Metaphors of Alignment & Coherence



Orchestra

- Every musician has a different role, but they follow the same score.
- The conductor ensures timing and coordination.
- Individual excellence matters, but collective harmony matters more.



Flying V Geese

- Each bird contributes to the lift of the others.
- Every bird knows the system. Knowledge is inherited and taught.
- Leadership rotates, but the system still works.



Rowing Team (Crew)

- Everyone rows in the same direction and rhythm.
- Even strong rowers slow the boat if they are out of sync.
- Alignment is not a one-time event; it requires constant adjustment.



Building a Skyscraper

- Every component bears load differently.
- Failure in one section affects the whole structure, especially the foundation under the earth that most don't see.
- Systems are only as strong as the connections between parts.



Spine/Back

- The spine provides central support. The cord carries the core signals. The vertebrae are distinct but connected. Nerves connect the whole body. This system needs both structure and communication to function well, to move together without becoming rigid.
- The most important work is often invisible.
- Alignment allows movement. Misalignment creates pain and limits motion. Alignment is ongoing maintenance, not a one-time fix.



Gears in a Machine

- Individual gears have distinct functions, and misalignment causes friction and inefficiency. If one gear breaks, the whole machine can go down in flames.
- We don't put unnecessary or extra parts in a machine.
- It's not just about the gears, but also about the oil or little things that keep it all working smoothly. Coordination matters as much as capability.



Threads Through a Vibrant Tapestry

- Up close, individual threads can look small, separate, or disconnected.
- Alignment means each thread moves in a compatible direction and contributes to the same larger pattern.
- Coherence emerges from connected actions over time.

Based on the Michigan Virtual blog post Choosing Your Next Right Move: How Metaphors Help District Leaders Build Alignment and Coherence in Their Complex Systems by Tovah Sheldon (September 24, 2026).

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