



Cultural Mergers

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For a project to end successfully, it must begin successfully and this statement could not be more true and the stakes higher than when it comes to mergers. Long before the CEO's are finished signing the final documents, the employees of each company have already started the process. In essence, the merger has already begun to take shape and for better or worse, sides are being drawn. Therefore, before engaging in any kind of intercultural event, try to get a good sense of your own culture. Train yourself in being culturally sensitive by visiting other organizations and figuring out how their assumptions differ from yours.

If you have the initiative in a merger, acquisition, or joint venture, try to visit the other organization and experience, as much as you can, how things are done there. Create dialogue groups across any cultural boundary that becomes apparent to you. Do not expect goodwill and experience to produce mutual understanding. Both cultural units need to learn to be reflective to get in touch with their own and each other's assumptions; this can only be successfully accomplished with the dialogue format.

If you are trying to gain mutual understanding between two or more cultures, you must create a dialogue form of conversation. This is best achieved by an outside and objective facilitator who can choreograph the conversation as well as ensure the focus and flow remains consistent with the original objectives. Below is a general outline of what should take place for an initial meeting.

1. Select ten to twenty people who represent the two cultures equally.
2. Seat everyone in a circle, or as near as possible.
3. Lay out the purpose of the dialogue: For example, "to get a sense of the similarities and differences in our cultures and from this learn to listen more reflectively to ourselves and each other."
4. Start the conversation by having the members in turn check-in by introducing who they are and what goals they have for the meeting.
5. After everyone has checked in, the facilitator should launch a very general question, such as, what is it like to be in this company, given the current industry and economic climate?" Everyone in the circle should, in turn, answer the question from his or her company and perspective and with the ground rule that there be no interruptions or questions until everyone has given an answer.

6. The facilitator should be observing the group dynamics and encourage an open conversation on what everyone has just heard without the constraints of proceeding in order or having to withhold questions and comments.
7. If the topic runs dry or the group loses energy, the facilitator should introduce another question. Such as, “how are decisions made in this organization” (in my experience, body language, people communicating through eye contact etc will tell a lot about who may want to speak up but be unwilling or unable to due to ‘unspoken cultural demands.’ Comment about confidentiality or the undercurrent the group may be feeling. Key point—discuss the alligator in the corner. There will always be one and everyone knows it is there). Again have everyone in turn give an answer before general conversation begins. This will encourage input from everyone and will detract from the more vocal members commanding the group dynamics.
8. Let the differences emerge naturally; don’t make general statements, because the purpose at this stage is to uncover mutual understanding, not necessarily clear description.
9. After a couple of hours, ask the group to pole itself by asking each person in turn to share one or two insights about his or her own culture or the other one; Another question that may encourage productive dialogue is; “what is one idea, concept, insight, or statement you received during this meeting that made our time together valuable for you?” I will always have a non participant writing all of these notes on flip chart paper taped to the walls. This way people can think and speak freely and a detailed description is available to be distributed later or for follow-up meetings.
10. The answers gleaned from these last set of questions will in turn spark new insight for both the members and the facilitator. These should be kept and used as follow-up information.

Realities About What Culture Is

Culture is the shared tactic assumptions of a group that it has learned in coping with external tasks and dealing with internal relationships.

Although culture manifests itself in overt behavior, rituals, artifacts, climate, and espoused value, its essence is the shared tactic assumptions. As a responsible leader, you must be aware of these assumptions and manage them, or they will manage you.

Unless your organization is a brand new conglomerate of people from other organizations, it has formed a culture that influences all of your thinking and behavior.

If your organization is a new mix, without prior shared experience, then all members bring their prior culture experience to the new situation and seek to impose it on that situation.

The quickest way to create a new culture in such a situation is to give the people a compelling, common task so that together they can build a new set of assumptions.

The strength and depth of an organization's culture reflects (1) the strength and clarity of the founder or the organization, (2) the amount and intensity of shared experiences that organization members have had together, and (3) the degree of success the organization has had.

Culture is, therefore, the product of social learning. Ways of thinking and behavior that are shared and that work become elements of culture.

You cannot, therefore, "create" a new culture. You can demand or stimulate a new way of working and thinking; you can monitor it to make sure that it is done; but members of the organization do not internalize it and make it part of the new culture unless, over time, it actually works better.

A given organization's culture is right so long as the organization succeeds in its primary task. If the organization begins to fail, this implies that elements of the culture have become dysfunctional and must change. But the criterion of the right culture is the pragmatic one of what enables the organization to succeed in its primary task.

As the external and internal conditions of an organization change, so does the functionality, or rightness, of a given culture assumptions change. Culture evolves with the fluid circumstances of the organization.

The essential elements of culture are invisible. They are taken for granted and have dropped out of awareness. But they can be brought back into awareness.

Failure to understand culture and take it seriously can have disastrous consequences for an organization.

Superficial understanding of culture can be as dangerous as no understanding at all.

Theory and concepts gained from Edgar Schein.