FOCUS ON:
Culture and change

Integrating cultures: learning to appreciate and capitalize on differences

A manufacturing company acquires a competitor but struggles with clashing cultures. How can they leverage their differences to prosper together?

A manufacturing company has enjoyed steady growth in a niche market. During their growth, smaller competitors dissolved, leaving our client in a strong position in the marketplace. Another company also provided in-demand products, specializing in rural markets. The two companies decided they could join forces and leverage their respective technical expertise as one to better serve the market.

The parent company was large compared to the acquired company. Teams were in turmoil as rapid change set in. Within the acquired company, many team members had worked together for as many as 20 years and felt like a family. The parent company team configurations changed frequently, including global assignments.

While the combined organization was on track for meeting revenue goals, behind the scenes trouble was brewing. The regional division, which housed the acquired company employees, began reporting an increase in employee absenteeism, slowed customer fulfillment, and a decrease in innovation. Given that the most attractive feature for the acquisition was the high degree of innovation in the acquired company, this was especially concerning. The parent company began to investigate but found nothing.

Business Challenges
- Declining innovation
- Increasing absenteeism
- Customer fulfilment delays

> " I got caught up in The Escape Experience and began displaying my typical deadline driven behaviors. This experience was an excellent way to immediately apply learning and identify how I will change my behavior on the job. "
>
> **Team member**

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Solution

The complaints focused on individual behavior, but we knew this wasn't the place to start exploring. There was a great deal of animosity, fear and defensiveness amongst the team members, especially with the acquired employees. Instead, we began at the organizational level.

Analyzing the organizational culture

The first step was to conduct a team level organizational culture analysis to help the team discover the root of their challenge. One exercise focused on organizational characteristics. We asked each person to choose three adjectives to describe both their own company and the other one. It was a powerful way to begin the diagnostic process and revealed significant differences between the two cultures. It provided a basis for open dialogue.

The next step was to evaluate the cultural differences. Certain behaviors appeared to be encouraged and rewarded in one company, yet were considered inappropriate in the other. There was a lack of self-awareness, too—the team didn't realize how their behaviors impacted one another differently.

With this foundation and context, the team was comfortable enough to explore their own work styles, communication habits, team expectations and how their own behaviors impact the team.

Using the escape experience

For the next phase, we created an environment where the team would work together towards a common goal in real time. To encourage lasting behavioral change, we applied experiential learning—which is *learning by reflecting on doing*—and devised an 'escape experience'.

We used the principles of an escape room event to create an experiential learning environment onsite at our client's location. In our Escape Experience, team members work together as Special Agents on a mission to solve a mystery before time runs out. The team gets

Solution

- Analyze organizational culture
- Deliver an Escape Experience for teams
- Use MBTI tool to explore preferences, improve communication and build trust
- Agree team behaviors
- Develop individual and team development plans

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an unfolding story, clues, puzzles and riddles, and must decide how to communicate, solve problems and work together towards a common goal. The mission has a time limit, which simulates the deadline-driven workplace.

The team got to work. As they worked on the task, individuals began to display behaviors that shed light on their team dynamics. This is exactly what an experiential learning activity should do: bring behaviors to the surface.

Reflecting on the activity

But the real value of seeing these behaviors is to reflect on them afterwards, and this is what happened when our consultants led a robust debrief. The team discussed observations of their own and their teammates' behaviors. They shared what they felt worked well, what was stressful, what they would have done differently. And they made connections between the experiential exercise and their behaviors on the job. This is where the insights began to strengthen.

As noted earlier, this team lacked self-awareness. The debrief changed this, leading to accelerated self-awareness as team members began to take responsibility for the impact of their behavior.

The debrief session allowed the team to talk openly about deadlines, pressure, leadership styles, communication, processes, procedures and accountability. People saw how their behaviors and interactions reflected the cultures of their former organizations.

One team member said, "I got caught up in The Escape Experience and began displaying my typical deadline-driven behaviors. This experience was an excellent way to immediately apply learning and identify how I will change my behavior on the job."

We then took the team through the following stages.

Results
- Immediate reduction in absenteeism
- Renewed commitment to customer focus
- Innovation reinvigorated

Building on self-awareness

We helped the team identify their natural personality preference. This helped the team understand how their personality filter was one of the sources for bias, which impacts how they judge behaviors.

Improving communication

The MBTI® framework helps people to understand the differences in how we each prefer to communicate. The team began to recognize differences as valuable. For example, one team member learned she had a Sensing preference and needed to ask for more details while communicating. Her teammate, who had a big-picture focus, felt this was valuable to know as it would help to balance things. Together their differences would be complementary.

Developing a shared purpose

This was critical (and needed quickly) for this team's success because the vast difference in their company cultures was the root of their challenges. The shared purpose was to manufacture to an exceptional quality and exceed customers' expectations while maintaining a safe, supportive environment for employees.

Increasing trust and cohesion

The team created practical, concrete agreements that described what success looked like on a day-to-day basis. Recognizing the impact of MBTI type on behavioral tendencies, the team identified common strategies which would support their new communication language. They also identified unacceptable derailing behaviors and agreed to hold each other accountable if those behaviors were displayed. One example is a tendency by some team members to interrupt others during a conversation. The agreement is to focus on listening, to affirm what was heard, and to acknowledge the other person's viewpoint before sharing his or her own.

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Planning for team and individuals

Finally, the team integrated their learnings into individual and team development plans. They each identified personal blind spots and how they needed to personally develop through action plans and timelines. They also identified the team development actions required to fulfil their working agreements and live the values to support their new shared purpose.

Results

This learning journey resulted in a rich increase in self-awareness, recognition of how behaviors impact others and appreciation of cultural diversity. By learning to value diverse backgrounds and experiences, the team could begin to leverage their differences as an asset for the organization.

The animosity, fear and defensiveness the team exhibited when we began working with them dissipated. They made commitments to hold themselves and each other accountable for their development plans and working agreements.

During our client follow-up, they were happy to report an immediate reduction in absenteeism, noting the extra energy and eagerness to work. Customer fulfillment was back to pre-acquisition standards and on track to exceed expectations. Most notable was a renewed focus on innovation, demonstrated by a new time-saving process improvement which empowered individual team members to make certain decisions which formerly required supervisor approval.

The leader of the team shared this: "I am encouraged and look forward to continuing our development together as a team. We will prove our combined company will be better as one and will enjoy tremendous success."

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The Myers-Briggs Company empowers individuals to be the best versions of themselves by enriching self-awareness and their understanding of others. We help organizations around the world improve teamwork and collaboration, develop inspirational leaders, foster diversity, and solve their most complex people challenges.

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