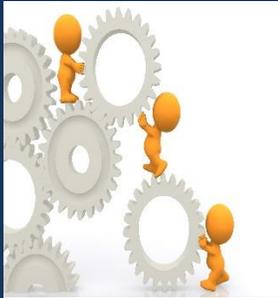


Cultural Integration: Thriving versus Surviving



The two companies have agreed in principle to merge. As employees hear about the impending merger there is growing fear, doubt and uncertainty. Leaders are too busy working on the deal or trying to make this month's numbers to respond to employees questions. The fact is, leaders know little more than the employees.

How can anyone bring their 'A' game under these conditions? Will the deal unravel like before? One thing is certain, people can expect many more months of uncertainty. Isn't there a better way to integrate so the people and businesses thrive?

Creating a strategy and integration plan alone won't lead to flawless execution. So often organizations spend tons of resources, money and time on integration plans only to toss the plans over to the leadership and assume it will all work out, and it doesn't.

Last I checked, businesses are run by people. The difference between successful and poor execution comes down to "how" people are led, "how" the leadership engages the organization to take the ideas and plans to reality. Imagine if a professional football coach created game plans, but never practiced the plays and expected the team on game day to execute the plays flawlessly. With so much riding on making the deal work, why is leadership often overlooked as a critical integration solution? What leaders do and say matters to the success of the enterprise.

Get to the heart of the differences in merging the two entities by engaging the executive team in cultural integration discussions that go beyond the tactics and logistics. Don't assume that integration periods need to be exhausting, gut-wrenching, heroic feats that leave people emotional drained and exhausted. Keen leadership with a focus on both "what" needs to be accomplished and "how" it's carried out can energize an organization. Define the leader's role and equip leaders to be able to juggle both the integration activities and the day to day business.

Below are simple success factors that are often glossed over in the race to integration. Addressing these factors as an executive team can take to make a difference from announcement to integration.

1. Gain Alignment Through the Integration Strategy

So much un-necessary churn occurs when leaders aren't clear on the direction. Define the integration strategy and how it impacts the business strategies. Communicate the direction through the words, visuals and leader actions in a way people can understand.

2. Prepare Leaders to Communicate Early and Often

Trust in management and the company begins to wane when employees hear more through the rumor mill than from the leaders. Go beyond the formal communications and equip executives to supervisors with the tools to cascade frequent, clear, consistent, credible and transparent messages. Alleviate churn by creating positive buzz, addressing issues and dispelling rumors with facts.

Realize one communication doesn't fit all and won't address individual concerns or questions. When leaders tailor messages to individual stakeholders more meaningful conversations occur and people can move to action.

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3. Keep Associates Focused on Business Performance

Business doesn't stop running in the transition. Prioritize and focus the organization on what matters. Learn to say "no" to the many ideas and "yes" to the great ones. In fluctuating times, leader may need to define the key behaviors to get the job done.

4. Champion Leadership Behaviors to Reinforce the New Way

Change brings uncertainty. People will be starved to know where they stand. At the same time, leaders can get distracted and the only input people may get is when things are going wrong. Visible and available leaders are able to provide direction and answer questions before things get off track. Leaders may need to increase feedback and coaching to keep people moving in the right direction. As people work outside their comfort zone, tension and frustration can rise. Leaders equipped with the skills to listen, collaborate, resolve conflict and energize others to action keep business running smoothly.

5. Understand the Cultural Comparisons

Organizations stumble and outcomes are stalled when leaders fail to address the cultural differences from a strategic perspective. The culture of an organization goes beyond the values, norms and beliefs. What gets "reinforced" or "discouraged" drives future behavior which leads to business outcomes. Left unchecked, the integration plan could drive the wrong behaviors and hinder future performance. Executives are encouraged to take a deep dive and review the business levers from a cultural perspective to ensure the integration plans create the intended organizational outcomes.

6. Equip Leaders to Lead the Change

Under normal business conditions, many leaders shy away from dealing with the emotional side of business. Equip leaders with tools to lead change so that fear, doubt and uncertainty can be turned into clarity and focus, excitement and engagement and energy and action to the new way. Prepare leaders to coach themselves and others through the cycle of change and to adapt to the new way. This goes beyond the basics of change management to provide real-time tools for executives and leaders to lead change in the organization.



7. Build Physical Stamina

It's easy to burn the candle at both ends during an integration as leaders and associates do double duty in running the business and managing the integration activities. Incorporate personal healthy habits including getting enough sleep and exercise. Stress reducing activities whether it is taking a walk, stretching, meditation, or mindfulness practices can be helpful to increase focus, creativity and decision making. Instead of bagels, donuts, cookies and pizza, provide healthy snacks including fruits, vegetables and protein and plenty of water to keep people performing at their best. Define a plan that gets the organization back to working a normal schedule.

8. Craft an Executive Integration Roadmap

Integration plans rarely go into the detail of "how" the leadership will carry out the activity. Activities become line items to check off without the forethought of the impact those actions have on the organization and overall results. Often it is assumed executives will know how to perform their role only to find their interaction is almost non-existent or off target. When executives have meaningful discussions regarding "how" they will lead an effort; changes are easily attained and sustained.

9. Build in Celebration

Don't wait for a major milestone to celebrate. Be on the look out to find people doing things right. Take time to be grateful and celebrate the small victories every day. Create an environment of exploration and learning as people navigate the new way. Remember, sometimes finding a mistake early is cause for celebration as the organization avoided lost time pursuing the wrong direction.

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