



Mergers: Fusion or Confusion

"It's not rocket science. It's everyone being on the same page and doing it well."

[Richie McCaw, current captain of New Zealand's national rugby team, the All Blacks, commenting on his team's latest major challenge, 11 September 2010.]

A merger-in-progress of two large service groups is struggling to achieve its intentions. The distinctly different organisational cultures are not a natural mix; each has a long history of operating idiosyncratically in separate regions, serving distinctly different demographics with strong local loyalties and attachments, and of growing their own unique responses to local problems over many years. Their leadership and management practices appear to be entirely dissimilar. Poles apart, people say. Chalk and cheese. Oil and water.

What's happening within this project has many lessons for everyday leadership, management and self-management practices. In short:

- Well-honed, *generic personal and group management operating systems* can provide clarity where there is confusion, and procedural certainty when we don't know what the heck we should do next. When there is no map, they can serve as a reliable compass.
- Acquiring them should never become a matter of urgency. If you don't routinely hone and habituate them, don't expect to apply them easily in difficult times when they'll be vitally important **and** urgent.
- When engaging in joint ventures we should check the alignment of our *personal and group management operating systems* "compass" with the other parties' compasses.

The merger in question is a forced marriage; neither party has a natural inclination to join forces but they are required to bring about a wide range of services operating seamlessly over a large geographic span at a number of sites, despite major differences.

Motives are suspected. The state of the others' organisational culture is viewed with derision. Senior managers are seriously alarmed by the level of challenge ahead. Some despair at the prospect and the lack of progress. Several key players predict an expensive and messily irresolvable impasse.

Much angst centers on the difficulty of "*Getting them* [counterparts in the other organisation] *to understand what's important and what's required for this to work. They can't keep doing it the way they're used to, because that doesn't and won't work here. It shouldn't work anywhere.*"

They are not even close to being on the same page. They're reading and quoting from different books, written in languages incomprehensible to the other. And the difficulties are hugely magnified (in the order of trying to swim through molasses) when the necessary discussions are attempted between and amongst groups rather than between individuals.

While I don't know if this merger will succeed or even if it should be attempted, I can see from working closely with some of the key people involved, that many of the usual suspects for organisational dysfunction are playing themselves out. Attending to them would help the parties get closer to making headway, towards singing from the same hymn-book if not exactly the same page.

Here's a discussion about three of those, the most obvious likely (and most common) suspects:

1. People focus on tangible goals, tasks, implementation plans and other "practical" agenda while making untested, unsafe assumptions about basic processes (personal and group *management operating systems*, for example) for developing capacity and working together.

Assumptions are suppositions or premises incorporated into thinking and regarded as true. If made unawarely, reached without positive proof, or not tested with others presumed to also hold them, they may be entirely invalid and lead to misdirection, confusion, conflict, blocked progress, inappropriate conclusions, unwise plans and initiatives. [See *Clarify and Test the Working Assumptions*, in the [Leadership](#) or [Teamwork](#) sections of our subscriber library.] Many unsafe assumptions are being made in this merger.

I've asked leaders involved, *Does your work on this project involving solving problems, making decisions and plans, trying to form teams, resolve conflict and run constructive meetings?* Yes, of course, they tell me, recognising that these processes are generic and fundamental to their merger initiatives and everyday work.

I've then asked, *Have you determined for yourself, the models or conceptual frameworks and assumptions you make about these matters for your work on the merger project? Have you raised those assumptions for discussion with your counterparts with a view to reaching agreement on appropriate processes - or at least to acknowledging and working around the differences?* The answer to these questions, universally and unfortunately, is No.

Of course, those who haven't yet deliberately honed and habituated constructive *operating systems* of that kind in their day-to-day work will, of course, find it difficult or impossible to do so. Especially when those practices are most required - where differences are at their peak, tension and feelings are running high, and the consequences of misjudgement, miscommunication and failure are particularly serious. They can expect unnecessary complications and problems – although these can be significantly eased, by shifting focus. [See a discussion of *meta-level* leadership in *Lead, Manage & Strengthen Your Leadership Practices*, within the [Leadership](#) section of our subscriber library.]

My questions are intended to help *bring important unconscious assumptions to awareness*. I remind people that not all those assumptions need be addressed at once; just those that are most basic, pertinent and pressing. Methodical Priority Management suggests they should always be within the *Never Urgent, Always Important* practices category. [See *Manage Priorities, Not Time* in the [Self-Management](#) section of our subscriber library.]

Making unwise and unsafe foundational assumptions appears to be commonplace in every workplace at the start-up for example, of working-parties, project work, teamwork, meetings, planning and strategic planning, problem solving and change initiatives. As with house-painting, careful preparation is often tedious but everything applied to a poorly-prepared foundation is wasted effort.

2. Managers and leaders often have perfect hearing, but their listening is seriously impaired. In their interpersonal and relationship management practices, they tend to present, describe, explain, advocate for, justify or defend positions, rather than listen to one another to hear and understand differing perspectives – especially to resistance, concerns and anxiety about change. They tend to push predetermined solutions, or to solve problems by arguing about solutions, rather than hear and explore challenges, issues and their causes. People on the receiving-end then become more solid in their opposition to what is proposed. Opportunities to build trust, respect and understanding are lost.

“Since we think our own beliefs are based on the facts, we conclude that people who disagree with us haven’t been exposed to the right information. So when we have failed to ‘educate’ our opponents – they still refuse to become enlightened – we move from the assumption that they are ignorant to the conviction that they are stupid. Or even that they are wilfully turning their backs on the truth, and are therefore evil.”

Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error.*

When I know that whatever I say and however I choose to say it, you will honour, explore, ask questions to elicit details, and reflect and demonstrate your understanding of my intentions until you show have understood them correctly - you clarify, develop and illuminate my thinking and you gain my trust.

When you engage in discussions about problems with high-quality listening and within a methodical problem solving framework, you make the process – and progress - easier. Solutions arrived at this way are likely to deal with root causes, to endure, and not cause further problems.

That high-quality active listening and good-sense problem-solving processes are far from routine in interpersonal and group relationships, ought to be plain to anyone capable of paying attention to *process* as they also engage in workplace tasks and agenda. Trouble is, few make the effort to bring these practices to awareness and many are unconsciously incompetent in their application. I am often shocked by how unaware are managers and leaders of their skill levels in this regard. Possibilities for real collegueship can be vastly enhanced by a determination to change this. Enhancing these skills is simple, though not necessarily easy. How well do *you* listen? How do you know?

3. There is no clear Big Picture, strategic direction and few meaningful drivers with which to guide other plans, other than a loosely-stated broad intention. There is very little methodical planning, a great deal of improvisation and many unclarified assumptions made about the planning process.

It’s common for organisations, leaders, managers, groups and teams to behave as though planning is a matter of tossing ideas around, arguing about them under the misconception that they are ‘problem-solving’, ‘brainstorming’ and ‘reaching consensus’, and then somehow prioritising them as a lightly-sketched list of actions. Although this sort of improvisation may succeed, its progress is frequently marked by the eventual need to revisit the issues from scratch or by having to undo things already done.

Things won’t go according to a plan you don’t have. [See the many discussions and guides on this topic in the [Planning](#) section of this website.]

Merger and restructuring initiatives as conventionally practised often involve trying to do the wrong thing (business as usual without regard to the causes of systemic problems), better (with reduced resources and fewer people). People in these organisations who lack the ability to resist or influence the process will live through slow motion catastrophes.

Those who can influence it, hold extraordinary potential for developing everyone's capacity.

Tom Watkins
October 2010