

## From Putting Out Fires to Fueling Engagement

While the cultural issues generated by a merger present challenges, the situation is also rich with opportunity. **BY MICHAEL ROSENTHAL**



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**Q.:** "As a manager, my organization's recent merger poses two challenges. First, while our company has long prided itself on creativity, our newer colleagues are used to a more structured environment. Second, the consolidation is forcing me to ask my team to take on additional responsibilities. Any advice on how to tackle these issues without disturbing the peace?"

**A.:** Unfortunately, as much as you'd like it to be otherwise, the peace already has been disturbed.

Nevertheless, while your situation presents challenges, it's rich with opportunity. It's up to you to make the most out of the circumstances and reestablish equilibrium.

The first step is letting go of the ideas that your newer colleagues must conform to the preexisting culture and that it's healthy for job descriptions to remain static over time. Instead, commit to identifying an environment that maximizes the group's, and each individual's, full potential.

Next, assemble the entire team for a general meeting. Acknowledge this is a team issue—not a you vs.

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them or them vs. them issue—and should be handled as a team. Not only will involving everyone unite the group and better ensure buy-in to the decisions that you (as manager) ultimately will make, but it also will inform those decisions—you will be drawing upon the insights and know-how of the entire group.

Start by reminding everyone that some contributors to the situation are systemic, and go beyond the individuals, work groups, and companies involved. The economy might be at play; mergers always evoke

change and emotional responses; every department has been asked to take on more work; etc. These things are neither subjective (and shouldn't be taken personally) nor controllable. But as a team, you will work together to make the most of the situation.

Emotions are bound to be high, so bring them up for discussion: "While the merger is an exciting and positive change, many of us might be anxious or feeling other emotions as we explore uncharted territory. This is normal and understandable, and I'm here to help." It's doubtful anyone will respond in the public forum. Nevertheless, calling attention to the 800-pound gorilla tends to have a positive effect. It also opens the door to the private conversations (in which you will invite each person to express his or her emotions while you suspend judgment and supportively listen) you will have with your staff in the days that follow.

Now it's time to address the acute issues. Frame things by telling everyone you will use their input to inform your decisions. Have the more recent additions discuss the firsthand benefits they've enjoyed from a structured environment, as well as the shortcomings. The longstanding employees then should cite the benefits and costs of a less structured environment. Once these things are on the table, ask the group for their ideas on how to incorporate the best aspects from each approach. Remain open to all of their suggestions. After the meeting, you will use the information to make your decision on how to create an environment that fosters engagement and efficiency for your team. Remember to thank your colleagues for their input and, subsequently, to share why you chose to proceed in a certain way.

Try a similar approach in addressing the "additional responsibilities" issue. Assemble folks by work groups, and explore the virtues and perils of assigning certain tasks to specific individuals. Have the group formulate ideas for the best ways of moving forward. And reserve the right and responsibility for making the final decision. **1**