

We versus They

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

After a merger or acquisition is announced, there is a period of integration while the cultures reach a new equilibrium. During this process it is common to hear a lot of "we/they" type of conversation coming from both groups. If not addressed, this parochial thinking process can go on for a long time. The longer the dichotomy is allowed to persist in the minds of people, the more problems will simmer during the integration and undermine the benefits of the combined entity. This article highlights some ideas on how to move from a "we/they" point of view and get more quickly to "us."

Sometimes there is a setup where both organizations are supposed to go on as if they were still separate entities. For example, Zappos under Amazon or Pixar under Disney were allowed to operate as if the acquisition had not occurred. The idea is for less disruption. That logic may hold for a while, but eventually the benefits of operating efficiently together will take the upper hand. Sooner or later, people are going to have to work as a team and trust one another.

In the majority of cases, the integration is a rocky process because trust is at an all-time low from the way the deal was struck. Getting groups to work together with one common set of processes is a journey that can, and often does, take years to accomplish. On paper, the full integration was to occur in a couple months, but in reality you can hear the "we versus they" logic for several years after the announcement. For example, you will hear, "**We** always did it this way, but **they** will not let us do it."

What gives rise to we/they thinking? I believe it is because people naturally fear change and try to make the inevitable changes impact the other group. In reality, both groups feel they have been taken over or at least greatly inconvenienced by the need to "do it their way," so people dig in their heels and try to subvert the changes by proving "they will not work here." That attitude is tantamount to sabotage, and it can sink all legitimate efforts to create the kind of efficient, homogeneous entity that was envisioned when the merger was announced.

One method is to toss out the procedures for each entity and invent joint processes that serve both organizations from the ground up. That process sounds like a fair one until you get into it and realize that you are fighting both groups on each and every process change. It is still we versus they but with a different flavor.

The most significant issue with the "we versus they" attitude is that it siphons off energy away from the main goal of the organization: to delight the customer. Instead, significant time and resources are spent arguing over the nits of process details, and the customer is left wondering what happened to the good old level of service that was the norm before the merger.

What steps can be taken to eliminate "we versus they" and get to "us" more quickly?

One method is to transplant enough people from one entity to the other that it becomes difficult to tell who are "we" and who are "they." That process is not always a popular one, but it does lead to a faster integration of the populations and it also enhances bench strength due to cross training.

One thing I have seen that erases the "we versus they" feeling is if another larger entity comes along and gobbles up the merged group. They are now fighting off a different "they" and quickly become the "we" together. Let me explain that a bit more so it is clear. You have the merger of A & B. There is significant angst because both groups feel taken over. They are trying to resolve their differences when Group C buys out the sum of A & B. Now, as if by magic, the merged A&B get along great and work to fend off the effects of the big bad C Group.

One effective and inexpensive way to address the problem is for the leaders to always model the use of integrated language and coach those who use oppositional language to change their pattern of speech. Replace "them" with "us" whenever possible and do not support discussions that pit one side versus the other.

Having both groups meet together to chart a mutual shared purpose and strategy often goes a long way toward getting to "us." When people put significant energy into crafting a collaborative vision, they tend to become closer as a result.

If both leaders of the prior entities are still on board heading up the combined unit, it helps to have them swap positions. That process adds to the knowledge base for bench strength and eliminates parochial thinking at the top.

Whenever you are involved in a merger or acquisition, it is wise to tackle the problem of "we/they" thinking with a conscious strategy. If not, your journey to full integration could be a long and painful one.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*, *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at** www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763

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