

# Meet Ronnie

What Alignment Actually Looks Like When It Works



I'm not sure I knew what "the alignment economy" meant when I first started using the phrase. I mean, I knew what I meant by it — I just wasn't sure I could explain it to someone in an elevator without losing them at "macroeconomic structural misalignment." So I stopped trying to explain it that way.

Instead, I tell people about Ronnie.

It was 1994. I was a young middle manager at McDonnell Douglas in Long Beach, walking the floor the way I always did — not because anyone told me to, but because that's where you actually find out what's going on. I'd stop and talk to people. Ask how things were going. Half the time I learned more in those five minutes than I did in a week of meetings.

On this particular day I stopped at a small group and asked the usual question. "How's everything going?"

One of the guys — Ronnie, maybe 23 or 24 years old — lit up. And I mean lit up. He had the kind of energy that makes you stop whatever you're thinking about and just listen.

"Life is great," he said. "I've got a great girlfriend, a kick ass job building airplanes, and I own 22 pairs of jeans."

I probably nodded and said something completely forgettable. But I've been thinking about that last sentence for thirty years.

Twenty-two pairs of jeans.

Now I want to be clear — I'm not here to tell you what success should look like. That's kind of the whole point. Ronnie had his own unit of measure, and by that measure, he was crushing it. He was young, he was proud, he was building something with his hands that would carry people across oceans. And he could afford more jeans than he probably needed. Life. Was. Great.

That's what alignment looks like when it works.

It's not a org chart. It's not an engagement survey score. It's a 23-year-old on a factory floor who feels so connected to the value of his contribution that he measures his prosperity in blue denim and tells his boss about it with a straight face and zero embarrassment.

He wasn't disconnected from the output of his work. He knew what he was building. He knew it mattered. And the economy — at least in that moment — was giving him something back that he could see, feel, and hang in his closet.

Here's what I wonder now, thirty years later: how's Ronnie's collection holding up?

Because I know how the story goes. McDonnell Douglas started shedding jobs not long after that conversation. The defense cuts came. The mergers came. Boeing absorbed what was left. Long Beach changed. And the broader economy that once allowed a factory worker to buy 22 pairs of jeans on a single income started quietly, persistently, making that harder to do.

It didn't happen all at once. It never does. It happened in the gap between wages and costs. In the distance between what we contribute and what we receive. In a thousand small misalignments that added up to something big.

That's what my book, *The Alignment Economy*, is really about. Not abstract theory — though there's some of that too, and I apologize in advance. It's about Ronnie. It's about what happens to the pride and the prosperity of working people when the connection between contribution and compensation quietly breaks down. And it's about what it looks like — what it actually looks like on the floor, in the numbers, in people's lives — when we get it right.

I hope he's still got a great girlfriend. I hope he found another kick ass job after the layoffs came.

And I really hope he's still buying jeans.

The Alignment Economy launches in July 2026. If this resonated, share it with someone who's ever measured their success in something that made perfect sense to them and nobody else.