

Getting Your Firm Culture to Support a Big Change

Want to ensure your new merger or acquisition “holds water” and succeeds over time? Want to guarantee your big internal change—new business strategy, CRM initiative, or employee incentive plan—is accepted and effectively implemented by your staff?

Donna Gaines, President of Gaines International, and Dorie Blesoff, a strategic alliance partner, have a solution: Use the power of your organizational culture.

In any scenario of large-scale design firm change, say Gaines and Blesoff, “the existing culture must be factored in. If not addressed properly, whenever there is a clash between what exists in the current culture and what is desired in terms of change, the current culture will win.”

How do you factor in your existing culture to make your change take root? Gaines and Blesoff suggest three tactics.

1. Use what's best about the past

If, for example, your firm started out as a small, proud, entrepreneurial effort, and has grown beyond recognition, look for ways to rekindle the entrepreneurial spirit while managing with updated processes and systems. If your firm has allowed autonomy and local experimentation, but now needs to standardize to increase efficiencies, find the best practices across regional or office boundaries. Take what's best about the current culture and use it to expand into new territory.

2. Watch for cultural hot spots

In preparing for an acquisition, the smallest change could cause a major reaction. If implementing a significant change, such as an ESOP, look for conflict between the proposed change and the “way we've always done it” attitude. Attend to these hot buttons:

- Autonomy vs. centralization between corporate and branches offices
- Slow decisions and 95% accuracy vs. fast decisions and 80% accuracy
- Modes and frequency of communication between departments, branch offices, and leadership
- Management focus on reliability of results (engineering culture) vs. innovation (design culture)
- Source of status: title/position vs. earning status through results
- Weight of consistent, formal policies vs. flexible, informal practices

Gain agreement from the key contributors (as many as possible), about what belief or behavior will best serve all of you going forward as a unified firm.

3. Use the familiar to support the unfamiliar

To understand the power of culture, recognize that it operates at both the conscious and unconscious levels, the formal and the informal, the spoken and the unspoken. When planning communication strategies and ways

to reinforce new beliefs and behaviors, use the familiar to introduce the unfamiliar. Starting with what you have, set expectations of change. Focus on:

- Language (acronyms, nicknames, titles, legacy names)
- Traditions (celebrations, seasonal events, emphasis on team)
- Symbols (brands, logos, how status is portrayed)
- Operational expectations (practices, “what works”)
- Rewards (method for receiving, types of, frequency of)
- Identity (who are we—to each other and to outsiders)

For big change, “Experts now advocate attentive management of cultural issues and ‘people’ factors,” say Gaines and Blesoff. Change *starts* with your people. Pay attention to them! ■

Gaines International (gainesint.com), provides executive and board-level searches and change management consulting for A/E/C firms.

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