission is just beginning to attract the attention of organizational researchers in empirically investigating these relationships.^{2–5} The current study seeks to advance the understanding of how the concept of organization alignment can help health care organizations better achieve their customer service mission.

There are many opinions about how to achieve excellent service. Most health care executives agree, however, that the ultimate key to excellent service is the individual employee who delivers that service. Whether it is the floor nurse, the X-ray technician, the attending physician, or the discharge administrator, the employee at the point of contact with the patient is the one who can make the difference between an excellent and an inadequate patient service experience.

The challenge in health care today is to discover how to get patient contact employees to perform their jobs in ways that not only satisfy increasingly demanding customers but even exceed their expectations. This challenge is exacerbated by the degree to which there is not a congruence or constancy of purpose between front line employees and the organization's mission. Organizations that are successful have a systematic process of providing signals or cues about their strategy, staffing, and systems that help align all members of the organization to the same mission.^{1–6} These authors argue that these cues or signals are based on ensuring that everything that management says, writes, and does is systematically and consistently aligned with the customer service emphasis in a corporate mission.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Management scholars have been discussing the importance of the concept of alignment in relation to both external contingencies and internal policies and actions for some time.⁷ Tichy⁸ noted that the strategic management task is to keep the organization both internally and externally aligned. Externally, strategic choices are shaped by the need to align organizational resources with

environmental opportunities and threats.⁹ An organization that is in close fit or alignment with various contingency factors (e.g., size, environmental, technology, resource availability) can significantly improve firm performance.^{7,10}

Internally, ensuring a consistent fit between organizational mission and the actions, policies, and procedures of the organization and its leadership can also significantly improve organizational performance.¹ Earlier, Porter¹¹ had suggested that the best way for any organization to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage is to reinforce its chosen strategy with a host of "activities," including functional policies, staffing decisions, and structure. Most specifically, Nadler and Tushman proposed five key areas that the organization should seek to establish and monitor where congruence or fit is critical for organizational success. They state; "Put another way, the degree to which the strategy, work, people, structure, and culture are smoothly aligned will determine the organization's ability to compete and succeed."^{12(p.214)} Fottler, Ford, and Heaton⁶ further note that the health care organization's mission should be consistently reinforced through a careful alignment of all its managerial actions, staffing policies and procedures, and systems design.

Research investigating the importance of alignment or congruence to an organization's success has, not surprisingly, found it important. One study tracing the linkage between organizational mission and financial performance in a health care organization found that the degree to which an organization aligns its internal structure, policies, and procedures with its mission was positively associated with employee behavior which, in turn, had the most direct relationship with financial performance.^{13,14} Writers in the human resource management area have also stressed the importance of focusing the alignment of HR policies and processes with the organizational mission.^{15–17} The need to ensure that all HR practices and policies are aligned with the organization's overall mission has now become well accepted. The relationship of alignment to organization performance appears to be well established in the management literature and is even a part of most standard texts on strategy¹⁸ and in textbooks that focus on strategy in the health care industry.¹⁹ Although most now acknowledge the criticality of alignment, its achievement is problematic.

Health care practitioners know that it is important to have everyone in the organization focused on the mission of service excellence. Therefore, they need to discover what factors lead to such a focus and how management can align them. In the context of this study, alignment is defined as follows:

Alignment is developing and making consistent the various cues, both written and verbal, and actions, that

managers use to communicate to employees what is important and what is not, what has value to the organization and what does not, and what they should do for their customers and what they should not.

In other words, managers have the responsibility to develop a consistently aligned set of cues, processes, standards, and systems that define the customer-focused culture that benchmark organizations utilize to achieve their mission of service excellence. More importantly, they then need to systematically assess the degree to which those cues are aligned with the achievement of that mission. When these cues are aligned, they collectively send a powerful message that guide employees as to what the organization's commitment to excellent customer service means in every encounter with every patient.

Employees quickly recognize inconsistency between what managers say is important and what they reward, between what mission statements say and what managers do, and between what top executives tell them the purpose of the job is and what the job description says. Consequently, alignment is premised on several key ideas.¹ First, employees know the difference between what is said to be important and what is measured and rewarded. Second, the greater the organization's cues are aligned with the mission of excellent customer service, the more likely it is that the organization's employees will actually deliver excellent customer service. Third, confusion over mission is not a good thing for the organization because such confusion can lead to missed goals, unhappy employees, and dissatisfied customers.

What these three points mean to the practicing health care manager is that it is in his or her interest to align the organization's strategic actions, staffing policies, and systems procedures so they all focus on the mission of excellent customer service for which they are being held accountable. In the hectic pace of today's health care environment, it is vital that everyone works toward the same organizational mission. This emphasis leads to consistent and focused cues that guide and direct employees' behavior as they encounter the various patients that come to the organization with their various needs and expectations. By creating and defining a strong customer service culture that is aligned consistently and constantly by everything that management does, says, and writes, the more likely it will be that the health care organization and its employees will be focused on providing excellent patient service.

Although this sounds obvious, it is not easy to do. If managers were able to set the example by walking the talk, reinforce the customer service mission by developing human resource policies that are consistent

with it, and design their information structures, physical facilities, reward, and service delivery systems to ensure they meet customer expectations, employees will likely provide the patient service expected.^{3,6} The organization can and often does send conflicting signals about what it expects, and managers can be inconsistent in what they say, do, and reward.²⁰ The result is a mixed message that dilutes or even distorts the employees' understanding of what the organization really expects of them in providing excellent customer service.

This study is premised on the idea that what management says, writes, and does should influence those in the organization to behave in ways that support the mission of service excellence. Hence, when managers say, write, and do things that are consistently aligned with the goal of service excellence, then the probability that an organization actually *provides* service excellence should be increased. Furthermore, the more clearly these management cues to employees are aligned with the mission, the more likely the organization will gain the benefits of this alignment. For example, employees should be more committed to the organization and more satisfied with their jobs and with the organization. Two research questions will be addressed:

- 1) What are the underlying factors which compose the specific strategy, staffing, and systems alignment items in our instrument?
- 2) Which alignment factors (if any) relate to positive employee outcomes such as employee commitment and satisfaction?

The purpose of this article is to advance the understanding of mission alignment in health care by applying a new instrument, which was originally developed and applied to hospitality organizations, that measures those key organizational factors suggested by research as important signals or cues to ensuring mission alignment.² Specifically, the alignment instrument tested the relationship between the cues sent by what management says, does, and writes regarding its strategic and tactical factors, staffing policies and procedures, and systems designs that should be linked to the organization's mission of service excellence.

METHODOLOGY

ALIGNMENT INSTRUMENT

The included questionnaire items were derived from the hospitality and service management literature^{6,21,22} and have been empirically tested in a hospitality

application.² The questions were divided a priori based on the way in which they are described and classified in the literature into the three categories noted above: strategy/tactical factors, staffing policies and procedures factors, and system design factors.

- Strategic factors include the mission alignment with departmental goals, environmental setting/physical design, annual managerial performance goals, service mission stories, events that are celebrated, and top management actions.
- Staffing factors include the mission alignment with job advertisements, interview process, on-boarding process, orientation programs, performance appraisals, rewards, and annual training.
- Systems factors include the mission alignment with feedback systems informing employees of service quality, measurement systems of service quality, service recovery systems, and service delivery systems.

The questionnaire included thirty-seven questions (see Table 1 for abbreviated versions of questionnaire items) designed to assess the degree to which measured key strategy, staffing, and system factors were present within the organization. Each item was set to a five-point Likert-type scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Prior to administration, an expert panel reviewed all questions for clarity and relevance in a health care application.

SUBJECTS

The questionnaire was then sent out to a representative sample of 250 predominately clinical employees of a large hospital located in the southeast United States, along with a cover letter from the hospital's administrator. Out of this sample, 71 respondents representing all eleven clinical departments and all levels of management responded, to yield a 29% response. Ancillary, ICU, Non-Surgical/PCU, and Rehabilitation had the largest responses. This response was felt to be adequate for an exploratory study of the application of this instrument to a health care setting.

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they believed that the items being measured were, in fact, descriptive of their organization. In addition to these perceptual measures of key strategy, staffing, and system items, the questionnaire included an organizational commitment scale,²³ four measures identified as items critical for successful employee performance in their organizational roles,²⁴ and an overall assessment of job and organizational satisfaction scale.² These latter measures were included on the questionnaire to assess the degree to which employees perceived

that their management's alignment of cues with the hospital's patient service mission yielded beneficial outcomes for both the organization and its employees.

ANALYSIS

The analysis of the data was achieved in two steps. First, the thirty-seven questionnaire items on the organizational alignment measure were factor-analyzed in one of two groupings. The items were sorted according to whether they assessed employee perceptions of (1) managerial or organizational actions, policies, and systems or (2) beneficial employee outcomes. The purpose of this distinction between items was to separate the assessment of beneficial employee outcomes from the factors that may play a role in influencing them. With each item set, the factors that emerged for the employees at the hospital were named according to the thematic thread that tied them together.

Then, the capacity of the identified factors to explain the variation in the beneficial employee outcomes was analyzed using multiple regression. These beneficial outcomes include employee commitment to the organization and job, employee satisfaction with the organization and job, and four beneficial employee outcomes identified by Buckingham and Coffman:²⁴

- 1) I know what is expected of me on the job.
- 2) I am able to do what I do best.
- 3) I regularly receive recognition or praise for doing my job well.
- 4) My supervisor, or someone at work, cares about me as a person.

The principal component estimator converged to a proper solution for the factor analysis of managerial/organizational actions, policies, and systems related to customer service. This analysis extracted eight factors (principal components) from the item data using Kaiser's rule. The results were orthogonally rotated using the Varimax procedure. The resulting underlying factors and the individual items composing each are summarized in Table 1. Display of the results in Table 1 was simplified for interpretation by showing only those loadings exceeding a value of .50. Factor 8 may be considered tenuous given that only one item loaded higher than .50 on that factor, but interest in the subject of this item persuaded us to retain it.

Together, the eight factors were capable of explaining roughly 81% of variation in the item variances. Results for the communalities suggest that the extracted factors were together capable of explaining from 68% to 96% of the item variances. Communalities may be interpreted as reliabilities revealing the relationship

TABLE 1

Factor Analysis of Alignment Items (Independent Variables)

	Factor Coefficients
Factor 1: Measures Aligned With Service Mission	
20. Management shares data on how well their units score on providing service to other departments	.817
18. Customer service performance scores are shared across units	.812
15. Management has standards of service quality for things our patients tell us are important	.803
21. Management seeks employee feedback on how well it supports employees doing their jobs	.787
23. Management compares our customer service performance scores to those of other organizations	.776
17. We consistently share customer feedback with our employees	.757
29. Annual continuing education refreshers include how to provide excellent customer service	.728
19. Comparisons of employee satisfaction scores are shared across units/departs	.720
27. Commitment to customer service is used for hiring decisions	.697
33. We train employees to properly respond to customer service failures	.684
26. We ask applicants about customer service commitment in interviews	.665
24. Management reminds staff members of service excellence in regular staff meetings	.659
16. We ask our patients about any complaints they have about our service	.640
37. Management shows its commitment to excellent customer service by visibly walking the talk	.622
34. We empower employees to resolve customer service problems	.620
31. Customer service is formally rewarded in our reward system	.583
Factor 2: Rewards Aligned With Service Mission	
41. Management rewards managers on how well their units provide service to external suppliers	.921
38. Management rewards department managers on customer service performance	.853
40. Management rewards managers on how their unit provides excellent service to other units	.829
39. Management rewards managers on how well their units do on employee satisfaction measures	.808
35. Management has formal celebrations for those providing excellent customer service	.652
36. Management gives our employees pens/awards/symbols for excellent customer service	.592
Factor 3: Employee Communications Aligned With Service Mission	
28. We explain commitment to customer service in new employee orientation	.833
25. Recruitment literature includes commitment to excellent guest service	.771
32. Poor customer service may cause employee discipline/discharge	.715
Factor 4: Service Mission and Values Formalized	
6. Corporate values include commitment to customer service	.846
5. Mission statement includes commitment to customer service	.778
7. Customer service excellence is included in managers'/supervisors' annual goals/plan/objectives	.731
Factor 5: Customer Communications Aligned With Service Mission	
14. We inform our patients about everything related to their hospital experience	.824
22. We consistently educate our customers so their expectations are consistent with what we do	.754
30. Customer service is included in our annual performance evaluations	.595
Factor 6: Service Recovery Systems Aligned With Service Mission	
12. We consistently fix service problems patients tell us about	.745
13. We enable our patients to co produce their own experience	.582
11. We consistently collect info about customer satisfaction	.503
Factor 7: Physical Environment Aligned With Service Mission	
8. Our physical facility/room layout is customer friendly	.877
9. Our environment is designed to be customer friendly	.801
Factor 8: Queue Management Aligned With Service Mission	
10. We record how long patients wait for service	.643
Alignment items appear in questionnaire as items numbers 5–41.	

between a given item and the underlying constructs for which it is a proxy. Sufficiently high communalities testify to the quality of the overall measure as they suggest that the item variances are explained well by the

underlying factors. Based on the present results, the average differences among participant responses to the questionnaire items (i.e., item variances) were adequately explainable by the factors identified as a part of the

analysis. Therefore, all items warranted inclusion in this analysis.

One factor (principal component) was extracted from the nine items pertaining to Organizational Commitment using principal component analysis (see Table 2a). All items on the scale loaded sufficiently strongly with Factor 1, suggesting they all thematically pertained to Organizational Commitment. Together, the factor was capable of explaining roughly 69.9% of variation in the item variances. All items were deemed acceptable for inclusion in this analysis, although the explanation variance in item 42 was comparatively less relative to the other items. Consultation of the results for the communalities suggested that the capacity of this single factor to explain item variation varied by item (see Table 2b). This single factor explained variation in responses to item 42 with the least at 26.5% and responses to item 46 the most at 83.8%. All items were deemed acceptable for inclusion in this analysis, although the explanation variance in item 42 was comparatively less relative to the other items.

One factor (principal component) was extracted from the five items pertaining to Satisfaction with Job and Organization using principal component analysis (see Table 3a). All items on the scale loaded strongly with a single factor, suggesting they all thematically pertained to Satisfaction with Job and Organization. Together this one factor was capable of explaining 78.2% of variation in the item variances. Consultation of the results for the communalities suggested that the capacity of this single factor to explain item variation varied slightly by item (see Table 3b). This factor explained variation in responses to item 56 the least at 62.2% and responses to item 57 the most at 87.8%.

Because there was no theoretical reason to factor analyze the measured items identified by Buckingham and Coffman as beneficial outcomes for employees, the questions representing these outcomes, questions 51 through 54, were not factor-analyzed. They were instead individually investigated as outcomes as an additional perspective on the value of alignment to individual organizational members. All eight factors used in previous

TABLE 2

Organizational Commitment

	Component	
(a) Component Matrix*	1	
46. I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization.	.915	
48. I am extremely glad that I chose this organization to work for over others I was considering at the time I joined.	.895	
49. I really care about the fate of this organization.	.893	
47. This organization really inspires the very best in me in the way of job performance.	.878	
43. I talk up this organization to my friends as a great organization to work for.	.876	
50. For me, this is the best of all possible organizations for which to work.	.848	
45. I find that my values and the organization's values are very similar.	.841	
44. I would accept almost any job assignment to keep working for this organization.	.787	
42. I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization be successful.	.515	
(b) Communalities**	Initial	Extraction
42. I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization be successful.	1.000	.265
43. I talk up this organization to my friends as a great organization to work for.	1.000	.768
44. I would accept almost any job assignment to keep working for this organization.	1.000	.620
45. I find that my values and the organization's values are very similar.	1.000	.708
46. I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization.	1.000	.838
47. This organization really inspires the very best in me in the way of job performance.	1.000	.772
48. I am extremely glad that I chose this organization to work for over others I was considering at the time I joined.	1.000	.801
49. I really care about the fate of this organization.	1.000	.798
50. For me, this is the best of all possible organizations for which to work.	1.000	.720

*Extraction method: principal component analysis; one component extracted.

**Extraction method: principal component analysis.

TABLE 3

Satisfaction With Job and Organization

	Component	
(a) Component Matrix*	1	
57. Overall, I feel that this is a highly professional organization.	.937	
59. Overall, I am satisfied with this organization as a place to work.	.922	
58. Overall, I am satisfied with my job in this organization.	.903	
55. Overall, I feel that management treats employees as customers in this organization.	.862	
56. Overall, I feel that this organization respects my training and experience.	.789	
(b) Communalities**	Initial	Extraction
55. Overall, I feel that management treats employees as customers in this organization.	1.000	.744
56. Overall, I feel that this organization respects my training and experience.	1.000	.622
57. Overall, I feel that this is a highly professional organization.	1.000	.878
58. Overall, I am satisfied with my job in this organization.	1.000	.816
59. Overall, I am satisfied with this organization as a place to work.	1.000	.850

*Extraction method: principal component analysis; one component extracted.

**Extraction method: principal component analysis.

analyses as predictors were in turn used to predict the variation in employee responses to questions 51–54.

RESULTS

ALIGNMENT DETERMINANTS OF ORGANIZATION/JOB COMMITMENT AND SATISFACTION

Table 4 shows regression results relating to the eight alignment variables (i.e., the independent variables) to both organization/job commitment and organization/job satisfaction. Both regression equations are statistically significant. As expected, collinearity, as determined by the variance inflation factor, was not a concern in either equation given that the Varimax rotational procedures were used in creating the factor scores. Moreover, there was no evidence of heteroskedasticity or linearity in either equation.

Only Factor 1 (Measures Aligned with Service Mission) was a significant predictor of employee commitment to the job and the organization. This means that employees who perceived an alignment between the organization's service mission and the measures used to evaluate employee and organizational performance were more likely to be committed to their job and the organization. Those perceiving a lesser degree of such alignment between the service mission and the evaluation methods used to assess performance were less likely to exhibit such commitment.

Table 4 also indicates the alignment variables which were significantly related to employee satisfaction with

the job and the organization. Three alignment variables were significant predictors of employee satisfaction: Factor 1 (Measures Aligned With Service Measures), Factor 3 (Employee Communications Aligned with Service Mission), and Factor 8 (Queue Management Aligned with Service Mission). These data indicate that those employees who perceive an alignment between the organization's service missions and its measures, employee communications, and queue management are more likely than others to be satisfied with their job and the organization.

ALIGNMENT DETERMINANTS OF OTHER BENEFICIAL EMPLOYEE OUTCOMES

Table 5 shows regression results relating the eight alignment variables to four beneficial employee outcomes identified by Buckingham and Coffman.²⁴ Across all four dependent variables, employees' perceptions of the degree to which "Measures Aligned with Service Mission" (Factor 1) explained responses to a statistically significant degree ($p < .01$ for three of the four). Those who perceive an alignment between the organization's service mission and measures used to evaluate service performance were more likely than others to perceive that they know what is expected of them on the job, believe they are able to do their best work every day, perceive that they regularly receive recognition or praise for doing their job well, and they feel their supervisor or someone at work cares about them as a person.

The four beneficial employee outcomes were also statistically related to additional factors. Employee

TABLE 4

Regression and Correlation Results Relating the Eight Alignment Variables to Organization Commitment and to Satisfaction With Job and Organization (t values in parentheses)

Factors	Independent Variables (Alignment Variables)	Commitment (Dependent Variable)	Correlation	Satisfaction (Dependent Variable)	Correlation
Factor 1	Measures Aligned with Service Mission	.753 (5.92)**	.735**	.592 (4.72)**	.383*
Factor 2	Rewards Aligned with Service Mission	-.131 (-0.98)	.173	-.104 (-0.89)	-.126
Factor 3	Employee Communications Aligned with Service Mission	.161 (1.03)	.051	.273 (2.40)*	.331*
Factor 4	Service Mission and Values Formalized	.122 (0.99)	.157	.045 (0.41)**	.406**
Factor 5	Customer Communications Aligned with Service Mission	.086 (0.76)	-.006	.057 (0.55)**	.473**
Factor 6	Service Recovery Systems Aligned with Service Mission	-.069 (-0.56)	.122	-.020 (-0.17)	-.159
Factor 7	Physical Environment Aligned with Service Mission	.043 (0.36)	.017	.187 (1.73)	.208
Factor 8	Queue Management Aligned with Service Mission	.076 (0.60)	.153	.269 (2.36)	-.134
R ²		.713		.715	
F		8.68**		9.40**	

*p < .05

**p < .01

perceptions of how well their organization has their “Service Mission and Values Formalized” (Factor 4) predicted whether employees believe they know what is

expected of them on the job to a statistically significant degree (p < .05). Separately, employee perceptions of the degree to which they perceived “Rewards Aligned

TABLE 5

Regression Results Relating the Eight Alignment Variables to Four Beneficial Employee Outcomes Identified by Buckingham and Coffman (t values in parentheses)

Independent Variables (Alignment Variables)	Know Job Expectations	Do What I Do Best Daily	Receive Recognition Regularly	Supervisor Cares About Me
(Constant)	4.312 (45.11)**	4.026 (30.66)**	3.564 (22.61)**	4.205 (46.79)**
1. Measures Aligned with Service Mission	2.58 (2.11)*	.752 (5.27)**	.748 (3.65)**	.472 (4.04)**
2. Rewards Aligned with Service Mission	-.134 (-1.18)	-.047 (-0.36)	-.010 (-0.05)	-.260 (-2.40)*
3. Employee Communications Aligned with Service Mission	.183 (1.65)	-.014 (-0.11)	-.099 (-0.54)	.052 (0.49)
4. Service Mission and Values Formalized	.265 (2.47)*	-.102 (-0.82)	.019 (0.11)	.112 (1.10)
5. Customer Communications Aligned with Service Mission	.110 (1.08)	.179 (1.50)	.296 (1.73)	.279 (2.87)**
6. Service Recovery Systems Aligned with Service Mission	-.146 (-1.26)	-.179 (-1.33)	-.030 (-0.16)	-.062 (-0.56)
7. Physical Environment Aligned with Service Mission	.131 (1.23)	-.041 (-0.34)	-.027 (-0.15)	.173 (1.72)
8. Queue Management Aligned with Service Mission	-.105 (-0.93)	.045 (0.35)	.247 (1.33)	-.060 (-0.57)
R ²	.448	.572	.512	.577
F	2.94*	5.016**	3.93*	5.12**

*p < .05

**p < .01

with Service Mission” (Factor 2) and “Customer Communications Aligned with Service Mission” (Factor 5) predicted to a statistically significant degree whether they feel their supervisor or someone at work cares about them as a person.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study offer some interesting insights into the importance of developing managerial strategies that align the organizational policies and practices to the mission. Therefore, we looked more closely at the component items of the factors to see how the individual items correlated to the dependent variables of interest in this study.

In particular, we wanted to see which specific cues had the strongest relationship to the employees’ commitment to the organization and his or her satisfaction with the job and organization. These two employee outcomes have been found to be strong predictors of other positive organizational outcomes, including higher levels of patient satisfaction^{25–28} and lower employee turnover.^{28,29}

Based on this exploratory survey, health care managers who wish to enhance their employees’ commitment to the organization, satisfaction with the job and organization, and perception of attainment of those items critical to their performance, can refer to the individual questions comprising this alignment questionnaire (see Table 1). Because Factor 1 is statistically related to all dependent variables, those identified items are a logical place to start in terms of auditing an organization alignment along the lines of that suggested by Crofts and others.¹ For example, sharing customer service data across the organization; developing standards of service quality; providing employee support; benchmarking customer service against other organizations; and measuring customer service commitment in hiring are critical management tactics to align an organization’s customer service mission with its measurement systems (Factor 1).^{14,25,28–31}

However, one should not stop with Factor 1 as Factors 2, 3, 4, and 8 also showed statistical significance to a dependent variable. For example, besides the always significant Factor 1, Factors 3 and 8 were related to satisfaction with job and organization. In a separate correlational analysis, thirty-three of the thirty-seven items were statistically significant in relation to one or more of these dependent variables. Thus, the health care manager seeking to utilize our findings should pay close attention to the individual component elements of these factors as well.

The above results tend to be mutually reinforcing, in that a number of management activities related to

customer service are also very strongly associated with various positive employee outcomes (i.e., overall satisfaction with job and organization, organizational commitment, and four other job factors associated with positive organizational outcomes). In addition, these positive employee outcomes are associated with positive organizational outcomes such as higher levels of patient satisfaction, higher levels of employee retention, and better financial performance.^{14,25,28–31}

This exploratory study is limited by its design to considering the relationship of alignment of what managers say, write, and do to cue employees about what its service mission is and the beneficial employee outcomes that should be obtained from achieving alignment. However, our data show strong relationships between those cues and the beneficial employee outcomes measured. Because there is a body of research literature that shows a strong relationship between beneficial employee outcomes and customer perceptions of service quality,³⁰ identifying the specific factors and items that lead to this linkage is a valuable addition to our understanding of the role alignment plays in health care organizational mission achievement.

These results are closely aligned with earlier work reported by Dickson and others using this same alignment measure, although there are differences. In that study of employees in a hotel, data analysis resulted in only seven factors.² These were termed in that study service culture definition, planning for service excellence, customer feedback, rewarding customer service, training, recognition, and disciplining for poor service. A close reading of the individual items comprising these factors shows consistency with the results found in this hospital study.

For example, the items that comprised that study’s “Service Culture Definition” is similar to those in this study’s “Measures Aligned with Service Mission,” and that study’s “Rewarding Service Excellence” is almost identical to this study’s “Rewards Aligned with Service Mission.” There are variations in the items loading on the other factors between the two studies and that variation merits further investigation to see whether this is an artifact of the questionnaire or represents the sensitivity of the questionnaire to pick up differences in how employees in different organizations, or even in different industries, see their organizations.

The results of both studies using this alignment measure suggest support for the common sense notion that managers can impact mission achievement through consistent alignment of its actions, words, and systems design. Although our study addresses a customer service mission, we believe similar results would be found for other elements of a mission statement. By focusing on the specific cues identified in this study to obtain the beneficial employee outcomes measured, management

has a tool to diagnose their own organization's strategic and tactical practices, human resources policies and procedures, and the design and implementation of their customer support systems.

Based on the established linkage between customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction,^{25,29,31} it seems reasonable to conclude that the more positively employees see their level of organizational commitment, critical job factors, and overall satisfaction with job and organization associated with these cues, the more likely it is that customer satisfaction will result. In other words, management can focus on these critical cues to shape a service culture and, by keeping them aligned, can positively impact both employee outcomes and customer satisfaction.

This exploratory investigation indicates that this instrument offers considerable promise in identifying the factors that management influences, which when aligned with mission have a positive relationship with the positive employee outcomes associated with its service mission. It also shows that the degree to which an organization is aligned with its service mission has a strong relationship with the degree to which its employees believe that they are committed to the organization and feel satisfied with the organization and their jobs. Discovering a positive linkage between these cues and beneficial employee outcomes supports the concept that the proposed alignment instrument is capable of diagnosing and measuring such alignment. Further work, however, needs to be done to validate the instrument with a larger representative sample and in differing health care contexts.

The measure should also be used at the unit level and in conjunction with measures of customer satisfaction to assess the linkage between employee perception of mission alignment and positive customer outcomes. Additionally, organizational and unit performance measures should be added to future studies to ensure that both the customer service mission and the firm's ability to sustain itself in a competitive marketplace are assessed against the degree to which the firm and its employees are aligned. Given the strength of the relationships seen in this current study, it appears that the proposed instrument merits further investigation in its measurement of service mission alignment. It has the potential to become an effective diagnostic tool to assess the health care organization's ability to implement a customer service mission and achieve or sustain competitive advantage.

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