
Practical Tips for Merger Communication

By Barbara Fagan-Smith and Ruta Skelton, ABC

At a time when the senior leaders at organizations undergoing a merger are tempted to say as little as possible, quite the opposite is necessary.

When two companies merge, the complexities, emotions and often sweeping changes behind the deal can hinder effective communication to key stakeholders. Yet, a well planned and implemented communication strategy contributes to the very success of the merger itself. How can you overcome the obstacles to developing and delivering on a merger communication strategy? There are some tried-and-true approaches to do so, but, first, what do we mean by "strategy"?

Strategy is the science and the art of using all of the resources of an organization to execute approved plans as effectively as possible. You need to be data-driven and logical, while also being open-minded and creative, to develop a highly effective communication strategy.

Yet what is the value of strategy without tactics? If you have a brilliant plan but don't follow through with it, it's meaningless. Likewise, if you focus on tactics without strategy, you will end up wasting time. Having a strategy saves time and energy. It ensures that the actions of the tactics of you take are effective and efficient.

It is vital to develop a detailed, ongoing communication strategy and tactical plan that includes essential elements, such as

- Leadership commitment to consistent and ongoing communication
- Strategic communication partnership
- A focus on face-to-face communication
- Continual monitoring of the employee "pulse"
- Employee ability to ask questions and get answers
- The ability to share issues.

Leadership Commitment

At a time when the senior leaders at organizations undergoing a merger are tempted to say as little as possible, quite the opposite is necessary. Leadership needs to be committed to consistent and ongoing communication throughout the merger process to explain both what is known and

Giving employees the opportunity to ask a merger question, any time, and receive a speedy response builds valuable goodwill and credibility.

what is not known. Management visibility and accessibility is key to building employee understanding and support for the merger.

Executives should be highly visible at regular senior leader meetings, all-employee meetings, group-specific meetings and through merger features posted on the company's intranet.

Communication Partnerships

To do a good job communicating a merger, the internal communication department needs to build solid working relationships with other groups in the organization, such as public relations, analyst relations and legal. It can't be done in a vacuum. Messages and timing need to be coordinated. The assumption is that everything said internally is shared externally, so this makes it difficult to give employees additional or advanced information. However, building these communication partnerships paves the way to communicating as much as possible, when possible, rather than facing communication paralysis.

Face-to-Face Communication

Much has been said about the importance of face-to-face employee communication, but nowhere is it as important as when an organization is undergoing profound change, such as during a merger. Managers throughout all levels of the organization need to be prepared to respond to employee questions (even when there are no answers), whether in group settings or one on one. Manager briefings, manager communication toolkits and manager web sites are all useful tools and orient new teams quickly. It's vital to build these into the overall merger communication strategy.

Monitoring the Employee "Pulse"

Having a plan and executing on the plan are not enough. By continually surveying employees to check for understanding and monitoring their "pulse," a merger communication team can calibrate its strategy and tactics for maximum effectiveness. Brief, random-sample online surveys do this job well. Sample questions might include

- How would you describe your current level of support for the merger?
- How has your level of support for the merger changed over the past month?
- How has this meeting affected your confidence in the business value of the merger?
- Because of this event, do you have a better understanding of the strategic rationale for the merger?

Ability to Ask Questions

Giving employees the opportunity to ask any merger question, any time, and receive a speedy response builds valuable goodwill and credibility. One company introduced an "Ask a Merger Question" and an "Ask an Integration Question" service on its intranet. Employee questions were funneled to the appropriate executive or content expert for responses, which were then posted. In addition, weekly reports outlining the break-

down of questions by category gave the communication team keen insight into where they should focus their energies.

Sharing Issues Up the Line

Successful merger communication also involves sharing issues, when they surface, to the very top. This ensures quick action before they take on a life of their own. A process for quickly responding to these issues and making decisions about follow-up steps needs to be built into the strategy.

If a merger communication strategy is implemented successfully, the communication function moves from a simple, two-way model to a continuous cycle. Strategy, brand, culture and communication are integrated. Benchmarking is established. Internal communication is integrated into leadership development, and communication strategy becomes an integral part of business strategy.