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Corporate Culture Research:

Clinical Research on Cultural Integration in Mergers

Summary

Cultural differences between two merging companies is a fact. As well, it seems to create unanticipated troubles. Also, the cultural change is usually bigger than is expected, even in cases where was thought to be almost none cultural differences, and especially on the worker-level it is felt more than on the management-level is often realized.

In four cases, which include some of the biggest mergers in Finland, were conducted action research processes to support the integrations, as well as to produce research data. During the processes, about 300 persons were interviewed individually and in group settings. Also, the effects of the created integration support process were observed.

The results suggest that members of organizations in mergers need help to understand and process the cultural differences, and that right kind of help is welcomed. In mergers, there happen losses of significant objects on both levels, including identity-related issues, old sociometric constructions, old management and support systems and patterns, old relations towards the management and other persons, and the objects of loyalties. These losses affect psychologically individuals. However, the common business management models, or management actions, don't support the psychological loss processing, which is, first of all, mourning. The results show that when the mourning is helped to happen, the members of organization are significantly relieved, and more able to accept the facts, and also can more wholeheartedly welcome the future. The results also show that integration on cultural, or psychological level, can be supported significantly, and that the used process reinforces motivation and commitment, as well as develop more open communication.

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Dr. Roman is conducting an extensive research project concerning corporate culture, especially in mergers and acquisitions. He has over 13 years of experience of organization development, including a post of business excellence manager and the secretary of the top-management team in an international energy company, and working as a consultant, a researcher, and managing director of consultant companies. He has education in engineering, in industrial management and energy technology. He is a doctor of technology from work psychology, and made his dissertation about dialogue in organizations. He is also Master of Quality, a specialist of organization development. Dr. Roman has six years education of group therapy, having a degree in psycho- and sociodrama, and he has specialized on systemic family therapy, being a family constellation therapist. He is also yoga teacher since 1997.



Cultural differences between two merging companies is a fact. As well, it seems to create unanticipated troubles. Also, the cultural change is usually bigger than is expected, even in cases where was thought to be almost none cultural differences, and especially on the worker-level it is felt more than on the management-level is often realized. In this article I explore the cultural questions in mergers and integration processes, and present the findings, like the relevance of mourning with a big change. The research question, leading this action research study, was: **How to support the integration culturally in mergers? And as a hypothesis and as a research strategy, the particular group and dialogue processes were used, and their effects were observed.**

The factors that promote integration in mergers and acquisitions have been identified in many studies (see e.g. Schein 1999, 2004, Taskinen 2005, Tienari et al. 1999, Buono & Bowditch 1989, Cartwright & Cooper 1993, Napier 1989, Frommer 2001, Schweiger & DeNisi 1991, Buono et al. 1985, Greenwood et al. 1994, Tienari 1996, Vaara 1999, 2002, Lohrum 1996). Many of them present that the strategic fit, organizational fit, and cultural fit, are the most relevant issues. But, much depends on the actual integration process, how the merging is actually managed. Hence, many of the researchers see that a good informing and communication, participation of the workers, justice in actions, and a good management of cultural questions are the most essential issues.

However, many of the studies have been quantitative, or based mainly on questionnaire-type surveys. This research is qualitative, and its approach is action research, or clinical research, which Schein (2004) defines as a research, whose starting-point is customer needs, or the aim to help customer, not primarily to make a research. The research data was collected in the companies while conducting a support process for integration.

Moreover, here is examined a support process in mergers, which was created based on the earlier theories and findings of other researchers, and my experience as an organization developer, consultant, and researcher investigating dialogue as a means to develop culture of organizations, as well as an action based therapist, using sociometry, psycho- and sociodrama and family constellation methods.

Corporate culture

Every organization, corporate, and group has a unique set of rules for action, a special way of thinking and behaving, which is also called as culture (Schein 2004,). Corporate culture rules how targets are set, how targets are reached for, how actions are valued and measured, and how things are communicated (Schein 1996, 1999, 2004). In its complexity, culture may seem to be difficult to reach, but it is actually visible more or less in every action in a company. For example, do we

just begin to do things, or do we first carefully examine all the facts and possibilities, e.g. conducting tests and pilots, or do we consider only some specific issues before taking an action? Or, for example, do we appreciate an open discuss about many things, or are discussions seen only as inefficient work-time utilizing? Or, are the “heroes” of the company those who can “go and do the job”, or those who take others with and help them to do their work better?

Corporate culture is always there. We have heard to be spoken about “strong” or “weak” cultures, but even a “weak” culture can be very strong; it may really rule the company. Actually, “strong” and “weak” cultures are often meant to mean as “good” and “bad” cultures. And a “good” culture can, in fact, be different things for different people.

A group or organization develops its culture according to its history, founders, directors, and experiences (Schein 1999, 2004). The unique way of handling things becomes soon self-evident, and the members learn – without being aware of what they learn – that “this is how we do things”. As a matter of fact, they have difficulties to explain what is their way, and even more, their culture. What they say, can truly be often quite opposite with their doings! This happens, when a company declares its “values” or “our way”, but is ignoring the fact that their actual way may be totally something else. It is not unusual that the written “values” and “principles” actually declares what the organization is lacking of – otherwise it would not be so obviously a thing to be underlined.

Corporate culture is a complex force-field

The problem with culture is that it *is* complicated: it is a network of human relationships with deep beliefs concerning survival, business, togetherness, and reality, and of collective forces, individual aspirations, loyalties, other players in the market, national cultures, and so on. Corporate culture is a playground for collective and individual psychology, strategic aspirations of the company, and reality of the markets.

Merging is accomplished, but the patient died

When an organization acquires another organization, or when two “equals” is merged, the cultural clash is bound to happen (ref. ...). The unspoken rules of the other organization are not visible, and therefore not so easily anticipated. Soon two self-evident ways of doing things meet, and both will fight for its right to live!

This may be seen by aggressions (or hidden aggressions), rejections, preoccupations, and projections towards the other party. In practise, these may appear as frustrations, accusing the other party of stupidity or “attitude problems”, or just overall feelings of resistance. Even years after the merging, two camps may be still there, lacking a deep communion with the other party, and even a will to understand the other side: they are “They”, and we are “We”. Or, as may also happen, and it can even be seen as a “successful integration”,

the other party has “given up” (Schein 2004), lost the war and perhaps even lost the will of living, and the best people have left the company and the former culture of success – the very reasons why the company was occupied – is ruined. The merging has been accomplished, but the patient died.

About the Research

The empirical data of the research was collected from four cases: three mergers, one telecommunication corporation and two co-operative shops, and one analysis of cultural forces in division of one energy company to two companies. The one co-operative shop merger was one of the biggest mergers in Finland. The turnovers of the two companies were between 1 and 1,3 billion euros, one company had about 400 million euros, and one company about 20 million euros.

The research approach was action research, or clinical research, which means that projects were designed to help the cultural integration, and at the same time the research data was collected.

Together, about 300 persons were interviewed in these four cases. In the study, the two co-operative shop mergers were studied in the all major business areas, which, for example, in the other case, which belongs to the biggest merger in Finland, meant to investigate actually twelve separate organizations that were put together as six organizations. Hence, the whole study actually included over 22 organizations, which means 11 integrations.

In general, the case processes included individual interviews and group interviews in top-management and worker levels, as well as dialogue meetings to process the cultural forces and how to go forward. The overall strategy in the merger cases was first to be in “the own groups” (group interviews) to investigate the own cultural background and also the experienced differences, as well as the problems in the merger process. Then the two groups were put together in a dialogue meeting.

From the biggest merger process also one-year-after investigation was done by a questionnaire to make a follow-up, and to see how things had evolved one year after the action research process. The other cases are still so recent, that the follow-up is not yet done.

The research methods were mainly qualitative from the interviews and group processes. The follow-up was quantitative.

As the process was designed to help the client, I also understood that every contact or meeting with the client is also an intervention in the organization. Hence, the research strategy was built up on the idea that there is no pure observation, but everything is an intervention (Schein 1999).

The supporting process in integrations

The process was designed basing the previous findings concerning the supporting factors in integration (look at the previous chapters). The basic concept for corporate culture came from Schein’s (1999, 2004) theory, especially the layers of culture:

1. Artefacts, the observable traces of culture, i.e. how members of an organization behave, what and how they do, what kind of procedures are used, etc.
2. Uttered values, i.e. what is said that is the values, principles, vision, mission, etc. of a company.
3. Deep assumptions, which actually lead all the actions in a company, and which usually are unconscious, hidden, and even difficult to trace.

In a half or a whole day process with from eight to fourteen participants we exposed these three layers trying to understand the culture of their organization, as well as the differences with the other party. We also used action methods to concretise, for example, history of the organization, or to create a “picture” of the organization showing how separate units were sociometrically related with each other, measuring the distance and quality of the relationship with each other, and also with the “core” of the organization.

Before these “group interviews” I conducted several individual interviews to get clearer picture of the whole, and the reality of the organization. The individual interviews served besides as contact creation with many individuals in the organization. Furthermore, the interviews provided also for the interviewees a chance for reflection, and even to get support in acute problems in their work.

After the group interviews, which were hold separately for both the merging parties, we came together in a dialogue meeting, which was meant to look together the previous findings, as well as to look forward.

I met the top-managers several times during the processes, and discussed with them about the meanings of the findings, and what to do in the future to support the integration of the company.

The empirical findings

The cultural clash is a reality

The two co-operative shop mergers are quite easy to compare with each other. One of the major differences was that the first case was a merger of two co-operative shops from *competitive* camps, while in the second case merging happened within a larger union of co-operative shops, which means that they were almost “sister” companies. In the first case this led to an assumption that there exist major differences in the corporate cultures (they were competitors and had totally different concepts), while in the second case the management supposed almost no differences (they used the same concepts, and had co-operated a long time). How-



ever, I was surprised to notice that the both cases seemed to have about as much cultural differences; both cases suffered similar problems in integration, for example, in the first case the other party was very developing oriented, which included, for instance, that they were used to have much meetings. The other party wasn't at all used to have meetings, and they were also more scared to speak aloud their criticism. It led to major stress in the persons from the "unskilled side", and they were not sure what they can express and what not. Furthermore, the other part started to look down the "unskilled", seeing them as "second class" people, or unskilled in their business.

Coincidentally, in the second case, which was first considered to have almost no cultural differences, the situation was very similar: the other party was meeting oriented, while the other party not, and instead individual work oriented. This led also problems in meetings, and also in overall integration management. It was felt that the party, which was more skilful in meetings was walking on the other party, which was more cautious (even scared of the meetings). As a result, this created aggressions in the more careful side, and also feelings of inferiority. And in contrast, this in turn created aggressions in the more develop-oriented side, and they were claiming the other party avoiding responsibility, and being unkind.

There were also many other examples of the differences between the cultures in both cases. For example, in the first case between the competitors the overall position and attitude towards management was really different. While in the other party it was allowed, even welcomed, to have other opinion than the boss, in the other party it could lead to being put in "the black list". Consequently, in the party where the managers were highly respected, even scared of, was actually only a little contact with managers and workers. It was not thinkable, for example, that a manager and a worker could come home by the same taxi after traditional Finnish Christmas party. But in the other party this was really an opposite: the managers and workers mingled a lot, and almost anyone could take a contact with the highest boss.

In the second case the attitudes and position of management were also very different. In the other party the management was really respected, almost loved from the workers side, but also – scared. The highest boss hold earlier all the threads in his hands, and he could jump up in everywhere in all the local shops, and even tell they to acquire new items, especially if the customers – with whom he also spoke a lot – had asked for it. But, in contrast, in the other party the highest boss had really low profile, not at all taking so much contact with workers and customers. He didn't intervene the daily work of the workers, and it was not thinkable that he had told to acquire some items. This major management-style difference created a lot of confusion after merging, when the dominating culture came from the "low profile management" side. As a result, the other party was expecting more visible lead-

ership, and was highly disappointed to the new management-style.

The overall climate, or culture, around the merging parties in the second case was also found to be very different, explaining also the corporate culture differences. When the area of the first party was close to the capital city, which, for example, pulled people towards itself, and had many available jobs, the area around the second party, was more far away from the capital city, being more close to another big city, but still having so much distance that it had become a centre of itself. Then, the company was playing a central role there, being one of the biggest (or the biggest) and a highly wanted employer. In contrast, the first party was not at all as central in its area, which also promoted no need to have a high profile. But the second party had very high profile, being almost every day in the local newspapers, commenting all kinds of things, etc.

Also many other background factors were found that explained the different corporate cultures. For example, in the first party, which was closer to the capital city, it was not anymore so important, where the eggs were coming from. But, in turn, in the second party, which was more agricultural area, it was much more important that where the eggs, or milk, were coming from.

In summary, all these examples reinforce the idea that every organization creates a unique culture, and that even two companies, which are thought to be very close together, may actually have major differences in their cultures, which in turn, can create unanticipated troubles in integration.

The need to reflect

The reactions of the participants in the group processes, as well as the free comments in the follow-up study, address that many members of the organizations had an unfulfilled need to reflect about the change, the merger, and also to be heard with their thoughts and experiences. While the group processes were done about one year after the merging, the participants repeatedly stated in all the cases that the process should have been done already in the beginning of the merging, "we could have gone through it so much easier". This, I think, means that firstly, they had an urgent need to get help in the merging process, secondly, they assumed that the cultural differences, which were unnoticed because they were not examined, produced much troubles, and that this process had helped them, and thirdly, they had a need to build a bridge between the parties, but this was not supported until then. However, it was not too late to get to know each other, which some of the participants stated that "it feels now that at a first time we have got to know each other".

Especially the "picture", which was created with some of the groups, was describing well the distance between the merging parties. The picture captured feelings, or experiences, that were difficult to utter by words. It also seemed to concretize the situation very

clearly; where “we” are compared with the “they”. And what was most interesting, when the picture was done again in a dialogue meeting, it showed significantly closer relationships with the merging parties. The changes were, in my thinking, astonishing big, thinking especially that the time-period between the first and the second picture were about two weeks. This means, in my opinion, that the process significantly helped the members to be more integrated.

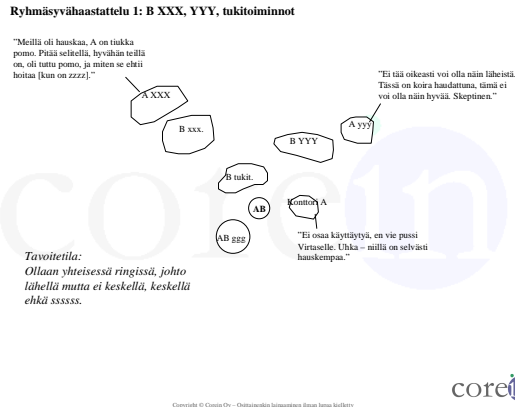


Figure 1: A picture from a group interview of the side “B”. About in the middle is the experienced “core” of the organization, which is illustrated as a circle with “AB”. The picture shows the experienced distances between the merging parties, for example, that “A tukit.” (administration A) and “konttori B” (administration B) are divided on the different sides of the “core” of the organization. Especially the comments that this group “B” put in to the mouths of the “A” demonstrate the large distance (for example, “ei tää oikeasti voi olla näin läheistä...”, meaning that “this cannot be really so close. There must be a dog buried; this cannot be so good. I’m sceptical.”). I interpret it to mean that the psychological distance between these two parties is still great.

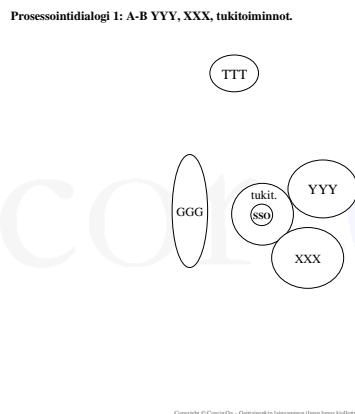


Figure 2: A picture from a dialogue meeting about two weeks after the creation of the picture presented in the Figure 1. It shows how the participants feel a major closeness compared with the first picture – they report united feelings with other party, claiming that the experienced boundaries are almost vanished.

Reflecting creates trust and gratitude

One surprising issue, I think, was that many participants also stated gratitude to the managers that the process was conducted. They pondered that it was a kind of statement, or signal, from the managers that the workers and their experiences were important, and that seemed to create more trust to managers among the participants. More than once, participants were tears in their eyes in the end, also telling me afterwards that they feel so relieved. More than once or twice I heard that “I was feelings so much anguish, but couldn’t talk about that with anyone. I was thinking that maybe I’m crazy with these thoughts. But now I have noticed that many others share the same experiences. I’m so relieved now.” Also in the follow-up questionnaire some had written the same kind of comments.

Letting go of the past needs mourning

For me this means also the need to salute the past to be able to let go of it. As one man stated in the dialogue meeting that “I’m quite surprised. We met two weeks ago, and then I had so much to complain. But I could say it all aloud. And now, I’m surprised. Somehow all those things that have been disturbing me two years don’t disturb me anymore. I feel good.” The same kind of statement was formulated in the follow-up questionnaire: “It helped to let go of the past, and welcome the future.”

I think that this is about the very natural mourning process. Tähkä (1993) describes the loss of an object, and the need for mourning. The merger is a great change, and the basic idea of a change is that something old goes away and something new comes to replace it. In other words, this means that we then experience a loss of something. And a experience of a loss means the need of mourning. The way we did the support process supported the mourning by firstly looking at the past – how we had it, how our culture was – and then the current situation – how are we now, how are the cultures clashing. I could also clearly observe the grief of the past, which was actually presented as the aggression against the current situation. This is also known well in therapy that the first stage is denial of the loss, which can be seen as anger. But, actually, that can then evolve forward to become grief, which in fact means the painful realisation of the reality. However, only through this grief can happen the letting go of the past. This is the reason we have the funerals.

When people mourn, they let also go of the past, they accept the facts of the reality (which is exactly what is painful, and the reason why many times it is tried to avoid – then we can hold up the fantasy of not having the change happened). And then, they also become relieved, and their mental capacity is freed, which in turn means that they become available for the new. In therapy is known that the new relationship is possible only after the old one is processed, which means mourned, and allowed to go.

To summarize, it seems, for me, in the merger process to be very crucial to help the members of the

organization to mourn the old to be really available to create a new future. It doesn't mean emotional arrangement, but a clear possibility to reflect the change, to look at the past, and to remember how we had it. In the conducted processes it took from half to whole day meetings.

Opening the communication culture

Moreover, the participants repeatedly stated their surprise about how relevantly they could discuss together, and how well "we could speak about things with their truly names". This was evidently experienced very relieving. Instead of being false, they were expressing their truth, and that seemed to reinforce their feeling of power. I believe that this was a major cultural intervention, creating more open communication. The trust was arisen from respectful listening, writing everything down that was said, and the interaction between the participants, which revealed that they shared much, even though they didn't know it beforehand. This made them not feeling so much alone anymore, but they felt to be accepted in the group.

One central observation for me was that the participants seemed really wanted to contribute their organization. That was the major motivation, which helped us in the process to go deeper and to create more than was expected.

Reflections from the findings

To summarize all this, I name four central issues that I believe to play a crucial role in integration process:

1. **Cultural differences & preoccupations:** The cultural differences are a fact, because every organization creates a unique culture. Even in cases where the organizations are thought to be quite similar, there seem to be great cultural differences. It also means that the other party is usually observed, especially on the worker level, some kind of threat, which affects the preoccupations. However, when they have come together, it seems that they have a need to create an understanding of the other party, and to be understood. This may not be supported in mergers, perhaps because there is a fear of thinking differences when it is supposed to be united. But, for me, it seems to be needed to really create respect. Respect is the key for good relation, and for common future.
2. **Managing the integration process:** While the cultural clash is a reality, the integration process should be designed to help people to be integrated culturally. At first there is a need to get all the processes to function, which creates a need for education, etc. However, I think, that a great weight should be in methods and interventions that create participation and possibilities to express own truths.
3. **Let go of the past:** A merger is a major change, and every change means a loss of some objects. This creates the need for mourn-

ing, to say goodbye. I believe that this is the only way to free the mental energy to create a common future. A new relationship is not possible before the old one is finished.

4. **Bigger size of an organization.** It is not yet much here discussed about the change of the size of an organization in mergers, but I observe it to be a major thing. Especially when it is a merger of "equals", when the size is doubled after the merger. It crystallizes the fact, that the organization is no more the same after the merger. The old ones have died, and a new one has been born. The huge growth of the size also means the great need to create new procedures to manage the organization. The way the smaller ones were managed, may be doesn't work anymore. The new procedures must be created. For managers it means also a big challenge – suddenly they have double size organization, and besides of that, they know only half of the members (if they knew).

Conclusions

One of my conclusions is that it is possible to help the integration in mergers greatly. I even claim that it is rather easy, at least simple, because it seems to follow the common psychological principles, which are: respect, mourning of the loss, and participation. I could also include reality-based communication, which means a possibility to express own truth, but also hear others truth, which is dialogue.

The support process that was used in these four cases, slightly modified to fit the unique needs, seems to incorporate the elements mentioned above. However, I believe, that it is not insignificant that *how* we approach people in organizations. Already the understanding of the need of mourning means, for me, that one carries more holistic and human view than maybe it is taught in business schools (Ghoshal 2005). In the end, I believe, this is the key in integration.

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