

How Accountability Aligns Behind Shared Purpose



By Tony Sutton

SVP Product Development

I like big challenges. I enjoy driving the strategic changes required to solve those complex puzzles. My comfort zone is somewhere near the head of the spear that breaks into unexplored territory. That's what motivates me - what gives me energy. For relaxation, I work with my hands to quiet my brain. In my workshop at home, I am currently finishing a 25-foot, 600-pound ball point pen that I hope will set a new Guinness World Record. And before you write me off as either an eccentric or lone-wolf commando, let me explain.

I am an engineer by training and disposition.

As the head of Navistar's product development team, I am hard-wired to think about finding better ways to do things. Empowering and channeling the creativity of our engineering team is a personal priority. I want them to wake up, as I do, excited about the problems we can solve, the processes we can improve, the component packaging we can simplify.

That's why Navistar's purpose statement makes so much sense to me. Engineers are uniquely positioned to do exactly what it says: *reimagine how to deliver what matters*. Change is implicit in the word *reimagine*. So is creativity. We became engineers because we are good at finding a better way to do things. But two of the biggest challenges we face relate to accountability and alignment.

First, let's consider accountability.

Traditionally, engineers, including me, are held accountable to working within basic paradigms. In almost 30 years in the business, I've never had a project where I've been directed to spend as much money as I want, use as many people as I need, and take as long as it takes. Usually, all three are in short supply. That's why we establish paradigms to help us manage cost, efficiency, quality, responsiveness, and all the deliverables engineers must sort through and prioritize to deliver great solutions. We hold ourselves accountable to these fundamentals. But sometimes, the basic guardrails we've set up to keep people safely on the right road grow into huge barriers that block our perspectives and trap our imaginations.

Here's a case in point. When our customers order a new truck, we consider all the equipment they need, their chassis-packaging requirements, their specific application, and customize the build accordingly. As a result, there are thousands of different ways to customize a vehicle that require variations in where to install basic components. When I asked my team to come up with one solution for a specific component that would work for every configuration, they said, "that's impossible." I secretly thought, "that's awesome - a puzzle worth solving." What I *said* was, "let's start by getting it down to three or four, and we'll work from there."

This was a long journey that makes for a longer story. We can jump to the ending. What made the task impossible was that the team assumed they had to continue using the conventional components trucks have used forever. The option reimagining a new solution was taken off the table because the team thought it would be too expensive. But when we built the business case, it proved that the change would be better for the customer's total cost of ownership. And the savings to Navistar, by eliminating all those build configurations, amounted to millions of dollars. Plus, it will let us redeploy those imaginative engineers who were stuck configuring traditional components; we will now have 30 more people developing exciting, new and necessary



advanced technologies.

My point is engineers are disciplined problem solvers who hold themselves accountable to whatever parameters they're given. They really want to do the right thing. By holding them accountable to our purpose statement, we give them permission to shake up the paradigms. In fact, it makes it *their job* to reimagine everything we do. That is incredibly liberating and rewards the innovative thinking Navistar needs to lead our industry into the future.

Now, let's talk about alignment.

In any large organization, there is a tendency to work in silos. The result is that if there is a barrier in the way – maybe a huge rock – one team might manage to push it out of the way, but into someone else's path. And that team might push it back or dig a tunnel under it. But while digging, they fail to notice that someone else is already building a bridge there that will block their exit. What needs to happen, but often doesn't, is that everyone first agrees on where the rock should end up so that they can easily push it there together. In my experience, the team that wins is the team that wins collaborating with a shared purpose. Every time.

This is what happens when we are aligned behind a shared purpose. At Navistar, when we agree to reimagine how to deliver what matters, we are obligated to step out of our silos and agree on precisely what does matter. In the case I just cited, what mattered wasn't the cost of the component, but the overall give-and-take along the entire value chain.

For my team, we have explicitly empowered everyone to reimagine what matters to dealers and customers. We are listening more intently to them than ever. In fact, during the darkest days of the pandemic, we used HoloLens mixed-reality technology to let our engineers virtually look over the shoulders of service technicians at plants and in test labs to help solve problems in real time. We got to see and hear what's top of mind with dealers and customers this way. And we discovered useful insights into things that could be simplified or improved at our end to make their jobs easier and more efficient. It's priceless.

With the entire enterprise aligned behind a single purpose, so many impossible things become possible. And when teams and departments hold themselves accountable for delivering what matters to their respective stakeholders, we can drive rapid progress. When people have the ability and authority to execute, because they know where they're headed, and they know that what they're doing is moving Navistar to where we want to be, that drives strategic innovation.

In just the last couple of years, we've been able to focus more on future growth and innovation. We are applying for more patents than ever. In just the first half of this year, we've already tripled what we've done in the past three years together.

I keep giving the team complex challenges at work to encourage them to break down paradigms. It's not easy or comfortable, but they are great engineers, and they will rise to the occasion and make us all proud. Today individual component packaging – tomorrow, something we haven't imagined. Yet.

Are you still wondering about that 600-pound pen? When I was living in India with my little girl, she challenged me to do it. It was sort of a pet project. I was a single parent in a foreign land, and it gave us something to share as we drew up plans and talked about how we'd set a new world record. Ten years later, my little girl needed a good laugh. I had a workshop and restless hands. So, I resurrected the project.

I believe my Navistar colleagues, like me, have energy and imagination they are eager to put to good use on something that matters. We are engineers. Our project is the future of transportation.