



Front Line Leaders in a Merger

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

I have been studying the impact of mergers or acquisitions on various stakeholders within organizations. It is impossible to state the impact on everyone in a particular organizational level because of situational and personal differences. It is, however, helpful to think through what a typical person in one level is dealing with even though the exact forces will be somewhat different in each case and perhaps vastly different in outlier circumstances. This article focuses on issues for the first level of supervision in an organization during a merger or acquisition.

In some cases, these leaders are called "group leaders" or "squad leaders;" in others, they are referred to as "supervisors." There are probably many other names, but for the remainder of this article I will use the word "supervisor." The common thread is that these people operate at the critical and delicate junction between management layers and workers on the shop floor. Depending on the type of work being done, these individuals come from a variety of backgrounds. The most typical history is that the supervisor was once a shop floor person who did very well on the job over a long period of time. Eventually this individual was tapped to do the work of supervisor when an opportunity arose.

Another common trait of supervisors is that they are often put in the job with little training. Reason: They already have deep process knowledge and have shown a natural tendency toward informal leadership, so they are given the responsibility with little or no formal leadership training. In most cases it is their excellence at doing the lower level jobs and their process knowledge that enabled their promotion to supervision in the first place.

The attitudes of supervisors during a merger or acquisition are critical to how the shop floor people will react to the change. If supervisors model a cooperative and adventurous spirit and keep looking for the good, it can really help people see that positive outcomes are possible. If the supervisors are rolling their eyes and visibly

displaying their own fears, then it is going to be picked up and amplified by people on the shop floor.

In a merger or acquisition situation, the shop floor processes are subject to combinations or modifications in order to accommodate the changing nature of the business. This could be threatening to supervisors, since their license to lead is their familiarity with the work rather than their deep leadership skills. Changing work means their platform to lead has been upset with little warning. Couple that with the inevitable push to reduce supervisory (and all non-direct) headcount, and you have an opportunity for some terrified people in these roles.

I believe the best approach for helping supervisors adapt to the new operating procedures is to have them work intensely with the shop floor people to invent the new combined processes. The involvement will put them in a natural leadership role during a time of significant chaos, which is precisely when a leader's skill and talent are best developed and tested.

Another way to help these people with the transition is to conduct information sessions with top management just for the supervisors. Of course, they will be part of the general data dissemination program, but their issues and concerns will have a different flavor than other levels, so it is wise to let them vent in a safe environment that is geared for supervisors. You might even want to encourage a kind of support group, because the ability to share experiences during the transition will help ease tensions.

Lastly, if there is time and money available, the transition period is a great time to do some serious leadership training for all levels. This includes the supervisors who may not have received training at the time they were elevated to their job.

A merger or acquisition is a nervous time for everyone in both organizations. Due to the unique nature of their position in the organization, first line supervisors need some special attention in order to help them and the direct workforce cope with the uncertainty and need for change.

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