



Rip Up the Agenda

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

One of my friends in the consulting business wrote an insightful article entitled [“Throw Away Your Integration Plan.”](#) The friend is John Pancoast of Acquisition Solutions, a firm that helps organizations achieve more effective mergers or acquisitions. His article was about having the flexibility to know when the plan you drew up before a merger was announced should be abandoned for another course of action based on some unanticipated development.

The main idea makes sense to me. No original plan can anticipate everything that is possible to happen, especially in a multifaceted endeavor like a merger. Sticking religiously to an a-priori version of the path forward will produce suboptimal results at best and may even be disastrous.

It is not just mergers and acquisitions where we need the flexibility to change a plan based on new information. We deal with the need for flexibility in every area of our lives. For example, the following incident actually happened to me in mid-career, and it illustrated the importance of remaining nimble.

I once spent a day in a workshop with my managers to develop some strategies. We planned the time carefully because time is the ultimate scarce resource. I had published a detailed agenda for the entire day.

When I walked into the room to start the meeting, I took one look at their faces and realized they were not in the same frame of mind as they were when we made up the agenda. Something traumatic had just happened with one of the benefits programs, and their faces told me they were preoccupied trying to deal with the damage.

I held up the agenda on a single sheet of paper and said, “I can see by your body language that this is not where you folks want to spend your time today. Am I right?” They all nodded kind of sheepishly. So, with great fanfare, I ripped the agenda into tiny pieces and threw the confetti into the air. I’ll never forget the look on their faces as the

simulated snowflakes fluttered to the floor all around me. We had a good and constructive meeting after that.

This article is not suggesting that making plans is fruitless. We need to have a nominal plan for every activity under the assumptions we are aware of at the time. We must always test whether that plan is still the right course when we attempt to execute it in the future. Here are a few tips to remember:

1. **Be alert to changes in body language.** Often you can read anxiety with a current plan in the faces of your coworkers.
2. **Build trust.** Create an atmosphere that is real rather than one of playing games.
3. **Ask for opinions.** If you ask, people will tell you if they are concerned.
4. **Verify the plan is current.** Test to see if conditions or assumptions have changed.
5. **Be willing to rip up the agenda.** It creates a significant event and sends a message of care rather than rigid implementation.
6. **Use a revision date.** Plans change with time, so if you have a file with the plans, use a revision date so people are aware they are subject to changing conditions.

Make your plans carefully and logically, but be prepared to change them when conditions require flexibility. Doing so will keep you nimble and relevant to current conditions. It is a great way to be effective.

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